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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Meanings That Keep Us Going in a Challenging Profession

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the sources of meaning in the work of Jesuit high school teachers, examining how these sources vary across professional status, geographical setting, and teaching period. Through a comparative case study and 105 in-depth interviews with Jesuit and lay teachers in the United States and Latin America, the research identifies four key sources of meaning: relationships with students and society, self-perception, the work context, and spiritual life. Findings reveal that while the "other-regard" dimensions—focusing on students and societal impact—are consistently central, self-regard, work context, and spirituality play varying roles influenced by cultural and historical contexts. This study highlights how Jesuit educational values and mission shape teacher identity and meaning, providing insights for sustaining commitment within changing educational landscapes.

Keywords:
Jesuit high schools, teacher meaning, other-regard, spirituality, Jesuit mission, comparative case study

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Introduction

Secondary schools may be transformed by many different means: technologies may be updated, infrastructure improved, leaders trained, and curricula refined. In the current state of secondary education, all of this is vital, and even more is necessary. Those familiar with the high school context, though, know the truth of the following statement: When the classroom door closes, only students and their teacher stay inside, face to face. The policymakers and the unions are not there, nor the school board or the institutional leaders, nor the parents or curriculum experts. It is the teacher who remains. Therefore, the attention given to teachers is crucial in the education of children and youth.

My purpose here is to uncover the meanings that secondary teachers attach to their work. In doing so, I plan to expand the scope of what is understood as a professional teacher. I use cases of teachers who worked in a global network run by the Society of Jesus. The Jesuits have been running high schools for more than 450 years worldwide. The cases I observe in this study are those of priest and lay teachers who worked or work in the United States, Bolivia, Chile, and Peru, before 1965, between 1965 and 1990, and between 1990 and 2016.

I introduce two areas of literature that relate to the conceptual framework of the study. First, I present different theories that have framed the debate on teaching as a profession. Second, I introduce the notion of the work of secondary education teachers and how that work was carried out in the context of Catholic high schools in the period between 1950 and 2016. Second, I present different ways of approaching the concept of the meaning of work through the disciplines of sociology and psychology.

At the outset of this article, I would like to mention that the type of school selected for this analysis—Jesuit, Catholic high schools—is a setting wherein teachers and the institutions are highly regarded in terms of their professional values. That professionalism has been carried out for centuries. It has included dramatic changes in terms of who the classroom teacher was—at one point in history a priest, and today mostly lay women and men. In this study, I aim to look at how meanings of a particular type of professional (teachers) interact with a specific profession (teaching).

Teachers as Professionals

Teachers' work tends to be examined within the context of a debate over whether it fits the definition of an occupation, a profession, or a semi-profession.[1] This debate has mostly taken place in the field of the sociology

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1   Cristián Cox, *La formación del profesorado en Chile, 1842–1987*, 1st ed. (Santiago de Chile: CIDE, 1990); Linda Evans, "Professionalism, Professionality, and the

of professions, with Andrew Abbott, Steven Brint, Amitai Etzioni, Julia Evetts, Eliot Freidson, Talcott Parsons, and Harold L. Wilensky being at the center of the dispute.[2] I present here first the main developments in the field of the sociology of professions and then the different ways in which teachers' work has been theorized in the field.

The first thinkers who gave shape to sociology as a discipline were, in general, concerned about the effects of new ways of conceiving labor in the modern industrial society. In studying the social distribution of labor, the commodification of labor in the market with its social and psychological consequences, and what the rationalization of work expressed about modern society, Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber not only highlighted the particular place work plays in human life but also the essential role it played in the creation of a new world.[3]

None of these pillars of sociology, who defined the broad frame of the new social science, pay attention to the division of labor expertise or expert labor. However, in 1933, Alexander Carr-Saunders and Paul Wilson published *The Professions* in the UK, thereby inaugurating the sociolog-

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Development of Education Professionals," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 56, no. 1 (March 2008): 20–38, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2007.00392.x (accessed December 10, 2024); Andy Hargreaves, "Four Ages of Professionalism and Professional Learning," *Teachers and Teaching* 6, no. 2 (June 1, 2000): 151–82, https://doi.org/10.1080/713698714 (accessed December 10, 2024); Dan C. Lortie, *School Teacher: A Sociological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); Iván Nuñez Prieto, "La profesión docente en Chile: Saberes e identidades en su historia," *Revista pensamiento educativo* 41, no. 2 (2007): 149–64; Willard Waller, *The Sociology of Teaching* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1932).

2   Andrew Delano Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Steven Brint, "Professional Responsibility in an Age of Experts and Large Organizations," in *Professional Responsibility*, ed. Douglas E. Mitchell and Robert K. Ream (Cham: Springer International, 2015), 4:89–107, http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-319-02603-9_6 (accessed December 10, 2024); Amitai Etzioni, *The Semi-professions and Their Organization: Teachers, Nurses, Social Workers* (New York: Free Press, 1969); Julia Evetts, "A New Professionalism? Challenges and Opportunities," *Current Sociology* 59, no. 4 (2011): 406–22; Eliot Freidson, *Professionalism, the Third Logic: On the Practice of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Talcott Parsons, "The Professions and Social Structure," *Social Forces* 17, no. 4 (1939): 457–67, https://doi.org/10.2307/2570695 (accessed December 10, 2024); Harold L. Wilensky, "The Professionalization of Everyone?," *American Journal of Sociology* 70, no. 2 (1964): 137–58.

