

Professionalism

Teachers are workers. Indeed, despite all the ways that public school teachers have been devalued and undercompensated, they are some of the most effectively organized workers in the United States. But what does it mean to take them seriously as such? This is one of the key stakes in the transformation of New Orleans schools to a privatized and mostly nonunion system. Charter schools emphasize and are lauded for their focus on professionalism and the work ethic of their teachers and school leaders. At the same time, critics of the charter school model decry the teachers' relative youth, inexperience, and lack of traditional credentials. It's clear that charter schools have sought to recruit a different kind of person to teach, but what is it exactly that they do every day? How have charter schools transformed teaching practice in addition to teacher subjectivities? Attending to the working days and work ethics of teachers in charter schools underscores the mechanisms and forms of expertise through which charter school teachers came to be exalted as valuable talent and "human capital"; it also exposes the rituals and practices through which

veteran Black educators were excluded and discouraged from belonging in new school work cultures. While charter school leaders often expressed the desire to hire and retain local Black and veteran teachers (as covered in the previous chapter), the ideals of professionalism, work ethic, timeliness, the willingness to collaborate and be surveilled, positivity, and fit reinforced new labor regimes, which excluded these same educators. Despite the friction between Black and veteran teachers and the work norms of charter schools, a commitment to hard work as necessary for eradicating educational inequality was shared between them. This commitment itself must be questioned if schools are to regain their promise as sites of empowerment and laboratories for modes of democratic living. In order to highlight these dimensions of the transformation of education work in New Orleans, I approached several school sites as if I were conducting a shop-floor ethnography. Worker identities are made and remade at the point of production and relations between and among workers and management are laden with contests over power and authority. The privatization of schools in New Orleans not only transformed the contract status and economic standing of educators, it also served as grounds for reconstructing the workplace as a site of racialized governance, authority, and selective inclusion.

Over the course of thirteen months of fieldwork I observed teachers at six K–12 schools in four different charter school networks, all of which could be fairly characterized as following a no excuses approach to school discipline, testing accountability, and implementing human capital strategies. Most days I popped in and out of individual teacher's classrooms at various points during the school day, sitting in an unobtrusive corner of the classroom quietly taking notes, sometimes working with students during individual and group work sessions, and once a week listening

in on professional development sessions where teachers worked on lesson plans, reflected on collective goals, and prepared for upcoming standardized tests. Every couple of weeks, on average, I shadowed a teacher or administrator for an entire working day, arriving at school when they did and staying with them until they walked to their cars to leave the building. These full day observations were grueling marathons, almost always starting before 7:00 a.m. and ending after 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. Teachers would typically arrive thirty minutes to an hour before students, using the calm before the storm to make copies, organize the classroom, or attend brief daily morning staff meetings, which school leaders used to check in with staff and build morale. Teachers would then spend most of the rest of the day with their students, with brief breaks for lunch, recess, or elective classes where students would be handed off to another teacher. School leaders spent much of the day observing teachers in classrooms, meeting with teachers and other administrators individually and collectively, or attending to students who had been sent out from classrooms for disciplinary infractions. Teachers and school leaders would both typically stay after school (which ended somewhere between 3:00 and 5:00 p.m.) to finish planning for the coming days and weeks. Almost every teacher or administrator I spoke with claimed to work a half day or more every weekend lesson planning, grading, or speaking with parents, amongst other tasks.

All of these are activities that teachers at any kind of school would be familiar with. However, teachers and school leaders at charter schools narrated their working day as though they shouldered more of these burdens than educators at other kinds of schools. As noted in the prior chapter, one of the ways that school leaders, human capital managers, and teachers at charter schools distinguished the talent they sought for their organizations from

veteran teachers at traditional public schools was by the hours they put in. *Talent* at charter schools did not ask hiring committees when school let out because they were willing to work as long as the working day went. I was intimately familiar with this emphasis on an extended working day, having previously worked as a teacher at a charter school in New York City where, although the official school day ended at 5:00 p.m., my principal reminded us that we worked at a place where people weren't supposed to be rushing to clock out at 5:01. Every day I wondered, "How long before I can leave the premises without causing gossip or disapproval? Is 5:15 too early? Maybe I should wait until 5:32?" You should never leave on a nice round number, lest it appear that your egress was planned with malicious forethought.

This anxious preoccupation with time was not limited to my own experience or solely concerned with clocking out. Marion, a young white transplant, described to me his disgust at the kinds of status games teachers would play to be seen as the hardest working. "People will park their cars in strategic spots where they'll be seen. You can be in the building twiddling your thumbs, but as long as your car is there, you're a hard worker. When you're leaving and you pass someone's car who is still there it's like, 'Fuck, I'm not as good a teacher as they are.'" Of course, school faculty in all kinds of places are subject to status games, but in New Orleans, the focus on intense and exclusive commitment was notable. Youthful transplants often had no other local social ties to command their attention, and thus the approval of their colleagues took on even greater importance. This commitment to long hours as an ethic and status-elevating behavior is itself a recent historical development among the relatively elite strata that charter schools recruited their teachers from. Whereas privileged elites earlier in the twentieth century often prided

themselves on not working and on the pursuit of leisure, a rise in working hours among the salaried professional classes in the later twentieth and earlier twenty-first century combined with the development of ethics exalting a grinding commitment to long hours in professional class work roles.

Employees at charter schools were under intense pressure to perform (both to achieve and to perform the cues that indicated excellence), and school leaders were constantly strategizing about how to best support teachers to execute under these conditions. In 2014, during the August following my year of fieldwork, I observed professional development for the start of the school term at two charter school networks that both turned to the same solution for helping their teachers to negotiate the demands of the working day. These professional development sessions were mostly comprised of programming facilitated by school leaders and veteran teachers to help the staff plan for upcoming lessons, strategize about classroom management and discipline, or discuss human resources issues like changing health care plans. However, sometimes schools would bring in outside consultants. That summer, two of the networks I had followed over the course of the previous year brought in a consultant with a program designed to provide teachers with an organizational system and philosophy for working efficiently and saving time.

