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# Teaching in Good Faith: A Exploration of the Personal, Professional, and Philosophical Evolution of First-Year Educators

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TEACHING IN GOOD FAITH: AN EXPLORATION OF THE PERSONAL,  
PROFESSIONAL, AND PHILOSOPHICAL EVOLUTION OF FIRST-YEAR  
EDUCATORS

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

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March 2017

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Title: TEACHING IN GOOD FAITH: AN EXPLORATION OF THE PERSONAL, PROFESSIONAL, AND PHILOSOPHICAL EVOLUTION OF FIRST-YEAR EDUCATORS

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### **Abstract**

The teaching profession is notoriously difficult. The attrition rate for teachers in their first three years is 25% compared to the national attrition rate of 3.4% (BLS, 2016). Many studies indicate that teaching conditions and school culture influence a teacher's decision to stay or leave (Headden, 2014; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005), but very few studies explore in depth the existential shifts that occur in teachers in their first year. It is this researcher's belief that the seed of attrition is planted in the first year, and that by attending with greater sensitivity to the struggles experienced by first-year teachers, schools can increase their chances of retaining teachers in the profession. This phenomenological study takes the first step toward detailing those supports by following a diverse pool of four first-year teachers in various urban settings through their first year. Through the lens of an Existentialist philosophical framework, this research explores in depth the personal, professional, and philosophical evolution of first-year educators.

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## Introduction

### **Dearth in the Literature: Examining the First Year of Teaching through the Lens of the Inner Core.**

Teacher attrition has reached “unprecedented levels” (Headden, 2012, p. 4) in our country, with most teachers leaving because of unsupportive school environments (Headden, 2012; Ingersoll, 2001; Weiss, 1999). Teacher induction programs provide support for teachers in the classroom, but it consists of primarily technical support that addresses observable, measurable outcomes (CTC, 2008). In contrast, teachers describe needing *emotional* support from their administrators (Headden, 2012; Weiss, 1999). Weiss (1999) states, “research that has focused on new teachers... has not fully explored the effects of school social organization on their commitment and willingness to stay” (p. 862). This indicates a need for the literature to recognize teaching as a complex, social endeavor with ties that exist beyond the encapsulated ecosystem of the classroom. It is significant that there are very few citations regarding the need for emotional support for teachers, and that one of them is from 1999. There is a jarring dearth in the literature surrounding social-emotional teacher supports and a critical need for these supports to be given legitimacy and language in the literature and in society as a whole.

In response to the demands that result from the influx of “replacement” teachers each year, and in response to our education system’s privileging of quantitative,

measurable academic outcomes, teacher education programs and induction programs have skewed toward defining teaching as a set of skills that can be measured, codified, and reproduced. Fred Korthagen (2004) describes the origin of this mindset, detailing a trend in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century towards creating “concrete, observable behavioral criteria... as a basis for the training of novices” (p. 79). He states,

For a number of years, so-called process-product studies were carried out, in an effort to identify the teaching behaviors that displayed the highest correlation with the learning results of children. This was then translated into concrete *competencies* that should be acquired by teachers” (p. 79, original emphases).

These competencies soon proved to be “unwieldy” and “resulted in a kind of fragmentation of the teacher’s role” (p. 79). The 1970’s saw a surge of research that sought to pose a counterargument to this competency-based view of teaching by examining the individual identity of the teacher. However, according to Korthagen (2004), this movement “failed to obtain broad support” (p. 79). Korthagen now views with wariness the current educational trends regarding common core standards and teacher evaluation methods, stating, “history is repeating itself” (p. 79).

As this paper evolves, I will explain why the application of wholly empirical, quantitative instruments to measure the full depth and breadth of a teacher is both flawed and incomplete. There is paucity in the literature that addresses the experience of a novice teacher in terms of what Michalec (2013) describes as the “inner core of teaching,” which he defines as, “a constellation of teaching qualities that characterize the inner life of teachers” (p.29). These humanistic qualities include love, heart, courage, resilience, authenticity, and a sense of calling. One of the few studies that touches on the

social-emotional aspect of first-year teaching is a description of the emotional cycle of a first year teacher by Ellen Moir (1990). This is an important study, but because it is a quarter-century old, it begs to be reviewed and updated according to current trends and values. Clearly there is a need to re-examine the holistic evolution of the first-year teacher in the current context which has since been influenced by No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, the advent and widespread popularity of charter schools, Teach for America, and countless other reformist efforts that have taken root since 1990.

