

## Beyond the Joys of Teaching: Stories from Four Novice Secondary Teachers

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this study was to document four novice secondary teachers' experiences as they progressed from the last year in their teacher education program through their first three years of teaching. Autobiographies, interviews, and focus groups were conducted to record their stories as novice teachers. In addition to the development of their understanding of teaching, their roles and responsibilities as teachers, and their interactions with students and families, teachers in this study also shared their understanding of today's educational context and how it impacted their development.

**Keywords:** Education | Novice Teachers | Secondary School | Professional Development

### **Article:**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Research examining the process of teacher professional development has indicated that teachers' values, beliefs, personal experiences, and visions impact who they are and what they do in their classrooms (e.g.,Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Connelly & Clandinin, 1985; Lortie, 1975). Other research findings suggest that the changing teaching context plays a pivotal role in teachers' shifting beliefs, their commitment and passion for teaching, and ultimately their decision to stay or leave the profession (Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009). However, even with more and more research focusing on teacher identity development, our understanding of secondary teachers' journey of becoming is very limited (Merseth, Sommer, & Dickstein, 2008), and how teachers teaching in different contexts negotiate their development remains relatively unexplored.

In this study, we followed four novice secondary teachers from the last year in their teacher education program through their first three years of teaching. Based on their written

autobiographies, interviews, and focus-group discussions, we explored the development of their perceptions of the “changing landscape” in teaching (Clandinin et al., 2009).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

With the changing cultural landscape of America's schools being greatly affected by demographics, immigration, globalization, political polarization, and economic instability, how we prepare teacher candidates must be considered. Additionally, given the fact that teacher retention, especially of novice teachers, is increasingly problematic, researchers have noted factors that affect novice teachers' decisions to leave the profession. Those factors may include student discipline issues, lack of mentoring and administrative support, poor working conditions, the obsession with testing, and the lack of opportunities to feel valued through participation in decision making (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Hirsch, 2006; Ingersoll, 2003, 2004; Kent, 2000; Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, & Meisels, 2007; Liu & Meyer, 2005; Scherff & Kaplan, 2006). Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2004) recommended that teacher educators take into account teaching context, teaching experiences, and teacher biographies in helping to develop teacher candidates' professional identities. More specifically, Clandinin et al. offered that we as teacher educators and educational researchers should not “educate teachers for a fixed landscape and for a fixed identity ... [but] educate them and ourselves for shifting stories to live by” (2009, p. 146) in order to sustain teachers in the educational environment. By composing “stories to live by,” teacher candidates can use their lives and those of others, as well as their school contexts, as “knowledge landscapes,” (Clandinin et al., 2009, p. 146) some of which will ultimately shift along the way, allowing both candidates and teacher educators to continually re-create our professional identities.

Preparing to become teachers is no small feat. Preservice teachers engage in gaining codified subject knowledge that is comprised of intellectual learning that progresses through various levels of abstraction and a more thorough knowledge of teaching (Wilson & Demetriou, 2007). Then, there is informal learning that takes place that is context specific. It is experiential and involves processes like problem solving and making informed judgments (Wilson & Demetriou, 2007). In other words, executing theory into practice involves merging professional knowledge and personal knowledge together to create effective instructional delivery within various different contexts. This delicate balancing act or constant shifting for novice teachers can be rather daunting, indeed. Additionally, given that new teachers are expected, with great finesse, to handle as much instructional and management responsibility as experienced teachers, especially in light of national accountability demands (Gordon & Maxey, 2000; Tait, 2008), learning to teach as a full-fledged novice teacher involves resilience (Benard, 2004; Gu & Day, 2007; Reivich & Shatte, 2002), personal and teacher efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Onafowora, 2005; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001; Woolfolk Hoy & Spero, 2005), and not only emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995; Tait, 2008) but also emotional understandings between teachers and students as a basis for learning (Hargreaves, 2000).

Today's schools are more multicultural than ever before, with increasing numbers of children who hail from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who are ethnically diverse, and who speak languages other than English. Many novice teachers are finding that their first teaching jobs occur in these settings (Hodgkinson, 2002), leading teacher education programs in the United States to become more concerned with preparing their teacher candidates to enter and remain in such educational environments (Freedman & Appleman, 2008; Singer, Catapano, & Huisman, 2010). Research related to teacher retention has been conducted in different educational contexts. For example, Freedman and Appleman (2009) discovered several factors that help to retain teachers in urban schools. They concluded that teachers' sense of mission, their dispositions for hard work and persistence, their targeted teacher preparation that included both academic and practical knowledge, the practice of reflection, the opportunity to change schools or districts and still remain in their profession, and sustained ongoing support and access to professional networks help to sustain teachers in schools that their colleagues tend to shun.