This program, which I am calling *The Disciplined Teacher*, was founded by a former teacher and executive in education nonprofits. I was able to sit in on one of these sessions during which the founder introduced the program and set forth an enticing aspiration for the room full of over 150 teachers from across the charter school network. Early in the session, the facilitator, equipped with a microphone headset and a no-nonsense tone, asked the room, “Why is being disciplined important?” The teachers in the

room ventured various responses, sharing a theme of being able to handle all the responsibilities of teaching in a high-stakes charter school environment. The facilitator underscored the importance of proper planning for sustaining the efforts and energies of the teachers in the room, saying she is “really, really worried about burnout, and planning is probably about fifty percent of that.” The official literature for the program stated, “The cost of not having a plan is enormous: Your students and colleagues suffer, you sleep too little, and you all feel overwhelmed. Thankfully, with some intentionality, routines, and habits, it is possible to be an effective professional—and *have a life!* [emphasis mine]” The vision of the teacher that was disciplined promised much. It reminded the educators collected in the room that time was a scarce resource and that the stakes of inefficient laborers were not only lessened capacities and availabilities for life-sustaining and replenishing activities but also diminished value for students and colleagues.

This aspiration differed from Taylorist designs on increasing worker efficiency through intense supervision and subdivision of labor insofar as it emphasized the personal nature of teaching work. The facilitator reminded the audience that “you love your work.” In an official testimonial, a school leader wrote, “[The facilitator’s] personal management systems and her work with our senior and middle leaders to customize these systems to their own personal styles has significantly improved the quality of their lives.”

The facilitator encouraged the audience to eschew the dichotomy of “work-life balance” and consider “blending . . . personal and professional together,” noting that “about 10 percent of you will refuse to blend.” This articulation of the personal and the professional took the emotional labor that service industries have

developed over the past thirty years (Leidner 1993) a step further and posed that the organization systems of a “disciplined teacher” could be a desirable way to structure one’s life off-hours, which were no longer strictly “outside” the working day. While this blending might sound oppressive in the abstract, The Disciplined Teacher website quoted teacher testimonials that described it in an alluring way as a model that could provide relief; for example:

The principles I have learned this year from [The Disciplined Teacher] have helped me keep it all together in a really busy time. Since February, I have sold a condo, bought a house, moved, and started construction on the new house, all while working full time as a teacher/coordinator and teaching 2 nights a week in addition to my day job. . . . [The Disciplined Teacher] principles can be applied to many areas of life. I am so grateful that [The Disciplined Teacher] came into my life!

While the facilitator surmised that 10 percent of teachers would reject these aspirations, they had a hunch that the other 90 percent would find the idea of being disciplined not only an attractive option for working *but also for living*. Charter schools and education reformers liked to emphasize the ways they were trying to elevate teaching as a profession, often using examples of collaboration, pay, and expertise as justifications for increasing demands and the dissolution of teachers’ unions. These attempts to make teaching more like a “profession” than a “job” certainly entailed a great deal of recalibrating of the workday and organizational structures and cultures. However, in the neoliberal era professions and professionalism have been marked by discourses of “loving your job” and the rise of the “creative class” (Jaffe 2021, Tokumitsu 2015). As much as these affective orientations to work represent desires to counter alienation in the labor process, they

also invite the colonization of the working person's inner life and subjectivity by work. In addition to the aforementioned means, the synchronization and blurring of work and life is one of the primary ways that charter school reform "professionalized" teaching.

Across many interviews, teachers and administrators at the schools I observed both celebrated the long working hours as proof of the commitment to students and expressed concern about being able to retain teachers in the face of burnout. However, the Disciplined Teacher model should alert us to the possibility that the organization of the working day is about more than quantities of time or expenditures of energy. Indeed, teachers at all kinds of schools have always worked long hours, if not in ways that are recognizable or rewarded in charter school environments.¹ Members of the American Federation of Teachers Local 527, the New Orleans Teachers Union, would argue that they worked for many years to raise the professional standards of teachers and that their members were just as hard working and committed as teachers working in charter schools. What is distinctive about working in a charter school if it is not the number of hours worked, the professional standards of the workplace, or the intensity with which teachers and school leaders pursue their labors? It is charter schools' commitment to a particular vision of work as professionalism that distinguishes them from other types of schooling. It is this vision of professionalism and the affective labor of fitting in and positivity at no excuses charter schools that is responsible on a day-to-day level for the relative exclusion of Black teachers from their working environments.² By blending the personal and the professional, these labor regimes not only intensify the working day but introduce racialized norms of fitting in that work to exclude teachers who don't conform to recognized practices of collaboration, organization, and positivity. Charter schools

should be distinguished not by the fact that their teachers and school leaders might work more but by the fact that they are more committed to a culturally particular ideal of work.

THE WORKING DAY

The length of any given working day can seem self-evident and mundane. School days in particular are familiar to the vast majority of Americans who have attended public schools, but the schedule and shape of a teacher's working day is the outcome of decades of struggle (Apple 1986, Spring 2018). At traditional public schools operating under union contracts, teachers' working hours are strictly delimited. The "Know Your Rights" section of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) website, for example, states that the school day is to be no longer than six hours and twenty minutes. The length of professional development sessions and sessions for parent engagement in addition to these instructional hours are likewise explicitly enumerated. The duties that teachers can be asked to perform during lunch or before or after school are listed, as well as protocols around the compensation of overtime work. The key difference between charter schools in New Orleans and the traditional public schools that preceded them was that, save a few schools that have voted to unionize over the past ten years, teachers at charters were at-will employees whose working day was undefined. Charter school teachers were not just asked to work more hours than teachers at traditional public schools, they were compelled to be flexible in ways their counterparts were not, taking on duties and responsibilities without extra compensation.