My study continues in the tradition of Moir, Michalec, and Korthagen who have explored and validated the inner core of teaching. Through the lens of the inner core, I intend to explore the subterranean shifts that cause the emotional phases and existential changes experienced by new teachers. This study is a pilot that seeks to distill the essence of the holistic experience of the first year teacher in order to better suggest targeted social-emotional support for novices.

### **About the Researcher**

I am coming to this research as a former teacher who felt a profound affinity with and calling to the teaching profession. I found teaching to be dynamic, frustrating, exhilarating, exhausting, and most importantly to this research, deeply transformative to my identity, perception of self, and my worldviews. In short, by the end of my first year of teaching I was a different, more fully realized person. In looking back, while these changes were occurring I realize I needed guidance and support to understand and contextualize what I was experiencing, but I was offered very little support beyond professional development on the technical aspects of classroom teaching. While this



helped me to improve my skills, alone it was not enough to fully develop and sustain me in the profession.

I believed as a teacher, and continue to believe as a researcher that education has the power to transform our society into a more equitable, democratic community. An examination of equity in education, however, is not complete without including a discussion of the fair, equitable, and ethical treatment of teachers. My driving question throughout graduate school, then, has been “what supports would I have needed in my first year in order to still be teaching today?”

To that end, my goal in this study is to look underneath the numbers, rubrics, and performance standards and examine what it truly means to become a teacher. I believe that the disruptions and unexpected questions in a classroom, the long sleepless nights, the continual reflection, and the unwieldy emotions that accompany the first year are not mere distractions from a more important goal, but the stuff of teaching. Once I understand the process by which a teacher goes through to reach his/her truest expression as an educator, I can begin to decipher how to support teachers in the process of becoming.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does a first year teacher’s view of teaching evolve over the first year, and what are the factors that shape this evolution?

*This question addresses the teacher’s view of her profession as a whole. It involves her preconceptions of what it means to be a teacher professionally, how she perceives the systems that shape her profession, what she believes is the purpose of education, and how and why this perception evolves throughout the course of her first*

*year. To answer this question, I will look for grounded moments or occurrences that cause the teacher to change her understanding of her profession.*

2. How does the first year of teaching affect the teachers' perception of themselves and their identity as an educator?

*In contrast to the first question, which referred to the teacher's evolving understanding of her profession, this question addresses the teacher's perception of her personal self and her identity within the context of her profession. It focuses on her belief in her own efficacy, her preconceptions about what it would mean for her to be a teacher (as opposed to what she thought the profession would be like in general), and how and why her beliefs and perceptions evolve throughout the course of the year.*

3. How does the teachers' philosophy of teaching evolve through the first year of teaching?

*This question addresses the teacher's idealized perception of teaching. The philosophy of teaching asks the teacher what values she brings to her profession. It also asks what the teacher believes teaching ought to be in its purest, most ideal form. This question addresses how and why this philosophy changes (or doesn't) throughout the course of the year.*

## **Summary**

Overall, my research questions seek to examine the changes in a first-year teacher's perception of self, of her profession, and of her teaching philosophy. I believe many these changes can be traced to specific experiences and tensions in the classroom and school. The purpose of this study is to determine what types of experiences lead to changes in self-perception, perception of profession, and philosophical ideals, and

ultimately, how these changes can be better supported to help the teacher maintain faith in her calling and her abilities.

Because these questions are highly metaphysical in nature I will be using Existentialist philosophy to frame my hypotheses. My methodological approaches will consist of a blend of phenomenology and arts-based research. These allow me to use open-ended theory to guide my understanding and to draw on my previous experience in schools. Furthermore, because I am seeking answers that delve underneath empirical numbers, these approaches give me the freedom to render my findings in a product that may capture more appropriately the metaphysical essence of my findings.