3   Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Free Press, 1933); Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Dent, 1957); Max Weber, "Bureaucracy," in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 196–244.

ical analysis of labor expertise.[4] They explain that professions are based on an aggregation of traits of specific occupations that were from then on called professions. In the United States, Abbott came up with a different way of defining a profession.[5] His research questions why societies decide to incorporate knowledge in professionals—meaning actual people—rather than just in rules and organizations. Abbott's answer is that the market value resources are held personally and that it is easier to organize knowledge for a body of individuals; therefore, professions are exclusive groups of individuals applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular situations. In giving this definition, Abbott contests functional,[6] structural,[7] monopolist, and cultural understandings of what a profession is.[8]

The action of applying abstract knowledge to particular situations is the work. Work is at the center of defining a profession. Historically, given the many variables in place in the workplace and the system that surrounds it, work has changed, becoming a domain that is disputed. The evolution of a profession is a history of competition for jurisdiction of work. The work that we associate with physicians today has not always been carried out by those professionals. The same also applies to teachers, engineers, psychiatrists, and ministers.[9]

A variation of a profession is given in Etzioni's work.[10] Based on the nature of the organization and the clients it serves, he thinks in terms of professional and semi-professional organizations served by professionals and semi-professionals respectively. The former is different from the latter in having a shorter period of training, a less legitimized status, a lower right to privileged communication, a lower level of specialization, and less autonomy from supervision. There is a professional principle, that of the discretion residing inside the professional, that is violated in the semi-professions.

In his *Sociology of Teaching* (1932), Willard Waller considers teaching as a profession based on a set of courses, formally organized, that teachers have to take to be in charge of students in a classroom.[11] This training is

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4   Alexander Carr-Saunders and Paul Alexander Wilson, *The Professions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933).

5   Abbott, *System of Professions*.

6   Abraham Flexner and Henry S. Pritchett, "Medical Education in the United States and Canada Bulletin Number Four (the Flexner Report)" (New York: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1910).

7   Wilensky, "Professionalization of Everyone?," 137–58.

8   Freidson, *Professionalism, the Third Logic*.

9   Abbott, *System of Professions*.

10   Etzioni, *Semi-professions and Their Organization*.

11   Waller, *Sociology of Teaching*.

what distinguishes teaching from an art. He focuses more on the psychology of teachers, whom he pictures as "people, women, who don't like to battle in life," than on the structure of what he calls a profession. Another sociologist, Dan Lortie, studies the ethos of teachers, whom he considers a semi-profession following Etzioni.[12] He is interested in the structure of teaching as an occupation and in the meaning teachers attach to their work. He ends up believing that both more collegiality and more control over knowledge is needed for teaching to become a stable profession. Iván Nuñez Prieto thinks in the same terms as Lortie when it comes to Chile and most of Latin America.[13] In these countries, teachers were never called professionals. During the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1974–80), a professional association of teachers was created, but only as a way of separating teachers from unions. However, this action did not prevent the association from working as a union after 1990.

Some aspire for teaching to become a profession like being a medical doctor. Nobody would fail to recognize a doctor as a professional, while many would also recognize a teacher as a professional. However, it is difficult to realize such an aspiration for every single teacher given the many different types of schools and educational subsystems where teachers work and the deregulation of teachers' training programs. And it is worth noting that the aspiration is not shared by all. Following the ideas of Richard Sennett in his work *The Craftsman*, Andrea Alliaud juxtaposes the technical idea of teachers as professionals with the idea of teachers as crafters of students' souls.[14] In her mind, such a task cannot be done following the principles of professionalism. Behind her ideas there is also Gloria Ladson-Billings's notion of teachers as dream-keepers, as well as the work of many other authors who have sought to rescue the caring side of teachers' work.[15]

Teachers Working in Catholic Schools
Catholic schools are not only valued because of their function in the religious socialization process[16] but also because they achieve better results

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12   Lortie, *School Teacher*; Etzioni, *Semi-professions and Their Organization*.

13   Nuñez Prieto, "La profesión docente en Chile."

14   Andrea Alliaud, *Los artesanos de la enseñanza* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2017); Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

15   Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (Newark, DE: John Wiley & Sons, 1994).

16   Christian Smith, Kyle Longest, and Jonathan Hill, *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults in, Out of, and Gone from the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

than public schools with fewer resources,[17] create a community environment that favors learning,[18] and successfully educate the poor.[19]

Since the 1960s, Catholic education has experienced dramatic changes in the composition of its workforce. Historically, both in Latin America and in the United States, with the exclusion of the East Coast of the United States, the teaching workforce in Catholic schools was composed largely of religious professionals.[20] The decreasing number of priests and religious personnel since the 1960s is an indisputable fact that has been documented elsewhere,[21] and this trend has had a direct impact on the staffing of Catholic elementary and secondary schools, resulting in the subsequent need to hire larger numbers of lay teachers.

As in many other religious orders, the Jesuits managed the training of teachers within their own institutions through a model called the *Ratio studiorum*.[22] The model included formation in letters, humanities, philosophy, and theology for eight to ten years, in addition to two to four years of working as a teacher in the Society's schools in the middle of that formation process. In the course of this ten- to fourteen-year formation, a Jesuit priest and teacher was formed with the goal of "teaching our neighbors all the disciplines in keeping with our Institute in such a way that they are thereby aroused to a knowledge and love of our Maker and Redeemer."[23] This same principle of formation through the *Ratio studiorum* was used in

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17   James Samuel Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore, *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

18   Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, and Peter B. Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

19   Diane Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

20   James Heft, *Catholic High Schools: Facing the New Realities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jurgen Herbst, *And Sadly Teach: Teacher Education and Professionalization in American Culture* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

21   John J. Convey and James Youniss, *Catholic Schools at the Crossroads: Survival and Transformation* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000); Kathleen Engebretson, *Catholic Schools and the Future of the Church* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); Gerald Grace, *Catholic Schools: Mission, Markets, and Morality* (London: Routledge, 2002); Thomas C. Hunt and Norlene M. Kunkel, "Catholic Schools: The Nations' Largest Alternative School System," in *Religious Schooling in America*, ed. James C. Carper and Thomas C. Hunt (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1984), 1–34.

