

To Leave or To Stay: The Stories of Five Elementary School Teachers' Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This study explores teacher retention and teacher resilience in the United States through the stories of five teachers. The researcher presents the research in two manuscripts. *Finding My Way through Teaching: A Critical Autoethnographic Play* combines critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) with autoethnography (Ellis, 2004) to examine the author's personal journey as a teacher in a private school, a public school, and a public school in Central America. The research is presented as a one-act play with scenes focusing on conversations with parents, principals, and students, along with scenes examining each situation that take the audience through the internal monologue of the researcher's decision making process to move schools, stay in a school, leave a school, and question their ability or willingness to return to K-12 schooling. *Building Relationships: The Stories of Four Small Urban School Teachers* shares the stories of four veteran elementary school teachers, teachers who have taught for more than five years, from Parker¹ City Public Schools. This study uses a case study approach with recorded dialogic interviews as data (e.g., Kvale, 1996; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The stories the teachers tell point to the importance of building and maintaining relationships with students, other teachers, and administration, as one of the key factors for overcoming the challenges of working in a small urban school division and one of the key factors for changing schools or remaining in a school throughout their careers.

¹ Pseudonym

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This study explores teacher retention and teacher resilience in the United States through the stories of five teachers. The researcher presents the research in two manuscripts: *Finding My Way through Teaching: A Critical Autoethnographic Play* and *Building Relationships: The Stories of Four Small Urban School Teachers*. In *Finding My Way*, the author uses critical autoethnography to examine their own journey as a teacher in a private school, a public school, and a public school in Central America. The findings are presented as a one-act play with scenes focusing on conversations with parents, principals, and students, along with scenes examining each situation, taking the audience through the internal monologue of the author's decision making process to move schools, stay in a school, leave a school, and question their ability or willingness to return to K-12 schooling. In *Building Relationships*, the researcher shares the stories of four veteran elementary school teachers, teachers who have taught for more than five years, from Parker² City Public Schools. This study uses a case study approach with recorded dialogic interviews as data. The stories the teachers tell point to the importance of building and maintaining relationships with students, other teachers, and administration, as one of the key factors for overcoming the challenges of working in a small urban school division and one of the key factors for changing schools or remaining in a school throughout their careers.

² Pseudonym

Dedication

To God who gave me wings, to Mom and Dad who taught me how to fly, and to Krysten,
Katlyn, Melissa, and Gerry who cheered the loudest along the way.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I grew up in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. Every summer I would go into the capital two or three times a month to visit the tourist sites thinking to myself, “*This* is D.C. And while it definitely isn’t the largest urban city in the world, it *is* the most important!” I never strayed from the row of monuments and museums that I could once recognize with my eyes closed. When I became a teacher, I took my students to these same places and frequently visited on my own knowing that I would inevitably end up with a few lesson plan ideas out of the process. Even as a teacher, I never once stepped outside the comfortable familiarity of the monuments and museums to see what life was like beyond the few blocks I knew so well. After all, Washington, D.C. schools were urban! And I knew exactly what that meant.

In 2013, I began a doctoral program at Virginia Tech in curriculum and instruction with a concentration in English as a Second Language (ESL) and multicultural education. I enrolled in ESL teaching methods classes and the internships associated with the coursework. The first day of class, I found out that the internships would take place in Parker City³, Virginia.

Parker City? Like the Parker City that is in Southwest Virginia?!?! I have to drive to Parker City how many times a week? I started this program to learn how to teach ESL⁴ students. There are plenty of ESL students in Blacksburg. They are the sons and daughters of international graduate students. They need help learning English too. Why do I have to drive an hour away to do the same thing that I can do here? What makes Parker City so special? We only read books on teaching in urban settings in class. What does urban have to do with Parker City? How are they connected? Where are the parks, monuments, and memorials? And no, that one random

³ Parker City is a pseudonym.

⁴ This paragraph is a direct copy from my personal notes written at the time. While names for the group of students who are learning English have changed and will continue to change, students who are learning English in schools currently are referred to as English Learners (EL).

Star does not count. Where is the cultural center where I can go and see plays, musicals, and art galleries? There has to be more than just the Parker City Civic Center. And ultimately, why do any of these questions matter? If the program is ESL and multicultural education, why do I have to intern in an “urban” school division? Why Parker City? Why?

This rant, in all of its forms and variations, spun through my head for the first two years of my doctoral studies. It consumed my thoughts, my conversations, and soured my relationship with Parker City and with the program in which I was enrolled. The idea that Parker City was urban was an impossibility. I could see similarities between some of the concepts identified in the textbooks used in class and Parker City, but I struggled to marry the image of Parker City with the many images of urban cities I had in my head. After two years, I was tired of being upset about Parker City. I was tired of hearing Parker City Public School (PCPS) teachers and interns talk about specific incidents that proved how much more urban their experience was than the other teachers in the class. I could not stand to listen to the discussions any longer. I had to do something to dissipate the anger. I needed to understand “urban” and these urban teachers.

Statement of the Problem

The United States Department of Education (USDOE) classifies PCPS as a small urban-city school division. Urban schools face a unique combination of challenges not always seen in suburban, town, or rural school divisions. For the last few years, PCPS has been facing unusually high mid-year teacher turnover, a phenomenon not seen in the surrounding areas. With this high turnover rate, teachers who choose to stay in the system carry increased loads while still confronting the challenges of working in an urban school division. While surveys provide data from teachers who choose to leave the system (e.g., national, state, or division teacher exit surveys), data gathered from veteran teachers tends to focus on performance outcomes for

students rather than the teachers themselves (e.g., United Federation of Teachers researchers Annual Teacher Survey).

Conceptual Framework

Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education and a social movement first described by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Critical pedagogy problematizes systemic injustices resulting from the unequal distribution of power and the impact these injustices continue to have on the vulnerable specifically with respect to “traditional” schooling (Apple, 2013; Freire, 1974; Giroux, 2011; hooks, 2003; McLaren, 2010; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). One of the key aspects of critical pedagogy is the development of critical consciousness.

Developing Critical Consciousness: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression

Every person has the potential to be an agent of change who can influence the direction of the world and society. While it may seem obvious, the first step in becoming an agent of change is becoming aware of one’s position in the system. To maximize the influence an individual may have, people must not only be aware of, but also challenge, their environment and the systems designed to prevent the growth of many individuals (Freire, 1974). In becoming aware of the system, individuals can change it:

Because they are not limited to the natural (biological) sphere but participate in the creative dimension as well, men [sic] can intervene in reality in order to change it.

Inheriting acquired experience, creating and re-creating, interacting themselves into their context, responding to its challenges, objectifying themselves, discerning, transcending, men [sic] enter into the domain which is theirs exclusively. (Freire, 1974, p. 4)

Freire refers to this process of developing critical awareness through interaction, response, and reflection as *conscientização* (Freire, 1970).

Conscientização, or critical consciousness, is not a process limited to either the oppressed or the oppressors, but is a process in which both must actively be involved. Through the process of conscientization, the oppressors and the oppressed can challenge the systemic injustices to which they previously subscribed blindly (Freire, 1970; Macedo, 1994). The purpose of an education rooted in critical pedagogy principles is to engage students in *conscientização* (Freire, 1985; Gruenewald, 2003). *Conscientização* is essential to engage fully in the world around us and in the classroom.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of elementary school teachers with respect to teacher retention. This study explores the experiences of five teachers through critical autoethnography and through case studies.

Manuscript 1

The following questions will guide the critical autoethnography: Why did I decide to stop working in elementary schools? What critical incidences caused me to change schools and ultimately to leave the profession of teaching in an elementary school setting?

Manuscript 2

The following questions will guide the case studies: How do veteran PCPS teachers overcome the daily challenges of working in a Title I school in a small urban school division? What are the catalysts for veteran PCPS teachers to leave the profession, move schools or school divisions, or stay in a school?

Definition of Urban

The USDOE classifies school divisions and schools. The categories are not fixed. The categories, and the school divisions that fit into each category, change over time as areas

develop, population increases or decreases, and population density changes. In past decades, the USDOE classified public schools in the United States into four main categories: city, urban fringe, town, and rural. While the two subcategories for each category provided additional information and detail regarding to each of these areas, the categories were insufficient. New urban-centric categories and subcategories created in 2006 use the 2000 census data specifically to better define rural areas, but also to provide additional population or distance-based guidelines for the other major categories (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

With the new classification system, schools in the United States are currently classified into one of four major categories - city, suburb, town, and rural - with each category being subsequently subdivided into three subcategories. Membership in each category is determined by the school's physical address and is based on proximity to a major city or urban cluster, population, and population density. Urban, or city, school divisions are subcategorized into large, population over 250,000 people; midsize, population between 100,000 and 250,000 people; and small, population fewer than 100,000 people. Population statistics drive city and suburb sub-classifications; however, city schools are distinct because they must be located inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city. (U.S. Department of Education, 2012)

Procedures and Methodology

Manuscript 1: Critical Autoethnography

For the critical autoethnography, I spent about one year writing down liminal moments from my teaching career that were both positive and negative. After collecting the stories, I chose only the stories that related to why I chose to move schools, stay in a school, or leave the profession. I combined my love of theater and the idea that autoethnography may be performed in a one-act play that tells my stories and examines them.

Manuscript 2: Case Study

For the case studies, I contacted teachers in Parker City Public Schools who had been teaching in the system for five or more years. Each of the four teacher-collaborators participated in a dialogic interview, an unstructured interview guided by the teacher-collaborator. I recorded, transcribed, and analyzed each dialogic interview. While the interviews were unstructured, all four of the teacher-collaborators discussed similar themes.

Significance of the Study

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing researchers is the accurate portrayal of someone else's story (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). From the day we are born, people tell us to empathize with others, not just sympathize with them. Yet as researchers, we need to resist the temptation to pretend that our individual experiences are the same or are equal to the experiences of anyone else (Liston, 2004). Every person has a uniquely individual experience of life; the lens through which they see and experience life is shaped over time producing an equally unique viewpoint that cannot be replicated or fully experienced by another individual. The desire to fully experience life or a life event as someone else has experienced it is simply unattainable, and the desire or attempt to empathize with others, equating their experiences to our own, reduces the uniqueness of what they have experienced (Liston, 2004), stripping the other person of their individuality.

Manuscript 1: Critical Autoethnography

Critical autoethnography allows me to tell my own story, using my own words in the way that I feel most comfortable (Choi, 2016). Little research exists that shows the ups and downs of an individual person's journey as a K-12 teacher in the United States. This piece adds to that body of research in a unique way through a one-act play.

Manuscript 2: Case Study

It is the ultimate challenge of the researcher to portray accurately someone else's story. The case studies, using dialogic interviews as data, allow for the voice of the teacher-collaborators to be the focal point. The teacher-collaborators lead the interviews through their own stories that they shared without prompting, giving them an authentic and organic feel. Additionally, most research on urban schools focuses on large urban school divisions. These case studies will add to an essential research topic as it focuses on teachers who teach in a small urban setting.

Limitations of the Study

Manuscript 1: Critical Autoethnography

With critical autoethnography, I have privileged access to my participant's life, my life. I infer myself from the world and have access to my life only as I see and experience it, which is a limiting factor. As I examine myself through my life story though, I am not the only character; I do not live in isolation. My portrayal of others and my interpretation and analysis of them are one-sided. Despite taking into account my personal biases, my own personal position affects the way I represent the other characters in my life throughout the data collection and data analysis processes. Ethically I am obliged to question whether I should give these other individuals in my stories the opportunity to read and contribute their personal view of the stories presented (Ellis, 1999, 2000; Wall, 2008).

Manuscript 2: Case Study

The collaborators themselves and the stories they choose to share limit the case studies. With a dialogic interview, the collaborators determine the direction of the conversation. As the collaborators have chosen to stay in PCPS for five or more years, our dialogues may tend to

focus on positive aspects of the school and school culture that draw them to return year to year instead of negative ones that would cause them to leave. Because the research may stay on these positive aspects, the collaborators may be more open and honest about their experiences without fear of rejection or retaliation from the local administration.

Organization of the Study

This study contains into two manuscripts, a critical autoethnography and a case study, and a final concluding chapter.

Manuscript 1: Critical Autoethnography

The critical autoethnography is a play. It begins with an introduction that provides background information about me to the reader, which may or may not be included as a part of the play itself.

Manuscript 2: Case Study

The case study manuscript explores the experiences of four small urban school teachers through a traditional piece with an introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion.

Final Concluding Chapter

This piece reflects on the initial concerns about the urbanity of Parker City and the new understandings developed through the research of “urban” and Parker City.

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Chapter 2: Finding My Way through Teaching: A Critical Autoethnographic Play

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Abstract

This study uses critical autoethnography to explore the author's personal journey as an elementary school teacher for three years in the United States and three years in Central America. Presented as a one-act play, this critical autoethnography is comprised of a prologue, seven scenes, and an epilogue. The scenes allow the reader to follow the author through her teaching experiences in a private school, a public school, and a public school in Central America. The scenes focus on conversations with the author's parents, principals, and students, along with scenes that examine each situation and take the audience through the internal monologue of the author's decision making process to move schools, stay in a school, leave a school, and question her ability or willingness to return to K-12 schooling.

Introducing the Playwright

Teaching has been my passion for as long as I can remember. As I finished my senior year of college and contemplated what the next step was going to be, I decided to put off the real world for another year, get a master's degree, and become an elementary school teacher. After a year of student teaching in upper-middle class schools in northern Virginia, I felt prepared for what might lie ahead. I was confident that, after 17 years as a student and one year as a student teacher, I knew all that I needed to know about teaching. Little did I know that being a good student does not mean you know how to be a good teacher (Lortie, 1975). As I entered the world of teaching, I began to discover my teaching style and to realize that despite my education and despite my students' growth, not all schools are a good match for all teachers.

