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Stayers, Leavers, Lovers, and Dreamers: Why People Teach and Why They Stay - 2004 Barbara Biber Lecture

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STAYERS, LEAVERS, LOVERS, AND DREAMERS:

WHY PEOPLE TEACH AND WHY THEY STAY

2004 BARBARA BIBER LECTURE

marilyn cochran-smith

Marilyn Cochran-Smith holds the John E. Cawthorne Endowed Chair in Teacher Education for Urban Schools at Boston College's Lynch School of Education. She also directs the Doctoral Program in Curriculum and Instruction. Cochran-Smith earned her Ph.D. in Language and Education from the University of Pennsylvania in 1982, where she was a tenured faculty member at the Graduate School of Education until going to Boston College in 1996.

Cochran-Smith is Immediate Past President of the American Educational Research Association and Co-Chair of AERA's National Panel on Research and Teacher Education. Cochran-Smith is also the Editor of *The Journal of Teacher Education* and Co-Editor of the Teachers College Press series on Practitioner Inquiry, as well as Co-Editor of the *Third Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*, which is in preparation.

Walking the Road: Race, Diversity and Social Justice in Teacher Education was published by Teachers College Press in 2004. Cochran-Smith's newest book, *Studying Teacher Education: The Report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education* (co-edited with Ken Zeichner), was published by Lawrence Erlbaum for AERA in June of 2005.

In 2004, Cochran-Smith won both AACTE's highest honor, the Pomeroy Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Field of Teacher Education, and the National Association for Multicultural Education's Carl Grant Research Award for Outstanding Research on Multicultural Education. In 2005, she was the recipient of the first National Impact Award from the New York State Association of Teacher Educators and the New York Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.

I am very proud and pleased to be here today among friends, colleagues, and students at Bank Street College. And I am even more pleased to have been invited to deliver the Barbara Biber Lecture, which memorializes Barbara Biber's legacy as a researcher, a scholar, and a leader in progressive education who concentrated throughout her career on children's and teachers' lives. I want to thank the Bank Street College community for this opportunity, especially Dean Jon Snyder and the Bank Street colleagues I have been coming to know as part of our mutual work on the Teachers for a New Era project, sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This project has given a number of us at teacher preparation institutions across the country the chance to redouble our efforts toward goals that are very close to our hearts—improving the preparation of teachers for the nation's schools, especially urban schools, and in so doing, enhancing the life chances of the children they serve. My sincere thanks for this opportunity to speak to faculty, alumni, and students, and my warmest wishes to all of you whose life projects focus on teaching, learning, and schooling.

Back to School from the Teacher's Side of the Desk

I would like to begin with the words of one teacher on her first day of school from the teacher's side of the desk. These are the words of Mickey Harris, a Philadelphia teacher, teacher educator, and writer, who kept a teacher's journal throughout her 30-year career as a teacher. These words are taken from a reflection she wrote, looking back over many of her years in the Philadelphia schools (Harris, 1993):

Day 1: September 22, 1969. It's September 22, 1969, and I am a teacher! ... My own high school, dear old Cecilian Academy for Young Ladies, instructed one hundred and twenty giggling scholars while adhering to a lengthy code of conduct which included uniforms, mandatory chapel, Friday afternoon high tea, nuns, and no boys! South Philadelphia High School is teeming with mini-skirts, graffiti, football jerseys, a lunchroom that has a city-wide reputation for food fights, and no nuns, high tea, or chapel... (p. 133)

Day 8: September 29, 1969. Well, they said I wouldn't last and here I am. I've been here one full week and I've been called "Yo, teach!" more times than I can count. I've had my hall pass stolen, my coat locker broken into, and my class list keeps changing from day to day. As soon as I memorize a name and connect that name with a face, both disap-

pear. Where are all of these people coming from and where do they go when they leave me? ... My students range from sweet to silent, somnolent to sarcastic. They don't seem to be sure of the fact that I'm going to stay.... There are sixteen new teachers at Southern this year. Six of the fellows in the group said that Vietnam had a lot to do with their career choice. Three of the sixteen are graduates of South Philly High and gave that as their reason for "coming home." We are to meet with [the principal] once a week to air our questions, learn procedures, and "get to know the place." [He] suggested that we walk around the neighborhood, visit the Ninth Street Market (where most of our students work), and judge for ourselves what makes this part of our city so unique. (p. 134)

Although the situation changed not too long after that time, when Mickey Harris started teaching in 1969, the nation was in the midst of a teacher shortage, and there were new, federally-supported programs and incentives to attract more people into the profession.