Yet, charter school teachers did not work simply at the whim of school leaders. They too shaped and contested the working day, if

in highly individualized forms distinct from collective bargaining. By changing the shape of the working day, charter schools not only transformed work time, they altered the temporal landscape within which the everyday politics of the workplace occurred.³ Work under capitalism is a provincial assemblage of forms of organization, labor, value, belief, ideology, ethics, and more, and the history of public schooling in the United States clearly shows a tendency towards organizing teachers ever more intensely as workers and professionals. Insofar as teachers are workers and because charter school teachers in particular are subject to intensifying professionalization and precarity, they are engaged in struggles over the working day.

The working day can be quantified in time or expenditure of labor or reckoned in terms of the value produced in a given term, but it cannot be reduced to these measurements.⁴ The working day is a fault line between the needs of the worker to labor in sufficient quantity to reproduce themselves and their labor power and the compulsion of the employer to extract surplus value from labor over and above the value of their efforts. These imperatives form a core contradiction within the working day and remind us that its terms are the outcome of histories of struggle.⁵ Through decades of organizing, the United Teachers of New Orleans, AFT Local 527, had won the right to certain limits on hours, amongst other concessions (Fairclough [1995] 2008). The force of Hurricane Katrina, the levee failures, and above all the organizing of pro-charter school policymakers wiped away this detente and instituted a new set of norms around an extended and indeterminate working day. Charter schools have expanded in many other districts across the country but nowhere on the scale that they have in New Orleans. In part the scale of expansion was made possible by the coercive actions of the state, which dissolved the traditional

public school system and the teachers' union base, a kind of primitive accumulation and taking of hard-won economic rights by force.⁶ It would be hard to imagine such a widespread change to the working day without the coercive force of the post-Katrina maneuvering of education reformers.

Among teachers in my field sites, it was commonplace to regard a ten-plus-hour workday as normal. Nora, a white transplant and elementary school teacher, told me she arrived at school "around 6:45 a.m." and stayed "until 5:00 p.m. most days." Nora also typically worked one day on the weekend, and if she didn't "do enough on the weekend," she explained, she would "then . . . work until 7:00 p.m. on Monday and Tuesday." Rob, a white Louisiana local and teacher at Nora's school, arrived at school around 6:30 a.m., an hour before students, in order to prepare and worked all day on Sundays to submit lesson plans to school leaders due that evening. Rob recognized the strenuousness of this routine and reassured me (or himself?), "I try to get six hours of sleep every night." Jay, a Black transplant teacher at another elementary school, left the job at the end of the school year because it required "too much of my time," saying that if the job was a "nine to five, that would be one thing, but I'm working ten hours a day at least." When teachers complained of exhaustion from the long hours they either contemplated leaving for another position or turned towards strategies of self-care, such as treating themselves to a vacation or massage, going out for drinks, or simply watching a favorite television program before going to sleep. When teachers were let out early from a professional development session, or in the case of Nora and Rob's school, when the principal announced that the following year, the school term would end a week early, these concessions were framed as gifts of time to teachers rather than concessions or compromises.

Teachers may have been exhausted or displeased when they deemed particular activities a waste of time, but they mostly took for granted the extended and flexible nature of the working day.⁷ As noted in chapter 1, while charter schools value “teamwork,” “collaboration,” and “fit,” they did so under models of subjectivity that isolated and atomized teachers as a class of workers. In the face of the exacting demands of the charter school environment, teachers were mostly only capable of accommodation, escape, or self-mastery. What is it that drove the administration at typical New Orleans charter schools to push for such an extended working day and why did teachers at these schools seem willing to accept these working hours, even to the point of exhaustion? At each of the schools I observed as well as at various education nonprofits, educators regularly used the expression “these kids” to index the profound social inequities that faced the predominately low-income Black students in New Orleans public schools. This linguistic marker was used in many different ways, each underscoring the ostensibly tremendous need this population had for education-based interventions. While the supposed deficits of “these kids” could be described using the language of “the achievement gap”—that is, the persistent test-score gaps Black students face compared with white children—“these kids” ultimately referred to an indeterminate source for valuing teachers’ labor. However much “these kids” can be used to justify alternative approaches to schooling based on audit cultures, this discourse also bears the mark of culturally arbitrary impositions. Annalise, a Black local who worked to develop an alternative school model counter to a no excuses approach, felt that “these kids” served as a vector for white elitism: “The underlying thing is there are people who believe that white people are simply better role models, period. So these kids need to see how

white people walk, talk, and interact with each other. ‘You need to see how I act, because being like you is not the definition of success.’” However it was used in education reform, “these kids” and the work that was done for them was the coin of the realm, justifying severe audit cultures and the destruction of prior work regimes in the name of children.

The working day of the charter school wasn’t extended because principals and network executives were domineering people who personally profited from the exertions of their teachers. Rather a combination of the discursive framing of the needs of “these kids,” an audit and test-based accountability culture, and charter school contracts with districts worked to produce an impersonal drive for producing results, mostly in the form of higher test scores and school performance scores, which at times included measures like attendance, graduation, and year-to-year growth. Evidence of results could also include narratives of success, which emerged out of school visits, websites and promotional materials, and grant applications for foundation funding. It is easy to sympathize with this drive. The vast majority of teachers and administrators I encountered at these schools sincerely believed in doing all they could to help their students succeed, however they may have defined success. But, by structuring teaching as a kind of labor that satisfied the generation of a particular kind of value, teaching as work took on destructive qualities.⁸

Burnout was a high-priority concern for teachers and school leaders as well as upper management at charter school networks as they faced one of the core contradictions in capitalism—namely, that workers are needed at the same time that their working conditions rob them of the vitality needed to continue their labor.⁹ At all points in the organizational chart, employees of charter school networks were well aware that the exacting demands of their

positions were in conflict with whatever they may have conceived of as a healthy lifestyle. When Jay told me of her decision to leave the classroom at the end of the year, she said, “I just needed to take a break from killing myself.” Rob reflected, “Work life is funny. I feel like work is my life. I talked to my mother about it, she said that’s how it is at first [i.e., work takes over your life before you get experience].” This wasn’t just a matter of the number of hours worked or the zeal with which employees pursued their tasks; this was a sacrificial ethic.