Similarly, preparing teachers for rural communities presents not only staffing issues but also social justice and equity issues (Burton & Johnson, 2010). According to Darling-Hammond (2006), rural schools often lack enough resources and have a high need for teachers. Perhaps, many novice teachers are not attracted to such rural areas because of their small size, teacher pay, and lack of personal connection with the community (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; White & Reid, 2008). Nonetheless, what retains novice teachers in rural schools is a personal connection to rural communities and they view themselves as individuals who prefer to live in such communities. Further, they see the school as a prominent institution in the community (Arnold et al., 2005).

In this study, we depicted the experiences of four novice secondary teachers in both urban and rural school settings. Through their stories, we captured their journeys from their preservice-teacher preparation program through their third year of teaching. Their accounts reflected their progress through their early years of teaching.

## **METHODS**

Participants in this study included four novice secondary teachers. All graduated from the same teacher education program at a midsized public university in the southeastern United States. The participants included two males and two females. All of them were White; however, two proudly recognized their Italian heritage in their autobiographies. Among the four participants, two (Charles and Karen) taught English and Social Studies in two different urban high schools in the same school district; the other two (Bill and Ellen) taught English in high schools in rural settings in the same county.

The general research question that guided our data collection and analysis was: "How do the experiences of novice teachers as they progress through their early years of teaching impact their thinking and their actions in schools?"

Qualitative data were collected from participants' last semester in the teacher education program to their third year of teaching. During their last semester in the program, all participants submitted an autobiography and participated in a focus-group discussion reflecting on their student-teaching experiences. During their first three years of teaching, individual interviews and focus-group discussions were conducted to allow the participants to share their teaching experiences and their understanding of teaching at their schools. At the end of each school year, we conducted an individual interview with each participant. Three focus-group discussions were conducted at the end of the first, second, and third year of teaching. Both interview and focus-group questions facilitated the discussion on their understanding of the teaching context, themselves as teachers, and others who have impacted their teaching (e.g., students, parents, colleagues, etc.).

Given the nature of the data and the intention to amplify the voice of the teacher participants, grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was applied to the data analysis. Two researchers analyzed and coded the data independently first and memos were kept to track emerged themes and patterns to address the general research question. Discrepancies in coding and analysis memos were resolved through discussions between the researchers.

## **STORIES OF NOVICE SECONDARY TEACHERS**

Through their autobiographies, interviews, and focus groups, all participants in this study reflected on (a) their backgrounds and the teaching context, (b) their growing understanding of their roles and responsibilities as teachers, and (c) challenges they faced as novice teachers. To detail participants' understandings of teaching and their development as teachers in their respective teaching contexts, in this section, we provide individual case descriptions of each of the four participants in this study.

### **Urban High School – Charles' Story**

#### **Background and Teaching Context**

Continuing his first three years of teaching in the same school where his student teaching occurred, Charles' desire to teach in a school designated as Title I and low performing had not wavered. He attributed his comfort in a culturally diverse school setting to his Italian roots and background experiences from growing up in one of the New York City boroughs (autobiography). The school he worked at has a diverse student population. As Charles commented during his first year teaching: “[Name of school] has a great deal of diversity, especially given the fact that there are students from around 40 different countries enrolled there” (first-year interview). He was fully cognizant of the infamous reputation the school had even while he was student teaching. Instead of seeing students' cultural and linguistic diversity as a challenge, he viewed it as a unique opportunity:

One of my greatest opportunities to work with diversity involved my sheltered English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class this past semester. I had 25 students, many of whom could not really speak English on a regular basis, and some of these students hailed from Mexico, Vietnam, Cambodia, India, and Africa. (first-year interview)

### **Teacher Roles and Responsibilities**

After student teaching, Charles viewed his role as a teacher to be a facilitator of content knowledge, especially in writing, an advocate for students, and a person who prepared his students for the real world. Though he felt comfortable enough in teaching English, he wanted his students “to enjoy English and not think of it as a prison sentence” as well as “to look beyond that point and just get ready for the world” (first-year interview). As evidence of his competence in the English content area and success with his students, Charles was voted as Rookie Teacher of the Year in his school. He was proud that he was able to maintain his own. Nevertheless, Charles confessed that he “was able to grow and see *with* them [his students]” (first-year focus group).

Charles' confidence and comfort as a teacher grew from year to year (first-year interview; first-year focus group; second-year focus group; third-year interview). He discovered a “shift” during his journey of becoming a teacher and attributed this shift to seeing school through the eyes and actions of his students.

