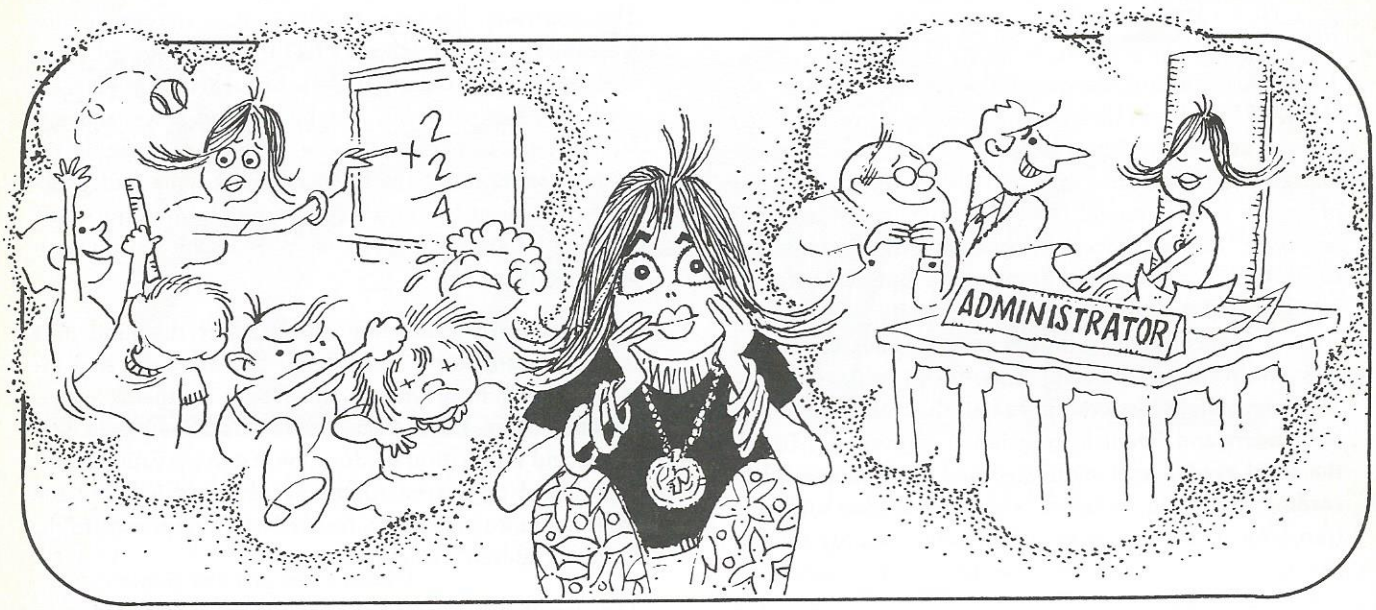
The teacher: Overcoming the power of cultural images

by Sara Lawrence Lightfoot



Assistant Professor Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (Ed.D. '72) is a sociologist whose primary concern is the study of school as a social organization and its relationship to families and the community, and the classroom as a dynamic social system. Her work includes observational research in classrooms, and documenting and analysing interactional patterns between teachers and children. Much of her research in schools has contradicted stereotypic images of the teacher as portrayed in the academic literature. This has inspired her to seek research alternatives that will give teachers a greater opportunity to present the complexities and subtleties of their role, as well as provide a more sophisticated analysis of the relationships, interactions, and social patterns that evolve with role definitions.

A very strange thing happens to teachers when they come inside the hallowed walls of Harvard. They spend some months publically proclaiming their origins and defending their humanistic profession. But slowly, almost inevitably, they begin to identify with the academician's arrogance towards the teacher's demeaning and low status; they begin to forget that they came to Harvard in order to become more skilled, masterful teachers; and they establish new identities that sound more lofty, prestigious, and acceptable to the University community. Teachers who have experienced this transformation are often the ones who talk most unsympathetically and negatively about their former colleagues—a common phenomenon experienced by new converts moving up, a blind combination of amnesia, dishonesty, and self-doubt.