Donovan, a white transplant and the human capital director at one of the charter school networks I observed apologized to me for his illness before I sat down to interview him between his other meetings for the day, saying, “If I was a normal employee, I wouldn’t be here today. The work is so urgent and important that I have to be here.” Donovan suggested that the extensive working day was reinforced by the cultural orientations of both teachers and organizations: “Is it the drive of the employee or the organization or both? I suspect it’s both. I think all orgs that are successful attract a certain kind of employee. Our organization attracts the kind of people that will power through walking pneumonia¹⁰ and be present on the day before the Fourth of July. That’s the nature of the beast.” Note how this framing naturalizes the idea of teachers being a “culture fit” for specific kinds of charter schools.

Donovan knew that this relentless drive was unsustainable in the long run, telling me, “Work-life balance is the million-dollar question in this industry. We work very hard. As a human capital director, I should be advising myself to stay home. . . . How do we create a space where we say it’s OK to call in sick? They [teachers] work just as hard or harder than I do, and they deserve it as much as I do.” Donovan spent a greater part of the year strategizing for how to improve working conditions for teachers, and

crucially, none of these strategies involved working less. Some of the strategies outlined included quality-of-life perks like “on-site car washing . . . dog walking . . . discounts with area gyms . . .” in addition to more serious benefits like “more affordable child care that matches our teachers’ schedules.” Donovan wanted to save his teachers time, saying, “We’re trying to remove those annoying tasks from your daily life. This past year, we had tax help for the first time. I got an email from a high-performing teacher asking for help managing her money.” Donovan recognized that this could appear exploitative but claimed that his network’s dedicated teachers would not be working less anyway: “People say it’s because you want to keep people at the office. Yes, we do! But we know they’re going to stay whether we offer this or not; how do we help them?” These programs all carried with them a concern for making teachers’ working lives less difficult, but they also contained the logic of maximum extraction of value.

The remaining major factor in the extension of the workday was the charter schools’ reliance on youth as a reservoir of energy. Besides race and place of origin, age and experience were the other defining differences between teachers before and after the post-Katrina expansion of charter schools.¹¹ While many considerations of youth perspectives in New Orleans schools focus on students (Michna 2009), we also have to consider teachers under the rubric of youth and youthfulness. More than a statistically significant feature of charter school teachers, youthfulness was part of a powerful ideological structure. Anthropologists have long understood youth to be a plastic cultural category (Bucholtz 2002). The dramatic shift in the demographics of the New Orleans educator workforce has shifted local understandings of the relationship between youth and teaching as a form of labor. While recognizing the coercive means through which

veteran, local, and Black teachers were excluded, it is important to also reckon with the ways that new teaching demographics also transform teaching as a generational phenomenon. The turn to youth by charter schools allows them to mitigate some of the “life-destroying” aspects of their labor regime.

Youthfulness became a highly prized characteristic in the human capital practices of charter schools. There were several institutional incentives for charter management organizations to favor young teachers, including being able pay them lower salaries and offer fewer benefits. Free from satisfying a contract with the teachers’ unions, charter schools were not required to take part in the Teacher Retirement System of Louisiana, meaning that veteran teachers’ retirement benefits would not carry over to charter schools. This served as a disincentive for veteran teachers to look for positions in charter schools and shows how the demographic shift in educators was shaped by our privatized health care and retirement systems. However, youthfulness was also imbued with ideological powers and was associated with a “culture of smartness” (Ho 2009). This could make teachers feel “old” or veteran when they would not otherwise have recognized themselves as such. Nora told me that at her previous position at a traditional public school, “I was the youngest teacher by fifteen years. I’m one of the older teachers at (this school)!” Transplanted from other places, youthful teachers didn’t have the kinds of local connections or family commitments that could compete with their work time. Teachers who stayed long enough to start to have children ran into difficulties negotiating their new families with the demands of school as a workplace. One teacher in particular, Kelly, a white transplant, recounted to me how she timed her pregnancy to have the baby at the beginning of summer break to avoid missing school time to be with the newborn. During the following school year, she struggled to get legally mandated accommodations

such as a room for pumping breast milk and felt the school director to be unsympathetic to her burdens as a mother. Kelly told me, “I asked him what he would do if his wife were in the situation I am, and he would make ridiculous, stupid comments like, ‘I would never let my wife be a teacher and have a baby!’”

While perceptions of the benefits of youthfulness played out in many complicated ways in the day-to-day operations of charter schools, they also structured hiring and retention processes in meaningful ways. In my time in New Orleans I interviewed administrators who explained that young teachers didn’t ask when school got out at career fairs, that they worked longer hours, that they didn’t question managerial authority, and that their lack of familial attachments tended to increase their investment in workplace status games as a source of social belonging. Kerry, a charter CEO, told me, when hiring, “we pretty much select for people that fit in culturally, and they know they fit in, and it makes them feel special.” Youthfulness was a key element in the construction of teachers and educators as working subjects, endowing them with a pliability and sense of attachment that enabled new intensities of working culture in New Orleans charter schools.

The working day is a field of struggle in which value is generated, subjectivities are formed, and rights are contested. However, the extension of the working day isn’t the only means by which charter schools attempted to distinguish themselves from traditional charter schools. Charter schools in New Orleans have also worked to “professionalize” teaching as a means of shaping their teachers as particular kinds of workers: professionals.