In 2004, we also hear a lot about current and impending teacher shortages. For example, all of us have heard the statistic that between 2000 and 2010, almost half of the nation's teaching force—teachers like Mickey Harris—will retire. We have also heard that these retirements—coupled with increasing student enrollments—will necessitate the hiring of more than two million teachers, and that there are simply not enough teachers in the pipeline. Teacher shortages, like the one we face today, are not new. Periodically over the last 50 years—as in Mickey Harris' time—there were fewer teachers available than were needed, and the response was primarily to step up recruitment efforts and issue temporary teaching credentials to those without qualifications.

Three things are new however: (1) the requirement that teachers in all schools be "highly qualified" (P.L. 107-110, 2002); (2) the realization that it may not be teacher recruitment that is the problem in staffing the nation's schools, but teacher retention (Ingersoll, 2003); and, (3) growing evidence that, like every other problem that plagues the nation's schools, the problem of teacher retention is most severe in high poverty and other hard-to-staff schools (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996).

What I want to focus on here is this relatively newly recognized problem of teacher retention and, especially, why people enter and stay in teaching. The title of

my lecture reflects this focus—“Stayers, Leavers, Lovers, and Dreamers: Why People Teach and Why They Stay.” I would invite members of the audience to think about these issues in terms of their different interests, experiences, and goals. But all of us who are committed to public education for democracy may want to think more deeply than we usually do about what lies at the heart of teaching and learning and in our own hearts and about what it will take to improve the current state of urban schools and the life chances of the children they serve.

By way of an overview, I will talk first about the problem of teacher retention, especially in contrast to the conventional wisdom that the major problem we face in supplying the nation with an adequate number of well-qualified teachers is recruiting more people into the profession. Second, I want to qualify this point about retention by talking about the characteristics of the new generation of teachers and how this new generation is and is not like previous generations. Then I’ll turn to why people stay in teaching—what I think of, in shorthand, as the “3 L’s”—Lovers and dreamers, Learners, and Leaders. In talking about these ideas, I will be drawing on a variety of things—recent research as well as new and older classroom vignettes and examples from various grade levels, schools, and subject areas in urban, rural, and suburban schools. To make my points, I’ll also use statistics as well as individual teachers’ writing and research, excerpts from interviews and group discussions, and even a poem. I’ll also draw on my own experiences as a teacher educator, working in urban areas and as part of urban teacher education programs for nearly 30 years. I use this admixture of illustrative and supporting material because I believe we can—and in fact, need to—learn about teachers and teaching from many different sources that cut across contexts, time periods, research paradigms, and ways of knowing.

Teacher Retention, Not Recruitment

As many of you will remember, the story is told that during Bill Clinton’s first run for the presidency, his advisors hung up a sign to remind them of the most important and pivotal issue of their campaign and to help them stay focused during their deliberations. The sign read, “It’s the economy, stupid!” To my knowledge, none of the current researchers or professional organizations addressing the teacher shortage have crafted their message in terms quite as blunt as these, but they are very clear in identifying the major obstacle to providing well-qualified teachers for every school child: “It’s retention, stupid!”

In 1999, in an article in *Education Week*, John Merrow (1999) reported that new research was beginning to show that recruitment was both the “wrong diagno-

sis” and a “phony cure” (p. 38) for the teacher shortage. By 2003, the National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future (National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future, 2003) had announced that teacher retention was a “national crisis” (p. 21). Both of these relied primarily on the research of Richard Ingersoll (1995, 2001, 2003), whose analyses of retention and attrition patterns in K-12 schools indicated that shortages were caused primarily by early attrition of those in the teaching pool rather than by either insufficient numbers of people preparing to teach or massive retirements. He also concluded that the retention problem was most severe in urban and rural schools where there were large numbers of poor and minority students. In short, Ingersoll’s conclusion (at least my reading of his conclusion) was this blunt message: It’s retention, stupid!

Over the last decade, Ingersoll has conducted a series of studies about the teacher workforce from the perspective of the sociology of organizations, occupations, and work. In many of these studies, Ingersoll has used data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and its Teacher Follow Up Survey (TFS) to look at patterns and trends in the supply and demand of teachers for the nation’s K-12 schools. Ingersoll’s analyses show that the conventional wisdom about the teacher shortage and the teacher quality problem is partly true: both student enrollments and teacher retirements have increased since the mid-1980s; most schools have had job openings each year; and a significant number of schools, particularly high poverty urban and rural schools and schools with large numbers of minority students, have been unable to find enough qualified teachers. But Ingersoll’s work also shows that the conventional wisdom is incorrect beyond this point. His analyses indicate that although there are not necessarily enough teachers produced in every field, the nation is producing enough teachers. His conclusion is based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the largest national data base on postsecondary degree completions: “There are overall more than enough prospective teachers produced each year in the U.S.” (Ingersoll, 2004, p. 8). In addition, Ingersoll’s analysis of the Teacher Follow Up Survey, which asks teachers to report why they stayed in or left teaching, reveals that most teachers who leave do so for reasons other than retirement.