I Moved

My first year teaching, I taught in a private, Catholic school. I struggled to connect with a few of the 31 students in my class and their parents, but overall felt I fostered a learning environment that was productive for the class as a whole. While one student lived in a smaller home and wore hand-me-downs or last year's uniform, the rest of the students were living in multi-million dollar homes with nannies and housekeepers. While I would have stayed at the school for another year, the administration and I did not see eye-to-eye on teaching methodology, with the administration in favor of a more traditional, lecture-based teaching style, while I opted for a discussion and discovery-based classroom, a decision I knew would cause friction. Because of this disagreement, I could not continue to teach in the school and joined the 13.7% of other new teachers as I left the school and moved to a different teaching job (Keigher, 2010).

I Stayed

The subsequent two years I taught in a public lower elementary school in a small upper-middle class school division. The year before I was employed by the school, the professional development book for the year was *Last Child in the Woods* (Louv, 2005), a book that addresses the importance of spending time with nature. When I was hired, I was lucky enough to create my own curriculum for a pilot program focused on taking education outdoors. I enjoyed every aspect of the job and, although only employed part-time, I stayed a second year to continue developing the program. As I started my second year, I focused my attentions on bringing in community members to help build the infrastructure the program needed. I went to workshops, read books on how to enhance the outdoor classroom experience, and paid special attention to the curriculum I was building in hopes of acquiring one of the full-time openings at the school at the end of the year. I felt confident in what I was achieving; ultimately, the administration and I disagreed on what those achievements meant for my future at the school.

I Left

As I struggled to find my place in an academic system that actively spoke about change, I found that many teachers and administrators were content with what they had become accustomed to and were unable to commit to changing their pre-existing curriculum (Lortie, 1975). With my growing unease, I left suburbia, joined the Peace Corps, and spent three years teaching in rural schools in Central America. For three years, I spent my time living and working with teachers who actively sought new ways of teaching material, who were willing and eager to try something new even if it meant failure. For three years, I was able to teach without the oppressive thumb of an administration that was unwilling to try new things because they might mean failure.

I Came Back

Upon returning to the United States, I started a PhD program in search of unanswerable questions. As I finish my doctoral studies and reflect on my years spent as a teacher in the US and abroad, I view my future with uncertainty. Where will my teaching style be welcomed? Will I find a public school where I feel I belong? Where do I go from here?

Exploration and Analysis with Critical Autoethnography

Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education and a social movement first described by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Critical pedagogy is the study of oppression in education and relies on students and teachers asking the question “Why?” (LiteracyDotOrg, 2009). Critical pedagogy is “guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive office” (Giroux, 2010, B15). Grounded on both social and educational visions of justice and equality, critical pedagogy is interested in the marginalized, their experiences, and the needs of ~~these~~ people faced with oppression and marginalization (Kincheloe, 2008). Critical pedagogy problematizes systemic injustices resulting from the unequal distribution of power and the impact these injustices continue to have on the marginalized specifically with respect to “traditional” schooling (Apple, 2013; Freire, 1974; Giroux, 2011; hooks, 2003; McLaren, 2010; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007).

As I attempt to follow and enact the principles of critical pedagogy, it is not sufficient for me only to promote the concept of critical engagement in my classroom; I must engage in critical self-reflection. Self-reflection, along with interaction and response, is a key aspect in developing *conscientização*, or critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). Critical autoethnography combines ethnography and autoethnography with critical pedagogy to create a research methodology that

allows me to examine myself and my position in society through my membership in a dominant or marginalized group. It is this deep reflexivity that takes place through a critical pedagogy lens that allows me to understand the complex aspects of my life and history that have shaped me (Tilley-Lubbs, 2014).

Life, however, is chaotic and memory is fallible. The stories I tell start off as the product of a one-sided subjective view and, with reflection and input from the friends and family I surrounded myself with at the time of each story, have become a “map of multiple discourses that occur in a given social space” (Denzin, 1997, p. xvii). Autoethnographic performance presents critical self-reflective analysis through textual and contextual analysis (Spry, 2001). Dialogic performance allows the autoethnographer to understand their interactions with others, as the self is the other (Spry, 2001). Additionally, autoethnography allows the researcher to examine their own taken-for-granted worldview and scrutinize it (Humphreys, 2005). “Autoethnographic texts reveal the fractures, sutures, and seams of self interacting with others in the context of researching lived experience” (Spry, 2001, p. 712). Critical reflection on teaching and teaching experiences through autoethnography can lead to empowerment (Wilson, 2011).

I am a White female in my thirties. Although adopted in infancy, I was raised in a traditional family with two sisters (also adopted, but who have different birth parents than I do) by both of my parents. We lived in the suburbs in a single family home. I have had the opportunity to go to some of the best schools in the United States and to travel the world to, according to my parents, “expand my mind and worldview”. My parents have always been able to meet my basic needs. Through the creativity and ingenuity of my parents, the goals that I have set for myself and my parents have set for our family have always been attainable. Through my

birth, I won the lottery; I was born White in the United States. I receive innumerable advantages simply through my skin color.

While there are pieces of my background that situate me as a member of a marginalized community, I readily acknowledge that these aspects do not affect my ability to be a participant in society on a day-to-day basis and I realize that unless I stand up and say something, I am perpetuating the ideals of the dominant culture. I write from a hegemonic place in my culture, working from my position of power and privilege. Critical autoethnography allows me to claim my role as a member of the dominant culture and problematize how I got here and how my position within it affects my future actions and interactions (Tilley-Lubbs, 2014, 2017).

A Critical Autoethnographic Play

Characters

There are eleven characters in the play played by five actors: three females and two males. Melissa is the narrator and key player. Each of the other four actors play various roles as needed ranging from a 6-year-old boy to a 60-year-old secretary. Actors playing the roles can be any age.

MELISSA: A woman in her early 30s.

MALE1: MR.THOMAS, a school principal in his 30s;

JOSEPH, an 8-year-old boy.

MALE2: JACK, a 6-year-old boy;

ALFONSO, a 16-year-old boy.

FEMALE1: PATTY, a 60-year-old secretary;

ALICE, a 60-year-old school principal;

JESSENIA, a 8-10 year old girl.

FEMALE2: CARRIE, an 11-year-old girl;
 LIZ, a 45-year-old secretary;
 MARIAH, an 8-10 year old girl.

Set

The stage is set up with four distinct areas, each with its own sets of lighting. Along the back of the stage sits a row of four chairs up on a 9-inch platform. At stage right sits a single desk with a chair on either side. The desk faces down stage left. At stage left, there are two black boxes - used as places to sit or stand throughout the performance.

Prologue

(All lights come up. ALL walk on stage. MELISSA walks toward center stage while ALL OTHERS slowly take their seats up on the platform. These are their permanent seats unless they are a part of a scene. MELISSA stops center stage. She looks at the audience half shocked to see them there and begins engaging them in a conversation.)

MELISSA: Oh, hello. Welcome. Before we get started, I want to take a moment to talk to you about the stories I am going to share with you. This play stemmed from a set of memories that popped up as I was re-reading a play (Zulia, 1999, p. 9-15). The memories of my own teaching experiences crept into my consciousness and led to a flood of stories that caused me to examine not just the memories, but my memory of the memories (Poulos, 2015). The stories I am about to share with you are my memories of now (Bochner, 2007). In sharing them with you, I seek to be faithful to my memory of these memories even if the stories are not exactly faithful to my past (Hacking, 1995). The way I remember each of these events has shaped me. I can still remember how I felt talking on

the phone with my parents or sitting in a meeting with a principal or teaching a class.

This play seeks to share those emotions with you all as I recall them.

(Stage lights dim to black.)

Scene 1: Why I Became a Teacher

(Spotlight comes up on MELISSA standing center stage. She addresses the audience directly as if directly responding to a question they have asked her.)

MELISSA. Why did I become a teacher? Well that's a good question. I guess I've just always wanted to be one, ever since I was little. *(Spotlight dims. MELISSA walks over to stage left. The lights come up on MELISSA who is pretending to talk on a cell phone. Her back is to the audience.)* Mom. Dad. I got kicked out of the architecture program. *(Pause as if waiting for someone on the other end of the phone to speak. MELISSA turns toward the audience. She is pacing.)* Ok, so I didn't get kicked out exactly. My professor said I didn't have the drawing skills needed to be a successful architect so he is either going to fail me, which would kick me out of the program, or he will give me a B if I transfer. *(Pause.)* I know I'm not a very good drawer but honestly I think the biggest issue is that I refuse to make non rectangular buildings. I tried to make one with all these funky curves in it, but I found it to be an extreme waste of space. How are you supposed to put closets in a house if everything is round? *(Pause.)* Yeah, I know, I know, I think like an engineer. I probably should have done that instead. But really I'm not sure engineers are any better than architects. *(Pause.)* Yes, I know you are both engineers. *(Pause.)* But some of those houses we have looked at with triangular closets. Who puts in a triangular closet? *(Pause.)* Exactly. What are you going to put in the tip of your closet? *(Stage left lights go to black. MELISSA walks back over to the spotlight at center stage. The spotlight comes*

back up and MELISSA addresses the audience directly.) Actually, can I be honest? I didn't always want to be a teacher. I wanted to be an architect for a long time but I wasn't creative enough. And then a mathematician, but I wasn't abstract enough. Then I tried my hand in database and programming work, but I couldn't deal with the solitude. I became a teacher because, well – I guess I just kind of fell into it. I had the grades and it allowed me to go to grad school without taking the GRE. *(Pause.)* Why elementary? Oh well that's easy. I didn't end up with the right kind of undergraduate degree to be a high school math teacher. And, since I'm being honest, I probably would have looked the same age as my students. Even as it was, my first year teaching some of my students were taller than me. I wore heels to work most days just so that I could look like I had some authority over my classroom.

(Spotlight goes to black.)

Scene 2: My First School

(Lights come to a dim on stage left where CARRIE is pacing back and forth nervously looking at imaginary notecards. She is trying to memorize what is on the notecards. Occasionally she will sit down on one of the boxes, but shifts around before standing back up and continuing to pace. Lights come to a dim on stage right. PATTY is sitting at the desk, facing the audience, pretending to type. MR. THOMAS is standing arms crossed angrily overseeing the action in stage right. He is standing in the shadows. Spotlight comes up on MELISSA standing center stage. She addresses the audience directly.)

MELISSA: Fifteen years ago I stood on the stage in my high school acting out “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten” (Zulia, 1999). The play is a series of vignettes that capture various scenes from a kindergarten classroom, each with their own unique

life lesson. “Cinderella” was my favorite. Dream big. Be yourself. In this scene, one of the students tells his teacher he is going to be a pig. As a high school student I missed the point though. The story was less about the ridiculous claim to be a pig and more about the teacher granting the child’s wish. Yes, I know that it says right there in the script that the teacher is the fairy godmother and the child is Cinderella, but I didn’t get it. The summer before my first year teaching I found my costume from the play. I thought back on “Cinderella”. What would have happened if he hadn’t gotten his wish? What would have happened if the teacher silenced his voice and disregarded his creativity for her own personal preference to adhere to the pre-determined story? And, I didn’t know it at the time, but what does it look like when a principal or an administration silences the voice and creativity of their staff of teachers?

(Spotlight goes to black. Lights come up on stage right. MR. THOMAS is far enough removed from the desk as to not be in the conversation that is about to take place. MELISSA walks over to the desk. She remains standing while talking to PATTY.)

PATTY. *(PATTY looks up from her work and stops typing.)* Principal Thomas will be ready for you in just a few minutes. Are you okay?

MELISSA. Yeah, I guess. Isn’t he meeting with all of the teachers?

PATTY. No, just you.

MELISSA. Do you know what the meeting is about?

PATTY. I’m just the secretary. He doesn’t think he should have to tell me, but I do know that quite a few parents from your class have called since first quarter report cards went home. They haven’t been happy. I assume it is about the grades you gave your students.

MR. THOMAS. (*Walks over to the desk. PATTY stands up and goes back her seat on the platform. MR. THOMAS sits down.*) Melissa, come in and take a seat.

MELISSA. Thank you. (*MELISSA sits. Her posture is near perfect with her back not touching the back of the chair.*)

MR. THOMAS. Melissa, do you know why I've called you into my office today?

MELISSA. I'm not entirely sure.

MR. THOMAS. Your class had the lowest grades out of the whole school.

MELISSA. They did?

MR. THOMAS. Yes. I have had multiple parents call in and tell me that you gave students Cs and Ds in some of their classes.

MELISSA. I did. A handful of students chose not to submit their in-class assignments and I—

MR. THOMAS. Don't interrupt me. I wasn't done speaking. It is your job to make them do the work. (*MELISSA's posture starts to decline.*) They shouldn't be deducted points *just* because they didn't do the work you gave them. You should grade them on the work they *did* complete.

MELISSA. I asked the students multiple times to turn in assignments, even if they weren't complete or to complete them at home and turn them in the next day. I also sent home notes to the parents of students who were missing assignments.

MR. THOMAS. That's not the way it works in my school. You can't ask them to complete something at home or expect them to turn something in that isn't done. These parents pay top dollar for their children to come to a private school. Their children should get good grades. How do you think they are going to get into a top middle school if you give them

Cs or Ds? How are they supposed to be competitive if you just give them whatever grade you feel like giving them?

MELISSA. I used the grading software that you require us to use. If you would like to look at their missing and incomplete assignments with me, I'm glad to go over them with—

MR. THOMAS. I already did. This is my school and I get the final say. I went in and changed your grades. I'm having the secretary print out the new report cards right now. I expect you to send them home with the students today with a note of apology.

MELISSA. I'm not sure I understand.