He remembered, “After putting myself into their shoes, I understood that they all have their own backgrounds. Whatever they've got, I just have to try and help them in their own way” (first-year interview). For Charles, students “having their own backgrounds” meant not only ethnic diversity but also socioeconomic, gender, and ability diversities as they related to schooling. Likewise, he also considered their backgrounds to include family composition, parent/sibling status (i.e., a parent or sibling who was incarcerated, deceased, or having to work more than one job), immigrant and/or refugee status, loss of or inability to find a job, and additional responsibilities [other than those of a student] that were related to sustaining the family.

Additionally, after three years of teaching, Charles reflected on his own growth in managing his classroom as a teacher:

I had fears going into it [teaching] when I was student teaching, and when I had my first year, I wasn't sure, again, if I was going to be able to handle the discipline issue and managing the classrooms. Now the fear is gone. Now I know my room is my room and the kids know it, too. They also know that I have structure in my room. I have expectations that I want them to follow. (third-year interview)

Further, the “shift” was also rooted in the expectations he had not only for the students but also for himself. He explained:

When I first started student teaching, I only really had expectations of the students. I didn't really have as many expectations for me. It was more based on them. But now that I see myself a little bit more, and try to help myself, and reflect upon what I have done, I've changed who I've become as a teacher. (third-year interview)

As much as he wanted to deliver English content well, Charles also wanted his students to know “I'm there not just for the content” (first-year focus group). Throughout all three years of teaching, he assigned papers such as “My House,” an assignment that reveals basic information about the students such as their likes and dislikes, in an effort to get to know his students better (first-year interview; third-year interview). He also attempted to connect with his students through similar interests since he was not too far removed from their ages (first-year interview; second-year focus group). Especially during his third year of teaching, Charles acknowledged not only was he a facilitator of knowledge but he also considered himself as a role model for and a parent to his students. Whenever he had an opportunity, he reminded students of their personal responsibility for themselves and of their learning (third-year interview).

Finally, Charles recognized his students' backgrounds and their family lives were not always ideal; yet, he desired to connect with the parents of his students. While he was getting better at making telephone calls to parents, as time went on, he admitted that “unfortunately other administrative duties made it virtually impossible for me to find the time” (first-year interview). Making those phone calls taught him a lesson, though. Charles attempted to understand the plight of his students' families when he made phone calls to their homes. He said:

[T]here are some families who really strive for their students to be successful, and there are some that either don't or don't know how to show that they need the help.... Sometimes it's hard to talk to families who, you feel they are being bothered by you calling them. So I think that was one thing I learned about families. It's hard to see what's going on based on what you hear on the other end of the phone. (first-year focus-group interview)

Unfortunately, mounting administrative duties made contacting parents and families by telephone more difficult during his second and third years of teaching as well (second- and third-year interviews).

### **Challenges in Becoming a Teacher**

Over the past three years, becoming better in instructional delivery, classroom management, national and statewide testing mandates as well as administrative demands and contradictions became challenging feats for Charles. While Charles contended that becoming a content expert and a strict disciplinarian would be challenges for him during student teaching, after his first year of teaching, learning how to adapt his lesson plans for every student and dealing with his school's administration were noted as areas of difficulty that needed attention (first year of teaching interview). Additionally, an ongoing challenge was keeping up student academic growth levels

as evidenced by course grades and standardized tests. With frustration, he confessed, “I think another thing that is very challenging is I'm feeling more vilified by the general public, especially with the perception that teachers are to blame if students don't pass or don't do what they're supposed to do” (third year of teaching interview).

More specifically, the consistency of the administration is something Charles would change if he could (second-year focus-group interview). He wanted desperately for the administration to “actually follow through on things that they say they're going to do and not just expect us [teachers] to follow through on things and then [ they – the administration] do nothing” (third-year interview). Even with these frustrations, Charles had no doubts that he still wanted to be teaching five years from now (third-year interview).

## **Urban High School – Karen's Story**

### **Background and Teaching Context**

With a scholarship loan in hand that committed her to four years of teaching in a public school within the state after she graduated, Karen focused on honing her teaching skills (autobiography). She experienced school internships each semester since she began her undergraduate studies; however, she readily admitted that she had more empathy for teachers after having endured student teaching. While she gained confidence in teaching history during student teaching, her greatest concern was making the classroom “student centered” (student-teacher interview) and learning a variety of instructional strategies “to make things interesting” (student-teacher interview).