Ingersoll challenges the conventional wisdom that the teacher shortage in the U.S. is due to a simple imbalance between supply and demand caused by large numbers of teacher retirements, increased student enrollments, and an insufficient number of new teachers. Rather, he argues that the crux of the retention problem is the teacher turnover rate—that is, the number of teachers per year who move from one

teaching job to another or leave teaching altogether. As Ingersoll (2004) points out, the sheer size of the teaching force coupled with its annual turnover rate (about 14%) means that almost one third of the teacher workforce (more than one million teachers) move into, out of, or between schools in any given year. Moreover, as is now widely known, teaching's "revolving door" (Ingersoll, 2003) swings shut behind an unusually large number of those in the early years of teaching, with as many as 46% of new teachers leaving the profession by the end of five years (Ingersoll, 2002). According to Ingersoll (2003), retirement accounts for a relatively small portion of departures from teaching (about 1/8), while job dissatisfaction and the desire to pursue a better job inside or outside the education field account for a much bigger share (almost 1/2 of the leavers). Many leavers are dissatisfied with their jobs because of low salaries, student discipline problems, lack of support, and little opportunity to participate in decision making. He argues that there is a high cost to teacher turnover in terms of time and other resources, school cohesion and community, teaching effectiveness, and students' achievement. Ingersoll argues that systemic and simultaneous changes in entry requirements, teacher preparation, teaching rewards, teacher autonomy, and teacher accountability are needed to change the "semi-professional" status of teaching as an occupation, bolster teacher retention, and ultimately provide a well-qualified teacher for every classroom.

These facts and figures make a persuasive case, I believe, that teachers are not staying in classrooms in the same ways they did previously. How to explain these patterns? This takes us to my second general topic about why people teach and why they stay—the next generation of teachers

This Is Not Your Mother's Teacher

Some of you will remember a widely-broadcast television commercial from a few years ago. It went something like this: We see an older man in front of his house, leaning on a rake and gazing in awe in the direction of an engine noise. As the noise gets louder, the camera follows the sound, and we see that the man is gazing down the street at a brand new—and very sporty-looking—car that is rapidly approaching. As the car gets closer, we see a young man driving and smiling. The older man smiles in recognition and with fatherly pride, but then shakes his head in surprise and a certain degree of amazement. At that moment, just as the car's insignia is revealed, the announcer booms, "This is *not* your father's Oldsmobile." If we could borrow this slogan for a moment, my major point about the new generation of teachers might be stated like this: "This is *not* your mother's teacher!"

I draw here primarily on the work of Susan Moore Johnson and the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. In a number of articles and in their new book, *Finders and Keepers: Helping New Teachers Survive and Thrive in Our Schools* (2004), Susan Moore Johnson and her research group colleagues suggest that 1960s and 1970s teachers had quite different expectations and experiences than those of teachers currently entering the profession. Johnson and colleagues argue that the current teacher shortage cannot be *fully* understood as a failure to retain teachers. Rather we need to address the teacher supply problem from a generational perspective that requires a redefinition of career expectations, career paths, and school organizations.

Quite differently from Ingersoll, who used statistical analyses of employment trends and patterns, Susan Moore Johnson's larger study of the new teaching generation utilized in-depth interviews and follow-ups over four years with 50 first- and second-year teachers who entered teaching from varied pathways, including university-based teacher education programs and fast-track recruitment programs, and who worked in diverse Massachusetts public schools. In *Finders and Keepers*, the research team focused on ten of those teachers, particularly on how they decided whether to stay, move to another school, or leave teaching. Connecting these interviews to current economic trends, Moore Johnson argues that the previous generation of teachers made the decision to enter teaching in a different labor market from that of today. This previous generation became teachers at a time when there were few career opportunities for educated women and people of color except teaching, nursing, and other kinds of "women's work." For the new generation, however, there are many competing career opportunities for educated women and minorities. Along these lines, demographer Harold Hodgkinson (2002) and others have suggested that declines since the 1960s in enrollments among African American students in teacher education programs are related in part to proportionate increases in enrollments in business administration majors.