MR. THOMAS. I've already explained to the parents that it was your fault that their children aren't doing well in your class. (*MELISSA's shoulders are slumped, a direct contrast to her initial posture.*) I've walked by your classroom before. The students all have different books they are reading. They are rarely in their seats. They are always talking. I never see you standing in front of the room. Every time I walk past your door, the desks are in a different arrangement. On Fridays, you take time away from class to have your students dress up some headless skeleton. You spend too much time on language arts and math and not enough time on religion. It seems all your class does is socialize. It's your fault that your class is falling behind, not your students' fault. They don't need to know all of the countries in Africa and Asia, they need to know their prayers and the Catholic doctrines that I use to run this school and that should run their lives. How else are they supposed to be successful members of the church?

MELISSA. I—um—well—

MR. THOMAS. Yes? Answer me.

(Lights dim on stage right as lights come up on stage left. MELISSA stands up and directly faces the action on stage left. MELISSA is confident and supportive.)

CARRIE. *(In a panic, pacing.)* Ms. Rose-McCully, I don't think I can do this. The whole class is going to be watching. That's like 60 eyes all looking at me at the exact same time. What if I mess up? What if I don't can't remember what I'm supposed to say? What if-

MELISSA. *(From stage right, in a calm, soothing voice.)* Carrie, calm down.

CARRIE. But Ms. Rose-McCully, I've never done this before. I don't want to look stupid. What if they don't like what I talk about?

MELISSA. Carrie, all you have to do is talk about the skeleton you dressed up and answer some questions. Let's start with something easy. What did you dress the skeleton up as?

CARRIE. *(CARRIE stops pacing.)* I dressed it up as a swimmer.

MELISSA. Why did you choose to dress it up as a swimmer?

CARRIE. *(CARRIE's speech slows down and becomes calmer as she continues to speak.)* I dressed the skeleton up as a swimmer because I am a swimmer. *(CARRIE turns away from MELISSA toward the audience as if giving her presentation to the class.)* I am on a swim team at my pool. I swim the breast stroke. That's why it has a swim cap because only people on teams have swim caps. It also is wearing my favorite goggles...
(CARRIE's voice silences as stage left fades to black.)

MELISSA. *(MELISSA turns back toward MR. THOMAS and sits back down. The lights turn back up on stage right.)* Well, I move the desk around a lot because rows don't work for most of the assignments the students have to work on in class. And I know it seems silly, but each student gets a chance to dress up the skeleton. They have to dress it before or after school and it has to represent the student. They give a five-minute presentation in

front of the class and answer the class's question, to practice their oral speaking and then we use the skeleton as a character in a creative writing piece that we do every Friday. I find that talking about the skeleton gets the students prepared for other things like doing the readings during Mass on Thursdays. Plus, the students get really excited to read the stories their classmates write about their skeletons.

MR. THOMAS. Moving the class is a waste of time. Having a dressed up skeleton and talking about it is a waste of time. Just have them read more of the Bible aloud in class. That is better for preparing them anyway. Focus on more religion in class and less of your nonsense.

MELISSA. And I know that we spend a lot of time on language arts and math, but we do it because a good part of the class is reading at a third grade reading level and many of the students have trouble adding three digit numbers. If I don't spend extra time on those areas, they are going to struggle in middle school.

MR. THOMAS. Make sure you bring me a draft of your apology note before lunch so that I can correct it for you before you send it home. I told my wife to bring my lunch to work today so I'll review it over lunch. And you can take the revised note along with the report cards at the end of lunch.

MELISSA. (*MELISSA stands up.*) Will you be signing the report cards before I pick them up?

MR. THOMAS. Of course. I always do. All report cards have to be approved and signed by me before you can send them home.

(*Stage right fades to black.*)

Scene 3: Why I Moved

(*Spotlight comes up on center stage. MELISSA continues her conversation with the audience.*)

MELISSA. After this conversation, I fell apart. I started to wonder if I had chosen the wrong career. I started to wonder if I was cut out to be a teacher. I had always been a good student and, like many, just assumed that since I had spent the better part of 20 years in a classroom I could be a good teacher. I couldn't understand what was wrong with the way I was teaching. I did all of the things my teacher education program had taught me. I used different texts with different groups of students so that they could all understand the content. And I made sure all of the texts were about the same thing so that we could have a class discussion without students feeling left out. I arranged the desks so that they were conducive for the activity at hand. I encouraged students to bring their interests and personalities into the classroom so that they engaged more with the material. I created a classroom where my students felt comfortable telling their stories, sharing pieces of themselves. I invited them to teach me what they knew so that I could grow along with them. According to the principal though, none of these things mattered. My classroom was in his school. It didn't look the way he wanted the classroom to look and therefore it was wrong.

I never quite got over having the principal correct the grades I "gave" my students the first quarter of that year. In the eyes of the principal and in the eyes of some of the parents I was a babysitter, responsible for making sure that the students behaved during the day – which really meant that it was my fault for not being able to manage the class if I had to call home because a student was being disruptive. According to some of the parents, they paid my salary and therefore they owned the right to tell me what to do and what grades to give their child. Academic progress didn't matter. Learning content didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that the students knew what to say, when

to say it, and how to behave properly in church. Because I chose to focus on what I thought was important – things like reading comprehension, personal expression through creative writing, world geography, addition, and oral speaking skills – over the one thing he thought was important – the religious curriculum, I was doing it wrong.

The rest of the year I continued to have a “wrong” classroom, but I dialed it back the best I could while still sticking to my personal philosophy of education that did not match the church’s. I didn’t want to be sent to the principal’s office again. I was never very good at taking orders from people who thought they had the right to silence me, especially men – more specifically, the Catholic men who believed whole-heartedly that a woman’s role is to submit to men. There were fifteen teachers and staff at the school - all women. The administration, the principal and the school priest were both men and, like in their private lives, their word was final. I once saw Mr. Thomas’s wife disagree with her husband when she thought no one was looking. He scolded her. She backed down instantly. He did not and would not bend. His mind was made up.

The most vocal of the parents continued to complain about my teaching even when their child’s grades improved. I didn’t fit in. I was a practicing Catholic working at a Catholic school and I didn’t fit in. And yet I was devastated when I wasn’t asked to stay for a second year. Looking back now, I should have known that the year would end that way. I distinctly recall meeting those vocal parents at Back to School Night. Before I could even introduce myself, they questioned my ability to teach their children asking how old I was, where I went to college, and my relationship status, making assumptions about me based on how young I looked as I tried not to make assumptions about them based on their invasive questioning. My youthful appearance combined with my single status seemed to

indicate that I was still a child in need of explicit direction and instruction from the parents of my students. I wasn't devastated about not being asked back for a second year because I was looking forward to working in a school where a group of parents felt it was their right to dictate and control the principal and teachers. Not being asked back meant I was unsuccessful. I failed at being an architect and now I was failing at being a teacher. I didn't have another plan. I had no idea what I was going to do or where I was going to go. All I knew was that I couldn't work in another school that made me feel like I was constantly looking over my shoulder, like any wrong move could mean another scolding in the principal's office. I felt powerless on a daily basis. I was in a position that didn't allow me to be myself.

(Spotlight fades to black.)

Scene 4: My Second School

(Lights come to a dim on stage left where JACK is pretending to garden. Lights come to a dim on stage right. LIZ is sitting at the desk, facing the audience, pretending to type. ALICE is standing reading a paper and taking phone calls casually overseeing the action in stage right. She is standing in the shadows. Spotlight comes up on MELISSA standing center stage. She addresses the audience directly.)

MELISSA: My second year teaching was a complete departure from the previous year. I was hired into a position that was newly created for the school year: outdoor classroom coordinator. It was almost exactly what I wanted. I was able to create a program out of absolutely nothing. I spent my days outside exploring the school grounds with students taking walks through the woods, looking for letters and numbers in the playground, planting gardens and digging up carrots, making human number lines, climbing up the

slides to discuss force and gravity, and creating recycled paper and crayons out of the scraps from the indoor classrooms. I found a job that allowed me to be creative and put students in a position to explore the world around them. I wasn't bound by the physical walls of a classroom. I wasn't compared to those that came before me because I was the first. I was teaching preschool, kindergarten, and first grade students, so there were no grades to give. Everyone got an "E" in my class because everyone was excellent. We went outside rain or shine, as long as the temperature was above 30°F. I loved everything about the job – everything except that it wasn't full time. I was only paid for 20 hours a week, and because it was a new position, I wasn't paid as a teacher. I built a curriculum out of nothing and taught classes like a teacher, but wasn't officially a teacher. I had to take on a second job to cover my daily expenses, but I was very fortunate that I had family to live with as I contemplated how I could stay in the same school and move into a full time position. *(Spotlight goes to black.)*

(Lights come up on stage right. ALICE is far enough removed from the desk as to not be in the conversation that is about to take place. MELISSA walks over to the desk. She remains standing while talking to LIZ.)

LIZ. *(LIZ looks up from her work and stops typing.)* Alice will be ready for you in just a few minutes. Are you okay?

MELISSA. Yeah, I guess. I'm a little nervous.

LIZ. You shouldn't be.

MELISSA. I know, but I am.

LIZ. You've got this! You've done an amazing job so far this year. Alice always talks about how this school wouldn't be able to run without you. And she loves what you've done with

the program. I can't imagine her not hiring you for one of the open positions. Everyone I've seen so far has been so drab.

MELISSA. You *always* know just what to say!

LIZ. Are we still on for dinner tonight?

MELISSA. Yeah, I'm going to meet up with your son for some tutoring after he gets out of school. He is *going* to pass 11th grade English even if we have to read *The Great Gatsby* a hundred times.

LIZ. Great! Oh, it looks like Alice is ready for you. Go ahead in. (*LIZ stands up and returns to her chair on the platform.*)

ALICE. (*ALICE sits down behind the desk, facing the audience.*) Hi Melissa. Come take a seat.

MELISSA. (*MELISSA reluctantly sits.*) Are we waiting on the teachers that will be in the interview? Or are we just going to get started?

ALICE. Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. There isn't going to anyone else. This actually isn't going to be an interview.

MELISSA. Oh? I was under the impression when you had Liz schedule this meeting that it was my interview for one of the open teaching positions.

ALICE. Well, that's what I had her schedule it for, but that's not what I wanted to talk to you about.

MELISSA. Um, ok.

ALICE. I just don't think you are a good fit for the classroom. I mean for a regular classroom.

MELISSA. May I ask why?

ALICE. Yes. I've seen you outside because sometimes you have the students right outside of my window and they are all doing different things. Some of them are drawing, some of them

are writing, they get up and move all around and in the end none of them are seated at the table. And every time it looks like one of them gets excited about something, you jump up and join them in that excitement.

JACK. (*Yelling excitedly from stage left, JACK stops digging, stands up, and climbs on top of one of the boxes.*) Ms. Rose-DaCully! Ms. Rose-Da! Ms. Rose! Ms. Rose! Ms. Rose!

MELISSA. Oh. (*Lights dim on stage right. MELISSA stands up and walks over to Stage left directly to JACK. Lights come up on stage left where JACK is still animated and excited about something. He is now standing back on the ground holding something imaginary behind his back. MELISSA is also animated and excited with him.*) Yes, Jack, what it is? What have you found?

JACK. (*JACK shows MELISSA an imaginary carrot.*) A carrot! A carrot! I found a carrot!

MELISSA. Where did you find a carrot?

JACK. (*Speaking excitedly without pausing for air.*) I found it in the garden where I was digging. You see I was trying to get out all of the plants so that we could put in the garden like we talked about when class started and I didn't have a shovel but I didn't think that should stop me from helping so I was digging with my hands and I felt something weird and no one else was digging with their hands. Is it okay that I was digging with my hands? Am I going to get in trouble for not using a shovel?

MELISSA. No, Jack. You can dig however you want. Tell me more about the carrot. It's so big!

JACK. It is big, isn't it! (*JACK and MELISSA stare at the imaginary carrot for a moment then JACK continues, again without breathing.*) Well I was digging with my hands and I felt this weird thing in the ground and I thought it was a rock, but it wasn't hard like a rock, so I started digging around it and then I saw that it was kind of brownish orangeish and I

thought, what could it be? So I just kept digging and digging and then I got to the bottom of it and I pulled it out and it was a carrot! And I was so excited that I brought it over to you. I didn't know that carrots grew in the ground! Can I take it home and show my parents? They just aren't going to believe that I found... *(Stage left fades to black as JACK's voice gets softer. MELISSA walks back over to stage right and takes her seat facing ALICE.)*

ALICE. *(Lights come back up on stage right)*. You leave all of the other students alone. I just don't think you could control a classroom the way it should be controlled. You seem to do okay with the small groups of 10 to 12 students, but with 20 I don't see how you could possibly get them to follow directions and learn. You just have too much energy for the classroom. You're *too* outside-the-box. I think you should think about being a PE teacher. That would be a better fit for you.

MELISSA. Thank you for your time. *(MELISSA stands and starts to leave. She is stopped by ALICE.)*

ALICE. I just put a renewal form in your box for next year. You've done such a good job with the outdoor classroom so far, I think it will be even better next year.

(Stage right fades to black.)

Scene 5: Why I Left

(Spotlight comes up on center stage. MELISSA continues her conversation with the audience.)

MELISSA. I hadn't realized that a person could have "too much energy" for a kindergarten classroom. I didn't realize that sharing in the joy of discovery with my students was an act that took away from the rest of the class. I quickly started to realize that while teachers and principals want to work in schools that focus on building relationships with

students, they can't quite get themselves to move beyond a traditional form of practice that is quite rigid with little reflection. School norms, dictated by a hegemonic tradition, decide what is considered normal. And I wasn't normal enough. As teachers, we constantly ask students to think outside-the-box, and principals ask teachers to be creative in how they teach and in acquiring resources for their class. I thought I was doing just that. I didn't know that there is only a certain level of "outside" that is acceptable. In truth when someone asks you to think outside-the-box, they are not asking you to create something out of nothing, they are asking you to create something out of something, to add embroidery to an existing fabric. Students and teachers who think outside-the-box, not those who hover close to the box, but those who truly think outside-the-box, are outliers and are frequently not given the opportunity to express themselves. Just a few years earlier as an architecture student I was told I wasn't creative enough and now I was too —too outside the box, too energized, too excited.

