



Behind Closed Doors: Teachers and the Role of the Teachers' Lounge. Miriam Ben-Peretz and Shifra Schonmann. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. 187 pp.

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This book provides an intriguing account of teachers' lounges in Israeli schools. In doing so, it raises interesting questions about how we think about teachers' professional lives in other schools, as well as in other nations, regions, and settings. It is an interesting book because of the varied data the authors examine, because they attend to dimensions of teachers' lives that are frequently neglected, and because of the implications they draw for teacher preparation.

On one level, *Behind Closed Doors* is a straightforward piece of multimethod fieldwork. Miriam Ben-Peretz and Shifra Schonmann wanted to study what teachers said and did in teachers' lounges and went about doing just that. Through field observation, audio and video recordings, and interviews, they looked closely at teachers' lounges in 26 different high schools. These field studies were complemented by survey data from a sample of 400 teachers in 19 elementary schools.

In the first half of the book the authors examine some of the contradictions, tensions, boundaries, and functions reflected in the lounge life of secondary school teachers. Drawing on rich observational and interview data, the authors challenge the conventional wisdom that teachers work in isolation from other adults and are primarily student oriented. They present instead a view of the teachers' lounge as a collective home from which teachers reach out into classrooms for momentary, but important, encounters with their students. As an extension of this perspective, Ben-Peretz and Schonmann make the case that the teachers' lounge, intentionally or not, is an important site for the professional development of teachers. In support of this idea they describe how key themes of teachers' occupational culture—for example, autonomy, isolation, collaboration—are both reflected and exercised in the collective dramaturgy of the teachers' lounge.

In the second half of the book, Ben-Peretz and Schonmann examine survey data from elementary school teachers for what they reveal about teachers' attitudes toward their lounges, and they also examine relationships between teachers' lounge life and student achievement. The latter is an ambitious task, and both their data and their analysis fall short of supporting some of their conclusions. The most general argument



they make—that teachers in high-achieving schools characterize their lounges differently than those in low-achieving schools—seems reasonable enough. However, the authors go beyond their warrant when they use this correlation to affirm the centrality of the teachers' lounge to school success. What makes this claim hard to assess is that Ben-Peretz and Schonmann do not describe what their sample of teachers said or did in classrooms, school meetings, cross-school workshops, professional associations, or any schooling or teaching venues other than the lounge. This restricted focus gives the book a certain charm by rhetorically highlighting "the lounge" as a subject in its own right. The downside is that it sheds relatively little light on relationships among lounges, classrooms, and other sites in which teachers are engaged.

The lounges described in *Behind Closed Doors* are portrayed as distinctive physical and social spaces within Israeli schools. We might expect as much, but I was caught short by the brief comment on page 64 that Israeli high school teachers "move from classroom to classroom" throughout the day. This contrasts markedly with U.S. high schools in which most teachers find ways to make a single classroom "their own," a proprietary gesture that alters radically the relationships among classrooms, lounges, and teachers' professional lives about which Ben-Peretz and Schonmann want to theorize. Mindful of my own ignorance about the Israeli high school, I was left wondering how many other cross-national and cross-system variations we routinely overlook in how school space is assigned and organized for teachers' work.

With this kind of wondering in mind, I wish Ben-Peretz and Schonmann had situated the teachers' lounge more clearly within the social organization of the schools they studied and of the Israeli teaching occupation. Lacking specificity about the contexts in which lounges function as Ben-Peretz and Schonmann observed, one is not quite sure how to extend insights from their research to situations in which teachers or schools are configured differently. That is unfortunate because their study has implications not only for how teachers are prepared (a topic that they do address) but also for how schools are designed as workplaces for teachers.

I found useful insights throughout the book, but I was perplexed by contrasts that appeared between rich and varied observational data and broad generalizations. When the authors tell us (on page 2) that "the lounge is the natural site for the development of professional communities in schools," I wanted to ask, For which schools and which teachers is this most likely to be true? Similarly, references by the authors to what "the teachers' lounge" does for "teachers" do not square with the numerous examples they provide of different teachers' lounges doing different things for different teachers. While one reads on page 53 that "entering a teachers' lounge one



immediately meets a businesslike atmosphere," this broad generalization is challenged by accounts elsewhere in the book of substantial variations among teachers and lounges on just this dimension.

Behind Closed Doors could be used to good advantage in a class about teachers' workplaces and occupational culture. It might also be valuable for a course on educational foundations, and it provides some provocative suggestions for preparing new teachers. But the book has both the strength and the weakness of its title. We learn a great deal from Ben-Peretz and Schonmann about what teachers do inside the lounge and why teachers might want their lounge doors closed. The unfortunate irony is that we are left wondering why the researchers themselves left it closed. They bless us with a rich glimpse into how teachers live within their lounges, but we are left with too many questions about how they live outside. What other worlds are teachers going into when they leave the lounge, and what worlds are they coming from when they walk in and close the door?

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