The previous generation of teachers also entered teaching at a time when it was broadly assumed that people taught for altruistic reasons. This, coupled with the fact that teaching was respected work, made the pay gap between other jobs and teaching acceptable (Moore Johnson & The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004). The new generation is entering teaching at a time when there are more expectations than ever about teacher performance, but also at a time when teaching has been broadly and publicly disrespected. Teachers may still want to teach for altruistic reasons—and I will suggest later that, indeed, good teachers continue to be "lovers and dreamers"—but they also want to be compensated fairly for

the hard work they do, and they want to have the means to buy homes, provide for families, and live reasonably comfortable lives. Drawing on her extensive interview data, Moore Johnson concludes: “Today’s new teachers expect to be paid well, if not handsomely, for the important work that they do” (p. xiii).

The previous generation of teachers consisted of first-career entrants who came to teaching right out of college. The new generation enters through multiple paths, including fast track and alternate routes. Increasingly, teachers are coming into the profession at mid-career, having already worked for a considerable amount of time in other areas. In the previous generation, most teachers expected to remain in the classroom; and when they retired, most had spent their career in a single role. The new generation is not only much more tentative about their plans to stay in teaching over a long time, they also “expect variety in what they do with differentiated roles and opportunities to advance in the profession. They want the chance to collaborate with colleagues and to work in organizations that support them” (Moore Johnson & The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004, p. xii).

There are many important points in Moore Johnson’s research about the next generation of teachers. One of the most striking is the changing profile of new teachers. As I just noted, unlike the previous generation of teachers who came into teaching right out of college, more and more of the new generation are mid-career entrants. Based on a random sample of teachers in seven states, Moore Johnson created a profile of who is entering teaching. In three of the seven states (Massachusetts, California, and New Jersey), 46-47% of new teachers were mid-career people whose average age was between 35-38. In three more states (Florida, North Carolina, and Washington), 32-35% were mid-career with, again, an average age of 35. Moore Johnson argues that this changing profile is important. New teachers who come into the profession with considerable career experience, especially in areas such as finance, technology, law, or management, are used to working in well-equipped settings that support their work. They also bring with them their considerable experience with organizations and may be surprised by the isolation and lack of collaborative opportunities of many schools. And many mid-career entrants—aged 35 to 38—have children of their own and can draw on that experience in teaching.

Here is an abbreviated excerpt from Moore Johnson’s book that describes one of the five mid-career teachers who was part of the group of ten teachers highlighted in their book (the other five were first-career entrants). This excerpt gives more details about the “new generation of teachers” that Moore Johnson identifies:

Prior to teaching, [Keisha Williams, a 29-year-old African American woman] had earned a master's degree in higher education administration and had been an administrator for five years in several settings—a private college, a public university, and a community college. Her desire to teach arose from her concern about the weak literacy skills of students she encountered. She said she was “really appalled” that “so many of the students arrived at college so ill-prepared...”

She explained her decision to teach and her focus on the elementary school level: “I knew I needed to teach, because I needed to correct that problem. I realized that problem started from day one. It starts from day one because at the elementary school is when you learn all of your foundations. After that, it's more and more and more and more. It just kind of builds on it.”

Keisha chose a traditional master's in education program.... She did her student teaching in a highly acclaimed urban elementary school...Keisha took the first job she was offered—(a second-grade position at an urban elementary school)... Keisha, who said, “I'm just kind of day-by-daying it,” did not see herself as a long-term classroom teacher, even though she felt “comfortable in the classroom” and “enjoy[ed] teaching kids.” Though she had planned to spend just a few years in the class, she expected that she would remain in the field of education for the long term...When Keisha spoke about whether teaching was a good fit for her as a career, she said, “I haven't decided that yet. I am still trying, literally—maybe I'll make a decision this summer—but I am not sure yet. I am not sure if this is where I want to be for the long haul, or half of the long haul. I don't know.” (pp. 42-43)

At the end of her first year of teaching, Keisha moved to a different school. After year two of Moore Johnson's study, she was still teaching.

Moore Johnson's work indicates that it is not enough to acknowledge that the teacher shortage problem is about retention, not just recruitment. We must also acknowledge that there is a new generation of teachers—whether they are first- or mid-career teachers—who are entering teaching with different expectations, different experiences, and who have different opportunities over time from those of “your mother's teacher.” So what keeps teachers in teaching? Why do they stay? This brings me to my third topic: the 3 L's.

Why Teachers Stay: The 3 L's

As I noted earlier, I want to address the issue of why people stay in teaching and what keeps them going by talking about what I think of as the “3 L's”—Lovers and dreamers, Learners and Leaders.