I signed the renewal papers that awaited me and stayed for a second year. I could still live with my family. I wasn't starving. And I really wasn't prepared to look for another job. After all, I wasn't sure I could deal with feeling like a failure yet again. I had committed to moving to Central America for the summer to live and work at an orphanage, so I focused on that instead of what Alice thought of me. Plus, I really did love my job. I loved the people I worked with. I loved the students. I just didn't like the pay.

I left the following year after a repeat performance from the principal when three new full-time jobs opened up. I assessed what I really wanted and set off in pursuit of the elusive job that would allow me to let my students actively participate in their own

learning, to explore the world with my students, and to think outside-the-box. I thought I found it when I joined the Peace Corps.

(Spotlight fades to black.)

Scene 6: The Peace Corps

(Lights come to a dim on stage left where ALFONSO, JOSEPH, JESSENIA, and MARIAH are sitting atop the two black boxes. They are listening to an imaginary lecture. Spotlight comes up on MELISSA standing center stage. She addresses the audience directly.)

MELISSA: One of the few academic things I remember vividly from high school didn't come from a tested subject area. It came from my 10th grade health class. As the teacher stood at the front of the room, she had each of us write down questions that we had about sex and she proceeded to answer them—every single one. She answered them willingly and with an honesty that was both refreshing and terrifying. In my opinion, at age 14, learning about STDs didn't make sense to me since having intimate relationships with other people was something that only married adults and the occasional high school student did. I didn't have a boyfriend. None of my friends had boyfriends or girlfriends. Sex was never a topic of conversation. Holding hands and an open-mouth kiss were about as risqué as we got. Conversations about sex and STS weren't taboo, they were just never had. I didn't see it as useful information for someone of my age.

(The spotlight fades. Lights come up on stage left. ALFONSO, JOSEPH, JESSENIA, and MARIAH are sitting pretending to talk to each other. MELISSA walks over and sits atop one of the black boxes. From this position, she tells her story to the audience.)

MELISSA: It was my first time meeting this group of students. They had been in school for over a month, but the torrential downpours had made the 55-minute hike up the mountains

impossible for me. It was a two-room school house. The first and second graders were in one room and the third through sixth graders were in the other. I was there to observe the older kids. I walked in, said a few words about myself in my somewhat decent Spanish, and sat down at an open chair in the back of the classroom. The youngest student was eight. (*JOSEPH stands up.*) The oldest – 16. (*ALFONSO stands up.*) He was in fourth grade.

The first class of the day: health. The first lesson: STDs. A whole class lesson. Instead of teaching, the teacher gave students three questions. They walked around the room and asked each other what they thought the answers were. All of the students, mind you – 8 year-olds and 16 year-olds were asking each other questions about sexually transmitted diseases.

I sat there listening to them all say they didn't know anything about STDs. (*JESSENIA walks over to MELISSA.*) One brave student came up to me and started asking me questions. As I answered them more students came over. (*MARIAH and JOSEPH walk over to MELISSA.*) The more students that came over, the bolder the questions became until I said the one word no one was ready to hear: condom.

I looked over at the teacher for help. I just didn't know the words to say what I needed to say. The teacher had already told them that HIV was a curable disease, which I politely disagreed with. The teacher just blushed.

Somehow the conversation shifted and I ended up saying that I would bring a condom up next week and do a condom demonstration. As I did, Alfonso, the sixteen-year-old, walked up to me.

ALFONSO. "Psst."

MELISSA. He nudged me.

ALFONSO. “Here.”

MELISSA. And he handed me a condom. *(To ALFONSO.)* “I don’t have anything to show you on. I’ll be prepared next week.” *(To the audience.)* I just wanted out. I wasn’t ready. I hadn’t practiced. After all, what kind of third grader needs to know how to put on a condom?

JOSEPH. “Psst.”

MELISSA. Joseph, the 8-year-old, nudged me.

JOSEPH. “Here.”

MELISSA. And he handed me a guineo cuadrado. For all of you who are not familiar with this particular delicacy, it’s a short, fat, square banana-looking fruit.

As I walked to the front of the room, (MELISSA walks stands in front of the black boxes but still facing and directing her monologue to the audience. ALFONSO is standing behind the boxes. JOSEPH is seated on one of the box closest to MELISSA. JESSENIA and MARIAH are sitting on the other box.) the teacher walked out. Waiting outside the door within earshot, his eyes, just like the eyes of all of the students in the classroom, were on me. In an instant I realized, he had probably never used one before. I knew his wife. She was an extremely conservative Catholic in a community without a health clinic. I’m not sure she had ever even seen a condom before.

(ALL continue to act out the following scene. MELISSA is still directing her conversation to the audience.) They watched as I explained every single step exactly the same way I had been taught. The entire class watched carefully, taking mental notes as I talked about each step. As I neared the end of the demonstration, I came to the point where I needed to

remove the condom from the short, fat, square, banana-looking thing. As I tried to slide it off the guineo cuadrado, it didn't move. I re-explained the step and tried again. Again, it didn't come off. I tried again only this time I could hear the barely audible rumblings of laughter. It wouldn't come off. The condom was stuck.

The giggles became audible. Joseph was in the front row and said he would help me. So I held the bottom of the guineo cuadrado and he took the top of the condom. And we started pulling in opposite directions. The room erupted in laughter: the teacher, the students, and myself. We pulled. He pulled while I pulled. I pulled while he pulled. We pulled. We could not get the condom off. With a giant suction sound, it eventually came off. I fell to the floor half in hysterics and half because I lost my balance. Everyone was laughing. Everyone except one student. Alfonso, the sixteen year old who gave me the condom, sat in the back of the classroom staring at me. He was appalled.

As the teacher walked in, I walked back to my seat.

ALFONSO. "Psst."

MELISSA. Alfonso nudged me.

ALFONSO. "I will never use a condom. It looks way too painful."

MELISSA. *(To ALFONSO.)* "Psst." *(To audience.)* I said back. *(To ALFONSO.)* "A penis isn't square. Condoms are easily removed after sex."

ALFONSO. "Psst."

MELISSA. *(To audience.)* He nervously replied.

ALFONSO. "Would you mind bringing me one next week from the health center since you said we could only use them once?"

(Stage left fades to black.)

Scene7: Will I Ever Go Back?

(Spotlight comes up on center stage. MELISSA continues her conversation with the audience.)

MELISSA. That day I felt fortunate. Fortunate that I went to a public school with a health class.

Fortunate that the curriculum included sex education. Fortunate that my parents didn't exempt me from the class. Fortunate that I had a teacher who was open and willing to talk honestly with a bunch of hormonal teenagers about the issues that *we* cared about.

Fortunate that I connected with that one lesson twelve years earlier even if I thought it was useless information – at least on the surface.

I couldn't believe that my first day at this school had gone so completely off script and it was allowed. I was shocked that the students who had just met me welcomed me into their classroom community and laughed with me as a lesson that should have been serious went so awry and I was amazed that there wasn't a mob of angry parents and administrators demanding my resignation. For the rest of the year, they would look at me and we would collectively laugh whenever guineo cuadrado was on the lunch menu. As the word spread across the village and into the town of this crazy new “gringa” teacher who didn't mind talking about sex education, I was asked to talk to other classes at other schools. There was something about being an outsider that allowed me to be an insider in those discussions.

The three years I spent in the Peace Corps teaching allowed me to grow both personally and professionally. I found myself and I found my own teaching style. A style that revolves around the needs and concerns of the students I am with. A style that relies heavily on teachable moments. A style that doesn't stick to a rigid lesson plan *just* because I spent a lot of time on it. A style that allows me to learn as much from my

students as they do with me. A style that allows me to stretch beyond what I know or think I know and into a world that is unknown.

I am a teacher. I am a learner. These are not two separate identities. They are intertwined and make up the core of my Self. I seek to know what is not yet known. I seek the stories of others in order to better understand my own stories. As I continue to search for a job that not just allows, but encourages me to be both teacher and learner, I wonder if I will ever find such a place. And more importantly, who will I be becoming as I continue on my journey?

(Spotlight fades to black.)

Epilogue

(Spotlight comes up on center stage. MELISSA continues her conversation with the audience.)

MELISSA. It kind of sounds like I found what I was looking for and I now know exactly what I want even if I am undecided on how to get there, right? Well, I guess that's only partially true, and since I've brought you in this far I think it's only fair to finish what I've started. I became a teacher because I could. I was a good student and at different points in my life people paid me to tutor them. Teaching one-on-one was easy. I thought the skill was transferable. I never realized how much harder it would be to teach a whole class of students.

I found my first few weeks challenging and followed the advice of the teachers who had all had my students. They said my students were a lost cause. I refused to believe them and built a wall insulating my classroom and myself. I allowed some of what Mr. Thomas had to say permeate my defenses but his way didn't seem to get any better results than my way and, at 22-years-old, I wasn't willing to bend if he wasn't willing to bend. As a

result, I broke. I felt like a failure nearly every day my first year teaching and yet I woke up and went to work every day with a smile, or at least half a smile, on my face. With that smile, I was desperately trying to prove to myself that despite how I felt I wasn't a failure.

I finished my contract out and continued teaching because I wanted to feel successful.

Teaching was my only option. When I changed schools, I found a place that better suited me. If salary wouldn't have been an issue, I might have stayed there until retirement. But when I was told I wasn't suited to be a classroom teacher, I felt like a failure yet again.

That was what I was trained to do and yet I was being told for a second time that I wasn't good at it. Instead of listening and trying to adapt to the wishes of the principals, I left.

The Peace Corps allowed me to feel successful for the first time in years. I was praised for my innovative teaching techniques and my fearlessness when it came to discussing difficult and sometimes controversial topics. But it was easy. Teaching in the Peace Corps was a lot like tutoring. It didn't matter if students were sitting in their seats or completely silent or raising their hands. At the end of the day, the only thing that really mattered was student learning.

Looking both backwards and forwards I know that while I didn't agree with the way Mr. Thomas and Alice thought a classroom should look, I know that they wouldn't have agreed with each other either. I was too stubborn to listen my first year teaching and too wounded to listen the next years. For three years, I had tried and failed to rebuild my self-confidence. I didn't know how to do it living in a city where everyone appeared to have it all. I didn't know how to fix myself without retreating into myself. Getting out seemed like the only solution. The Peace Corps was my escape. It allowed me to rebuild myself

and find the confidence and success for which I desperately had been searching. It gave me the vocabulary to express myself and the isolation of the town I lived in gave me the space I needed to be introspective and to piece myself back together. No one knew me so I didn't have to live up to the imaginary achievement standard I permitted to rule my life. I allowed my career as an elementary school teacher to be cut shorter than it otherwise may have been because I never got over being told that I wasn't good enough to be an architect when I was 20. I still don't know if I will ever go back, but I now have a better idea about why I left.

Post Script

I have been telling stories on a stage since I could talk. I started at home retelling the stories my parents told me, acting out the parts with my sisters. By the time I was six years old, I was performing other people's stories in public. I have always felt there is something freeing in the dichotomy of knowing that being on stage means that an audience is out there listening and watching my every move and yet the audience is usually made up of complete strangers who I will never meet. I rarely share my own stories and when I do, I pick and choose carefully, painting a picture of myself that my audience will enjoy and that paints me in a positive light. When people ask me about my experience in the Peace Corps, the condom story is my go-to. I have told that story more times that I can count. It is easy to tell stories that make people laugh. On the other hand, I can count the number of people who I have told about the meetings with the two principals on one hand. From my own personal experience I have found that people do not want to hear the sad or negative stories and I refuse to feel like a failure for not belonging.

The stories, however, are the easy part. The hard part is taking the time to reflect critically on what happened, to put aside the deep-rooted emotions and get to the underlying

issues. Critical autoethnography allowed me to do just that. Critical autoethnography provided me the means to deconstruct my teacher journey and see what it was exactly that I was looking for: a place to be the kind of teacher I want to be, a place to be the kind of teacher my students need me to be, a place to be the kind of teacher I know I can be.

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Chapter 3: Building Relationships: The Stories of Four Small Urban School Teachers

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Abstract

Parker City⁵ is a small urban school division in southwest Virginia. It has a diverse student body and has been facing high teacher turnover in the last few years. This research investigates four veteran teachers currently employed by Parker City Public Schools, teachers who have taught for more than 5 years. This study uses a case study approach with recorded dialogic interviews as data. Through the dialogic interviews, the four teachers identified the challenges of working in an urban school and how they overcome them on a daily basis. This study also addresses why they have chosen to either change schools or ultimately leave the profession. The stories the teachers tell point to the importance of building and maintaining relationships with students, other teachers, and administration, as one of the key factors for them changing schools or remaining in a school throughout their careers.

⁵ Parker City and the names used for all teacher-collaborators are pseudonyms.

