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Detention and Retention of the English Teacher

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Many individuals see teaching as a life's calling, a deep-seated desire to have an impact on the future while it is still young. And for many in the profession, that calling has one and only one manifestation—a classroom of students, the sound of a school bell reverberating off concrete walls, the dry itch of chalk dust over all that we own.

Our careers in English education began with just such a philosophy. We were wet-behind-the-cars idealists, self-affirmed in our public school classrooms, engaged in the great struggle—as our trusty administrator phrased it—of “stamping out ignorance.” We were colleagues; we were friends; we were mentor-mentee; we designed lessons together; we collaborated on common projects and assessments. More importantly, we shared the belief that we must teach students the beloved subject of English, a mantra that underscored everything we did and continue to do in our professional lives.

And then, as our desires and our personal goals began to change, we each chose to leave the public school classroom. We were not ‘tired,’ nor were we ‘quitting,’ or ‘giving up’; rather, we were following the very same philosophy we sought to instill in our students—learning is a life-long endeavor, and new challenges are always on the horizon.

We feel it was the limitations of a life in the secondary English classroom that ultimately drove us from our classrooms—the stranglehold that was being exerted on our own professional learning and growth, the lack of flexibility in our schedules, the limited potential for career advancement, or a kind of professional and career detention. Christian, after five years in

the classroom, completed a doctoral program and is now Assistant Professor of English education at the University of Arkansas. Matt, after nine years in front of students, is now Language Arts and Literacy Consultant for the Kansas State Department of Education.

In thinking back on why we left the classroom, we wondered how our experiences might help other teachers understand some of the forces behind our decision and we wanted to volunteer our stories and feelings to help people identify with why so many teachers, in fact, leave the profession prematurely, not just the classroom.

Our Motivation for Leaving Early

Our motivation in leaving the classroom centers, to a large degree, on two main ideas: the inherent benefits gathered from professional collaboration and teacher leadership, as well as the generational differences in attitude and mindset regarding such concepts as career, mobility, and job security.

While new teachers range in age from twenty-two to sixty, some evidence present in generational research points towards younger teachers being more apt to depart (Peske et. al). These under-thirty professionals have needs much different than their counterparts from earlier generations. Among those needs are expanded professional opportunities both within and beyond the classroom.

For decades, researchers have commented on the culture of independence and isolation that seems to permeate most schools (e.g., Lortie; Goodlad; Little). In fact, Judith Warren Little concludes that, “schoolteaching has endured largely as an assemblage of entrepreneurial individuals whose autonomy is grounded in norms of privacy and noninterference and is sustained by the very organization of teaching work” (530). The repercussions of such a philosophy and approach are clear. As Parker Palmer describes:

When we walk into our workplace, the classroom, we close the door on our colleagues. When we emerge, we rarely talk about what happened or what needs to happen next, for we have no shared

experience to talk about. Then, instead of calling this the isolationism it is and trying to overcome it, we claim it as a virtue called “academic freedom”: my classroom is my castle, and the sovereigns of other fiefdoms are not welcome here. (142)

However, evidence is growing that younger teachers are bringing to the job mindsets that are more open to the idea of professional collaboration. Studies completed more recently (e.g., Johnson, *Teachers at Work*; Kardos et al.) suggest collaboration is becoming a desirable component of workplace conditions, and schools that do not create those environments for professionals may be contributing to teacher attrition. On the other hand, and also somewhat paradoxically, this paradigm shift in teaching from a close-your-door-and-do-your-job approach to one of learning communities and collaboration could also contribute to teachers seeing and seizing increased opportunities for personal and professional growth and, perhaps, opportunities to leave the classroom, if not the profession.

Although in a somewhat different form, our classroom experiences seemed to capture the essence of this paradox. We did, in fact, receive meaningful and valuable help from colleagues of all ages as we began our teaching careers, but that early collaboration also helped us to reinforce our eventual feelings of being confined in our classrooms.