22   Claude Pavur, S.J., trans., *The* Ratio studiorum: *The Official Plan for Jesuit Education* (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2005).

23   *Ratio studiorum*, 7.

the education process of laypeople early in the Jesuits' history. By formation here is meant an education that involves all dimensions of the person.

Lay teachers increasingly replaced the Jesuit priests who were formed under this model with a clear calling to serve in their religious capacity and arguably in their teaching capacity as well.[24] The shift from priest teachers attending to the needs of the school to lay teachers performing the same tasks led to a change in the composition of the faculty of Jesuit high schools. As a result, the Society of Jesus embraced a commitment to collaboration with laypeople[25] and the construction of a support network to introduce lay collaborators to the spirituality and mission of the order.[26]

Reflecting a broader concern for the role of the laity in the schools of the Catholic Church overall,[27] the Jesuit order issued "The Characteristics of Jesuit Education"[28] as an effort to retain the identity, culture, and mission of Jesuit education. In particular, the Society emphasized the idea of serving as a single apostolic body made up of Jesuits and lay women and men. In the United States and Latin America,[29] local educational plans regarding the role of the laity have been issued to help Jesuit schools maintain their Jesuit identity with less Jesuit faculty and more lay teachers.

The Situational Meaning of Work

Both the more specific question of the meaning of an individual life, that is, what makes a life worth living, and the question of the ultimate meaning in

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24   Jesuit Educational Association, "Proceedings of the Fourth Principals' Institute Regis College" (New York: Jesuit Educational Association, 1959).

25   Vincent J. Duminuco, "Jesuit High Schools in North America" (Washington, DC: International Network on Jesuit Education, 1982).

26   Grace, *Catholic Schools*; Gerald Grace and Joseph O'Keefe, "Catholic Schools Facing the Challenges of the 21st Century: An Overview," in *International Handbook of Catholic Education*, ed. Gerald Grace and Joseph O'Keefe (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 1–11, http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4020-5776-2_1 (accessed December 11, 2024); Heft, *Catholic High Schools*.

27   Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, "The Catholic School" (Vatican: Roman Curia, 1977), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19770319_catholic-school_en.html (accessed December 11, 2024).

28   International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education, "The Characteristics of Jesuit Education" (n.p.: Society of Jesus, 1986), http://www.sjweb.info/documents/education/characteristics_en.pdf (accessed December 11, 2024).

29   Provincial Assistants for Secondary and Pre-secondary Education, "Our Way of Proceeding: Standards and Benchmarks for Jesuit Schools in the 21st Century" (Washington, DC: Jesuit Schools Network, Canada and United States Assistancy, 2015).

life, fit the definition of *existential meaning*.[30] In contrast, *situational meaning* refers to more specific domains, such as relationships or work. The search for meaning involves the space occupied by work, which is one of many situations in life.[31] Although there are many ways of defining work, here I focus consciously on the economic definition put forth by Arthur Brief and Walter Nord,[32] who emphasize activities that are done, at least in part, for monetary compensation. There is by all means a moral component both in the work[33] and in the preparation for the work.[34] Purposes such as financial compensation and moral ideas can be related in the definition as far as the activity called work is the main activity to earn a living. Although imperfect, such a definition is broad enough to think about the work of teachers in the terms expressed in the first section on existential meanings.

Therefore, from a psychological perspective, the meaning of work can be defined as the "purposes—that is, intentions and expectations—the concrete realities which operate on those purposes, and their dynamic relationships."[35] This idea of work's purpose is rooted in the motives for doing the work. As Boas Shamir writes, "excluding the term 'meaning' from the vocabulary of motives, and limiting this vocabulary to 'needs,' 'drives,' 'rewards,' 'outcomes,' and 'satisfactions' reflects the view of the person as an entity disconnected from society."[36]

The meaning of work can also be understood from a sociological perspective. Studies like that of George England and William Whitely show that workers of different nationalities attach different meanings to work.[37] Within the five countries in their study on the meaning of work—Belgium, Japan, Israel, West Germany, and the Netherlands—all but the Belgian workers defined "getting money for doing an activity" as the first element

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30   Paul T. P. Wong, "Introduction," in *The Human Quest for Meaning*, ed. Paul T. P. Wong (New York: Routledge, 2002), xxix–xlvi.

31   Wong, "Introduction."

32   Arthur P. Brief and Walter R. Nord, "Work and Meaning: Definitions and Interpretations," in *Meanings of Occupational Work*, ed. Arthur P. Brief and Walter R. Nord (Lexington, MD: Lexington Books, 1990), 1–19.

33   Joanne B. Ciulla, *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work* (New York: Times Books, 2000).

34   William M. Sullivan, *Work and Integrity: The Crisis and Promise of Professionalism in America*, Preparation for the Professions Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005); Sullivan, *Liberal Learning as a Quest for Purpose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

35   Brief and Nord, "Work and Meaning," 17.

36   Boas Shamir, "Meaning, Self and Motivation in Organizations," *Organization Studies* 12, no. 3 (1991): 405–24, here 409.