But we should not condemn too quickly the individuals who want to dissociate themselves from teachers and teaching. Their individual character and motivations are not as disturbing as the values and norms of the institutions in our society which shape their attitudes and behavior. How is one to continue to place great value on developing as a teacher at Harvard (not a teacher of teachers, nor a curriculum developer, nor an administrator, nor a policy-maker) when Harvard decided it was not worthwhile to revitalize the MAT program which had been stumbling towards its demise for years? How are teachers supposed to have self-confidence in their work when only a small portion of the Harvard faculty does research in schools or feels that it is valuable to spend a portion of their time living in schools and intimately experiencing the life of a teacher? How is a teacher expected to cling to her[1] idealistic, professional images if the literature read in her graduate courses characterizes the teacher as a one-dimensional, vacant human being who merely transmits the content of a curriculum that has been developed by "experts" who are thought to be more cognitive and innovative?

But we cannot focus on the lofty insulation of Harvard as the sole source of discontent for the newly arrived teacher. That would be shortsighted. Even if teachers

[1]In this essay, I will refer to the teacher as "she" because women have a significant and dominant presence in the education of young children. I also wish to contradict the general tradition of linking all of humanity with masculine identities.

have managed to ignore their threatening implications, society's messages have been a significant part of the teachers' personal and professional development long before they arrived at Harvard. Harvard might exaggerate general cultural phenomena, but obviously one must recognize the strong, pervasive, and conflicting cultural images of teachers in this society, and the impact of those stereotypes on the evolution of the teacher's self-concept, role-development, and decision-making patterns.

Images of the American teacher

> "Sociologists and the general public continue to expect the public schools to generate a classless society, do away with racial prejudice, improve table manners, make happy marriages, reverse the national habit of smoking, prepare trained workers for the professions, and produce patriotic and religious citizens who are at the same time critical and independent thinkers." (Barzun, 1945)[2]

When we think about the educational process in a modern industrialized society, we usually confine our visions to what happens inside schools and to the teacher as the central figure in the process. The teacher is most often viewed as a woman and she is seen as the one who makes education happen for children, the one who transmits the patterns and values of the mainstream culture. In her book, *The School in American Culture,* Margaret Mead describes three images of the American school which correspond to three role definitions of the American teacher. In reality, these three definitions of the teacher do not exist as separate and exclusive entities, but rather our view of the American teacher encompasses bits and pieces of the three images. It is important to recognize that the role definitions of the teacher described by Mead are not only culturally defined and sustained, they also have been the predominant images used in the academic literature. It is for that reason that I think it important to give them explicit attention in this paper.

The little red school house is a reality that few of us have experienced, but it is an image that lingers in our minds and symbolizes the democratic tradition of America. We visualize a rural scene, well-tended farm land, cows, horses, blackberry bushes surrounding a one-room school house where big children are responsible for the learning of little children and where parents and teachers are sympathetic to the same values and cultural traditions.

> "Here the teacher herself often a mere slip of a girl, a young teacher, wrestles with her slightly younger contemporaries, boards with members of the school board, is chaperoned by the entire community of which she is one, and finally marries a member of that community — or goes on teaching forever happily, with at least one attributed romance to give her dignity and pathos." (Mead, 1951)[3]

In this deeply-rooted American stereotype, the teacher is viewed as a young girl rather than a mature and whole woman, whose identity is closely tied to her monolithic role as a servant of the community. She is seen as a guardian of the morals and traditions of the community and must reflect the purity and virginity of her nature in her abstinence of lovemaking, passion, or other worldly pleasures. As a matter of fact, this guardian of children cannot even be trusted to guard herself. She lives under the careful and judgmental scrutiny of the community fathers and mothers.

Mead's second image is the historical tradition of the academy. This was an institution established for the privileged, where young minds were introduced to the mysteries of the Greek and Latin past. Parents were not content to impart the wisdom of their generation to the children, but they "sought to structure the future in terms of the past, to guarantee the child's future position by the degree to which he participated in the heritage of the past." [4] The academy was seen as being dominated by male teachers and students. The male teachers not only symbolized the relationship to the cultured European tradition, but it was also believed that a male presence would stress clear, rational, and objective thinking in an orderly world.