Many seasoned teachers were overjoyed to share their pedagogy and philosophy, some for the noble reasons of improving student learning and school climate, others for the more selfish reasons of creating allies in the culture wars persisting within our large English department. But regardless of the motivation, the guidance and assistance offered to each of us was instrumental in helping us to tap into the philosophical underpinnings of our pedagogy, develop our repertoire of instructional strategies and activities, and personally develop as professionals. The input of colleagues made us better classroom teachers and, simultaneously, better educators overall. We found that the shift in mindset from professional independence to professional inter-dependence not only improved our teaching but altered our own self-identities as well.

Teaching English meant creating many lessons from scratch, attending conferences and workshops, and engaging

in hours and hours of conversation about what was best for our students—we loved these aspects of the work. Teaching English was never easy and often involved false starts, constant reflections, and recursive revisions, but the rewards far outweighed the costs. We knew our students were worth every ounce of extra effort and every ounce of pain we experienced in attempting to deliver an authentic English education to them. And within the collaboration and professional relationships we established with our colleagues, we found solace and commonality and growth. We committed to sharing our ideas, first with each other and then to as many people as we could reach, in hopes others could reap similar benefits. Or, as Palmer states, “If we want to grow in our practice, we have primary places to go: to the inner ground from which good teaching comes and to the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft” (141).

Such attention to the craft of teaching can, for some, lead to a desire to have a greater impact on education than cannot be accomplished within the walls of a single classroom. It certainly did for us. In fact, in one study of second-stage teachers (identified as individuals between their third and thirteenth year of teaching) who held differentiated roles and responsibilities that reached beyond a single classroom, Berg and others found that “a desire to make a difference in education” superseded all other reasons for leaving the classroom, including greater pay and job flexibility (11).

Likewise, for many individuals in the generations before ours, there was a sense of honor, of prestige, in remaining in one job and in one place of employment for an entire career. Peske and others write, “today, candidates have multiple, attractive career options, and they hold different expectations about career mobility and job security. New conceptions of career are emerging in our society, and many individuals now regard the notion of a single career or loyalty to a single organization as obsolete” (305). Schools have changed and are changing. Cities like Detroit and Kansas City have announced plans to close (or raze) countless numbers of buildings in early 2010. Support systems like tenure, previously institutionalized across the country, are now being called into question and challenged.

Amidst these changes, however, “teaching appears to be one of the few lines of work that has maintained a

static conception of career” (Peske et al. 305). This idea is present in the very structure of the educational system. For many who did not desire or did not have the qualifications to move into roles as principals and administrators, teaching was a kind of flat career, for once a person entered the classroom there were no more opportunities for promotion and advancement; the only movement opportunities available were horizontal.

But as our society and our world have continued to grow and change, generational attitudes have begun to shift as well. Many educators entering the profession now no longer hold such reverence for remaining in a single position for an entire career. They want opportunities for advancement and new challenges, opportunities to re-invent their professional selves. This, too, is apparent in the changes to the structures of schools in the last decade with the growth of new types of positions such as learning coaches, assessment coordinators, instructional facilitators, and expanding roles for teacher leaders. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, career ladders were being extended to teachers beginning to take on these additional roles and responsibilities within the school hierarchy, often in exchange for additional pay or a lighter course-load. Opportunities like these hold potential to allow teachers to share their wisdom and influence in more classrooms than just their own, while still firmly grounding themselves in first-hand classroom experiences.

In the current budget situation, opportunities like these are shrinking, opportunities that could create a better working environment and help teaching appeal to a new generation.

For us, such career ladders were not available, and although we sought out opportunities to dialogue with colleagues, develop and share our instructional strategies, and enhance our influence, it was always done in addition to a full load of classes, students, and papers to grade. Over time, the enormous weight of such responsibilities bore down upon us, and the natural, temporal tug-of-war between doing what was best for our students and doing what we found to be professionally rewarding began to take its toll.

Becoming involved in local, state, regional, and national organizations dedicated to creating more effective English instructors became part of our mission as early career teachers.