Introduction

Over the last ten years, teacher mobility has been a major issue in Parker City Public Schools (PCPS) in Parker City, Virginia. At the start of the 2006-2007 school year, 227 teachers who had worked during the previous year were no longer teaching in the division. While 60% resigned from their teaching jobs and 20% retired, the remaining 20% were forced out of a job due to non-renewed contracts, expired teaching licenses, and elimination of positions, among other reasons. While turnover is expected, the emphasis placed on test scores due to No Child Left Behind was noted as the cause of the spike from around 16% turnover up to 20.7%. (Harrison, 2006)

Six years later, in 2012, a one percent salary increase was credited for the low teacher turnover, with nine out of ten teachers remaining in the division. With only a handful of teachers being forced to leave due to non-renewed contracts, expired teaching licenses, or eliminated positions, the year began with one of the highest retention rates in recent years (Cutright, 2012). Yet, only two years later, PCPS found itself in an unusual position: while retention rates were still hovering between 89% and 90%, more teachers were leaving in the middle of the school year than ever before. This trend, not seen by other school divisions in the area, as reported by the PCPS Superintendent, was being monitored but did not seem to have a clear cause. With the PCPS Superintendent placing possible blame on the division being urban and the newly hired staff being unsuited for the job, it was clear that teacher mobility is not only an issue from year to year, but also during the academic year. (McCallum, 2015)

Teacher Retention: Movers, Leavers, and Stayers

As the number of students attending public schools increases across the nation, the number of public school teachers does as well. The number of public school teachers increased

by 20% between 1996 and 2010, a trend that is expected to continue with a projected increase of 15% in public school teachers between 2010 and 2021 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). With this increased need for teachers, data regarding attrition and mobility are essential. Teacher attrition and mobility from year to year are divided in three distinct categories: stayers, teachers who remain at the same school; movers, teachers who move to a different school and continue to teach; and leavers, teachers who leave the profession.

Movers and leavers. Data show new teachers are the most likely to leave the profession and teachers with one to three years of teaching experience are more likely to either be movers or stayers than teachers with more teaching experience – numbers that are reflective of the teaching population as a whole and are consistent across urban-city, suburban, town, and rural school systems. The statistical data as presented by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) show that while teacher attrition rates are similar across all division types, high-poverty divisions, both urban and rural, are more likely to have higher teacher turnover (Fideler & Haselkorn, 1999; Hare & Heap, 2001; Imazeki, 2005). Among public school movers with four or more years of experience, slightly more than half moved schools within their division, about two-fifths moved from one public school division to another public school division, and less than three percent left teaching in public school to teach in private schools (Keigher, 2010).

With high teacher-attrition rates that have been steadily increasing since the mid-1990s (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Gold, 1996; Ingersoll, 2003; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), it is not sufficient, simply to know how many teachers fall into each of the three categories, it is imperative to know why each of the teachers chose to move or leave the profession. Movers and leavers cite a number of different reasons for their change in school or profession. These factors fall into eight main categories: non-renewal, personal factors, assignment and credential factors,

salary and benefits, classroom factors, school factors, student performance factors, and other factors (Andrews & Martin, 2003; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Hare & Heap, 2001; Hirsch, 2006; Imazeki, 2005; Ingersoll 2003, 2004; Keigher, 2010; Kent, 2000; Liu & Meyer, 2005).

While leavers and movers have about the same percentage of annual turnover (Ingersoll, 2004), the groups place different importance on each of the above factors. Perhaps the most interesting differences between leavers and movers are directly related to the school factors, classroom factors, and student performance factors. Only twenty percent of movers cite these three reasons for moving to a new school, in contrast over half of the leavers cite these same three reasons (Keigher, 2010).

Movers and stayers. Movers prioritize personal life factors, school factors, and the catch-all category of “other” (Keigher, 2010). Stayers prioritize students and school culture as the two main reasons they choose to remain in the same school. Resilient teachers, those who have taught in an urban setting for three or more years, do not simply prioritize students, they prioritize the lives of the students and they prioritize student learning, doing whatever it takes to help students be successful (He, Cooper, & Tangredi, 2015; Patterson, Collins, & Abbott, 2004; Rinke, 2011).

School culture can be subdivided into a number of categories including professional development, collegiality, and administrative support. Resilient teachers not only desire professional development, but seek out the development that they need, whether offered by the school they work at or not (Patterson et al., 2004). Additionally, resilient teachers act as mentors toward one another and support each other emotionally as well as intellectually. While structured mentor-mentee relationships are strongly suggested for beginner teachers, mentoring

relationships, whether assigned or selected, are essential throughout a teacher's career and provide opportunities for informal professional development (Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Rinke, 2011; Simos, 2013). Working with an administration that recognizes and supports its teachers allows those teachers to focus on the needs and education of the students (Olsen & Anderson, 2007).

Features of Urban Education

Urban education is marked by a number of unique characteristics. While students, teachers, and schools across urban schools in the United States may not experience each factor exactly as presented, the following are issues that are uniquely urban and generally define all urban schools. While family makeup, population density, school size, attendance, and transportation are each aspects of urban education (Kincheloe, 2010), I will highlight economic disparity, racial and ethnic diversity, immigrant populations, linguistic diversity, and student mobility.

Profound economic disparity. In the United States, 15.6% of the population lives below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015a). While urban and rural areas are both marked by poverty, urban areas provide an interesting contextual space where the extremely wealthy and the financially disadvantaged live within the same small geographical area whereas in rural areas the extremely wealthy and the financially disadvantaged may live in a large geographical area while still living in the same community. Thus the experience for children living in urban poverty has the potential to be markedly different than the experience for children living in rural poverty (Milner, 2013; Shipler, 2004). Students raised in poverty experience more chronic stressors than their peers from higher-SES homes leading to increased absences and reduced motivation, determination, and effort, among other things (Szanton, Gill, & Allen, 2005). As a response to a

growing number of students being raised in poverty, and as a part of his War on Poverty, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), better known as Title I: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Title I, the nation's oldest and largest federally funded program, was written and has been amended to bridge the gap between low-income and at-risk students and other students. Despite the evolving Elementary and Secondary Education Act, economic disparity can be seen in most classrooms across the United States. To the teacher, however, with only one or two students from low-SES or living in at-risk households, the face of poverty and the effect it has on their classroom is completely different than a teacher with a classroom where only one or two students do not come from low-SES or at-risk households.

Higher rates of ethnic and racial diversity. While the terms melting pot, mosaic, salad bowl, and kaleidoscope are all used to describe the people who live in the United States, the Census Bureau and standardized forms do not provide adequate options for individuals to adequately describe their racial and ethnic makeup. White students in urban areas are underrepresented while Black, Hispanic, and Asian students are overrepresented. While nearly 50% of the school-age population identifies as minority and nearly 65% of the urban school-age population identifies as minority, the teaching profession is still principally comprised of teachers who identify as White, 81.9% (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, 2016). This gap continues to grow, creating a teaching force that racially, ethnically, and culturally does not mirror the school population they are serving (Bosner, 2014; Dalton, Sable, & Hoffman, 2006; Howard, 2010; Milner, 2010). Teacher-student relationships form more quickly and are perceived as more beneficial for students when teachers and students have multiple points of

commonality, including race and culture (Coplan & Prakash, 2003; Egalite, Kisida & Winters, 2015; Pianta, 2006; Tosolt, 2010). As the teaching population becomes increasingly more homogeneous and the student population becomes increasingly more heterogeneous, questions regarding teacher effectiveness, quality, and retention are being pushed to the forefront of research in urban education.

High immigrant populations. The Naturalization Act of 1970 restricted U.S. citizenship to “any alien, being a free white person”. As the nation grew and developed, amendments and changes to this act needed to be made. The Page Act of 1875 prohibited the entry of “undesirables,” individuals from Asia contracted to be laborers, into the United States. In the nearly fifty years following the Page Act, additional restrictions were instituted for laborers, political activists, disabled individuals, along with increased restrictions for individuals from specific continents or nations (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2015, 2016). Since the Page Act, the United States has enacted various Immigration Acts at different times to allow or limit entry into the country. In 1966, the Hart-Celler Act abolished the quota restrictions placed on peoples from various countries allowing unprecedented access for many individuals to enter the United States. Since 1965, the immigrant population has nearly tripled and, according to the 2010 census, is now at about 13% of the total United States population (Camarota, 2012). In addition to the increase in the immigrant population, poverty rates for immigrants and their U.S. born children are staggering. About 23% of immigrants and their native born children live in poverty with an additional 24.6% living near poverty (Camarota, 2012). With 95% of immigrant children and children of immigrants attending urban schools, the faces of urban students are changing, becoming increasingly more diverse (Fix & Capps, 2005). Immigrant students are

confronted with a culture and language that frequently is different from their own and that of their parents or guardians.

High linguistic diversity. The United States does not have an established national language. In direct opposition to this, official documents such as the Naturalization Act of 1906, mandate that immigrants seeking naturalization in the United States pass reading, writing, and oral exams in the English Language (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2015). Additionally, while not the national language, English is the language of legislation, courts, and official documents and is also the principal language of formal education in the United States. Federal law defines English Language Learners (ELLs) or Limited English Proficiency (LEPs) students as students who speak a language other than English as their primary language at home and who have not achieved sufficient mastery of the English language in reading, writing, listening, and speaking to meet state standards of excellence in English-only classrooms (Limited English Proficiency Federal Interagency, 2015). The percentage of students identified as ELLs in the United States has slowly risen in the last ten years from 8.7 percent in the 2002-2003 school year to 9.2 percent in the 2012-2013 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). Urban areas have an average ELL enrolment of 14.0% with large cities having 16.7% of their student body and small cities having 9.4% of their student body identifying as ELLs, above the national average (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). Additionally, graduation rates for ELLs in large urban school divisions are incredibly low with New York City Schools showing a 37% graduation rate for ELLs (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011).

High student mobility. Current compiled data on student mobility focus on kindergarten through grade eight students across the United States. Students with four or more school changes from kindergarten through eighth grade are considered “more mobile”. Approximately 13% of

students are more mobile (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2010). While statewide and national curricula attempt to ease the transition from school to school, division to division, or state to state, there is no international curricula and all mobile students still face difficulty with this transition because of the differences in content and teaching style (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2010). In addition, research suggests socioeconomic status and race are factors in student mobility (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1996; Gruman, Harachi, Abbott, Catalano, & Fleming, 2008; Heinlein & Shinn, 2000; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2010). For all students living below the poverty threshold, approximately 26% will change schools four or more times, double the national average. Additionally, a disproportionate number of African American students are more mobile, nearly 25% (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2010).

Summary

Teacher retention continues to be a topic of conversation in education in the United States specifically in urban school divisions. Data compiled about teachers through self-reported surveys and research conducted in large urban locations provide a general picture of what the student population looks like and why teachers choose to move schools or leave the profession (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Poverty, ethnic and racial diversity, high immigrant populations, linguistic diversity, and student and teacher mobility are issues that can be seen throughout the U.S., but are predominant in urban settings (Bosner, 2014; Fix & Capps, 2005; Kincheloe, 2010; Milner, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). As teachers across the United States become increasingly more mobile and attrition rates rise (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), there is a need for research that focuses on a different kind of urban school, the small urban school. The issues facing small urban schoolteachers are the same as the issues facing

large urban schoolteachers, but may manifest themselves in a different way (Milner, 2013; Shipler, 2004). Research on the small urban schoolteacher is a drop of water in a bucket filled predominantly with research on large urban schoolteachers. As we continue to combat attrition rates across the nation, we need to change our focus from why people leave to why they choose to stay and examine what is driving them to teach in school divisions with so many challenges.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of veteran small urban schoolteachers working in PCPS, a small urban school division in southwest Virginia. In order to examine this topic, the following questions will guide the research:

- 1) How do veteran PCPS teachers overcome the daily challenges of working in a Title I school in a small urban school division?
- 2) What are the catalysts for veteran PCPS teachers to leave the profession, move schools or school divisions, or stay in a school?

With attrition rates in PCPS becoming the focus of conversation in the last few years, it is important to discover why veteran teachers stay in the school system despite the challenges of teaching in a small urban school division. Focusing on why veteran teachers continue to teach may provide research needed to shift teacher retention conversations from leavers to stayers.

Research Design and Methodology

A case study approach suits the research questions and allows for focused study in a real world context (Saldaña, 2011; Yin, 2014). This section will discuss site description, the process of collaborator selection, the procedures of data collection, and the steps of data analysis.

Site Description

PCPS is one of eight small urban school divisions in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Parker City is an independent city located in southwest Virginia. Parker City is situated near two private institutions of higher education and one large Research I institution. Parker City sits east of the Appalachian Plateau in the valley between the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Allegheny Mountains. Parker City is the largest municipality in southwest Virginia with a population of approximately 97,000. PCPS is the public school division that serves the population of Parker City. PCPS has two high schools, five middle schools, and 17 elementary schools that serve approximately 13,500 students.

In Parker City, nearly 10,000 students are enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program. The difference between the school with the lowest percentage of students enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program, 17.3%, and the school with the highest percentage of students enrolled in the program, 99.2%, indicates the economic disparity between neighborhoods and schools in Parker City (SchoolDigger, 2015). About 45% of the students identify as Black, about 40% identify as White, about 9% identify as Hispanic or Latino, and about 3% identify as Asian (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b). As with the economic disparity information, the racial and ethnic breakdowns of the individual schools varied greatly indicating that neighborhood schools, principally elementary schools, were not only segregated along economic lines, but also along race and ethnicity lines.

Parker City has a foreign-born population of 7.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015b). Foreign-born populations include any individuals who are not U.S. citizens at birth: permanent residents (e.g., immigrants), temporary migrants (e.g., foreign students), humanitarian migrants (e.g., refugees and asylees), and unauthorized migrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The PCPS

website indicates that there are students from more than 40 different countries currently enrolled in the school system (Parker City Public Schools, 2016). Additionally, more than 30 native languages are spoken by the over 1000 students enrolled in ESL programs across the city (Parker City Public Schools, 2016). Among the general population, nearly 4,000 speak Spanish as their first language in their households, making up about 4.4% of the population. Less than 1% of the population speaks each of the subsequent nine most spoken languages: African, French Creole, Chinese, French, Vietnamese, Arabic, German, Tagalog, Serbo-Croatian, Portuguese, and Cambodian. The main PCPS website provides website translation in ten languages to ensure that students and parents have access to information in the language that best suits them: Spanish, Cantonese, French, German, Italian, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Korean, Russian, and Hindi. Individual school webpages offer the same service, however forms, documents, and attachments are offered predominantly in English only.