PROFESSIONALIZATION

When my informants working in schools were critical of the work regime of charters, it was mainly in terms of sustainability and

capacity, a question of strategy and efficacy. The primary question was whether teachers worked too much or too little, too hard or not hard enough. Teachers, school leaders, nonprofit workers, and entrepreneurs were all uniformly committed to the idea that some species of “hard work” was necessary to serve “these kids.” Zadie, a white local and an administrator at one of my field sites, was particularly enthusiastic when describing the unique work environment at her school,

I would not go back to working at a traditional public school. . . . Everyone is here for a greater purpose, and everyone is aware of the sacrifices that must be made, and they take joy in that sacrifice, being together and feeling like we’re working for something. In traditional schools, people stopped believing that what they did could make a difference. That’s it: people are willing to make a sacrifice, and willing to improve themselves. I mean—have you hung out at a traditional public school?

No one, not Zadie nor any of the other employees at her school or others, ever questioned whether we should consider teaching “work” at all or raised the question of whether this particular form of “work” was the right way to organize the pedagogical development of our society’s children—with understandable reason.

Americans have longstanding commitments to understanding the self as a worker and teachers in American public schools generally and in New Orleans in particular have organized for many decades to be recognized as workers and won many concessions in so doing. Since the nineteenth century, teachers in public schools have been caught between two poles—that of being an occupation of care, feminized and craft-like, and that of being professionalized and scientific, masculinized and industrial. While post-Katrina New Orleans is a dramatic example of moving from one pole to the other, there have been multiple waves of transition

between the two in American history, typically resulting in the displacement of female and racially marginalized teachers in favor of professionalized educators. Embracing teaching as work has been used to exclude educators as unqualified and unfit, but it has also served as the basis for union organizing to protect these same teachers and build a power base among Black communities in New Orleans. Work is not uniformly oppressive in its effects, but it is nearly universally regarded as an appropriate and desirable framework for organizing school life.¹² By focusing so intently on how teachers should work, charter schools also end up changing what kind of people teachers should be. Therefore, professionalizing teaching is not a matter of colorless organization, it is the grounds for many layers of subject making, racialization, and class conflict.

It can be difficult to make a critique of work that is composed of more than a criticism of working conditions, one that does not valorize people who work for being workers as it decries their exploitation.¹³ It is important to keep this antiproductivist and antiwork perspective in mind when analyzing the working lives and conditions of teachers in New Orleans charter schools. The point of analyzing the working day is not to sympathize with the benighted charter school teacher's exhaustion or exploitation, though such sympathy may have a place in both political advocacy in education and in ethnographic ethics. By scrutinizing the professionalizing discourses of charter schools, we can point out how they work to exclude certain kinds of racialized and class subjects from teaching positions while privileging others—important political and analytic work that has already been done by others (Buras et al. 2015). In taking antiproductivist stances, we can appreciate how these dynamics of exploitation and exclusion are both rooted in and productive of the relations structuring work

itself, and we can understand how an embrace of work is one of the key factors in the changing shape of teachers in New Orleans schools as racialized, localized, and generational subjects.

One of the central criticisms of Teach for America and other alternative certification organizations as well as charter schools themselves has been that they “deprofessionalize” teaching by bringing in “talent” who have not been trained in schools of education or traditional teacher-preparation programs, who have fewer years of experience, and who stay in the classroom for less time—in classrooms that generally have not been unionized.¹⁴

While these critiques put valuable attention on the way that charter school-based reforms have circumvented the traditional hierarchies of teacher preparation, characterizing these agendas as “deprofessionalizing” can obscure as much as it reveals. Staking such a strong claim on the grounds of professionalism buys into the same productivist tendencies as charter proponents themselves have. I have no doubt that many of those deploying this kind of critique are sincere in their beliefs. However, such investments represent an analytical failure to see the productive effects of charter schools’ attempts to reshape the teaching profession. It would be more accurate and effective to frame the human capital practices of charter schools and education-reform organizations as a case of “hyperprofessionalization.” This dynamic should be analyzed in a way that is critical of attachments to the professional status of teachers and other education workers.

Advocates of charter schools recognize the kinds of demands that are placed upon teachers there but believe that ultimately charters are better places to work than traditional public schools that serve low-income Black and brown students. Eli, a white local and a director at an education nonprofit in New Orleans, had been

a teacher at a traditional public school before working to expand charter schools, and, as he described reformers' efforts to raise professional standards in schools, he used his experience to draw the following contrast:

The things that keep people in their jobs are the same in schools as elsewhere. A culture of high expectations where people feel supported, strong professional development, stretch opportunities, clear goals and feedback, incentives to stay, monetary and nonmonetary rewards. This is the same thing you would find in the private sector. There are opportunities for advancement. Schools that are better at retention do that. There wasn't a lot of turnover at [the traditional public school], but it was a terrible place to work and low performing.

Here, Eli exemplifies the ways that teaching can be conceived of as an arena within which to develop one's own human capital, a step in a career path rather than a simple calling or caring labor. Eli was adamant that teachers should be shaped as professionals rather than workers, explaining, "I would say it's problematic to think of teachers as labor. You don't think of doctors and lawyers as labor; you think of factory workers as labor. If you want teachers to be innovative, thoughtful, resourceful professionals, then making rules about how long they should work every day and exactly how they should be paid and fired and when is just sort of antithetical to that; you would never do that to what we think of as a profession." Whereas the AFT defines professionalism in terms of the rights of teachers, the concessions they are able to win from employers, and protections over their expert knowledge, Eli sees professionalism in terms of flexibility, career pathing, and information flow, using the private sector rather than the public sector (which is the largest source of union employment in the United States) as a model.

In embracing professionalism, both critics and proponents of charter schools spoke of “elevating” the teaching profession, indexing the kinds of demonization of teachers analyzed in chapter 1. One of the concrete ways this goal manifested was in discussions of how to give teachers recognition for increased mastery and progress. In unionized schools, such recognition, in the form of increased salary and rights according to tenure proceedings and seniority schedules, is often baked into the contract. However, at charter schools, no such progression was formalized, and methods of recognition were more fragmented and haphazard. Lisa, a white transplant and an entrepreneur who consulted on teacher professional development, told me about one effort to award teachers with digital badges like Xbox achievements to recognize their successes. But she was deeply skeptical of the effort: “I think it’s a great idea for kids—but for teachers? . . . We’re trying to elevate the profession, and I don’t want to treat teachers like children. I want serious elevation of my professional growth, recognition that feels authentic. I don’t think badges is the solution.”¹⁵ It was possible for both charter advocates and critics to claim the mantle of professionalism because they were both using this signifier to pursue different ends and maneuver in different discursive territories. On the one hand, unionized teachers use professionalism to protect teachers as a class and ensure certain rights whereas, on the other, charter advocates use professionalism in an atomized politics of recognition.