The First L: Lovers and Dreamers

In contrast to Ingersoll's and other studies of the macro-aspects of teacher retention, Sonia Nieto's (2003) recent book, *What Keeps Teachers Going?*, turns the retention question on its head by asking not why so many people leave teaching, but why some teachers “persevere, in spite of all the deprivations and challenges” (p. 7). To explore this question, Nieto formed an inquiry group of eight highly experienced educators “known as excellent teachers of students of racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds” (p. xi) in the Boston public schools. (Some of these were undoubtedly what Susan Moore Johnson would call “the prior generation” of teachers who have taught for 25 and 30 years, but others were part of the new generation, and some conversations included student teachers as well as experienced ones.)

Based on the group's inquiry and on talk and writing with other urban teachers over a year, Nieto offers a “counter narrative” to the prevailing wisdom” (p. 7) that the way to improve education is to “fix” teachers or “fill them up” (p. 8) with best practices. Instead Nieto argues for an alternative viewpoint about what is worth preserving in public education by building on teachers' strengths. Nieto's analysis suggests that good teachers stay in teaching—even in the most difficult of circumstances and with the most marginalized students—for reasons that have more to do with loving and dreaming—with teaching's heart—than with either its physical conditions or the availability of the latest techniques.

I was struck by Nieto's chapter titles—“teaching as love,” “teaching as hope and possibility,” “teaching as anger and desperation,” “teaching as democratic practice.” In fact, a central theme in her book is that part of why good urban teachers stay is that they love, believe in, and respect the students they work with and that they can dream of or imagine possibilities for them other than the dire circumstances in which many of them live. Nieto's study as well as other recent work on teaching—Sam Intrator's *Stories of the Courage to Teach* (2002), Cindy Ballenger's *Teaching Other People's Children* (1998), Nel Nodding's (1984) analyses of teaching as caring, Gloria Ladson Billings' (1995) and Jackie Irvine's (1990) work on teaching African American children by connecting and caring about them—emphasizes the

idea that teaching is relational and is fundamentally about forming connections that scaffold learning. Good teaching is (at least partly) about developing loving and caring relationships with students as human beings and, at the same time, being deeply committed to ensuring that all students have rich opportunities to learn academically challenging material that will maximize their life chances.

Garret Keizer's *No Place But Here* (1988) is his account of teaching English in rural Vermont, a book that has long been a favorite in my collection of teachers' accounts of teaching and learning. The excerpt I want to share offers an excellent example of what I mean about teachers as lovers and dreamers. In a chapter called "Criticism and Wonder," Keizer suggests that teachers have the job of both teaching their students how to be critical but also instilling in them wonder and curiosity and appreciation—even awe—for the world around them. At the end of the chapter, he offers this vignette:

Once when I was leaving work for the day I met a young man at the door who had stayed after school to make up a mathematics test. "I feel so stupid," he said. "I feel so ashamed." "How come?" I asked. I could not imagine why a student like this one could have any legitimate reason to be so ashamed.

"I got real involved in doing this one problem and I let...things get away from me. I wet my pants." I looked down at his trousers. He sure had. His math teacher rushed by us to get her car and drive him home before anyone saw.

I saw, and I will remember for a long time. We all have our little regrets, our fuel for self-pity, and one of mine is that I did not go to an Ivy League college. Like many people's comparable regrets, I probably flatter myself by imagining I even could have done what I wish I'd done. And I don't deny the fine teaching I received from some very accomplished instructors, from men and women whose names I invoke like those of guardian angels. I only wonder if, with wiser planning and higher striving, I might have become one of them, I might have seen "professor" and my name written in some form besides graffiti, I might have developed greater capacities for criticism and for wonder.

But then I never would have met this boy. Where at Yale or Stanford or Princeton, where but in this little high school with its back against the woods would I have met a man or woman devoted enough to algebra to piss his or her pants for it? (p. 88)

There is no question in my mind that rural teacher Garret Keizer loved and cared deeply about his students and could dream for and with them about rich and rewarding possible lives regardless of their current situations.

The urban teachers in Nieto's (2003) study also loved and respected their students. These teachers acknowledged the inequities of society, were frustrated by the urban educational bureaucracy, and were plagued by their own self-doubts, but they believed that education and teachers could make a difference in students' lives. To persevere, they looked for options other than giving up on students and their dreams, such as participating in teacher communities and other opportunities to meet, talk and work with others who saw teaching "as a way to live in the world" (Nieto, 2003, p. 101). When Nieto asked the teachers to think about what they would tell new teachers coming to teach at their school, one of them said this:

I think I'd say, "Thank you for coming." Everyday, "Thank you! Thank you!" Thank you for coming into the Boston Public Schools. You really could be doing other things and make so much more money and have much better working conditions. But one thing I said when [my student teacher] was talking about how all the student teachers, once they came in here, they're like "I don't have a life anymore! I don't have a life" And I said, "You know something? This is a life!"