## **Review of Literature**

### **The Crisis of Teacher Attrition**

Teacher attrition in the United States is both a symptom and cause of many of our educational inequities. R. M. Ingersoll (2001) referred to teacher attrition as “a significant phenomenon” (p. 501), and a quick scan of my sources on teacher attrition indicates that educational literature has exploded in the past 15 years with new reports on the nationwide problems that stem from teacher turnover. Teacher attrition has now received so much attention that academic literature cannot contain it. Reports of the “crisis” of teacher turnover have appeared in local Denver publications (Zubrzycki, 2015) and has even been covered by National Public Radio in an interview with Richard Ingersoll (Phillips, 2015). The reason teacher attrition is receiving so much attention is because it *is* an enormous problem. Teacher attrition has reached “unprecedented levels” in our public school system (Headden, 2012, p. 4), and has been classified by Kenneth Zeichner as a “significant phenomenon” (Zeichner, 2003, p. 501). According to Ingersoll & Merrill (2012), “in 1987 the modal, or most common, public school teacher had 15 years of experience under his or her belt... But by 2007-08...the modal teacher was not a gray-haired veteran; he or she was a beginner in her first year of teaching” (p.8). This indicates that the past couple of decades have seen a significant increase in the number of teachers exiting their profession. It also indicates that currently most teachers are very, very new.

Nationwide, public schools in America lose 450,000 teachers (Carlson, 2012). This number is staggering, especially when we consider how much of this turnover consists of novice teachers. As stated by Carroll and Foster (2010), “First-year teacher attrition has been steadily increasing since 1994. After 5 years, over 30% of our beginning teachers have left the profession. Many of these teachers leave before they have had time to become proficient educators who know how to work with their colleagues to improve student learning” (p. 4). This NCTAF report is corroborated by other sources whose numbers report that 25% of teachers leave within the first three years (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2009), and that by five years, 50% of new teachers have left the teaching profession (Headden, 2014; Jacob, Vidyarthi, & Carrol, 2012). If we follow teachers from the beginning of their preparation programs to their third year on the job, the numbers rise to a 75% attrition rate nationally (Zeichner, 2003).

### **Why Teachers Leave**

While relatively low salaries for teachers surface as a factor in turnover (Coggshall, Ott, Behrstock, & Lasagna, 2012; Headden, 2014; R. M. Ingersoll, 2001), overwhelmingly, teachers cite a lack of administrative support, an “unsustainable workload” (Zubrzycki, 2015), and a lack of autonomy as their primary reason for leaving (Headden, 2014; R. M. Ingersoll, 2001; Phillips, 2015; Weiss, 1999). Weiss (1999) states, “successful experiences of new teachers depends at least in part on an environment that responds to their needs” (p. 862). She also states that “of the American teachers who were dissatisfied with teaching as a career, the majority reported concerns with inadequate support from the school administration” (p. 862). Weiss published her

research in the late 1990's. Twenty years later, teachers are still reporting these same difficulties. Headden (2014) in a recent Carnegie Foundation Report states baldly,

“The primary driver of the exodus of early career teachers is a lack of administrative and professional support. The problem takes many forms including the feeling of being isolated from colleagues, scant feedback on performance, poor professional development, and insufficient emotional backing by administrators. Quite simply, teachers don't think the people they work for care about them or their efforts to improve” (p. 5).

In addition to the tension internal to the schools, teachers are also subject to demanding, and often negative, scrutiny from the public eye. The external movement to create more empirical accountability in schools, as will be discussed at length later in this paper, has given rise to an archetypal “bad teacher” image which has been disseminated perhaps most widely in popular culture by the film “Waiting for Superman” (Guggenheim, 2010), but is also corroborated by leading figures in educational reform including Dave Levin, the founder of America's KIPP schools and Joel Klein, the former chancellor of New York City schools (Dubner, 2014). These sources posit that public school teachers are both the cause of and solution to America's educational problems. This theory bypasses a discussion of endemic, systemic challenges and places the full weight of responsibility and blame on the shoulders of our educators.