One of the ways that technology-focused reformers discussed teacher professionalism was under the rubric of “unbundling the teacher.” Unbundling is a tool they used to take a complex problem and break it down into its component parts. They would talk about the teacher itself as a problem that needed to be unbundled. Lisa told me, “I think the role [of teacher] is unsustainable.

We need to rethink the role, and then we'll see greater retention. . . . We expect teachers to be everything, and we need to think about specialization and professionalization." Campbell explained to me her belief that teachers were asked to do too much in the current charter school environment, that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to teacher roles was not adequate to the challenge of education the New Orleans public school population, and that new technologies would enable the role of the teacher to be radically redesigned to better fit the individual talents of teachers themselves as well as the needs of students. Monica, a white transplant and a facilitator at Incubator, a startup I discuss further in chapter 4, was particularly excited about a school being developed by a former participant in Incubator programming, where the idea of unbundling was the foundation of the school model.

Technology is one of the primary mediums through which attempts at unbundling are executed. Many charter schools in New Orleans have expanded their use of "blended learning" programs, including some of my field sites as well as one of the new school experiments I discuss in chapter 4. In a blended learning environment, students used internet and digital media to navigate academic content at an individualized pace. There are various methods for implementing this basic structure, but the examples I observed usually involved students completing a selection of "learning modules" while the teacher used the time previously spent on facilitating the whole class to take data from these programs to target specific students for interventions, requiring a different skill set from educators. This model promised greater personalization for both teachers and students, but schools also used it to justify a higher teacher-student ratio. An informant familiar with the model expressed some skepticism as to district and network motivations before affirming their support, stating,

“The district is interested in cost savings, ‘How can we leverage technology to reduce staff and lower the budget?’ I felt ambivalent about that, but I no longer feel ambivalent, because we are dealing with a crisis, and we do not have enough quality teachers. We have a very real talent problem. If this helps us keep good teachers and reduce poor performing teachers, awesome. . . . Publicly, the plan is about personalized learning, privately, it’s about budget.” At the same time that “unbundling” could be a means of shaping the teacher’s role according to personalized aptitudes and needs, it could also be a vector for austerity.

Techno-professionalism ultimately entailed a level of collaboration and surveillance that employees at charter schools felt distinguished their work environment from traditional public schools. Hayden, a hiring manager at a charter school network, used neighboring Jefferson Parish as a contrast:

We lost a teacher at one school to Jefferson Parish because she wanted to be in a more traditional public school setting . . . where she can close her door and be an all-star and not have to worry about collaborating and sharing, and maybe that fits a little bit more to her lifestyle. We lost another teacher over requirements to teach and develop other teachers. She told me if we just left her alone to teach, she’d stay . . . Yes Orleans Parish and Jefferson Parish are separate districts, but now they’re like two different worlds entirely.

The trope of “closing the door” was used by Kim, principal of a school in Hayden’s network, when she discussed her experiences working in Orleans Parish before the storm. (Several other educators I spoke with who had become teachers through TFA and other alternative certification organizations before charter schools became prevalent also used this trope). Closing the door was a term they used to describe their isolation and abandonment in traditional public schools, whereas charter schools emphasized

“open doors,” constant collaboration, and frequent observations of classrooms by administrators and other teachers. As a novice ethnographer I was nervous about intruding upon classrooms and disrupting teachers and students, but teachers were so used to being observed by a number of different individuals that they were openly indifferent to my presence in the classroom. I was just another visitor passing through and, indeed, many of the classrooms I visited had dedicated desks for observers with folders including the day’s lesson plans, forms for giving feedback, and lists of classroom rules and procedures. To be a professional in these settings meant to be open and collaborative.

There were times however, when techno-professionalism, collaboration, surveillance, and unbundling combined to turn teachers into a kind of prosthetic of the teaching process. Rob was a first-year teacher during my fieldwork and, like many first-year teachers, struggled with classroom management and lesson delivery. As such, Rob was frequently visited by his administrative coach for observation. About halfway through the school year, the coach decided to try out a new system called “real-time teacher coaching” whereby the teacher would wear an earpiece and the coach would give corrective instructions as the teacher delivered their lesson. Earlier in the year, Rob told me, “I don’t really feel like myself in the classroom,” and he talked about being nervous about the real-time coaching in his grade team meeting before the observation. I arranged with Rob to come observe during this session, but the coach asked that I not attend so that Rob would be more focused while trying out the new technology. In the grade team meeting following the observation, Rob spoke with the other teachers in his grade about the stresses of this kind of observation. Rob said, “I usually feel good after an observation, but I cried after the first session. . . . I didn’t like it when [the consultant from

the real-time coaching company] was telling [the coach] what to tell me . . . I don't like doing things that go against what I want to do." Apparently, the coach was being trained on how to use the real time coaching technology at the same time, adding another layer to the prosthetic professional rabbit hole.

I can imagine that some schools find the rapid feedback cycles of real-time coaching to be very useful in improving teacher performance. On the other hand, it's clear that Rob was profoundly stressed by the experience. The technological mediation of his observation can come off as a bit surreal. What is important to recognize here is the way that this technology accelerated an already existing vision of professionalism in charter schools and facilitated the employment of Rob and other teachers as a kind of prosthetic to experimental visions of "what works." I would argue that this techno-prosthetic professionalism is not a break with previous regimes of professionalism in traditional or charter schools but an intensification of it. Technology enables particular manifestations of "rendering someone prosthetic," but the core dynamic is social, political, and organizational.¹⁶ Rob's distress however, isn't just because the technological mediation of feedback was unfamiliar or confusing. It can also be connected to his feelings of not "being like himself" in the classroom. At the same time that Rob was rendered prosthetic through devices like real-time coaching, charter schools also trafficked in discourses that personalized work and intensified the affective demands of being a teacher and a worker. These demands existed in tension with techno-professionalism and are the subject of the next section.