This vision of the academy is still prevalent today in many elitist private schools. It fosters images of control, order, and superiority among men. The teacher of the classics rejects the confusions and complexities of the contemporary world and creates an environment for students that is stable, anticipatable, and without tension and emotion. This environment is designed for men and for boys who will grow up to be men in control of their destinies.

The third image of the American school is the city school, a place where children are not taught the traditions and values of their ancestors, nor the realities and constancies of their parents' present. The city school is a scene of acculturation and assimilation, a door through which the estranged children of immigrants, the foreign-born, will learn the behaviors and values of the New World.

> "They are not only poor, but they are foreign; they have unpronounceable names and eat strange things for breakfast; their mothers come with shawls over their heads to weep and argue and threaten a teacher who is overworked, whose nerves are frayed by the constant battle."[5]

To the urban children of poverty, the teacher in the city school represents hopes for the future, but she also symbolizes the rejection of the cultural and familial values and traditions of the children. The teacher is considered

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[2]Barzun, Jacques. 1945. *Teacher in America.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

[3,4,5]Mead, Margaret. 1951. *The School in American Culture.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

successful to the extent that she manages to alienate the children from the bonds of their family and to the extent that she directs them to an unknown future in a bewildering and changing world. This teacher feels a sense of inadequacy because she feels that what she knows will not be necessarily the appropriate preparation for the children's lives ahead. The teacher's own educational history seems strangely outmoded as she is forced to transcend her past in a desperate attempt to provide a meaningful present for her charges.

Although the three cultural definitions of the teacher often combine to form our conception of the teacher role, parts of the three definitions are often in conflict with one another. Each of these images of the American teacher implies a different set of personality characteristics, social skills, and cognitive facilities. Each of these roles implies a different relatedness to parents and community. Each of these roles implies a different kind of adaptation and responsiveness to the changing needs and demands of society, implicitly and explicitly imposed by the world of work in which children will eventually find themselves. Despite all the differences, there is one theme shared by all three definitions; that is the expectation that teachers should be all-giving, nurturant servants of the people, whose job expands to adapt to the needs of society.

As cultural definitions of good and bad become more and more ambiguous in our society, as the future becomes less and less predictable, the definitions of the teacher's role found in the literature has become enormously expanded since Mead's writings of two decades ago. Critics of formalized schooling and advocates of strong familial socialization have challenged the all-encompassing influence of teachers on the lives of children.

In *Deschooling Society,* Ivan Illich claims that schools have taken total control over the lives of children and the teacher has become a custodian, a preacher, and a therapist.[6] As a custodian, the teacher acts as a master of ceremonies, arbitrates and structures rules and regulations, and initiates children into the mainstream social values and rejects any attitudes or behavior that deviate from this narrow cultural norm. She not only seeks to control their moral visions inside school walls, but she expects those visions to extend into their lives beyond the classroom. Finally Illich sees the teacher as a therapist who controls the personal lives of children, analyzing and directing their motivations and actions in order to direct their psychological growth. The therapist role is thought by Illich to be the most potentially destructive and manipulative force in the lives of children, and dangerous to the development of their natural expression and exuberance.

Anna Freud also criticizes the encompassing nature of the teacher's role defined by the literature and expressed through our cultural myths. She is less concerned with Illich's negative criticism of the social and political consequences of using the school as a total institution and more concerned with the psychological experiences of the child who is trying to define and understand his/her relationship with the teacher as a special person. She describes the psychological transition of the child from the all-encompassing, unmeasured love of mother to the more circumscribed attention given by the teacher. But, more importantly, Anna Freud talks about the need for mothers and teachers to perform distinctly separate roles in the lives of children.

> "The teacher's role is not that of a mother-substitute. If, as teachers, we play the part of mother we get from the child the reactions which are appropriate for the mother-child relationship — the demand for exclusive attention and affection, the wish to get rid of all the other children in the classroom." (Freud, 1952)[7]

Anna Freud, therefore, is proposing that the teacher's role be far more circumscribed, objective, and generalized in relation to children. Teachers, she claims, should develop a more distant relationship to children and escape the dangers of rivalry with mothers, "who are the legitimate owners of the child," by taking a "more general and less personal interest in the whole process of childhood with all its implications." In the same sense, the teacher must not shift into the therapist role and become dangerously sensitive and responsive to the emotional involvements of the child. She believes that teachers should become neutralized, objective human beings who avoid creating strong emo-

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[6]Illich, Ivan. 1970. *Deschooling Society.* New York: Harper and Row.