They follow, however, in a long tradition. In the media and throughout history, teachers have been accused of being lazy and ruining our youth (Goldstein, 2014). Influential education reformers like Wendy Kopp (2011), founder of Teach for America, Geoffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem Children's Zone, and Michelle Rhee, former chancellor of Washington DC public schools perpetuate this image by treating teachers as

expendable if they do not meet student performance standards (Breslow, 2013; GovChristie, 2010; Guggenheim, 2010). Even the popular writer and researcher Malcolm Gladwell (2008) in a study on Value Added Modeling suggested bluntly that firing the bottom 6% of teachers would improve the educational system immeasurably. He was, of course, using student test scores to delineate the “bottom 6%”

The fact that so many notable, influential public figures regard teachers as expendable, especially teachers whose students do not perform well on standardized tests, indicates an inherently deficit mindset in reference to the teaching profession. This obscures the real, empirical deficit, however, which exists in the actual number of teachers who are entering the field. Ingersoll (2001) states “in plain terms, teacher recruitment programs alone will not solve the staffing problems of schools if they do not also address the organizational structure of low retention” (p. 501).

Much of the academic literature offers a distinctly different image of teachers than that put forth by Kopp, Canada, Guggenheim, Levin, Klein, and Rhee. Coggshall et al. (2012) found that, in addition to salary raises, teachers value “having meaningful learning opportunities” (p. 4), “meaningful collaboration with colleagues,” (p. 15), and “sustained, constructive, and individualized feedback from principals to help them become more effective in the classroom” (p. 13). Weiss (1999) provides a description of most common teacher requests that include, “appropriate workload, opportunities for collegial interaction, professional development, participation in decision making, and support for student discipline” (p.863). Teachers across the country are asking for the resources, autonomy, and time they would need to improve in their field. Far from retreating from responsibility, the literature indicates that teachers have a desire to participate in the

school-wide initiatives that directly affect them (Meredith, 2007). Teachers want to learn from their peers, and, rather than asking to be left alone by administrators, are requesting continual involvement and feedback from administrators and peers (Coggshall et al., 2012; Gordon & Maxey, 2000; Headden, 2014). These reports, far from uncovering teachers as lazy and unmotivated, depict a driven, wholehearted, invested profession. Teachers are not leaving because they do not care; they are leaving because they care too much and cannot effect the changes they'd anticipated coming in to the profession.

Unfortunately, attrition has become a negative cycle. The fact that roughly half of teachers leave the profession within five years because they feel unsupported and undervalued (Headden, 2014) indicates a nation-wide underinvestment in new teachers. Teacher attrition causes administrators and policy-makers to become wary of investing too much in the teachers they have, and in turn, teachers leave because they feel like “the people they work for care about them or their efforts to improve” (Headden, 2012, p. 5).

### **Invisible Teachers**

As stated in the introduction, an examination of equity in education is not complete without including a discussion of the fair, equitable, and ethical treatment of teachers. Currently, teacher attrition literature focuses most closely on the effects of turnover on student achievement and school culture. Very little of it, however, focuses on the debilitating effects that unsupportive environments have on the teachers themselves. Many teachers cite lack of support as their primary reason for leaving the profession, but few studies delve into what exactly this means. What supports are needed? What supports are missing? How does the environment affect the teacher? The literature, then,



metaphysically reflects a problem with the system as a whole. Teachers' voices are ignored or undervalued, which effectively renders them invisible in their own profession.

This can be a confusing statement, because, as shown by publicly available, nation-wide testing results, and the explosion of "moral panic" about what to be done with the teaching profession (Goldstein, 2014, p. 215), teachers seem more scrutinized and visible than ever before. My argument, though, is not that we've forgotten teachers, but that we've forgotten that they're human. The same process that transforms living, breathing, thinking students into irrefutable numbers on a spreadsheet, transforms living, breathing, caring teachers into an aggregate of those same numbers.

Richard Ingersoll (2001), one of the leading researchers of teacher attrition, stated that "teacher recruitment programs alone will not solve the staffing problems of schools if they do not also address the organizational sources of low retention" (p. 501). By his calculations, then, even by combining all incoming teachers from traditional teacher education programs and all of the alternative licensure programs, the nation will still not have enough educators to compensate for the rate of attrition. Despite this, schools still seem reluctant to invest in high-quality professional development programs or induction programs that could aid in teacher retention (Zeichner, 2003). Instead popular alternative licensure programs like Teach for America seek to supply the ever-increasing demand for teachers by fast-tracking under-qualified college graduates into the classroom (Zeichner, 2003). The strategy to recruit young college graduates for two-year commitment to teaching, can serve to ameliorate the short-term symptoms of the teacher shortage, but do not address the underlying problems.