37   George W. England and William T. Whitely, "Cross-national Meanings of Working," in Brief and Nord, *Meaning of Occupational Work*, 65–106.

of the meaning of work. Compared to workers from other countries, Dutch workers ranked work that contributes to society as being the most important, while those in West Germany and Israel mentioned most frequently that the first element of the meaning of work was to add value to something.

The meaning of work can have many sources. Brent Rosso, Kathryn Dekas, and Amy Wrzesniewski define four sources of situational meaning: the self, others, the work context, and the spiritual life.[38] The self or the self-concept of the worker is shaped by their own values, motivation, and beliefs, and an activity can acquire meaning by virtue of its connection to these categories of personal values, motivation, or beliefs. At one point in history, the self was understood as an immutable essence that did not experience change.[39] Eventually, though, the concept of the self changed and began to be defined as a reality experienced as a reflexive process in the individual.[40]

Coworkers, leaders, and groups to which workers belong can also be a source of meaning. The types of relationships that form in the workplace and/or the connection of family with the work one does can define the type of meaning attributed to work. The work context—the design of the job tasks, the organizational mission, or the national culture—are also ways in which the meaning of work is shaped within the workplace. Under very challenging circumstances, a sense of mission can also lead the worker to find meaning in their task.

Finally, the spiritual life, that is, one's own spirituality or sense of a sacred calling—as opposed to the secular callings of belief—can also determine the meaning ascribed to the work.

The research question that guides this study is: What are the meanings teachers attach to their work in the context of religious schools, and how do those meanings expand their perspective as professionals?

Method

I use a qualitative methodology understood in John W. Creswell's terms, that is, as "an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct meth-

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38   Brent D. Rosso, Hathryn H. Dekas, and Amy Wrzesniewski, "On the Meaning of Work: A Theoretical Integration and Review," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 30 (2010): 91–127.

39   Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York: Scribner, 1902).

40   Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Double Day Anchor Books, 1959).

odological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem."[41]
Such a methodology is suited to understanding the meanings of situations,
events, and experiences, as well as processes and causal explanations.[42] In
this case, qualitative methodology is suited to understanding the meanings
of human work.

Case Selection
I purposely selected a bounded set of high school teachers, as opposed to
obtaining a sample from a universe of teachers.[43] Tables 1 and 2 show the
criteria for the case selection.

Table 1: Selected Factors of Similarity and Variability for Case Selection

	Item	Condition
Factors of Similarity	Years of teaching	All teachers were either veteran or retired.
	Level	All teachers work or worked at the secondary level.
	Employer	All teachers work or worked in Jesuit high schools or at the secondary level of K-12 Jesuit schools.
	Students' social class	All teachers work in schools meant primarily for families of medium to high socioeconomic status.
Factors of Variability	Status	Teachers who are priests and teachers who are laymen or women.
	Temporality	Teachers who taught before 1965, between 1965 and 1990, and between 1990 and 2016.
	Region	Teachers who taught or teach in the United States, Bolivia, Chile, or Peru.

41   John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (New York: Sage, 2012).
42   Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012).
43   Mario Luis Small, "How Many Cases Do I Need? On Science and the Logic of Case Selection in Field-Based Research," *Ethnography* 10, no. 1 (2009): 5–38, https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138108099586 (accessed December 11, 2024).

Table 2: Distribution of Factors of Similarity and Variability in the Set of Cases

	Item	N	%
Factors of Similarity	Years of teaching		
	10 to 20	20	19
	21 to 30	36	34.3
	31 to 40	25	23.8
	40<	24	22.9
	Level		
	Secondary	105	100
	Employer		
	Jesuit schools network	105	100
	Students' social class		
	Upper-Medium high SES	105	100
Factors of Variability	Status		
	Priest	46	43.8
	Lay	59	56.2
	Temporality		
	Pre 1965	31	29.5
	1965–90	38	36.2
	1990–2016	36	34.3
	Region		
	Bolivia	16	15.2
	Chile	15	12.4
	Peru	20	19
	US—California and Oregon	14	13.3
	US—Maryland	11	9.5
	US—New York and New England	15	14.3
	US—New Orleans and Missouri	14	16.2

Data Collection

I used a semi-structured interview strategy.[44] This style of interview allows for reflection upon the context of the respondent's responses with respect

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44   Lisa Given, ed., *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2008), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909 (accessed December 11, 2024).

to certain topics, as well as making room for a broad understanding of the meaning of those responses.[45]

I built an interview guide following Michael Quinn Patton.[46] Given the set of cases I am using in this study, it was pertinent to have in mind a particular way of interviewing elderly interviewees (i.e., oral history). Although this is not an oral history project, a style of interviewing that not only deals with the past but also engages with it was appealing and appropriate given the age of a subset of the population in the study.[47]

I conducted 105 in-depth interviews between November 2016 and June 2017, most of which were in two parts and lasted, in total, between fifty and 180 minutes. In the case of active teachers, the interviews took place in the high schools outside of the class schedule.

Data Analysis
I employed narrative analysis of the data coming from the interviews, a type of analysis that refers, in broad terms, "to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form . . . The cases that form the basis for analysis can be individuals, identity groups, communities, organizations."[48] Here, I use thematic analysis.[49]

The narrative character of my interviews left flexibility with respect to how the themes would be articulated. This open-mind approach to the cases has been used before in studies on teachers' lives, as Freema Elbaz-Luwisch points out.[50] Different from the work of Jennifer Nias,[51] which focuses on the lives of teachers, my analysis of the narrative included special attention to both the narrative contexts given by the historical component

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45   Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).

46   Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014).

47   Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010).

48   Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2008).