[7]Freud, Anna. 1952. "The Role of Teacher," *Harvard Educational Review.* Fall 22(4):229-234.

tional and sexual bonds with children; that the teacher-child relationship be removed from drive-activity and instinctive wishes. Interestingly enough, Freud assumes that the teacher of young children will be a woman, but she feels that the teacher's role must be more circumscribed and defined in such a way that she is less seductive, less entrapping to the expressive instincts of young children. Perhaps she must be thought of as less nurturant, less loving, and even less woman.

Idealized images and real-life status

> "It has been said that no woman and no Negro is ever fully admitted to the white man's world. Possibly we should add man teachers to the list of the excluded." (Waller, 1932)[8]

> "There seems to be very little recognition that a teacher is a human being, and that a teacher has transitional stages, that a teacher is a *modern man*, and that a teacher is more than just something that goes into a classroom and, like, teaches." (Brenton, 1970)[9]

What is intriguing about our boundless expectations of the teacher is that, for the most part, we are directing our demands to women. When we speak of the socialization and acculturation of our country's children and when we speak of teaching the basic cognitive and social skills, we are thinking of the learning that is done in the early school years. We are, therefore, directing our extreme expectations towards a population of elementary teachers who are 85 percent women.

Even though our idealized vision of the teacher demands the impossible—asks that she be superwoman, mother-earth, mind reader, and soothsayer—the teacher's real-life status in the social and occupational hierarchy is dramatically low. There is a great contrast between the expectations of our idealized images and the negative qualities of the teacher's real experience. Social scientists have attributed the low social status of teachers to a low respect for intellectual endeavors, the preponderance of women in the profession, the lack of professional autonomy (i.e., lack of power in the gate-keeping function) and the low degree of professionalization.

Beyond the limiting impact of the social and economic factors, the teacher's low status reflects the cultural perceptions of the teacher as woman and the teacher as child. Envisioning the teacher as woman is not simply an indication of the large proportion of women in the profession. These character traits symbolize the psycho-social qualities that we attach to both male and female teachers—the traditional womanly dimensions of nurturance, receptivity, passivity, and the child-like dimensions of creativity, affection, and enthusiasm. One is impressed on the one hand with the multi-dimensional nature of our great expectations of teacher and on the other hand our view of the teacher as a one-dimensional being who is subordinate, passive, and responsive to the needs of children.

It would seem that our cultural definitions of the teacher-role pose an inherent contradiction which claims that in order to communicate effectively with children, teachers must exhibit the nurturant, receptive qualities of the female character ideal and the expressive, adaptive qualities of the child. Ironically, these same qualities are viewed as inferior and of low status when one conceives of the teacher in relation to the social and occupational structure of society.

I think it important to emphasize the difference between the cultural images of the teacher role and the attitudes and behaviors of teachers today. I have been concerned with analyzing the descriptions of teacher images, not with observing actual behaviors through the eyes of a journalist. In real life, the teacher is more or less affected by the imposition of cultural stereotypes, but she is not hopelessly bound in these traditional molds. In recent years, one recognizes a severe cultural lag between the teacher, as stereotyped by the literature, and the contemporary teachers who are demanding the prerogatives and power that other professionals have been accustomed to.

It is evident, therefore, that a large proportion of America's teachers today defy the stereotypic images of the teacher presented in the literature. We can also identify a small and vocal population of teachers who show a great deal of aggressive strength and political savvy; who find themselves behaving like professional men.

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[8]Waller, Willard. 1932. *Sociology of Teaching.* New York: John Wiley and Sons.

[9]Brenton, Myron. 1970. *What's Happened to Teacher?* New York: Avon Books.