Collaborator Selection and Description

The collaborators in this case study were the teachers. As the researcher, I was inherently in a position of power since I defined the topic, interpreted the data, and represented the data (Kvale, 1996), but I had little experience teaching in a small urban school division. I used the term “collaborators” instead of “subjects,” “informants,” or “participants” because these terms are hierarchical. “Subject” is a term used in experimental research implying that the people involved in the study are items being researched (Morse, 1991). “Informant” is a term traditionally used in anthropology where the informant interprets a culture or phenomenon for the naïve researcher (Morse, 1991). “Participant” is a term used in qualitative inquiry and implies a relationship between the participant and the researcher, albeit an unequal one (Hoffman, 2007; Nind, 2008). While “informant” could have been deemed appropriate since my experience in

small urban schools was minimal, I was not a naïve researcher. Additionally, participant could have been deemed acceptable, but an unequal relationship with myself still having more power was not conducive to the research questions. Therefore, I chose to use the word “collaborator.” Collaborator implies that the people involved in the study are “so central to the development of the research” that they may change the direction of the research (Long, 2011). Working with the teachers as collaborators allowed the teachers more flexibility to mold and shape the direction of the research and led to the teachers feeling more invested in it, which in turn led to richer data.

To participate, collaborators must currently work in one of the public elementary school in Parker City and must have worked a minimum of five years consecutively in PCPS. This five-year mark is crucial because over the last fifteen years key reports have stated that within the first five years of teaching anywhere between 20% (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014) and 46% (Ingersoll, 2003) of teachers leave the profession. While these reports come to different conclusions, they both note that after five years, the number of teachers who remain in the profession increases greatly until these teachers reach retirement age.

I began my search for collaborators by contacting three PCPS teachers I had either worked with in the past or taken a class with, each at a different elementary school. The teachers I initially contacted helped me identify additional teachers who might have been interested in participating in the study. I contacted ten teachers in total, seven of whom I knew of or knew personally. Of these ten, four had the necessary experience and were available to collaborate: Amy, Beth, Cynthia, and Diane.

Amy grew up in the Parker City area. She has been teaching for about ten years. She ran an at-home day care for about ten years before becoming a teacher. In the last ten years as a teacher, she has taught various levels of elementary school. Currently she is a Reading Specialist

who works with second graders. She sees the same 25 to 35 students every day in small groups for about thirty minutes. My relationship with Amy was collegial prior to her interview. About three years prior, we attended the same class. On occasion we would share professional stories about our teaching experiences, but I knew little of her personal life or how important it was to her teaching before the interview.

Beth is a career-switcher. Before moving to Parker City, Beth worked in Richmond as a social worker and a teacher. She has dreams of switching careers again but knows the time for that is not now. Beth currently works as a Reading Specialist with fifth graders. She works with the same students every day in small groups for about thirty minutes. Throughout the course of our conversation, Beth and I discussed the international students with whom she works and the current political climate for non-whites in the United States. When people ask her why, as a white woman, she cares about and advocates for non-whites, Beth shared that she responds with, "I am not white, but I look white and I'm afforded that privilege which has helped me out in life." Much like my relationship with Amy, Beth and I had been enrolled in a class together. At the time of those classes, Beth had expressed interest in starting her doctoral studies. I did not see her in any subsequent classes and assumed she decided against continuing in school. Only when I asked specifically did she share that, while she would love to get a PhD, it did not fit in with her family plans at the moment.

Cynthia has been teaching in PCPS for about ten years. She recently changed schools after eight years working at another school in the division, she was searching for a school with a greater sense of collaboration and a family feel. She moved from fourth grade down to first grade. Cynthia currently teaches a first grade cluster English as a Second Language (ESL) class. Cynthia has a dual role, teacher and disciplinarian for black students. Her classroom is frequently

used as the In School Suspension (ISS) location. My relationship with Cynthia was significantly deeper prior than I had with either Amy or Beth. Cynthia and I worked together for a semester. I volunteered in her classroom a few days a week and had the opportunity to co-teach with her on several occasions. While a few years had passed since I was last in her classroom, meeting back up with her was like meeting up with an old friend. We started our in-depth conversations right back where we had left them.

Diane has been teaching in PCPS for nearly thirty years. Diane teaches ESL to kindergarten through fifth graders. After a long and successful career, Diane is strongly considering retiring this year, an idea that she has not given serious thought to in the past, but now feels she is ready to do. Diane works with the same small group of third, fourth, and fifth graders every morning for about 75 minutes. She also works with the same two students at the end of every day. Diane spends the rest of her day pushing into various ESL cluster classes in the building. Diane and I had also worked together in the past. Diane served as a mentor and a sounding board for me when I first started engaging in discussion surrounding the urbanity of Parker City.

Data Collection: Dialogic Interviews

For this study, I used dialogic interviews as data. Interviews seek to explore the views, experiences, beliefs, and motivations of individuals (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2006; Frank, 1999; Kvale, 1996; McNamara, 1999; Seidman, 2013). Interviews help researchers delve into the way people make meaning of their individual experiences. In a traditional one-on-one, face-to-face interview, the interviewer defines the situation and topic (Kvale, 1996). In traditional one-on-one, face-to-face interviews, the interviewer defines the situation and topic (Kvale, 1996). The interviewer predetermines the location, topic of conversation, and questions. This

immediately creates an asymmetry of power in which the interviewer has all of the power and the interviewee might feel powerless. This asymmetry of power is ever-present during the interview and creates a space where the participants need to decide if they are the giver of knowledge or if the interviewer is seeking to affirm conclusions they already have (Kvale, 1996). In a dialogic interview, the researcher and the collaborator engage in a natural conversation where both are intimately involved in the co-construction of knowledge (Freire, 1970, 1974; Kvale, 1996; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). When collaborators perceive themselves as givers of knowledge, power lies in their hands; the collaborators view their own stories as valuable to the researcher and unique from the experiences of the researcher and the other collaborators.

I engaged in one dialogic interview with each of the collaborators. The collaborators guided the conversations and ultimately determined the length of the interview. Initially I requested two hours of each collaborator's time with plenty of time for the collaborators to ask questions, discuss any concerns, and sign the appropriate consent forms. In the end, however, the recorded portion of the interviews with Amy, Beth, Cynthia, and Diane lasted 2 hours, 4 hours, 3 hours, and 2 hours respectively.

One of the challenges of doing dialogic interviews is that the collaborator and the researcher are engaged in a free-flowing conversation that may or may not address the researcher's topic. While I never directly stated the research questions to the collaborators, I shared with them my overarching topic of teacher retention in PCPS when I first contacted them and it was written in the informed consent document. As the conversations developed, I did not seek out ways to interject and change the course of the conversation to steer the collaborators

toward a specific topic of conversation of my choosing, but responded to their stories with my own prompting rich discussion about a variety of topics.

Dialogic interviews can also be challenging for the collaborators, however. At the end of each interview, each of the collaborators felt the conversation had included many sidebars and asked me a variation of the following two questions: “Did I answer your question?” and “Did you get what you needed?” To each of the collaborators I gave the same answer, “yes.”

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data for this study using a type of whole text analysis derived from procedures established by Saldaña (2011, 2013).

After each interview, typically within 48 hours of the interview, I transcribed the interview verbatim. In my written transcription, I removed any information that could potentially identify the collaborators or others mentioned during their interview. I noted abrupt changes in the conversation and noted emphasized words or phrases as well as level of expressed emotion and other nonverbal information that could add to meaning during the coding process. During the transcription process, I wrote notes about the interview that could later be used to create potential codes (Saldaña, 2013).

During the first reading of each transcript, I focused on getting an overall sense of the collaborator’s experiences. During a second reading of each transcript, I noted specific words, groups of words, and entire stories that the collaborators used to describe their experiences.

After I finished transcribing and the initial readings of the interviews, I excerpted relevant material from each transcript. I used in vivo coding to capture meaning using the collaborator’s own language (Saldaña, 2013). Each excerpt was self-contained and varied in length to preserve the collaborator’s full and complete meaning. Two key ways of identifying the end of an excerpt

was a shift in the meaning of the collaborator's discourse and the ending of a story.

After identifying each excerpt, I coded it. The purpose of coding is not simply to label the excerpts, but to link the data to a larger idea and back to the other data (Saldaña, 2013). Coding is cyclical. As I coded each new transcript, I compared each new code to the previous codes to ensure they identified the distinctive properties of each.

Finally, after I coded each of the excerpts, I compared the codes and clustered similar codes together to form categories. These categories captured meaning at a higher level of abstraction than codes. I gave each category a detailed label to ensure that while some codes clustered into more than one category, the categories were mutually exclusive.

In addition, throughout the data analysis process, as issues arose, I wrote memos to document ideas, issues, or questions requiring further clarification, refinement, or verification. Memo writing is an important aspect of the data analysis process because it allowed me to theorize these ideas, issues, and questions to help guide the data analysis process.

Findings

The analysis of the transcripts produced six categories: connecting with students, taking on dual roles in the school, engaging students in their own narratives, advocating for students, moving schools, and leaving schools. Because of the nature of dialogic interviews, each of the four collaborators and I shared personal stories relating at least five of these six categories. I selected one collaborator's story to illustrate each of these categories. While discussed separately, it is important to note that the categories are interconnected and most of the stories, while they specifically address one of the categories, have elements of the others embedded within them.

Connecting with Students: Amy's Shared Experience of Grief

Amy has wanted to be a teacher since she was five or six. She lined up her siblings or her dolls and played school with them. For Amy, teaching is all about the students. She stated:

I love the kids. I love working with the kids. I end up getting very close to some of my students. I go to their basketball games and football games and things like that. The parents really appreciate it when you take that kind of interest in their children. I love the kids. That, [teaching,] that's all I've really wanted to do.

Amy taught kindergarten for a number of years before becoming a second grade reading specialist. Although she loves reading and teaching reading, Amy was nervous about moving up to second grade. Amy shared:

At first I didn't like second grade. I was nervous about the discipline part because, I mean, let's be honest; I'm not the strictest person in the world [giggling]. But you know you don't have to be. I realized those kids will do anything for me. I treat them with kindness and respect and that's how they treat me.

For Amy, kindness and respect are just a starting point. She also has to feel a connection with her students. Amy moved schools at one point in her career because she didn't feel she was a "good match" for the kids.

As Amy revealed that she changed schools because she did not feel connected with her students, I realized that I also had made the choice to leave a school because I didn't feel I was connecting with my students. I had been working for two years as a specialist teaching Outdoor Classroom in a lower elementary school. In response to her story, I shared with her one of the contributing factors as to why I was unable to stay in my last teaching position.

After two years [at the school], I was looking for a full time position and they weren't looking for me. They really wanted me to stay as the Outdoor Classroom coordinator, which would have been fine under other circumstances. But Northern Virginia is hard enough to live in when you're working part time. And I just really wanted to spend more time with the kids. I only got to see them for 30 minute a week because I saw all 20 classroom throughout the week.

I had thought that by going home to the community in which I grew up connecting with students would be easy, but I found time to be an obstacle to forming deep connections with the over 200 students I saw every week.

At her current school, Amy feels she has a great deal in common with her students beginning with the fact that she grew up in Parker City in a neighborhood not far from where she teaches, and she attended PCPS schools.

Amy has first-hand experience with a feeling that many of her students have faced: loss. Within the last three years, Amy shared that she had lost both her husband and her son saying:

It gives me something a lot of people don't have. It's not good and I didn't want it to happen, but it gives me a knowledge of things that a lot of people don't have... And maybe that's why I do bond with them a lot.

The grief associated with the loss of family, whether permanent or temporary, is something that many of her students have gone through. Amy is in a unique situation where she can provide a safe space for her students to open up and share personal stories of tragedy because she has her own stories to share. Amy went on saying:

There was a student that I had - she came to this country in the fifth grade. She already graduated high school now and I think she's been out for like two years. We still stay in

touch. We still talk. We still go to the movies together. We still go out to eat together. She finally opened up to me this past year about coming to this country. It breaks my heart. [crying]. She's just been through so much. Now she is just so afraid of the president coming in and that she might get sent back. She just opened up a whole new world to me. I didn't even know that so many are not here legally and what they had to go through and why they are scared to go anywhere and how careful they. She confided all of that to me. Amy's continued relationship with her students and her ability to be vulnerable with them has opened her world in ways she never thought possible.

Amy's story exemplifies the importance of connecting with students. Student-teacher relationships do not always come easily. While race can be the basis of forming a common bond (Egalite, Kisida & Winters, 2015), Amy uses a shared human experience to forge a connection with her students.

Taking on Dual Roles: Cynthia the Disciplinarian

Cynthia holds two positions at her school: teacher and unofficial disciplinarian. In describing her dual roles, Cynthia said:

Don't let me get it twisted. We [Blacks] are for some odd reason disciplinary gurus for the black kids. Because I'm Black I can deal with every misbehaved Black kid in the world. You didn't know that, did you? I didn't know that either. And this year, for some odd reason I'm designated ISS (In School Suspension) room.

This second role was unexpected. Throughout the school year, an administrator would come into her room and ask if a student with disciplinary issues could stay in her class. While she initially thought her coworkers were having the same experience, she soon found out that it was her room exclusively that was being used in such a way. When she confronted an assistant

principal about the situation, Cynthia found out that the students in ISS acted better and were less of a disruption in her room than in other rooms. Cynthia chalks this up to the fact that she now has an official refocusing area for students being placed in her class. Cynthia's refocusing area consisted of a small, cleared off desk and chair near her own teacher's desk, outside of the constant motion of her first grade classroom but not in a place of isolation. After all, placing a fifth grader at the table with her first grade students would definitely be a disruption.