Desiring to teach in hard-to-staff schools, she began teaching in an urban school located in the same school system as is the school where her student teaching occurred. Her school is quite ethnically diverse, including a large international population. As Karen commented in her first-year interview: “I don't know the specific numbers, but African American students, Hispanic students, white students. We have a lot of English-language learner students from various countries” (first-year interview). In addition to ethnic and linguistic diversity, she also observed the difference in students' socioeconomic backgrounds:

There are students from wealthy backgrounds and from really poor backgrounds. And what's interesting about our school is depending on which way you drive to get into the school, because it's right in the heart of the neighborhood, you either drive through million-dollar homes, or you drive through run-down houses and public housing and that kind of stuff. (first-year interview)

### **Teacher Roles and Responsibilities**

During her first year of teaching, Karen did not always feel that she made a difference with her students even though she worked hard (first year of teaching interview). She recalled that she

was “patient in hard situations” and she wanted “to take on responsibility in my job and my role as a teacher” (first-year interview). However, Karen acknowledged that “the realities of teaching hit me a lot harder this year” (second-year focus-group interview). Though her history and International Baccalaureate course teaching flowed in a more fluent manner, increased apathy of her students really angered her as well as decisions that her school administrators made. She summed it up by saying, “it's almost like the blinders are off now and I can see all the issues that there are in education and in our school” (second-year focus-group interview).

By far, the third year of teaching was hardest of all for Karen (third-year interview). She attributed her difficulty to “a lot of ethical situations that were not ok this year” (third-year interview). For her, how teachers and administrators are preparing today's students is very “disheartening” (third-year interview). Since the school district did not encourage grade retentions, Karen was quite frustrated because she believed students should rightfully earn their grades; if they did not complete all of their requirements in a satisfactory manner, then they should not be rewarded with a final passing grade. She stated, “Whatever we have to do, we're going to make them pass ... and it's not good for society as a whole” (third-year interview).

Related to her role and responsibilities in teaching, Karen considered herself first and foremost “their teacher” (first-year interview). She stated that she was there “to educate them [her students], but I'm also there to be a role model, to provide an example to students who need an example in their lives, and to give assistance that goes beyond the classroom” (first-year interview). In doing so, Karen desired for her students “to take responsibility for their own learning” (first-year focus group). She further acknowledged that content area knowledge is not the only learning that should occur for students. She cautioned that “it's sometimes not just about what you learn in the book; it's about what you can teach students as humans, as individuals” (first-year interview).

Still believing that she should be a teacher to her students in her second year of teaching, Karen felt that “it's my responsibility to make sure that my students know what's going on in their world, because if they have no concept of what's happening, then they're not good citizens” (second-year focus-group interview). She also considered being an advocate and confidante as two of her responsibilities. She wanted “to be someone that they [her students] trust in and feel like they can go to, even if our teacher-student relationship in the classroom sometimes can be rocky” (second-year focus-group interview). Additionally, she desired to be “a part of their lives in a responsible way” (second-year focus-group interview). Continuing to perceive her role as one who educates, Karen confirmed that she was “an ally for a lot of students” (third-year interview).

Karen attempted to get to know her students' families through a face-to-face meeting when parents were invited to come in four times a year to get a progress report on their children.



Going to sporting events and other functions outside of school, as well as making phone calls to parents was another method she used to engage with the families of her students, although she admitted “but of course, it could always be better” (second-year focus group). Further, student council-sponsored community projects allowed Karen to get to know members of the community (third-year interview).

### **Challenges in Becoming a Teacher**

An area of great frustration for Karen during her first year of teaching was school system politics that she perceived led to students' lack of responsibility. For example, at her school, there is a grade recovery program in place for students who scored an average between 60 and 69 points for any class. These students would have a second chance to earn a passing grade by enrolling in a 20-hour workshop/class. If students successfully passed the workshop/class, they could get a passing grade of “D” for the semester's class. Karen was livid with this plan and how “it is a disservice to all the students” not only now but also in the future as well (first-year interview). She explained:

I felt it was unfair for the students who did nothing throughout the semester and then got the opportunity at the end of the semester to do a 20-hour course where they really don't learn anything. They just complete some worksheets to get the D. And I felt that was unfair because it's unfair to them; they don't learn. And it's unfair to the students who worked their hardest to get a D because that's all that they could do... . If we're going to spoon-feed some of these students, then when they get out in the real world and they're not going to be spoon-fed anymore, they're going to face disappointment and failure and they're not going to know how to cope with it. (first-year interview)

Additionally, decisions administrators made contributed to the bitterness at times Karen felt in her second year of teaching. She reiterated:

It frustrates me to no end that we just let things go and then in the last eight days of school, now you want to enforce rules that you should have enforced at the beginning. It's very much a “do as I say, not as I do” kind of mentality for some of my administrators. (second-year focus-group interview)

Of course, teaching to the test, though Karen did not teach a course in a tested content area, became an additional contextual factor that discouraged in her years as a novice teacher. The ethical decisions made by state education officials, central office personnel, and principals about teachers and students continued to disturb Karen (third-year interview). Students must be made to understand that there are consequences for their actions. For Karen, it was a must! Having no doubt the aforementioned frustrations would not be ameliorated, Karen made the decision to honor her teaching scholarship loan commitment of teaching for four years in her state, but she will leave the teaching profession after then (third-year interview).