Exploding myths

Why have social scientists not recognized the obvious contradictions between the real-life teacher and our idealized myths of the teacher? Why have researchers not explored the more profound questions about the woman as a central and dominant force in the education of our children? Firstly, I think that the paucity of work done on the role of teacher reflects the hierarchy of values of a generally male-dominated academic structure. It cannot be overlooked that the great majority of teachers are women (and those who are men are thought to be woman-like) and researchers almost invariably emphasize male behavior. This seems to be another facet of this society's firmly established habit of placing more importance on what men do than on what women do.

Besides the general negligence of exploring the experience of women, one also finds that any work done by women in this society is devalued and given minimal attention. In her book, *Male and Female,* Margaret Mead observes that in all known societies, the work which occupies men is the superior work. If men hunt and fight, then hunting and fighting are the superior occupations of that society; if men weave and care for babies, then weaving and child care have the superior prestige. The principle inherent in this observation operates unmistakably in the literature on the teacher. The women's role in the educational process is viewed through the male perspective and not given serious analytic attention.

A third reason that the professional characteristics of the teacher are often diminished and/or ignored has to do with the prevalent social attitudes towards women establishing a professional identity. In our society the woman must justify her choice of lifestyle and the locus of this justification lies in the family rather than in her professional work. Traditionally, it has been her ability to supervise a household, have a happy marriage, and bring up well-behaved children that has served as the real justification for a woman's life rather than her success and satisfaction in her profession.

One of the ways women seek to establish an integration of their domestic and professional roles is to find work in the fields traditionally conceived as feminine—work devoted to the problems and concerns that the woman herself faces in her private capacity within the family. Choosing a profession like teaching provides a continuity of this sort because it supports a special form of integration in the woman's life. Lessening the distance between her two roles reduces contradictions in her self-image.

Interestingly enough, the blurring of distinctions between family life and work has provided social scientists with an opportunity to give less attention to the characteristics and qualities of the teacher role. Such a continuity has led sociologists to assert the lack of commitment and attachment that women feel towards their work lives. The teaching profession is seen as a woman's secondary role that competes with her primary role as mother of a family. It receives, therefore, only peripheral attention from the sociologists who do not seem to be interested in the teacher's conception of her work, her professional goals, and her maturation.

The negative stereotypes of teachers offer rigid anticipations of teacher behavior. There is need to consider the teacher not as a one-dimensional servant of the people, but as a developed human being with her own concerns, hopes, anxieties, and goals. Robert Merton's term "role-set" supplies a crucial concept and framework for perceiving the teacher as a comprehensive being.[10] A teacher's role-set encompasses her relationship with numerous role-partners (children, parents, administrators, fellow teachers) and their expectations of her, her expectations of them and of herself.

In order to document the dynamic patterns of these changing, often conflicting relationships, social scientists must develop research strategies and intellectual perspectives that encompass various aspects of the teacher's being and permit her to express the multi-dimensionality of her roles. Minimally, this means that research perspectives must move beyond the behaviorist tradition of relying exclusively on visible and countable interactions. Research on teachers also must include methods that probe the origins and dynamics of individual motivation and personality and document the nature and scope of the social and political structures that shape the norms and values to which the teachers must adapt.

I am not proposing naïvely that researchers, engaged in exploding cultural myths, will change the status and self-image of teachers in this society. Social science research has never been a powerful, initiating force for social change. Certainly, we cannot dissociate myths and images from the economic and socio-political structures that shape them. I merely wish to argue that our cultural patterning and our social images have a profound impact on how we perceive the nature and scope of the teacher's role in this society; and that one aspect of giving value and clarity to the teacher's role lies in its redefinition by social science. It is my belief, that until social science research begins to reveal the distortions and contradictions in our cultural images of the teacher, real-life teachers will remain burdened by unrealistic expectations and constricted by narrow definitions of their professional identity.

Moving within the walls of Harvard, our educational and research agendas must reflect a concern for teachers and teaching. This demands a recognition that teachers are worthy of study, that teacher training must be seriously reconsidered, and that teaching is a laudable profession that deserves the dignity of our praise.

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[10]Merton, Robert K. 1957. *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Rev. Ed.). Glencoe: The Free Press.