49   Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*; Kathleen Wells, *Narrative Inquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

50   Freema Elbaz-Luwisch, "Studying Teachers' Lives and Experience: Narrative Inquiry into k-12 Teaching," in *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*, ed. D. Jean Clandinin (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007), 357–82.

51   Jennifer Nias, *Primary Teachers Talking: A Study of Teaching as Work* (London: Routledge, 1989).

of the comparative case study in place[52] and to critical events mentioned by the participants.[53]

I analyzed the 105 interviews using NVivo on an ongoing basis, as soon as transcriptions were obtained. For the coding, I used a deductive or directed process[54] based on the main concepts laid out in the section on prior literature and concepts.[55]

Results

Finding Meaning in Others

Teachers tend to find meaning in their work when they live their lives with regard to the other. Their own sense of self is impacted by others, especially their students but also their communities and broader society. In what follows, I introduce how the teachers in the study construct meaning through their relationships with both students and society. I make a distinction here between students who are assumed to be agents and those who are believed to be objects of their formation, and between a relationship with society in the abstract and in a face-to-face fashion.

Students as Recipients and as Agents

There are two basic ways in which the teachers in this study understand their work vis-à-vis their students. There is a first group composed of what I call active teachers, and they work with the belief that they teach passive students. There is a second group who also consider themselves active teachers; however, they work under the assumption that their students are also active in the learning process. Different meanings arise from these two types of understandings of the teacher–student relationship.

The first group of teachers expresses the meaning of their work as being protagonists in the formation of their students. As happens in a play, the protagonist or main character is the one on whom the dramatic tension is focused. In the case here, formation is understood through the role the

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52   Ann Phoenix, "Analyzing Narrative Contexts," in *Doing Narrative Research*, ed. Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire, and Maria Tamboukou (London: SAGE, 2008), 64–77.

53   Leonard Webster and Patricie Mertova, *Using Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method: An Introduction to Using Critical Event Narrative Analysis in Research on Learning and Teaching* (London: Routledge, 2007).

54   John W. Creswell, *30 Essential Skills for the Qualitative Researcher* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015).

55   Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2014); Anselm L. Strauss, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

teachers play in their students' process of self-discovery. There is no evidence of selfishness on the part of the teachers who understand themselves as the protagonist—quite the contrary. These teachers are still quite selfless in serving students, but they are attached to the idea that they are key to their students' growth. This mindset is expressed in their narratives as they associate their work with verbs such as model, influence, shape, create, spark, ignite, and build. Using this building analogy, one lay Peruvian art teacher related what the work has meant for her after eighteen years of practice:

> The formation of the kids is like a building, a building that is about to be built, that is in the process of being built. It is like the essence, the inner structure of the person that is being built and that is influenced by different factors. Of course, the family, but it also is in need of some role models that help to create the fabric of the person . . . like the beams of what a person comes to be. (lay_per)[56]

There are also suggestions within the interviews of the great responsibility that teachers have, especially given that the young people with whom they work are vulnerable in certain respects. As a lay Peruvian drama teacher stated: "To have in my hands a fragile group that I always have to take care of is a tremendous responsibility that I assumed in the students' formation process. The younger the students, those in their fourteens and fifteens, are always to me a fragile group" (lay_per). Something that is fragile, though, can also be malleable, if it is treated with care. And if malleable, it can be shaped or modeled. For a group of teachers I interviewed, the idea of shaping and modeling is key to finding meaning in their work.

Another characterization of the meaning of teachers' work is the sense of igniting something in the students or being a spark. Although this attaches more agency to the student, it is still an approach that emphasizes the active role of the teacher. One lay Chilean art teacher puts it in these terms in reference to a student she encountered years after his graduation:

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56   After each excerpt from the narratives, the professional status, country, and Jesuit province in which the teacher is or was teaching will be indicated in parentheses. For all those in the United States, the name of the province is listed followed by usa (ucs=United States Central and Southern province, formerly Missouri and New Orleans provinces until 2017; une=United States Northeast province, formerly New York and New England provinces until 2015; mar=Maryland province; uwe=United States West province, formerly California and Oregon provinces). In the case of the Latin Americans, the province name is the same as the country's name (bol=Bolivia; chi=Chile; per=Peru), so it follows the professional status.

> His work was in black and white, and he always painted in black and white . . . so then he told me "I think you know, thanks to you I discovered color." I do not remember what strategy I used, but I must have insisted a lot. I must have insisted, which is perhaps why he said, "Thanks to you I discovered color and that opened to me a whole world." I swear that after he came to my house and it was like (sigh), of course, as a teacher you're there and you know how important you are, so he realizes how much he can do, to take off, to take a path. (lay_chi)

This teacher found meaning in igniting something that has been central in her own life as an art teacher and became so also in the life of the student, namely to get out of black and white and into a world of discovering color in life and in art.

There is a second group of teachers who consider their students as more active participants in their formation. They do not consider them as a *tabula rasa* or as material to be shaped, modeled, or built, with the meaning of the teachers' work instead articulated as caring, affirming, influencing, sharing, and especially accompanying the students. As a priest American teacher of English comments:

> I very much enjoyed watching them grow, and most of my teaching years, I would teach . . . a combination of sophomores and senior advanced placement, and to see the kids that I taught as sophomores move into junior and senior year was just wonderful to watch. So, that is what a high school teacher thrives on, I think, the slow maturation of kids. They start as boys and, you know, become men. (priest_usa_mar)

Rather than the teacher moving the students from one direction to another, this is a much more contemplative, as opposed to highly active, process. The teacher does the work, but the meaning is not self-centered in their capacity to enact something, with the meaning occurring in observing the slow maturation of the students who are shaping their own destiny.