## **Rural High School – Bill's Story**

### **Background and Teaching Context**

Bill is a white, male teacher who entered the teacher education program as a traditional-age college student. He described himself as being from “a small town” and was inspired to become an English teacher because his “high school [English] courses were exceptionally well put together, fun and informative” and he “had such great teachers” (autobiography). He conducted his internships and student teaching in suburban school settings. After graduation, he went back to his hometown and became a high school English teacher, though not at the high school he previously attended. Over his first three years of teaching, he taught ninth or tenth grade English, communication skills, and yearbook classes. These classes took place in a rural school that was filled with students of families who were recently laid off by the textile and manufacturing industries. Furthermore, due to school-board-mandated redistricting, a growing Asian and multiethnic student population attended school there. Moreover, Bill taught students whose postsecondary school goal in life was to “work in the factory,” thus following in the footsteps of their parents (first-year interview). On one hand, with the economic recession so severely affecting their families' livelihoods, some students appeared to be at a loss about what to do after high school. On the other hand, more students were demonstrating an interest in seeking a higher education than ever before.

Across three years of teaching, Bill generally felt teaching is “exhausting,” but “kind of fun,” “pretty pleasant,” and “rewarding” especially when he sees the “light bulbs go off in their [students'] head[s]” (first-year interview). When asked whether he will still be teaching five years from now, he confidently responded, “yeah, absolutely. I enjoy this as a career” (third-year interview).

### **Teacher Roles and Responsibilities**

He described himself as being “laid-back” (first-year focus group) and believed that his role as a teacher was “to guide the students in their learning” (student-teacher interview) and to be a “facilitator for those life skills that they [students] are going to need to graduate from high school” (first-year interview). In addition to “generating interest in students” and keeping them “interested and engaged” in the content instruction (first-year focus group), as a third-year teacher, Bill started to see it his responsibility to

instill with them [students] some sense of optimism for the future, that there are jobs out there that they can do, and that there is a wonderful future available for them if they are just comfortable enough to pursue it ... and are able to use words like globalization without a fear of it. (third-year interview)

With more teaching experiences, Bill also mentioned that he “got a lot of resources at my [his] disposal to use and can spend more time refining things and less time creating things” (third-year

interview). Comparing his student-teaching experiences and first two years of teaching, Bill stated that the biggest difference is that he is “more confident” in front of his “fellow faculty members”:

By the third year my confidence level has gone up tremendously. ... I am much more confident ... with my fellow faculty members, my place in the school, what I can and cannot do. ... I feel like everybody knows who I am now. ... I generally get the sense from my faculty members that I'm respected, that I'm appreciated. (third-year interview)

Perceiving himself as a facilitator of student learning, building relationships with students, and knowing their family backgrounds have always been important to Bill. Starting from his first year, he wrote an introductory letter to his students and assigned students to write introductory letters so he could get to know them. In his third-year interview, he mentioned that he “would read those and try to remember the stuff that they [students] tell me [him] in those letters and try to bring up in casual conversations.” Because he is close to his students' ages, Bill also felt that he has the advantage in connecting with them:

I recognize their euphemisms and their metaphors. ... I can recognize a lot [of] the bands that they listen to and relate to them on a music level and a social level. ... It's actually a way that I've found I can get some respect, too, is by knowing and understanding what Facebook and MySpace are. (third-year interview)

Bill did admit, however, he “spent a lot more time getting [to] know my [his] students than getting to know their parents right now.” He said that one of his goals is to “develop more relationships with the community, with their parents specifically” (third-year interview).

### **Challenges in Becoming a Teacher**

Both geographic and economic contexts play an important role in Bill's development as a teacher. He commented that the biggest change from his student teaching to his first year was the geographic teaching context from suburban to rural. He recalled, “It was such a different area demographically from my student teaching. And it just — it was like switching to a completely different job almost” (first-year interview). According to Bill, the school is situated in a “very, very rural area” with “95% White” students who are mostly very “religious” and “conservative” (first-year interview). As a result of the different contexts, he pointed out that “respect was automatically given” to him in the first-year teaching setting, while in his student teaching, he needed to “earn the respect” from his African American students (first-year interview). Considering the change in the local economy, Bill commented that with “furniture and hosiery manufacturing in this area, you could drop out of school in seventh grade and make a living here.” However, “it's not like that anymore at all, because all the manufacturing has left” (first-year focus group). He felt it important, therefore, to better connect with parents and to share higher expectations to support students' learning (first-year interview). In addition, as a result of the economic downturn, Bill also felt it “nerve wracking” in his third year “because of the