THE JOY OF FITTING IN

Despite the many attempts to professionalize and standardize teaching throughout American history, the job has persistently

carried heavy connotations of care and femininity. The veteran teachers that were fired en masse after Katrina were overwhelmingly Black women. Critiques of their dismissal balked at the violations of their rights; they underscored that these women were not only the “backbone of the Black middle class” but were also the proper stewards of the mostly low-income Black children attending New Orleans Public Schools. In chapter 1, we found that veteran teachers spoke of special relationships with students and parents, intimate connections to the neighborhoods and communities that their schools served, and of their long-term investments in their schools. These emotional bonds existed alongside and in spite of the labor regime of public school teaching between the end of official segregation and Hurricane Katrina. Charter schools make affective demands of teachers as workers and professionals with greater intensity than do traditional public schools, and crucially these affective imperatives are racialized in such a way as to subtly exclude many of the veteran Black teachers that formed the majority of the teaching corps before the post-Katrina reforms. These changing demands on teachers aligned with broader transformations in neoliberal economies, service and professional labor, and entrepreneurial spirits and conflicted with the kinds of working subjectivities veteran teachers had been accustomed to.

It would be fair to say that even though teachers in charter schools were younger and more often white and not from New Orleans, they still formed powerful affective bonds with the students and communities they served. Teachers often referred to their students as “my kids,” and even years after leaving the classroom, managers at education nonprofits would still affectionately reminisce about their favorite students. Walking around the offices of education nonprofits in New Orleans (where many employees were former teachers), you would see pictures of

students on cubicle walls along with classroom paraphernalia. What was distinct about the charter school work environment was the way it made affective demands on teachers as an explicit and routine professional duty.¹⁷ In the “closed doors” narrative of teaching, teachers were “left alone” so long as they satisfied certain requirements, but in charter schools, collaboration and fit in unique school cultures required affective self-management in new ways.¹⁸ Recalling the example of *The Disciplined Teacher*, the idea that teachers should blend their personal and professional lives begins to make more sense. There is a way that this idea was packaged with the ideological notion of “loving what you do” to make it seem like work was an extension of personal preferences and fantasies of life trajectories, but these broader trends in service work point to the possibility that this blending was a way for work itself to colonize and shape these preferences and desires.¹⁹ Teachers in charter schools don’t just face increasing demands on their time, as discussed earlier in the chapter. The hyperprofessionalization they undergo also makes demands upon their affect and subjectivity in ways that repel teachers accustomed to previous labor regimes.

Many of the school administrators and human capital managers I spoke with at charter school networks expressed a genuine desire to increase teacher diversity in the schools and to hire more veteran teachers. They claimed that the problem wasn’t that they were rejecting veteran Black teachers outright but that Black teachers “just don’t apply” or that they “don’t work out” when they are hired because they don’t “fit” with school culture. This lack of fit was often framed in terms of veterans not wanting to work the kinds of hours and schedule that charter schools demanded or not wanting to participate in collaborative activities. Zadi recognized that they had a problem bringing on a diverse set of

teachers to their staff, telling me, “I want a school full of people that want to be moms, that want to stay, and that doesn’t happen if we just hire young transplants. But I’m not getting the people. I talk to Donovan, and I ask, ‘Why aren’t people applying here?’ He says there is a stigma about our school—that it is temporary, that it is run by foreigners, that people don’t understand our kids, so I don’t want to work there.” Rather than imagine these reactions to charter school work cultures as a kind of stubbornness or unwillingness to change old routines, we should consider that, in part, these veteran teachers didn’t apply or “things didn’t work out” because they resisted the affective demands of day-to-day work in charter schools.

Charter schools couldn’t just make school culture and collaborative work appear through decree—they had to create rituals and practices to shape teacher enthusiasm and assent to these modes of professionalism. One of the rituals that staff at many charter schools across the city were asked to participate in was something that was often called “staff standup” or “morning meeting.” Typically, at each school, all school staff would have a ten-to-fifteen-minute meeting in the cafeteria, gym, or theater. Staff would stand in a large circle facing each other and school leaders and teachers would share announcements and issues of concern. On Mondays during football season, there was often talk about the Saints. A crucial part of these meetings were affirmations, whereby staff would give “shout outs” to particular teachers or staff who exemplified school culture or were especially helpful. Often these affirmations were tied to specific values in the official school culture, such as “grit” (e.g., “Shout out to Rob for showing grit. He had an honest conversation with me before real-time teacher coaching”). Kerry’s school had the most intense version of morning meeting I observed. Kerry and the leadership

at their schools insist that “adult culture should be the same as kid culture,” and thus when teachers broke up into small circles for part of the meeting, they addressed each other, clapped, used turn and talks, and other classroom techniques that they would use with children all with a relentlessly positive and energetic tone.

Zadie dealt with a staff that was less enthusiastic about these morning rituals. As a new school leader, Zadie was eager to make her imprint on school culture and was astounded by the lack of purpose teachers had in morning meetings, saying, “Some people thought we did staff standup in the morning so I can see who is on time. That’s not why we do it! I could have you punch a card. People didn’t understand. You have to communicate the purpose.” When I interviewed Zadie, she had just finished hiring teachers for the new school year and was excited to bring in people who fit her vision for a positive work environment: “Hiring for next year is my first chance to shape exactly what I want this building to be next year. . . . I want people who are incredibly positive, incredibly resilient, and people who do not speak negatively about past jobs or students. . . . That means hiring for people who are able to stay emotionally constant when the work gets tough.” Zadie told me that she was happy with the composition of the new staff and that they only lost people who were not asked to return or who were not good fits.