Teachers speak frequently about influencing as something that provides meaning to their work. More specifically, there is an understanding that to influence the students' direction is not confined just to the classroom or the school but also extends into their lives outside school. A retired priest American history teacher put it in these terms:

> As I look back on it, it is very interesting to me because I've married a lot of these people on their weddings, baptized their children over years, and years, and years, and years, and years. It's that . . . I just think as a teacher, I was an important part of that development. I was the important part of it. That's

you, you did that, but I conceived myself that I helped them move to a differ-
ent direction or better direction or helped them, I made them in one sense.
(priest_usa_ucs)

Teachers who see their students primarily as agents tend to describe their
work as sharing something they have with others, but not in a superior
fashion. An American priest and English teacher defines his work as "shar-
ing what I have to offer with the kids, with another generation. Trying to
inspire" (priest_usa_mar). A lay Bolivian math teacher thinks likewise that
"this chance to share with the guys . . . I tell you sometimes one says this is
a magic process, is a beautiful process of education, to see where they are
at this point and where the guys can get and by their own means, I tell you
now, to unexpected places" (lay_bol).

The teachers' disposition to share with their students what they have,
or admiring their students' slow maturation, can be linked to the idea of
accompaniment. To accompany someone in their life journey is different
from shaping them into the image that a teacher has selected for the student.

A Society to Serve: An Abstract Idea and a Face-to-Face Interaction
Society also functions as a source where teachers find the meaning of their
work. The evidence indicates that teachers express the meaning of their
work in a continuum from an abstract pole to a concrete (face-to-face) pole
in the process of understanding their role in society. While abstraction is
characterized by concepts or ideas such as changing the world, building a
new society, or shaping good leaders for society, the face-to-face or con-
crete way of expression is represented with images such as being a public
servant in a private school, serving a city, working for the entire school
community, and building a safe space or making a refuge in the school.

Another subset of teachers interviewed assumed, a bit more humbly,
that they would not change the world. They are more cautious when they
express how the big, abstract ideals of serving the world relate to their con-
crete work. A lay Chilean art teacher shares what most teachers in this
study experienced when they discovered they wanted to be teachers:

When I was very young, or younger, I thought I would be able to change the
world. Then in college I said yes, it is possible to change the world, and then I
said this question went nowhere because it cannot; however, to be a teacher I
think is a good tool. (lay_chi)

It is not despair or pessimism but realism that allows teachers to be bet-
ter teachers. One lay American history teacher reflects: "I know that I will
never change the world. I will never make the world actually a better place.
I cannot reverse climate change. I cannot solve poverty and world hunger.

But over eighteen years, I have now taught about 3,500 students. Those 3,500 students are somewhere doing something" (lay_usa_uwe).

Teachers in this group make meaning of their work by believing first and foremost that their work is about public service in a private setting.

Contrary to the abstract, change-the-world meaning of teachers' work, in this paradigm, it is the local community that reveals itself as important; it is the city that is highlighted by many teachers as the goal of their work. One American history teacher and priest comments about the work he does: "I'm not here just for the students . . . I'm here for the city. I represent the school, the church, the Society [the Jesuits] to this city" (priest_usa_une). And another lay American Spanish teacher likewise reflects that "what we do here for forty years is going to impact the city, you know, and the state as a whole" (lay_usa_uwe). There is a broad sense of responsibility for the formation of a different society, again, at the local and concrete level. One lay Bolivian theology teacher says:

> I have a commitment to my country, to Bolivia, to the world, you know, I am a citizen of the world, so I cannot produce, with the forgiveness of the word, people with a mediocre profile, [they] have to be people who always look for the *magis*, excellence in everything they do. (lay_bol)

The world gets better in concrete ways. A lay American English teacher shares:

> I did not become an English teacher because I secretly want to bust out a novel when I retire. I became an English teacher because I think I can use these books both to get students to understand other people's conditions in the world better, and I can make my students be better men through the lessons we learned through the novels. (lay_usa_ucs)

Finding Meaning in the Self

In the interview data, there were two identifiable emphases or expressions that stood out in how the teachers connected the self and meaning in their work: self-regard and other-regard. The other-regard pole is characterized by what is moved at the level of the self when teachers focus on those around them, which has been the content of the previous section. The self-regard pole is not to be confused with selfishness or bringing about any kind of value judgment; it is better described as a cluster of meanings where teachers highlight what they experience internally as a result of the

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57 *Magis* is a key concept in Jesuit life that refers to the reach for excellence, to aspire to search always for the best expression of yourself, to make use of the talents given to you, etc.

work they do. Concepts like feeling fulfilled, helpful, appreciated, belonging to a community, receiving joy, or becoming a better person make up this group.

For many teachers, to work around youth and establish relationships with them makes their life enjoyable. From these interactions and the school environment, they retrieve meaning for the work they do. Their sense of self, some say, gets balanced and invigorated. As one retired priest American physical education teacher comments: "That's what happens between years. You stay forever young by fighting off cynicism and other poor choices in life versus opting for the best. So, I see that as the gift that I have" (priest_usa_une).

Feeling deeply satisfied with the work and how it impacts on the self corresponds with feeling like a better teacher. A lay American astronomy teacher reflects:

> Now, at the end of the year, they know this and that, like you talk about black holes and relativity and stars you know. So that's very satisfying . . . and then, it's even more satisfying to know that in a few months, I get another group of kids. I can take them on this journey once again, but I've gotten a little better so . . . the journey is going to be a little different . . . the satisfaction actually continues to grow. It continues to get better year after year after year because I become a better teacher I think, year after year and the kids are more fulfilled, I hope . . . by the end of the year. (lay_usa_uwe)

Such deep satisfaction is also expressed in the form of pride in the work. As one lay Chilean English teacher says with respect to his work: "I feel proud of being a teacher, and I believe that I owe all that I possess to being a teacher: the material, the spiritual, my family, and my affective life. In that sense, I feel really proud" (lay_chi). He feels proud because of something that happens in his inner life.