economy and not knowing whether or not I'd [he'd] have a [teaching] job” (third-year interview). In his third-year interview, Bill commented that his school was becoming even less ethnically diverse because “it's not a place that people are moving to right now,” and the school has the “most students identified as being free and reduced lunch” in the county. Regardless of these concerns, he said that “it's important for me [him] to look for things, to seek out things, to actively seek things that are positive about the profession.” Not satisfied with how standardized testing was used to measure students' success, he found the new reforms and changes in promoting formative assessment tools particularly encouraging and felt like we are moving “in the right direction.”

## **Rural High School – Ellen's Story**

### **Background and Teaching Context**

Ellen considered herself a “mountain girl” and was eager to experience “city life” as she attended college (autobiography). She completed her internships and student teaching in suburban settings and went back to her hometown to teach high school English. She taught tenth grade English for the first two years and started teaching twelfth grade English during her third year. While Ellen taught in rural settings with a majority of White students in her school, she considered her student population as “incredibly diverse” especially in terms of socioeconomic status (second-year interview). In her third year teaching, she also found that the “Hispanic population has gotten a little bit bigger,” but she admitted that “unless you are looking for those things at this level, you wouldn't notice” (third-year interview).

After completing her student teaching, even though Ellen successfully fulfilled all the requirements, she described her experience as “horrible” (student-teacher focus group). She admitted that she was not confident enough and “at times it felt as though they [students] could see right into my lack of self-esteem and certainty” (autobiography). Another aspect Ellen struggled with was the conflict between the ideal and reality of teaching: “I noticed that I am an incredibly idealistic person, especially when it came to teaching. ... The truth is, however, that teachers can only bring so much idealism inside the door with them” (autobiography). During her first three years of teaching, while there were “bad moments” (first-year interview), in general, Ellen felt “great” as a teacher and gained “more confidence” in teaching. In fact, she stated “this is definitely a job that I [she] can do” (third-year interview). As she developed familiarity with the curriculum and confidence in her interactions with students, she felt that she “can come up with projects and ideas so much quicker now” and was “more relaxed as far as my [her] reaction to them [students]” (third-year interview). At the end of the third year, Ellen made the decision to leave teaching, but she emphasized that this decision is “hard, because I love my job. I love this job at the end of the day with all the headaches that it causes. ... I mean it's making me tear up just thinking about leaving, because I love it.” She considered herself as taking a break from teaching and hoped “to be going back into this profession” after five years (third-year interview).

## **Teacher Roles and Responsibilities**

Consistent from the beginning of her entry into the teacher education program throughout her third year of teaching, Ellen viewed her responsibilities as a teacher beyond content area instruction. During her first-year interview, for example, she commented:

My ideal impact would be one that would cause them to think, possibly change how they look at things and the world... . Knowledge, yes; I obviously want them to have that. But, more than anything, I want to shape them into decent adults. (first-year focus group)

Throughout her second and third year, being “a caring figure in their [students'] life” was her “first priority” beyond classroom instruction (second- and third-year interviews). She wanted to make sure that her classroom was a “safe place” for all students and stressed students respecting each other within and beyond classroom settings. Because she often took on the role of a “mom” for her students, teaching became very “emotional” for Ellen (second- and third-year interviews).

Building relationships with the students and parents has always been an important aspect of teaching for Ellen. Throughout our interviews and focus-group discussions over the years, she recalled many cases where she developed personal connections with her students. Growing up in the area where she taught, in addition to working with students directly, Ellen also developed personal relationships with many parents, although she commented that the parents “are either your greatest ally or your biggest enemy” (first-year focus group). For Ellen, if she learned about issues in students' family lives, “it's hard for me [her] to sit back,” “because after a while, after I've had them for six — eight months, they are my children” (first-year focus group).