Strategies to staff schools by increasing teacher supply, instead of protecting the teachers who are already teaching, are suggested by influential reports like “The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America’s Schools” (Jacob et al., 2012). This report calls for a selective retention of teachers who have demonstrated a preternatural ability to raise student test scores. The implication in this report is that teachers who fail to raise student test scores are deemed expendable and replaceable. This mindset indicates a pervasive lack of respect for the numerous skills, talents, and experiences that each teacher brings to her classroom, and easily gives up on teachers who have difficulty reflecting their expertise in standardized test scores. This mindset causes the teacher herself to feel disenfranchised and dehumanized, and ultimately results in burnout and attrition. Furthermore, it reinforces the idea that teachers are visible and valuable only insofar as their students succeed on standardized tests and further reduces the definition of “success” in the profession of teaching to this set of narrowly defined, quantitative criteria.

### **Effects of Teacher Attrition**

Why is teacher attrition a negative phenomenon? Certainly the nation embraced initiatives like Teach for America, which only asks for a 2-year teaching commitment, but is willing to trade burnout for test scores.

Unfortunately, teacher attrition impacts far more than student test scores. It is a symptom and cause of the problem of equity and access, it puts undue burdens on the teachers who remain in the school, it disrupts the continuity of school culture, it is fiscally costly, it deals a mortal blow to the overall morale the school, and it hinders a larger movement toward creating an innovative and equitable society.

First, attrition is a problem of equity and access. It is well documented that teacher attrition is concentrated in high-needs, high-poverty, neighborhoods with high populations of racial and ethnic minorities (Boyd et al., 2009; Headden, 2014; R. M. Ingersoll, 2001; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013; Strong, 2005). Both Headden (2014) and Ronfeldt et al. (2013) report that attrition in high-needs schools that serve at-risk populations experience up to 50% more turnover than low-poverty schools. Therefore, the lowest-resourced schools serving the highest-needs students are also trying to mitigate the financial and emotional effects of having staff in a state of constant transition. These effects can take many forms. According to Ronfeldt et al. (2013) attrition

“may have a broader organizational influence that reaches beyond leaving teachers, replacement teachers, and their students. Where turnover is considered to have a disruptive organizational influence, all members of a school community are vulnerable, including staying teachers and their students. In such disruptive accounts of turnover, even when leaving teachers are equally effective as those who replace them, turnover can still impact student achievement” (p. 7).

To extrapolate, teacher turnover can have wider social implications beyond simply the school. If we believe that “education is a part of society. It is not something alien, something that stands outside. Indeed, it is a key set of social and personal relations” (Apple, 2013, p. 18), then schools come into focus as indelible threads of the fabric of our society. I believe that schools can and should be sites of what I am calling “equity innovation,” which I define as “creative solutions that disrupt the status quo in a way that adds value to society by transforming the harmful mindsets and ingrained practices of the dominant culture.”

If we accept the premise that schools should be sites of equity innovation for society, we can see how teacher attrition works against equity innovation by perpetuating what Michael Apple (2012) refers to as “collective amnesia” (p. 10). To truly address the equity problems in our country, schools need to retain a strong institutional memory on which to build a cohesive, long-term movement. This type of movement is hindered by the fact that new teachers often begin teaching immediately after college (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012), and therefore begin their teaching career with what Maxine Greene (1988) describes as, “an implicit encouragement of the tendency to accede to the given, to view what exists around [them] as an objective ‘reality,’ impervious to individual interpretation” (p. 7). These novice teachers are being inducted into the tyranny of the status quo, which is powerful because of its very existence. As Maxine Greene (1988) stated “when people cannot name alternatives, imagine a better state of things, share with others a project of change, they are likely to remain submerged” (p. 9). I see the word “submerged” as poignant here, because it calls to mind an image of drowning or suppression. Teachers, as we will discuss presently, assume their vocations very often because they love children and want to make a positive impact on society. To initiate change and “achieve freedom,” one must comprehend limitations as “obstacles, most often obstacles erected by other human beings... These obstacles or blocks or impediments are, as it were, artifacts, human creations, not ‘natural’ or objectively existent necessities” (Greene, 1988, p. 9). Too easily, teachers can drown in the overwhelming demands of their jobs, or, by submerging their own instincts, become inured to the detrimental artifacts of oppression that surround them. New teachers with very little previous experience or context for understanding the inequities in schools,

disproportionately find jobs in the hard-to-staff, marginalized schools where equity innovation could have the most profound impact, but where the naming of alternatives is a dissident and often unwelcome action.