To be important for someone else is a basic human need. The teachers I interviewed mentioned that the reality of being important for their students is a source of meaning in their work. A lay Peruvian math teacher reflects:

> These kids come back after years and they hug you and say thank you. Or sometimes, things you tell the parents . . . after years they come back with tears in their eyes and say, "thank you for what you did for our son" . . . then I say, "this is worth it." This is when I find meaning in my life as a teacher. (lay_per)

It is important to note that in these narratives, the idea of being important for someone else refers to the students; there is no expectation of being respected by society.

There is another group of teachers for whom the idea of fulfillment comes from a different place than student relationships. They feel fulfilled by the possibility of access to knowledge and to a continual experience of learning. As one lay American history and psychology teacher says:

> I love that I'm in a profession that requires me to constantly be learning because I love learning. I love knowing things. It's perhaps why I like psychology now more than I like history and that's because history is relatively static. (lay_usa_uwe)

Finding Meaning in the Work Context
There is a vivid sense that in a Jesuit school you can nurture your own talents; you can develop a career and become part of what many described as a community. As in many other Catholic schools, the idea of a community working with a missionis an important driver to work toward excellence.[58] However, there is a sense in Jesuit schools, especially for those coming from other work experiences in public, private, and/or other kinds of Catholic high schools, that you can develop yourself because the organizational culture favors it. A lay Chilean English teacher comments:

> I came across an environment that I had not known. I found a school which formed me, I mean, through all things, all the experiences that I could have or all the experience I had as a teacher, I could develop myself. I found a wide freedom to execute things, and that for me was fundamental in the exercise of teaching because I could do everything, and I was not limited to certain things. When you have that freedom, one says, my God! You've got a place where they are believing in you and that somehow forms you as a person. (lay_chi)

There is an existing trend in different realms of work that has begun to attach certain values to work that were previously associated only with the family.[59] For example, the work context of the high school may now be considered a refuge; it is characterized as a place where a teacher can find comfort in times of distress. Teachers who feel the school can be a refuge refer primarily to troubling times in their personal lives, mostly related to their family or religious life. It is a refuge in the sense that it considers the

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58   Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*.
59   Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997).

human side of the worker—as should be the case in any kind of work—but also because the type of work enacted, with its intensity and demand, requires a community of peers. A Spanish teacher in Peru comments:

> I appreciate the human group with which I share my work, the other teachers here. I have always found good friends, very good people who have helped me be open without any fear or envy, [the] kind of "Better not explain how it is done because I will win," I've never found that here. Here I have always found people willing to help and support you. (lay_per)

The work context and community are a source of meaning for teachers because of the status provided through being part of a Jesuit high school in the societies where they reside. As a lay Bolivian chemistry teacher says: "In the city of La Paz, to work in this school where we are is practically like winning an award. You are on the top. To be invited by the Jesuits to work here has been a challenge" (lay_bol). As mentioned earlier, Jesuit high schools are in general appreciated and important in the cities in which they were founded and in the context of the local Catholic churches. The Jesuit schools have often helped form cultural, political, and, in some cases, economic elites. Therefore, for teachers to work in a context that elevates the impact of the work provides meaning.

Finally, schools in many respects are not the same today as they were sixty years ago. The culture has changed drastically. And like the culture, the work context has changed too. One veteran priest teacher in the United States comments that "nothing is the same . . . it has been fifty years since I walked into a classroom" (priest_usa_une). "Nothing is the same" was expressed by this teacher in a deeply somber tone, but in general, this disposition is not what I found in the majority of priest teachers. For priest teachers, the work context has changed in such a way that more and more lay teachers, women and men, have joined them, which certainly makes for a cultural challenge. Most of the priests, though, valued this incorporation of lay teachers.

One American priest teacher comments: "Many of the things that the lay teachers here do, the level of commitment they show, the hours they put in, and so on, really shows their dedication above and beyond the call of duty to the work of formation that we have here in the school" (priest_usa_une). And another respondent reinforces the idea by emphasizing that the lay teachers are "seen as so essential that if there were no Jesuits at the school, the school would still be a Jesuit school . . . they feel as though they possess the . . . charism of the school, too, and they're very dedicated, you know, despite or in addition to raising families" (priest_usa_mar).

Finding Meaning in the Spiritual Life

Many teachers in the study find meaning in their work through their spiritual life. I will briefly sketch here two ways in which teachers express the experience of meaning through their spiritual life within their work context. The first is respondents' articulation of a spiritual force expressed in actions, and the second, an experience of a spiritual force communicated through feelings.