Those opportunities and discussions critical to our futures were often not held in the always busy hallways in which we worked; there our energies and attentions were firmly focused on serving the learning needs of our students. Outside of our classroom walls and on our own time, however, we served on boards, participated in projects, sought out writing endeavors, shared our successes in presentations, and metamorphosed into teacher leaders through our conversations with others.

All too often, we had to exit our classrooms—and the isolation they facilitated—to gain the perspective that allowed reflection to occur and insight to develop. Our enlightenment of how to better reach and teach our students occurred only with the help and dialogue of our colleagues, and then, ironically enough, the dialogue and camaraderie that developed directly contributed to our ultimate decisions to leave our positions.

Because of our desire to improve education and because of our own cultural experiences and generational mindsets, we eventually emerged from the comfortable cocoons of our classrooms, in a sense, reborn with new visions of our expanding roles within the education profession. The experience of leaving the classroom was—for us—very necessary but certainly came with both advantages and disadvantages. For Christian, education has taken the shape of preparing students in the Master of Arts in Teaching program at the University of Arkansas.

For Matt, education is statewide endeavor as he works as the lead writing consultant for the Kansas State Department of Education. It is from these two unique perspectives we offer the benefits and regrets of our common decision to leave.

Benefits in Leaving the Classroom

1. *Influencing change in education in more classrooms than just our own.* There is no more important job, in our minds, than to teach on a day-to-day basis. Being champions of the classroom teacher and student has led us to increased opportunities outside of the classroom. At first, these thoughts and feelings were awkward, almost contrary, to what we believed—taking us away from the students we prioritized. However, our desire to affect more classrooms than just our own grew, and

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soon the opportunities to leave the classroom began to outweigh our determination to remain entrenched in the front lines of public education.

2. *Searching for new challenges.* Our lives in the classroom were rewarding and enriching, but at the same time, we were very aware that other, newer challenges existed as well. Eventually, a sense of the “been there, done that” took hold and the thought of teaching even our favorite lessons for the umpteenth time began to urge us toward new experiences. No matter how much you love it, you teach *Romeo and Juliet* thirty six times in nine years and it slowly loses its luster.
3. *Believing in educational research and wanting to take participatory roles in that setting.* We both graduated from teacher education programs that put strong emphases on teacher research. And, unfortunately, our desire to engage in the research that interested us had to be balanced with the commitments that being an effective classroom teacher requires. Something had to give; there simply were not enough hours in the day to follow our passions in both of these directions.
4. *Engaging in professional endeavors such as speaking and presenting, which are not seen as part of the classroom responsibility.* From battling bureaucracy in order to present at conferences to paying our own way to national conventions and other professional learning opportunities (something neither of us have completely avoided in our new roles), we each have a professional appetite to learn and take participatory roles in the teaching of teachers. Unfortunately, our local administrators did not always agree with our priorities.
5. *Preparing future teachers and providing professional learning opportunities for current teachers are privileges we value.* We agree that the responsibility of working with pre-service students, student teachers and other practitioners is critical to the future of the profession and one of the highest honors available someone in education.

Regrets in Leaving the Classroom

1. *Missing the realities, challenges, strangeness, and rewards, which all accompany teaching on a*

day-to-day basis. From lesson planning to insipid faculty meetings and from departmental squabbling to (yes, believe it or not) grading student writing, we miss the ‘daily grind’ of teaching—the work, often done out of the public eye, that drives both instruction and learning.

2. *Missing the parents, other patrons, and the entire community who provided support both to the school as a whole and to us as individual teachers.* Whether in the form of newspaper clippings in the mail, brownies during long days of parent teacher conferences, their presence at school sponsored events, or just friendly conversations, many fond memories still remain and stand testament to the value and importance that was placed upon our role in the lives of youth.
3. *Seeing students making personal breakthroughs in their literacy development with the reading and writing assignments and the activities we created.* Little could ever compare with seeing the light bulb moments when instruction takes root and learning occurs. Whether it is Joe or Andrew clearing the hurdle of crafting believable dialogue in a short story, or Kait or Olivia physically shuddering at the cold ruthlessness of Lady Macbeth, or even rebellious Alex or Cori finally mastering the fine art of the compound-complex sentence, the collaborative construction of meaning was an awesome thing of which to be a part.
4. *Missing, more than anything, the daily, concentrated contact with our students.* Ultimately, we miss Joe and Andrew, Kait and Olivia, and—although we sometimes might have sworn we wouldn’t—even Alex and Cori. The enthusiasm, energy, and perspective they brought were important elixirs in our lives not just our classrooms.