"You come in, you grow, you learn, it's never the same, it's always different. You heal, you help, you love. What's wrong with that? Is that a life or is that a life?"

Lovers and dreamers—this is the first "L" about why teachers teach and why they stay. In a certain sense, this first L flies in the face of current policies about teacher quality. Interestingly—and most unfortunately—there is no reference whatsoever to the caring, relational aspects of teaching in No Child Left Behind's definition of "highly qualified teachers" and no recognition at all of the idea that teachers have to be able to build relationships, based on respect, with the students they teach if they expect learning to take place.

The Second L: Learners

Let me turn now to the second “L”. I believe that many people enter teaching—and decide to leave or stay—because of their bedrock commitment to learning and to improving their students’ life chances in the world. When schools are organized for learning and teachers are supported so that they can enhance children’s learning, they are much more likely to stay. This point is coming through loud and clear from a variety of sources, including new studies by Richard Ingersoll and others indicating that full opportunities to participate in induction and mentoring programs that are focused on improving children’s learning have a statistically significant impact on the likelihood of teachers staying longer in the classroom. Susan Moore Johnson’s interviews also point to the importance in new teachers’ decisions about whether to stay, move to another school, or leave teaching—of their sense of efficacy. That is, their perceptions of whether or not they are meeting the learning needs of the students in their classroom.

One of my recent doctoral students, Kelly Donnell, completed a grounded theory study dissertation, based on interviews with 27 teachers whom she followed from their preservice programs into their first year of teaching in urban schools. She found that the decisions new teachers made were complex, depending on the interplay of many factors. Central among these was the teacher’s ability to learn from and with their students and to ensure that they were learning. In short, Donnell found that the more successful new urban teachers were in promoting students’ learning and in continuing to learn themselves, the more satisfied they were with their school experiences and the more likely they were to stay engaged in teaching in productive ways.

As usual, this point about teachers’ focusing on students’ learning is clearest in the words of a teacher herself. These words are from the writing of Gilliam Maimon (1996), a former student of mine, who began teaching in 1996. Her struggles during the student teaching period to assure that her students were learning were poignant and palpable in her own words. Over the course of a year, Maimon was student teacher in a class of 16 first graders in a primarily working class elementary school in urban Philadelphia. Her class was uncharacteristically small because, as she noted, the children “were skimmed from the perceived ‘bottom’ of the first grade population”—that is, they were children who had been designated “at risk” by their teachers, ear-marked for remedial instruction, and expected to spend at least two years in first grade.

I want to read from her teacher inquiry project based on a small group of

children engaged in a “literature study” by exploring multiple versions of the three little pigs story.

Although she began with high expectations for the children and for herself, she also had doubts about both of these. She wrote:

We had never attempted anything as open-ended as a literature study in this classroom because the teacher had assumed that the students would be overwhelmed by any activity that lacked strict, teacher-controlled structure. Though I believed that my teacher had woefully underestimated our students’ potential throughout the year, I worried that six months in this classroom setting had conditioned the children to focus only on minutiae, like individual letters and words, rather than on ideas. I had to prepare myself for the possibility that the students would not be able to meet the challenge...[What would happen in] ... a project which asked them to think deeply about books [and] to pose and wrestle with questions that had no clear-cut answers...

Maimon’s report on the group’s work was titled, “Little Pigs, Big Ideas.” Although she occupied the ambiguous and often low status role of student teacher in her classroom, she found that a small learning community of “at risk” first graders were able to engage in quite sophisticated intellectual work, debating points of view, seeking evidence, and comparing/contrasting multiple versions.

In one session, for example, the student teacher had the children draw pictures and offer their opinions about story characters. She wrote:

I found Timmy’s sympathy for the wolf so interesting that I wanted to include the entire class in our exchange. After Tim described his picture to everyone, I asked him, “Do you think the wolf deserved to be eaten at the end of the book?” He answered with a definite no. He explained. “You know why? Because the pig was mean. He came at different times and he wasn’t waiting for the wolf [several times in the story, the wolf makes plans to meet the pig at a scheduled time, but the pig outsmarts him by arriving earlier]. It wasn’t fair. That’s why he shouldn’t get eaten.” In response, Colleen stated strongly that the pig’s deception was a necessary evil. “[He wasn’t mean...] He had to do that or he would have been eaten.”

I quickly polled the room to see who stood where on this wolf issue. In the days that followed, Maimon and her students discussed, wrote, drew, and read. In addition to versions of the classic story that varied in language and illustrations, they read parodies, played with point of view, and novel characters.