The spiritual force expressed in actions refers to a God who is experienced actively in the life of the teachers through pushing, motivating, or obliging them to be active and intentional through their work. One aspect of this is building the Kingdom of God, a category present in the Gospels, especially in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew. The Kingdom of God represents Jesus's mission on earth; it is the realization of the words Jesus pronounced. Some teachers make meaning of their work in embracing their role as builders of the Kingdom of God. As one lay Chilean history teacher reflects:

> You say I contributed to the kingdom, and I can say, looking at these thirty . . . years, I've been teaching classes and by doing so, I have contributed to the kingdom. I committed to that, so this was part of the kingdom, that I have also tried to be faithful to that commitment because I believe it, and I try to live it as part of my faith . . . I think it is a central element of pedagogy. (lay_chi)

Another aspect of this sense of being pushed or motivated by God is the use of a particular subject matter to connect students with the transcendent or spiritual dimension of life. A lay American science teacher explains it as follows:

> That's what science is all about. I want kids to be able to see something happen and experience that sense of awe because that sense of awe is what takes us back to God and . . . all of it traces back to those roots and that ability to see God in all things, you know that's people, that's plants, that's relationships, that's everything. (lay_usa_ucs)

The second way of making meaning out of this spiritual dimension is by acknowledging God's presence in one's inner life, taking on the work as a destiny, a call, or a non-material, fulfilling experience. One teacher expresses this sense of God's presence as part of her discernment to become a teacher and to remain in the profession for over thirty years. When considering other possible paths, she reflects that teaching

> is where the consolation is. That's where I am most alive, where it resonates, where it feels closest to God's desires for me. So that's why I'm sure I'm in the

right thing. It feels right. And when I imagine an alternate, it does not feel right in the same way. (lay_usa_uwe)

Discussion

Through the exploration of meanings in teaching, this study gives critical insights into why teachers enter and stay in this type of work, especially for those interested in understanding more deeply who teachers are and what they strive for. The study also shows how being a professional is lived not in opposition to attaching particular meanings to work but quite the contrary. The narratives illustrate how the meanings are entangled with the sense of being a professional in a very challenging profession.

Teachers in the study showed a relatively similar pattern of making meaning in their work using the four sources of situational meaning discussed by Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski.[60] These authors studied how others, the self, the work context, and the spiritual life become essential domains where meaning is created. It was evident from the first interviews I conducted and subsequently confirmed in the analysis of the narratives that the teaching and learning process is dependent on the relationship between teachers and students. As a result, a clear distinction emerged in the *others* category, which I separated into two dimensions—students and society. Further, I found that teachers tend to subdivide the student dimension by distinguishing between seeing or perceiving students as *agents* or more as *passive recipients* in their education. Another clear distinction in the teachers' narratives occurs within a dimension of meaning involving their relationship with society, between categories that I call abstract or out-of-touch and another view of their relationship with society in which needs are experienced as concrete, face-to-face with an other.

In asking where teachers find the most meaning in their work, *others* arise as the most salient dimension of meaning. With regard to students, there is a group of teachers who understand themselves as actively laboring with passive students. Most of the teachers operate out of a notion of formation as opposed to the concept of education focused just on the transfer of information, and within this notion of formation, the teachers understand themselves as the protagonists or main character. For the teachers who perceive students as passive, the formation of the student is articulated through the role that teachers play in this process. It is not necessarily an act of self-praise or even selfishness, though; these teachers believe they have a responsibility. They understand their way of proceeding as a service. This mindset is expressed in their narratives through the association

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60   Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski, "On the Meaning of Work."

of their work with verbs such as to *model*, *influence*, *shape*, *create*, *spark*, *ignite*, and *build*.

The group of teachers who consider their students active participants in their own formation, on the other hand, are teachers who find the meaning in their work through accompanying their students. Instead of focusing on the *shaping*, *modeling*, or *creating* of a student who is passive, these teachers find meaning in *caring*, *affirming*, and *influencing*. Teachers who see their students primarily as agents tend to describe their work as sharing something they have with others but never in a superior fashion.

Teachers express the meaning of their work, when connected to society, in a continuum from an abstract to concrete (face-to-face) pole, understanding and articulating their role in society differently at each pole. While abstraction is characterized by concepts or ideas such as *changing the world*, *building a new society*, or *shaping good leaders for society*, the face-to-face or concrete way of expression is represented with images such as *being a public servant in a private school*, *serving a city*, *working for the entire school community*, and *building a safe space in the school* or *making it a refuge*.

There are teachers for whom, in addition to *or* as opposed to the other-regarded source of meaning, find meaning in their work via their understanding and experience of the self within their work. This self-regarded category is made up of a cluster of meanings where teachers highlight what they experience internally as a result of the work they do, and this includes concepts such as feeling *fulfilled*, *helpful*, *appreciated*, or *joyful*, or as if one *belongs to a community* or *is becoming a better person*.

Teachers value the work context of Jesuit high schools and find meaning in it. In fact, second to the other-regarded categories of meaning, work context is the next primary realm out of which teachers create their meaning structures. This is demonstrated by the frequency with which this category appears in the teachers' narratives.

There is a vivid sense that in a Jesuit school, teachers can nurture their own talents. Teachers in the study have experienced the development of their career and, at the same time, felt that they have become a part of a larger community. As in many other Catholic schools, the idea of a community working with a mission is an important driver to work for excellence.[61] However, there is a sense in Jesuit schools, especially for those coming from work experiences in other public or private high schools, that teachers can develop personally and professionally because the organizational culture favors it. The work context and community are a source

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61   Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*.

of meaning for teachers' work because of the atmosphere often provided through being part of a Jesuit high school in the societies in which they live and teach.

Finally, spiritual life is another source of meaning that the teachers interviewed expressed in their reflections. Spiritual life was further divided into the dimensions of actions and feelings to better understand how teachers related their entire work or parts of their work to this source of meaning. The spiritual force expressed in actions refers to a God that is experienced actively in the life of the teacher though things like *pushing*, *motivating*, or *obliging* them to be active and intentional through their work. The second way of making meaning out of this spiritual dimension is by acknowledging God's presence in their inner life, taking on the work as a *destiny*, a *calling*, a *non-material, fulfilling experience*. These aspects make up the dimension of feelings within the spiritual life.

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