## **Challenges in Becoming a Teacher**

Having developed personal relationship with the students, Ellen found it hard to keep “a balance between personal life and work life”:

[P]retty much the three years my personal life has been my work life. I stay here until 8 o'clock with students. And sometimes it's hanging out. It's just talking, because that's what they need... . I've taken so many kids home this year, particularly with senior projects that I can't count how many times I've done it. And I think that's part of the reason why I'm experiencing what I'm experiencing as far as feeling like I've put so much into it. (third-year interview)

The biggest challenge, however, for Ellen had to do with educational policies. It was important for policies to be aligned with what is best for students to develop into good, caring citizens. To her, the policies — local, state, and national — were not always designed with the students' best interest at heart. She commented:

I'm not happy about where education is going in America which makes me really sad. ... I see these different policies that are in play, and I just think about those kids who come from these terrible situations, and these policies are not for them. (third-year interview)

In addition to the district's decision to cut high school teacher positions, as a twelfth grade English teacher, she was particularly concerned that the district budget decision to enlarge senior class size would impact the effectiveness of teaching, which was one of the reasons she decided to leave teaching: "I'm thinking about those 40 seniors that are going to be in that class, trying to do senior projects, ... my heart breaks for them. I mean that's kind of what's pushed me to step away for a while" (third-year interview). Further, the emphasis on standardized testing in the current educational system also made Ellen feel the teaching context was not ideal: "The ideal school would have absolutely no standardized testing reports to the state, period. That is the single worst tool they could use to see how much the student has learned" (third-year interview). Unequivocally, Ellen desired to be in a school environment where the focus is on "the students and their well-being" (third-year interview).

### **TEACHER DEVELOPMENT IN "CHANGING LANDSCAPES"**

Tracking participants' professional development from being student teachers through their third year teaching, we noted their shifted perceptions of teaching. As many other novice teachers, our participants sought for balance in different aspects of being a teacher. Their accounts of their understanding of their roles and responsibilities, their students, and their teaching contexts reflected the "changing landscapes" in teaching.

Consistent with research on teacher longitudinal development (Kagan, 1992; Levin, 2003; Melnick & Meister, 2008), all four participants developed their confidence in teaching as they became more familiar with the content curriculum and expectations of teachers. For all our participants, teaching is beyond content instruction within the classroom. They commented on their ideal impact as preparing students for their future beyond schooling. Being close to their students' ages, they were able to establish relationships and connections with their students through discussions about topics such as popular music and the use of social media. They were also able to integrate these topics into their content instruction because it was important for them to make their classes engaging for all their students.

During our interviews and focus-group discussions, all participants expressed their passion and dedication for the teaching profession and were very proud to share the achievements of their students. It was interesting to note that, although all of them resented the pressure of standardized testing, they stated students' academic successes in terms of standardized testing results when talking about the effectiveness of their instruction. However, all of them went into much more detail about specific incidents where they felt they made an impact as teachers. Ellen, for example, spoke about her former students who regularly dropped by. One in particular was inspired to become a teacher just like she is (Ellen, second-year focus group). They all agreed

that it was the success of their students and the feeling that they made a difference in their students' lives that is the most rewarding aspect of teaching.

Given their different teaching contexts, we also noted differences in participants' perceptions of teaching, especially in terms of the student population they worked with and the relationships they established in their own teaching settings. For example, in rural settings, though there has been a slight change in student population and the shift in local industry forced students to think differently about their futures (Bill, third-year interview), in general, a majority of the students shared similar experiences growing up and their prior schooling experiences were also similar (Bill and Ellen, second- and third-year focus groups). On the other hand, Charles and Karen who taught in urban schools are facing much wider student diversity in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and language backgrounds. Given such large populations of immigrant and refugee students in their schools, not only did Charles and Karen have to address students' English language development needs but they were also recognized as teaching in schools where end-of-course (EOC) grades tended to be lower than those of other high schools, especially in Charles' case. In addition, because students attending urban high schools are much more likely than rural high school students to have had different prior schooling experiences, their expectations of schools and plans for their own future may vary greatly (McCracken & Barcinas, 1991). With this recognition, Charles and Karen encountered situations with students that included a lack of student motivation resulting from poor academic preparation that was linked to prior school experiences, a characteristic that has been noted in urban high school populations. Nonetheless, Charles and Karen desired to teach in culturally responsive ways, in part, through the relationships they developed with their students.

This difference in student population between urban and rural contexts impacts the way teachers position themselves in relationship to their students and their parents. Both Bill and Ellen recalled how they could leverage their relationships with families in the community to get to know their students and parents chiefly because the community was small and the high schools served as facilities where families could come together and socialize. For Charles and Karen, connecting with families beyond school settings was a very different experience, for within urban environments there are multiple activities in which families can engage that potentially compete for their attention. Therefore, there was little likelihood for Charles and Karen to engage with many of their students' families as they would have preferred.

While all four participants talked about developing skills in classroom management in their first three years of teaching, the challenges they faced were very different. With urban secondary schools facing pressure to alleviate high dropout rates, administrators' hesitancy in formally suspending students, or sending students back to class without experiencing consequences, as well as district policies that allowed students multitudes of opportunities to pass their grades without really earning the right presented unique challenges in handling discipline and grade issues for novice teachers such as Charles and Karen. This inconsistency in administrative

support, policy, and procedure regarding student discipline and grade issues also led to Karen's ethical dilemma that ultimately resulted in her decision to leave the teaching profession.