In commenting on the literature study project as a whole, Maimon reflected on her children's abilities as learners, the power of shared literary experience to turn a small group into a learning community, the difficulties of being a teacher who is also student, and the damaging effects of a learning culture based on low expectations. In concluding, she wrote:

As for my question about the children's ability to think independently, I have no doubt that my students are as insightful and courageous in their convictions as their counterparts at [any other school] ... I rejoiced to see them articulate a variety of viewpoints, debate with each other, back up their ideas with examples from texts, change their minds when persuaded by classmates, refuse to accept information presented in a book at face value. ...I have been told so many times, "You can't do this because they can't do this," and "You don't understand the way you have to teach these children." ...In response to these words of suppression, I hold up the powerful, angry, excited, exciting, deep, enlightening, funny, brave, complex, strong responses of these "At Risk" students over the course of our literature study. Our exploration has been their and my vindication.

The "learning" L is not just about students' learning, but about teachers' learning as well. Teachers are much more likely to stay in schools and to be successful when teacher development is understood as a learning problem and not a training problem where the point is simply to be sure teachers can follow scripted materials and pacing schedules. This means that part of the goal in meeting the teacher shortage is not just to recruit and support teachers who know subject matter, but also to know how to pose and solve the new problems that continuously emerge in classrooms and schools, know how to provide rich learning opportunities for all of their students, and know how to work together with other teachers in learning communities.

In short, when teaching is rightly regarded as an intellectual activity and

when it is acknowledged that teachers are motivated—at least in part—by their ability to support and enrich their students’ learning, then it becomes clear that part of what is needed are more opportunities for teachers to work with other teachers in learning communities, to raise new questions about students, subject matter, assessments, equity, and access, and to generate local knowledge through collaborative analysis and interpretation. The key here is that new teachers are socialized into teaching by becoming part of a community of learners who see questioning as part of the task of teaching across the life span. The struggle inside a community is so different from doing it on your own.

Let me read the words of Mary Kate Cipriani (1996), another former student teacher of mine, who was reflecting on her experiences learning to teach over the course of a year in an urban school:

My salvation became the teacher communities I [was part of]... The term “communities” ...encompasses so many kinds of support groups and moments. It includes the mornings when [the other new teachers who taught with me at the school] would come by my classroom to ask me questions that ranged from, “Have you ever used pattern blocks?” to “How are things going in your life?” ...It includes the ethnography paper group and Sunday nights we spent beside [our professor’s] fire-place wrenching and writhing over our journals and papers, looking for themes. It includes [my cooperating teacher] and me chatting about our students’ academic behavior and who likes who this week. It includes dinners at [my supervisor’s] house, classes at the university, and special events [where we got to present our work to a larger group] ...I am a teacher because we are a teacher community and because we are a teacher community, I am a teacher.

The Third L: Leaders

I would like to turn now to the third “L” about why teachers teach and why they stay—teachers as leaders. Susan Moore Johnson’s (Moore Johnson & The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004) interviews with teachers suggest that the new generation of teachers want differentiated job opportunities and a variety of tasks. Many do not intend to remain in teaching over the career span. Like the work of Johnson and colleagues, the Teacher Education Program Research Group (TEP) at Center X at the University of California, Los Angeles, has been

studying the career trajectories of teachers in public schools. Somewhat differently from the work of Moore Johnson or Ingersoll, however, the work of the UCLA group is based on the assumption that teaching is a social justice project and that teachers should be leaders and activists in making their schools and society more just and equitable places at the same time that they are educators. Elaborated in a set of recent papers (Lyons, 2004; Olsen & Anderson, 2004; Quartz et al., 2004; Quartz et al., in press-a; Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003; Quartz et al., in press-b), available through UCLA's Center X website, the TEP is currently in the fifth of a seven-year longitudinal study of more than a thousand graduates from UCLA's urban teacher education program.

Working with members of the Urban Educator Network, a community of their graduates committed to urban education, the TEP group designed and conducted interviews and surveys to find out more about which of their former students were staying, switching, or leaving urban schools and why they were doing so. Based on ongoing analyses of their graduates' self-reported data, the TEP Research Group identified three general themes in the reasons graduates give for staying in urban teaching: (1) graduates learned to identify and build on the strengths of the urban communities in which they worked, rather than conceptualizing them in terms of deficits and deficiencies; (2) they developed a strong sense of efficacy as educators and worked as change agents in their schools and communities; and (3), they found multiple vehicles and avenues for professional development, including involvement in a variety of learning communities both within and outside of the teaching profession (Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003).

The opening lines of an article (Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003) the group published about their research sums up the power of these themes:

Cicely grew up not far from the urban school where she now teaches. During her first year student teaching, she was robbed at gunpoint—a terrifying incident that clarified what she calls “a mission to help children see the range of possibilities for their lives...”