Zadie emphasized that even though some of the people that left were “good teachers,” they were not a good fit for the school culture she was trying to build, telling me, “As a school leader you want to have a strong enough school culture that people can identify for themselves if they fit in or if they don’t. And if you don’t, no hard feelings. Go have fun somewhere else.” One of the other teachers on Rob’s grade team was a young Black transplant who was recognized among their peers to be the strongest teacher on that grade

level, but this teacher clashed with administration because they did not adopt the classroom management techniques Rob and the other first-year teacher in the grade were advised to employ. This teacher felt that the standard classroom discipline techniques of the school were cold and oppressive. They left over the summer because they no longer fit with a school culture in which they felt they had to “flip a switch to teach and demand authority.” One of the affective demands of teaching in charter schools like *Zadie’s* is the desire to fit, the ability to express enthusiasm for a unique school culture, and crucially, to present oneself as the kind of person that aligns with the value and the mission of the school.

Hayden, the human capital manager at a different school network, agreed that school leaders were focused on positivity. I spoke to him about one of his network principals emphasizing the need for positive attitudes among teachers and Hayden responded, “When I heard you say the [other] principal said ‘positive,’ I knew exactly what that person meant, just with different words. It’s team player, have a smile on their face, bringing a lot to the table, and things like that. It’s great to have 100 percent compliance on that.” Hayden admitted that discipline and authority underpinned this logic, continuing,

But if you have someone who has great results, will you sacrifice that if someone is a little bit more of a prickly pear to deal with, for lack of a better description? . . . They’re not always on board with everything at the school, the rah-rahs, the pep rallies the things like that—over the person that may be a first-year grad from TFA and will basically let you do and say whatever you want to them and they’re going to do it because they’re that type of person, but now they’re getting 20 points less on their scores with their kids because they don’t have that teaching experience. It’s definitely one of the things my school leaders look for—are you going to bring something positive to school culture? They’ll definitely place a higher value on

someone who is trying to get better and is positive than someone who may get the best test scores but doesn't play well with others. To use a sports analogy, we're not building an all-star team, but guys that work well together. Our schools are in that camp where we would take that positive person over someone who is draining the culture.

Zadie and Hayden show us that positivity was more than an externalized display of affectively legible gestures, expressions, or attitudes. Positivity connoted a kind of compliance and flexibility desired by school management, as well as a personalized enthusiasm for the particular school culture.

Annalise, a Black local and school founder who was in the process of designing a school model explicitly counter to the dominant trends in no excuses charter schools, was highly skeptical of fit, particularly as a tool of race and class reproduction. "Fit is just another word for 'You're not enough like me. I want to hire doppelgangers of myself.' Even when I do see Black people in some of these schools, many of them are, um, cognitive replications of the school leader or CMO leader. . . . Fit means I need to reduce the chance of being challenged out of fear it might spread." The idea that school leaders and hiring managers might want to hire people "like themselves" has a commonsense quality to it. When I asked Donovan, the human capital director at Zadie's network, about the ways that social network effects might be hampering efforts at increasing teacher diversity, he somewhat defensively assured me that this is something you see "in every industry." But as decades of research on racialization have shown, identification of likeness is a very complex and multilayered process mediated by cultural practices and instructional imperatives. There is no particular reason in the abstract that school leaders should want to hire people like themselves. It is the

particular labor regime of charter schools in New Orleans as well as broader intensifications of affective demands in professional settings that drive this tendency.

These reflections should cause us to reframe our understanding of what it means for veteran teachers, local teachers, or Black teachers to not fit in at a charter school. School leaders at charter schools will insist that these are personalized misalignments with school culture, in other words, “this just wasn’t the place for them.” What these characterizations show us instead is that no excuses-style charter schools aren’t explicitly excluding these kinds of teachers; instead, they have constructed a work culture in which the affective demands of the workplace exclude those who do not conform to particular modes of professional subjectivity. When veteran teachers refuse to apply or refuse to conform, they are resisting new kinds of demands of an encroaching work culture, even if only to hold up the expectations of the old one.

The work ethic at charter schools is not just a matter of working longer hours or with more intensity, it is also a vehicle for new professional subjectivities and affective demands in the school as a workplace. Critically, it is one of the means through which Black, local, and veteran teachers continue to be excluded from charter schools.²⁰ It is tempting to respond to attacks on the work ethic solely in a producerist vein and defend the record and capabilities of all of the kinds of teachers that have been excluded and maligned in the post-Katrina school system. This is important work, and scholars, educators, and activists have been doing it since the major wave of reforms began. But it shouldn’t be the only critique of the work sensibilities and structures of charter schools.

When I began my fieldwork, I imagined that I would conduct a labor ethnography of teachers in charter schools in order to

take teachers seriously as workers and that I could take the same kinds of analytics applied to factories, offices, and entrepreneurs to the school building. I believed that doing so would be an ethically appropriate way of illuminating how the work cultures of charter schools were racialized and would respect the efforts of both those excluded from and empowered by education reform. However, during the course of my fieldwork and post-field reflections, it became apparent to me that I, like many of the educators I observed, was too committed to work, too enthralled by its dignity and importance as a social form. I've come to think that the problem with teaching in charter schools is that it is too much like work: too professional and too regulated.

This isn't to argue that we should go back to some idyllic pastoral vision of community schooling but that it might be productive to question the place of work in schooling. I have no idea what a school that was less entangled in work and the work ethic might look like, but I think the utopian question has a provocative political utility. I've come to now think that taking teachers seriously as workers means taking work less seriously. A good starting point would be for teachers in charters to all become unionized and to demand fewer working hours and stricter boundaries between their professional and personal lives. Until that day in which labor is abolished and teaching is freed from its strictures, the very least we can do is limit its hold on our pedagogical and vital capacities.