Considering different school contexts, we observed how our participants reacted to challenges they encountered differently. Both male participants, Charles and Bill appeared to be much more laid back in their attitudes toward teaching even though they were concerned about various aspects in teaching and learning. For example, Charles became concerned about his students' lack of motivation, at times, and their subsequent behavior; however, he maintained a rather calm, yet concerned stance about it. Bill's laid back manner could perhaps be attributed to the fact that he did not have to teach a course that was required by the state to be tested. On the other hand, both Karen and Ellen expressed noticeable emotion about their concerns at school. The ethical dilemmas encountered by Karen caused her such great frustration that she wanted to leave the teaching profession. Ellen's feelings of responsibility for her students beyond the classroom caused her to question local and state educational policies that she perceived would negatively impact her students' well-being. It appeared that the weight of caring about their students and exerting authority in doing something about the issues became a fragile balancing act — one that was quite emotional (Hargreaves, 2000), so much so that they did not want to continue. More specifically, teaching is a job that requires emotional labor (Bellas, 1999; Hebson, Earnshaw, & Marchington, 2007; Hochschild, 1983). In fact, over one third of jobs that demand such labor are held by women (Bellas, 1999; Hochschild, 1983). Both Karen and Ellen wanted to be capable, competent teachers; however, the daily execution of various teaching tasks coupled with their need to connect with their students took a greater toll on their emotional well-being than with Charles and Bill. We concluded that the social expectations of teaching (i.e., being female dominated; one that requires nurturing and caring, etc.) caused Karen and Ellen to invest themselves more emotionally in their daily work. This is not to say that Charles and Bill did not make such an investment as well. It appeared, nevertheless, that Charles and Bill's demonstration of investment did not result in emotionally driven manifestations as they did with Karen and Ellen.

### **STORIES TO LIVE BY AND STORIES TO LEAVE BY**

Given our attention to Charles, Karen, Bill, and Ellen over the past four years, we have become a part in “the meandering parade” (Clandinin et al., 2009, p. 142) of their journeys of becoming teachers. Changes have and will continue to occur in their lives. As they conclude their fourth year of teaching, these novice teachers who should be readying themselves for tenured teacher status have plans for their futures. Those plans have become their “stories to live by” and their “stories to leave by” (Clandinin et al., 2009, p. 147).

While the two males in our study will continue teaching in public school classrooms, the females have different plans. Determined to leave after her fourth year of teaching, Karen has been accepted in a graduate degree program in student affairs (Follow-up communication, fourth year of teaching). She hopes to become a Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs on a university campus



someday. Due to the economic downturn that affected her county, Ellen was reassigned to a teaching position that would have split her time between two schools. This teaching assignment together with her frustration and dissatisfaction with county school board policies not being equitable, in her estimation, for all children, led to her decision to leave the profession for a while. She is presently making plans to begin a Master's program in either psychology or school counseling. She regretfully stated that "I don't know that I have what it takes to be a teacher" (Follow-up communication, fourth year of teaching).

## CONCLUSION

While we began our study with the depiction of our participants' "stories to live by" as beginning teachers, we ended with some "stories to leave by" in this study (Clandinin et al., 2009). The results of our longitudinal study not only allowed us to describe the development of four secondary teachers with whom we worked but they also led us to question our current teacher education program and reimagine alternative ways of teaching and learning in teacher education. Because being a teacher requires one to be successful at more than just teaching, we wondered what we could do as teacher educators to prepare our teacher candidates beyond content and pedagogy. These findings assisted us in recognizing that we must fully acknowledge, in a generational sense, who our traditional preservice teachers are and who the students they will be teaching are as well. Just as the novice teachers found connections with their students, we, as teacher educators, must also know the characteristics of the present high school population. Through such acknowledgements perhaps we can better understand, for instance, why such strong administrative support is needed by novice teachers especially where disciplinary matters are concerned and why the obsession with testing suppresses their joy of teaching.

As Freedman and Appleman concluded in their study of teacher identity and retention, in order to prepare sustaining and optimistic young teachers, we need to "offer our best theoretical and practical pedagogical knowledge, and help them to become more knowledgeable about the challenges they and their students face" (2008, p. 124). We believe that it is critical for teacher educators to purposefully introduce preservice teachers to the complexity of teaching and to equip them with strategies to negotiate their identity in various teaching contexts in twenty-first-century teacher education programs.

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