She now teaches the younger siblings of the kindergartners she taught five years ago. Still living in the community and buying her groceries alongside her students' parents, Cicely is a deeply committed social justice educator. The longer she teaches, the more opportunities she finds to make her school caring and just. She is always frustrated by conditions familiar to so many who work in urban schools—an

unsupportive administration, inadequate facilities, too few community supports, and so on. But she is [also] buoyed by conditions that are not available to many urban teachers. She has the daily support of a partner teacher, monthly discussion with fellow UCLA alumni, her work as an editor of an online journal focused on social justice teaching, and more. Why does Cicely stay in (Urban) teaching? She says she is “too angry to leave.” (p. 99)

The UCLA group is beginning to identify a social justice career pattern that differs from the now well-documented migration of teachers from less to more affluent schools: the switch from full-time classroom teaching in high poverty schools to either the combination of part-time teaching with leadership roles or full-time leadership roles dedicated to social justice goals (e.g., literacy coach or supervisor in high poverty schools, teacher of university courses related to social justice, community activist) (Olsen & Anderson, 2004; Quartz et al., 2004). The ongoing research program of the TEP group suggests that we may need an expanded notion of retention that recognizes the migration to leadership roles not as failure to retain but as an appropriate career path for some social justice educators. At the same time, however, they also argue for more dual roles so successful urban teachers can remain in classrooms while also having expanded career opportunities. Based on the responses I received, I paired up individuals with classmates who held opposing opinions and asked each group member to try to convince the other, using information from the story.

Understanding Why People Teach and Why They Stay

The teacher shortage problem in the nation’s K-12 schools is not simply a supply problem that can be resolved by fast-track entry routes and other short-term recruitment schemes. As the various inquiries and analyses mentioned here make clear, the teacher shortage is in large part a demand problem that can be solved only if we decrease demand by increasing retention. What is also clear, however, is that teacher retention is a multi-dimensional problem, requiring both macro- and micro-level analyses and policy initiatives. These will need to address teacher recruitment and entry requirements (especially in terms of diversification), teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning, the cultures and conditions of schools, the rewards and incentives of teaching, the definition of teaching career paths, and the balance between teacher autonomy and teacher accountability.

Some of the most important aspects of the “staying” problem, however, are often given the least attention. From my perspective as an urban teacher educator for almost 30 years now, I believe that despite changing times, good teachers are still lovers and dreamers. Many enter teaching for idealistic reasons—they love children, they love learning, they imagine a world that is a better and more just place, and they want all children to have the chance to live and work productively in a democratic society. But these reasons are not enough to sustain teachers’ work over the long haul in today’s labor market and in the face of the extraordinarily complex and multiple demands today’s teachers face.

In order to stay in teaching, today’s (and tomorrow’s) teachers need: school conditions where they are successful and supported, opportunities to work with other educators in professional learning communities rather than in isolation, differentiated leadership and advancement prospects over the course of the career, and good pay for what they do. But we also need to rethink what “staying” in teaching means as a goal for the educational community, especially whether it makes sense to argue that teaching is a profession at the same time that we claim that the ultimate goal is keeping teachers in the classroom and thus maintaining a flat career trajectory where entrants do essentially the same work as effective and experienced teachers. It is clear that “staying” needs to be redefined. On the one hand “staying” needs to include a variety of career trajectories with multiple avenues for leadership roles and advancement over the career span. On the other hand, it also needs to include majority institutions’ efforts not only to get but to keep minority teachers in the pipeline and educators who “stay the course” of work for social justice across multiple roles and responsibilities. We face multiple challenges as we rethink teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention. There are multiple new role and partnership possibilities for the universities, professional organizations, school districts, and communities with the vision to imagine them and the will to implement them.

In closing, I want to share a poem that has been a favorite of mine for many years. I do not believe it is well known. But for me, it has always been a way to get at the crux of some of the hardest questions about teaching and staying—questions about whether one’s work matters in the larger scheme of things. For me, the poem has always spoken to the tension between the challenges that face the individual teacher—often daunting and sometimes seemingly impossible to overcome—and the power of larger social movements and agendas. Individual teachers cannot substitute for social movements, but they can contribute to them in ways—with enough individuals—that are powerful.

*The One Who Doubts The Wisdom
Of Doing Anything If You Can't Do Everything*

by Bruno Overstreet

You say the little efforts that I make
 Will do no good
 To tip the hovering scale
Where justice hangs in balance?

I do not think I ever
Thought they would.

But I am prejudiced beyond debate
 In favor of my right
 To choose which side
Shall feel the stubborn
Ounces of my weight.

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