Conclusions

Turning away from life as a classroom teacher was the right professional path for each of us; it may not be right for others. We entered the profession as continuous learners. We earned advanced degrees, garnered ideas from conferences, and challenged each other with our ideas, assignments, and appetites for professional activities. Eventually, we

outgrew what full-time life in the classroom could afford and recognized the institutional constraints present. We see possibilities beyond the classroom walls—and opportunities to establish more effective professional learning and career ladders within the classroom walls—as being valuable incentives to help retain teachers in the profession. But we firmly believe that unless our society and our profession begin to address the modern realities and working conditions of classroom teachers, the duration of the average teaching career will continue to shrink. The interesting and unsuspected outcome of these increased opportunities and experiences with collaboration, as we have mentioned, could be that these new teachers will leave the classroom and/or profession all the same. Teaching is not the career it once was.

With that in mind we turn our attention to the future, more importantly to understand which direction education should point in the next generation. First and foremost, we must start with a renewed respect for and focus on the teacher and her present working conditions. Seemingly lost in the national conversations of 2010, it is time that we really understand teachers on a deeper level and help to improve education through the lens of what is actually happening in the classrooms. What is the average workload of a high school English teacher, for example? In 1999, the National Council of Teachers of English recommended that teachers teach no more than 80 students a day, and no more than five hours out of the day. Yet our sense of the reality of the public school classroom is one where teachers, especially English teachers, get more piled on their plate each year, including more students and preparations. We both know English teachers who have 30–40 students in their classes, 150–180 in their total student load—numbers we classify as criminal. If education is to move forward as a profession, we have to do so with an acute focus on the working conditions of teachers.

Beyond understanding teachers through more research and attention to their situations, other innovations and reform should be considered as well. But any of the myriads of reforms out there must focus on teachers and their working conditions. Innovations such as performance pay, charter schools, vouchers, and the elimination of tenure are bantered about as if the teachers in this country could work harder or could be more dedicated to their jobs, usually by people without classroom experience. Programs like

Teach for America and the spread of alternative routes to licensure are lauded for providing people easier routes into the classroom. What we do not need in education are people underprepared to perform this significant work or people only committed to teaching for a short time. We do accept that education needs to change. Least frequently consulted

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about these changes, ironically, are teachers themselves.

Carefully considered innovations—or the continued study of teachers staying in education—have the potential to extend the numbers of years new teachers remain in the classroom. We agree with Richard Ingersoll that such retention initiatives might be more effective than teacher recruitment programs in addressing the teacher shortages that we expect across the country. And we agree with Susan Moore Johnson that workplace conditions and their context can and do affect overall teacher quality and, therefore, student learning.

We know that the most significant factor in student achievement is the classroom teacher (e.g., Sanders and Rivers; Darling-Hammond; Rowan, Correnti, and Miller; Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain; McCaffrey, et al.). Additionally, we know as Johnson states, that “the departure of an experienced, effective teacher reduces [the] school’s capacity to do its work” (*The Workplace Matters* 3).

But what happens when teachers leave the classroom so early in their careers? As Johnson, Berg, and Donaldson write, “If teachers repeatedly leave a school before becoming competent in their practice, students will be taught by a string of teachers who are, on average, less effective than more experienced teachers” (11). It seems to us that finding new methods and exploring new innovations to keep teachers teaching for longer periods of time would

be at the forefront of our profession's priorities.

While we are no longer in the classroom on a day-to-day basis, we respect and value the people who are. We remain dedicated to education and to classroom teaching and believe that better teacher retention can only be accomplished if classrooms become places that are not associated with professional and career detention—our students and their learning depend upon it.

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