Because the presence of older students in her classroom has become a somewhat normal part of her everyday classroom, Cynthia takes the opportunity to ask the older students to give a short presentation to her students at the end of the day. She asks them to tell her students what they have to look forward to and the consequences at their grade level. She asks them to share the good things and the bad things as they need to know about everything. Cynthia recalled the story of one student:

I had one particular child – this is the best analogy I've ever heard. He sat there and he was telling. "Well I do want to let you know that it gets harder. Every year gets harder. Matter of fact, it's like playing a video game. You know how every level you go up it gets harder and harder? Well that's how school is. Each time you go up a grade it gets harder and harder just like a video game."

The student's presence in her class was astonishing to Cynthia since the student was clearly smart. When asked why he was in ISS, he claimed not to like his teacher. Cynthia took the opportunity to really dig into the issue saying to the student:

Let me ask you, you not liking your teacher, how is that hurting her? Does she go home every day sad, crying because you don't like her? Think about it. Who is it hurting that you've been sent out, missing that education that she's already got? You're missing out on

a lot. So who is it really hurting? Every time you are sent out, that's just taking away from you – your education.

Cynthia's story about this young boy continued and she soon found out why, or at least part of the reason why, he did not like his teacher. Cynthia's story shifted gears and focused on the teacher. She remarked:

When the teacher did come by to get him, you kind of can see why he is so disconnected from his teacher. "Get your stuff! Let's go! Did you do anything?" She comes into my room, not even quietly. She disrupted my classroom and they're talking about this kid being disruptive. Rapport is so important. How long do you hold onto that [anger]? How long does this child have to endure that?

In the moment, I could not help but reveal one of the stories I hold closest to my chest; the one story that nags at me to this day. I confided in Cynthia and shared:

I don't know that teacher, but I know what it's like to not get along with a kid in your class. One year I had a fifth grader who was impossible. When I said to sit down, he stood. When I told everyone to sharpen their pencils, he refused. When I told him if he got up one more time during an assessment I would take his test away, he got out of his seat. I took his test away and his mom showed up that afternoon with a five-foot dog to chat with me about her son's test. It didn't matter what I did, we just couldn't get along. One of my greatest regrets is that I let his purposeful defiance to get under my skin. I allowed my anger prevent me from continuing to try. I gave up on him. I gave up on myself.

Cynthia acknowledged that since she did not know the exact nature of the relationship she was not in a position to really comment further on the situation. Instead Cynthia discussed her own personal belief on the importance of not getting angry.

This is how I see it, and this is for adults and for kids. When you sit there and get angry, get mad, you just gave somebody your power. You just let them take the power away from you. I refuse to give my power to anybody. I am very confident in who I am and I'm not giving anybody my power. I'm not going to get upset. If you want to call me a name, ok, all right. If that's how you feel about me that's your opinion. Let's move on. It's just sad because you see that a lot and the sad part about it is the stress of teaching is bad enough. I mean it can be stressful. It's the way you want to take it, how you want to be with your career in that sense, but I don't see it as a future, a retirement endeavor when you sit there and stay mad like that all the time.

I agreed with Cynthia's take on how anger does nothing to help a situation. Even in telling my own story of anger with my fifth grade student felt as if I was telling the story of a different person, a different me.

Cynthia took on her unofficial second role as the school disciplinarian without complaint and turned what many consider a nuisance into an opportunity. She continually utilizes this additional role to enhance the lives of the students sent to her and the students in her own classroom.

Engaging Students in their own Narratives: Beth and Stephanie

Beth currently works with a fifth grader from Haiti named Stephanie. Stephanie was supposed to start kindergarten in 2010, but in January of 2010, Haiti was hit with an earthquake with a 7.0 magnitude followed by at least 52 aftershocks of 4.5 magnitude or greater within two

weeks. Due to the earthquake, about two million Haitians lived as squatters and the existing shortage of potable water became an even greater issue. Beth shared the beginning of Stephanie's story:

[Stephanie] lived in camps. They don't even know what happened to her. She lived with her mom. She got separated from her dad. Her dad just got custody back. This kid lived in Haiti for years without going to school. We just finally figured that out and she's in fifth grade. She has nothing in her own language, doesn't even know her own language. It's almost like she's disassociated herself from everything that happened there. She speaks some dialect of Haitian Creole that nobody here knows. There's nobody that can speak to her because nobody understands the dialect that she speaks when she will talk to you.

In Virginia, fifth grade students are required to take the Reading, Math, Writing, and Science SOL exams. Beth is visibly and audibly frustrated as she talks about Stephanie having to take these standardized exams saying, "She's never been in school before as far as we can figure out and yet she's expected to take the tests. It's like, 'Are you kidding me right now?'"

Beth veers away from this discussion and refocuses on the huge improvements Stephanie has made in the last few months. Beth illustrates Stephanie's successes by continuing Stephanie's story:

This little girl gets so incredibly excited that she can say, "Hello, how are you?" And I'm like "Stephanie, how are you this morning? You look so beautiful." And she says, "Thank you Miss Beth. Good morning to you," and she just beams. It took her from September till [January] to learn that. This kid had been so traumatized that I don't even know what's working in there. The ELL teacher that's been working with her has been just working on

really basic sight words and really basic three letter CVC words. So now she can read Zac the Cat. It's just so – her little face lights up and she's just so thrilled that she can do that.

For Beth, teaching is all about stories like Stephanie's. "I want to be able to talk to kids like that. I want to be able to talk to them about what's going on and how they're feeling and talk to them about their culture." Beth engages in non-text based conversations with her students, connecting students' personal stories to the concepts they are working on. Forming those connections takes time, time that Beth is willing and eager to take, but time that the administration says she does not have. Beth shares:

You've got administrators saying, "I was in your class and I was watching you with your last group. You're time-on-task wasn't that good." And I'm just like oh my God they're not automatons. We can't just push these kids through like they are on a conveyer belt. I'm not Lucy and Ethel shoving the chocolates in my mouth. I can't do that. These kids are people. They need their experiences to be - for somebody to validate them.

As Beth's story about Stephanie ended, I could not help but bring up a question that had been nagging me ever since I was a teacher. I ask, more aloud to myself than to Beth:

I *love* the concept of time-on-task because I just want to know what an administrator thinks that means. I think of time-on-task – and let me go back to reading out loud – I use stories to engage students in their stories because it's all about connecting, right?

Everything is about connections because if you can't connect to something -

Beth completes my thought, "- you don't understand it."

I continue my train of thought by telling Beth about teaching my 5th grade students about aqueducts in Central and South America.

Unless you can really connect thing, they don't really matter. For example I taught aqueducts. In Central and South America, aqueducts are hugely important. And instead of doing an end of quarter test, I did an end of quarter project and they had to build an aqueduct. One of the parts of the project was to talk about aqueducts in the past and talk about a modern aqueduct.

As we talked in class, my students were able to derive the purpose of an aqueduct from the text while connecting it to a modern object that does the same thing. At the end of the year, three quarters later, the students still knew what an aqueduct was and what it did.

Beth's story about Stephanie and her desire to make sure every student feels their experiences are valid and relevant illustrates just how important a student's personal narrative is to the class and to their own understanding of the material presented.

Advocating for Students: Diane and Mariah's Glasses

For Diane, making sure that the basic needs of a student are met is perhaps one of her biggest tasks, and perhaps her greatest achievement. As Diane finished recounting the story of one of her students who was not receiving the services they needed because the school psychologist wanted to wait to see if the issue was language or learning, I expressed concerns with the idea of waiting around, "You know, that is what has always bothered me about the category of developmental delay. It's not like we wait until students are eight years old to give them glasses. How is this any different?"

Laughing at my comment, Diane shared another story. One year, she met with the same two students who were struggling with reading every day at the end of the day. Mariah, a fourth grader who attended the school in first grade, returned to her home country with her family for

second grade and half of third grade, is now a fourth grader. She is struggling to read and holds texts inches from her face. Diane explained the situation:

In October when they do the eye screenings I ask to have her screened because everybody says, "Mariah can't see, Mariah can't see". So I say, "We'll make sure that she gets her eyes screened". And it did happen and nothing happened. In January I go to the nurse and I say, "I know you screened Mariah. I'm wondering what the results were because she still can't see". So the nurse pulls it up and sure enough she sent a letter home in English. So then we have to call dad. And dad says, "We had a problem with Medicaid. It's taken a whole long time to get Medicaid worked out, and so first I took her to the doctor. Then I took her to the dentist. And eyes are next on the list." And we said, "Well, she can't read because she can't see and therefore we need you to take her right away". So he had to take her and pay himself because for some reason Medicaid wasn't going to work. And she now has glasses. But I don't know what else the family doesn't get because Mariah got glasses. Now we have to wait for her to use her glasses for another six weeks to find out if its vision that's stopping her from reading or whether she has a learning disability.

The story of Mariah's struggle with vision took a rather unexpected turn when Diane shared that Mariah wore glasses in first grade. Mariah's glasses broke when she was in Mexico. She didn't like them because the other students laughed at her for wearing them. But Diane felt that Mariah's issues went beyond vision. Diane went on to explain some of Mariah's history:

Back in first grade when Mariah wore glasses she couldn't learn to read. The teacher was very concerned with how she was not learning in first grade and that teacher proposed that in second grade they would bring her up for RTI. But that teacher left AND Mariah's

family left. They went back to Mexico. So she is in Mexico for second grade. She comes back in third grade half way through and doesn't know how to read. At all. When she came back in January or February or whenever it was, we can't say, "Well, she may have a learning disability," because she's been in Mexico for a year and a half. So we are still working at it. We don't know if she has a learning disability. She behaves like she does, but she behaves like she can't see also. But she can now! She got her glasses!

Diane knows that these are the types of issues that come up, especially in an urban school.

Poverty is vicious and parents should not have to choose between getting their child glasses or other family essentials. For Diane, Mariah's story showcases one major sentiment. She stated:

I feel like I really made a difference in her life. It's a lot of work. You can't let the ball drop. I like knowing that when I push, sometimes we do good things for kids. You have to fight.

Mariah's story showcased how easily a student, especially an ELL, could get lost in the system. By acting as Mariah's advocate, Diane was able to move a stagnant situation forward. If Diane had not have pushed, no one else would have.

Moving Schools: Cynthia's Search for a "Family" Feeling

Knowing that Cynthia had recently changed schools, I began our conversation asking Cynthia about her new school placement. Cynthia taught at an elementary school in Parker City for eight or nine years. She recently asked for, and was granted a transfer to another elementary school in PCPS. In recounting her story, she talked about why she chose to leave the school and how her new school placement fulfills her need. She began:

I like the collaboration. I think my last school USED to have that collaboration. I think with the new administration that came in, it kind of bats people against each other. So

that collaboration, that family type of staff that we used to have where we're all smiling when we go down the hall and high fiving each other, that [was] taken away little by little by the new administration. You can feel the tension. You can feel the unhappiness in the school and that's sad. It's really sad when you get to that point. And at this point in my life, I don't need that negativity. I need something that's positive. [My new school] has been my positivity.

Cynthia continued recounting her tale by explaining that the challenges of teaching in a small urban school were not unsurmountable when the teachers felt like they are a part of a team.

When you feel like you are working with a family, you can change stuff up every year. You can sit there and give us 30 or 40 kids in a classroom. If we feel like we're in a family and have that tight knit collaboration, we'll take on all that stuff and it won't even matter. We won't even mind. But when you dismantle that family unit, when you take away that, people are unhappy.

Although the school no longer had a family feel, Cynthia and the other veteran teachers still felt like a family. And like any family, they talked to each other. The unhappiness at the lack of collaboration and lack of a team feeling was not exclusively felt by Cynthia. The year that Cynthia put in for a transfer to another school, about twenty other teachers also left the school. Most of the teachers had ten or more years of teaching in the school. Of the twenty teachers, fifteen sought out teaching positions in other schools or divisions and five left the profession. Cynthia contacted human resources in her division to put in for the transfer. Although told to submit the transfer papers only once, she submitted them three times. Cynthia was surprised to receive a phone call from the head of human resources. She recounted:

At that time we were going on three years of that school having 20 or more teachers leave. I guess [the head of human resources] looked at it like this: she's willing to transfer and still stay within the city – I think we better give her what she wants.

Cynthia received her first choice school and her first choice grade level. Her new school placement is closer to her home shortening her commute by 30 minutes each day, which she claims gives her 15 extra minutes in the morning to work on her hair or cuddle her children.

As often is the case in dialogic interviews, our discussion shifted topics a number of times, which did not provide me an opportunity to share my own story about moving schools. This did not surprise me, however. In the past, Cynthia and I had discussed my teacher journey when we worked together and she knew it well.

What made Cynthia's story so important to tell was that she was one of the few teachers at her school willing to stay in Parker City. Cynthia did not give up on PCPS, she sought out another placement and found the family feeling she was searching for at her new school.

Leaving Schools: Diane's Retirement

Diane recently decided that this would be her last year teaching. She is ready to retire. The school culture has changed over the last few years and she does not feel the same sense of community and school pride that she once felt. While this feeling definitely has taken a toll on her day-to-day joy at being in the school, ultimately she did not choose to retire because of that change. And while she still loves getting up in the morning and coming in to teach, she feels that something else really has changed and has allowed her to come to the conclusion that this really is the best time for her to retire. Diane stated:

Back in the 90s, the three or four ELL teachers that I worked with, we were indispensable. We ran the show. The schools needed us. The kids needed us. The parents

needed us. I never would have considered doing anything else but I now have seen teachers who I think do a better job than I do.

Diane paused. She was not soliciting a compliment or even looking for one. She was simply stating the facts as she sees them. She has been teaching for nearly thirty years. Diane has seen the birth of ESL as a profession and has seen the growing need for teachers who are prepared to work with ELLs. She explained some of the growth she has seen:

So many classroom teachers come with experience of or training in working with ELLs. But what I'm thinking about is the VATESOL conference in Harrisonburg at JMU in the fall. The workshops I went to were mostly the ones by the Harrisonburg teachers talking about their newcomers program and things that they do there which I think is very interesting and impressive. Well these teachers were - I would love to have them here! Their enthusiasm, what they do with the kids, how they connect with the families. They are ELL teachers and they have the kids all day long and they teach all subjects. There's a program where the kids are in there for up to a year and once they have certain skills, they can go to another program in their home school which is half a day ELL and half a day with the other students. On Fridays, for example, the kids get together at one school and do STEM activities. The ones that have a little bit more language help the ones who are new. And there's just so much really good interaction. But what my point is that these were excellent teachers. They showed videos of what they are doing in class and what their students are doing. I'm thinking, 'I would love to have my students that fully engaged in learning math and learning science'. I think young teachers are being trained to do really good things with students

In that moment, thoughts about my own teacher preparation program swim through my head. I shared the one that first popped into my mind:

I remember taking a class on exceptional learners when I was getting my master's degree. It was more than 10 years ago at this point but I seem to remember that they put all of the exceptionalities in one class – special education, gifted, English learners. I can recall most of my coursework from back then and can recall facts left and right, but I don't remember anything about working with English learners. I think it was an afterthought, a sidebar in the conversation that focused almost exclusively on special education. With the growing number of ELLs, I feel like they can no longer be relegated to the sidelines. I think teachers have to be ready to work with a more diverse population than they did even ten years ago.

Again, Diane paused. She concluded matter-of-factly. "I'm ready to let it go and come in as a tutor or something like that. I don't need to run the show anymore."

Diane remained in PCPS through the vicissitudes because she felt the school and the students needed her and needed her expertise. Her retirement will have a yet-to-be-determined impact on the students and on the school she has worked at for much of her career. Her story was one of hope. It illustrated a teacher chose to leave because she decided it was time, instead of a teacher who had given up.

Discussion

All teachers have unique stories to tell about their teaching experiences. Perhaps the most important thing is simply to share these stories. Performing dialogic interviews afforded me the space and flexibility necessary to form deep connections with my collaborators. As they shared their stories, I shared mine. The more we shared with each other, the more detailed and personal

the stories became. Through the intimacy of this interview format and the openness of my collaborators and myself, Amy, Cynthia, Diane, and Beth shared stories with me that they had not shared before with people outside of their immediate circle.

Connecting with Students: Amy's Shared Experience of Grief

Amy got incredibly emotional as she shared her own stories of heartache and as she shared stories of her student's heartache. She attributed her ability to connect with students to a shared community and experiences with grief. Grief can be triggered by any significant change be it positive or negative. Talking about grief is an uncomfortable thing that we do not prepare teachers to do. For teachers, "unexpressed grief can cut off their ability to bring love into teaching – to be open and authentic with students, to have passion for a subject, and to care deeply about students" (Kessler, 2004, p. 138). As Amy shared the story of her grief, our rapport grew and we both began to share deeper stories with more meaning. Had I not known Amy prior to this interview, she may not have felt comfortable enough with me to share all that she did. Watching this unfold throughout a two-hour interview and listening ~~back on~~ to the recordings again allowed me to catch a glimpse into the way Amy teaches and the way she connects with her students on an emotional level. Being able to connect with students is an essential part of meeting the needs of students (Jett, McNeal Curry, & Vernon-Jackson, 2016).

Taking on Dual Roles: Cynthia the Disciplinarian

While the story that Cynthia shared about her dual role as a teacher and school disciplinarian for the Black students is unique to her, it is a role many Black teachers, specifically male Black teachers in urban schools, are filling, a role specifically sought through targeted recruitment (Brockenbrough, 2015). Teachers in urban school divisions who identify, racially, with their student population feel more successful and more satisfied than teachers who

do not identify, racially, with their student population (Kearney, 2008). This feeling of success and satisfaction from the teacher's standpoint is not surprising as students feel a greater obligation to work hard and achieve success when their teachers look like them. Some teachers struggle with their role as a member of the minority (e.g., racial, ethnic, religious, gender) in a school and wrestle with the expectation by the rest of the school that they are the voice of an entire community or liaison for an entire community (Brockenbrough, 2015). Cynthia took advantage of the position being a minority teacher in an urban school provided her to lift up her students. She overcomes the daily struggles of working in Parker City by not only embracing her work, but also by finding joy in it. I cannot help but wonder if I had a similar outlook if I would have been able to find a way to connect with my fifth grade student.

Engaging Students in their own Narratives: Beth and Stephanie

Beth faces one of the greatest challenges of any teacher; she is racing the clock. With the increase in standardization, the freedom to veer from a prescribed plan, both for students and for teachers, has been slowly disappearing from the educational system (Garrison, 2012; Hilliard, 1995; Selwyn, 2007). Schools are designed to be the factories to which Beth refers (Upitis, 2010). Beth has a quota to fill. She does not have the time to spend with each student supporting them the way they need. Instead, she feels forced to push her students to "succeed" no matter the cost to them (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2006). Beth's desire and willingness to push back against this system and focus on her students' learning and comprehension over their test scores and language levels is admirable. In my own classroom, I also pushed back against my school's preferred traditional forms of learning and assessment. Like Beth, I found that true learning takes place when students are able to connect to the material through contextualizing it with their own narratives.

Advocating for Students: Diane and Mariah's Glasses

Mariah is a student who is in a low socioeconomic class, is Mexican, is an immigrant, speaks Spanish as a first language, and is highly mobile. This student faces adversity that is beyond what the average student, even the average student in an urban setting, faces. Her short academic history has included inconsistent language of instruction, inconsistent content instruction, and inconsistent attendance. All three of these things lead to below grade level academic performance (Kraft et.al., 2015). Diane's push to make sure that Mariah receives the services she needs goes beyond making sure Mariah gets glasses. Diane cares for the overall wellbeing of her students and notices that Mariah's struggles in school go beyond her physical ability to read. Research has long show that ELLs are overrepresented in special education but recent research shows that in the early grades, children of immigrant families are less likely to receive special education placement (Hibel & Jasper, 2012). Testing a student who does not have certain language abilities can be a challenge, but Diane feels that this should not prevent testing. By the time an elementary school student has the language ability to be tested, they may have been in the country for years and the potential for that student to fall far behind their peers only increases year to year.

Moving Schools: Cynthia's Search for a "Family" Feeling

Cynthia is an internal mover. She changed schools within her school division. This move was unimaginable to her about five years ago. With a change in administration and a change in administrative priorities, collaboration, and the sense of family disappeared from the school. This administrative change happened after the failing school finally achieved accreditation. With some resources withdrawn from the school and with a lack of collaboration, student success decreased and the school returned to its failing status. Collaboration among instructional teams,

particularly in the areas of math and reading, leads to better instructional strategies which lead to increased student achievement (Banerjee, Stearns, Moller, & Mickelson, 2017; Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015). Furthermore, collaboration leads to professional growth, which is tied to job satisfaction for many teachers (Schneider & Kipp, 2015). Cynthia's desire to find the collaboration and sense of family that she lost at her school is an important reason for moving to a different school. In urban school divisions, it is crucial to retain veteran teachers if possible. These teachers know the community and are instrumental in mentoring incoming teachers.

Leaving Schools: Diane's Retirement

Diane is technically a leaver, but she is not really leaving the teaching profession; she is retiring. Diane feels that the new teachers at her school are better prepared to work with ELLs than she is. As classrooms across the United States become more linguistically diverse, including coursework in a teacher preparation program that focuses on working with ELLs is essential (Coady, Harper, & de Jong, 2016). This type of coursework is only required in a handful of states and is not currently required in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Additionally, starting the 2017-2018 school year, teachers who have a current Virginia teaching license will be permitted to receive an endorsement to teach ESL as long as they pass the Praxis II, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (8VAC20-22-350, 2017). This change from a required 24 semester hours of coursework to the passing of a standardized test has the potential to change the field of teaching ESL, and not necessarily for the better. As a teacher who completed the coursework before taking the Praxis II, I know that I would not have been able to pass without time spent studying and a detailed study guide. With the completed coursework, I do feel confident enough to work with ELLs in a general education classroom, but do not feel I am adequately prepared to teach ESL. Time will tell if this change gives qualified and prepared teachers the ability to access

a field to which they previously did not have access, or if the field will become flooded with unprepared teachers looking for a change.

Conclusion

Amy, Cynthia, Beth, and Diane face challenges on a daily level that many teachers may never see in their entire careers. The unique blend of poverty, racial and ethnic diversity, immigrant and refugee populations, linguistic diversity, and student mobility can be seen in nearly every story they tell.

To overcome the daily challenges of working in a Title I school in a small urban school division, each teacher has a different strategy with the same overarching goal: building relationships. Amy forms deep connections with her students through treating them with kindness, respect, and an openness about her personal stories of grief and loss that many teachers are not able to do. Cynthia uses her additional role as the school disciplinarian to build up students who are seen as disciplinary problems by providing a space where they can reflect on their own situation and speak to other students about what the future at the elementary school will look like. Beth pushes aside an administrative view of students being “automatons” to engage students in meaningful conversations and help students achieve their full potential. Diane advocates for students who are slipping or appear to be slip through the cracks. She pushes and pushes until her students’ basic needs are filled. Each of these teachers uses a different approach to accomplish the same goal of building relationships with students.

Amy, Cynthia, and Diane also each discussed the specific catalysts that caused them to move schools within the school division or to leave, retire. Each of these teachers focused on the relationships they had with students, faculty, or administration as the reason for making a change. Amy focused on her ability to relate to the students that she worked with, noting that she

did not connect with all students at all schools causing her to seek out a school where she felt a connection with the students. With a change in administration, Cynthia felt the overall sense of school community and the family feeling she had with the faculty and staff of her school was not only not encouraged, but disappeared completely causing her to seek out an alternative place to work. Diane decided to finally retire because she felt other people were being prepared to work with and advocate for vulnerable populations. She no longer felt she was alone and even felt that other teachers were better prepared for the job than she was.

I have never taught in a small urban school division, but over the course of my discussions with Diane, Beth, Cynthia, and Amy, I found that much of what they shared prompted me to share similarly themed stories from my own experiences. Upon reflecting on the conversations, I found myself unearthing even more stories from my past and wanting to share them with the collaborators. I became anxious to hear what experiences my stories would elicit from them.

For Cynthia, Beth, Diane, and Amy, being a teacher is not just a job. They spend their days building relationships with the people around them and doing all they can to support their students and colleagues. This focus on building and maintaining relationships needs to be a central tenant of professional development workshops and of teacher education programs. A change in focus from teaching strategies to teacher qualities and characteristics may play a positive role in teacher retention.

Beth's, Diane's, Amy's, and Cynthia's stories showed how these four veteran teachers overcome the daily challenges of working in a Title I school in Parker City, a small urban school division. Teacher attrition is an ever present topic of discussion in PCPS and in schools across the United States. Shifting our research and conversation foci from the reasons why teachers

leave public schools to the importance of building and maintaining relationships between teachers and students and among teachers and staff could play a key role in long-term teacher retention.

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Chapter 4: Reconciling Parker City

This dissertation began because I sought to understand why Parker City⁶ is “urban”. When someone says “urban”, the first thing that comes to mind is still cities with populations in the millions: New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami, Philadelphia, Dallas, Houston, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Boston. I created this image in my childhood based on the portrayal of urban schools and urban life as seen through popular films and the media. Hollywood’s interpretation of urban became my reality of urban. *Dangerous Minds* (Simpson, Bruckheimer, & Smith, 1995) was my first glimpse into urban life. It romanticized a teacher’s ability to achieve the impossible provided the teacher is well meaning and comes from a place of privilege (Bell, 1998; Cann, 2013). Even documentaries reinforce negative stereotypes about families, schools, and the everyday struggles of living in urban areas (Bell, 1998; Biron-Meisels, 2011; Dumas, 2013). My exposure to urban schools was limited to these types of outlets and they skewed my perception. My inability to marry Parker City with my image of urban should not have come as a surprise. I needed the operational definition of urban to begin a conversation.

With the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) classification, I was at least able to grasp the label, although I found that the label of “urban” did not give me as much information as I needed since a majority of the research conducted focused on those large cities with populations in the millions. It was not until I started asking teachers about their experiences and ultimately interviewing four teachers that I started to see the similarities and differences between the small urban city of Parker City and the large urban cities I had been envisioning. I still struggle with the USDOE classification system, however. After all, Montgomery County, Virginia is also urban, a fact that I really struggle to grasp.

⁶ Pseudonym

Through my conversations with Beth, Amy, Cynthia, and Diane, my view of what an urban school looked like changed. Through their stories, I began thinking about urban schools in terms of the characteristics of the individuals who lived there, not population size or population density. The stereotypes I had allowed to shape my understanding of urban schools had prevented me from seeing Parker City as it truly was, an urban city-center in southwest Virginia filled with culturally, linguistically, ethnically diverse learners from different social strata all living in the same community.

If I had ever dared to venture beyond the rows of monuments and museums I called home in Washington, D.C. or if I had engaged in these in-depth dialogues with Amy, Cynthia, Diane, and Beth before interning in Parker City, maybe my issue with Parker City's urban label would have been a non-issue or perhaps it would have been more of an issue. I may have found more similarities than differences or more differences than similarities. School divisions are as unique as the students we teach. As a teacher with a different teaching background than my collaborators, I was surprised to see how similar our needs for building relationships with colleagues and students were.

As we prepare teachers for the challenges of working in urban school settings, we need to continue to engage in the conversation surrounding the word, and the use of the word, urban. Preparing teachers to work in PCPS can and should look different than preparing them to work in Richmond, Virginia, or in New York City. Working or student teaching in one division may not prepare you for working in another. As we move forward, perhaps we need to redirect our teacher education programs and our professional development in schools to emphasize building and maintain relationships. As Cynthia pointed out, teachers can put up with just about anything as long as they feel they are a part of a family unit.

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