Furthermore, given the fact that over 50% of teachers in high-poverty schools will leave teaching entirely within the first five years (Headden, 2014; Ronfeldt et al., 2013), and be replaced by a corps of teachers new to the school and its culture, there is very little time or stability on which to build a long-term movement toward equity. Teacher turnover, then, simply reinforces the status quo by destabilizing school culture and pride in areas that these commodities are most needed.

On a local, individualized scale, teacher attrition erodes trust and morale within a school community. As a former teacher in high turnover schools, I experienced firsthand the challenges of earning my students' trust. In my first year teaching, I was one of 80% new staff in the school. 80% of this school's staff had transferred or quit the previous year. The legacy that this provided was a student body that viewed us incoming adults with mistrust and guardedness. At one point during the year, one of my students became upset during an informal lunchtime chat and said, "Ms. Newburgh I like you. I don't want you to leave." I was perplexed by this and asked her what she meant. She responded saying, "all the nice teachers leave us." I could tell she was hurt and had taken personally the teachers' decisions to leave the school. Perhaps as an indirect result of conversations like this, despite my disagreements with the administration, I looped with those students and taught them until they graduated to 9<sup>th</sup> grade before I left that school.

I transferred the following year to a school that claimed to value teacher input. When I found that school to be an emotionally toxic and physically unsafe environment, I

transferred again at the end of the year. Upon returning to that school to pick up paperwork, one of my students who I'd advised confronted me saying, "you left us because you hated us didn't you? Why did you leave? You must hate me."

While there seems to be very little literature documenting the students' perceptions of teacher turnover, it was clear to me that these students felt personally abandoned by their teachers, and in at least one case, by me. Considering the fact that hard-to-staff schools lose on average 20% of their staff per year (Haynes, 2014), very rarely does a student form a relationship with an adult that he/she can count on for the long term.

As described by Bryk and Schneider (2003), relational trust is necessary to enact real school reforms, create a safe environment, and facilitate effective learning communities. Unfortunately, teacher turnover requires the school to start all over creating and nurturing the trust that low-turnover schools have the capacity to develop long term. This cycle adversely effects student achievement, teacher buy-in, and the school's capacity to enact long-term improvements (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

In more concrete terms, teacher turnover is expensive. R. Ingersoll and Perda (2010) calculate that the yearly cost of teacher attrition throughout the nation is between 1 and 2.2 billion. Barnes, Crowe, and Schaefer (2007) report that the cost of recruiting and training new teachers can exceed 7 billion per year. Whether the nation spends 1 or 7 billion, however, these costs are substantial and largely concentrated in the schools that can ill afford it. Paying for new teacher recruitment and training is a necessary reaction to turnover, like bailing water out of a sinking dinghy. Ideally, though, schools would be concentrating their resources on finding the leaks, plugging them, and then renovating the

dinghy into a pleasant, high-quality vessel. To translate, instead of pouring money into stopgaps, schools could be investing in long-term solutions that target the cause of teacher attrition, which would also free up funds for enriching educational experiences and resources. Much of this study is centered on detailing long-term solutions to teacher attrition, so I will address that question more fully in the final section of this literature review.

### **The Ravenous Giant: Testing and Accountability in Public Schools**

Given the high rates of attrition, it is no wonder that Osborne (1992) described teaching as “the profession that eats its young” (p.3). In this section I will attempt to link teacher attrition to the current trend of accountability and testing.

As alluded to earlier, there is a trend in our educational system of increased reliance on large bodies of quantitative data to inform us about the academic “levels” of our students, and the efficacy of our teachers. Many writers, such as Dana Goldstein (2014), Diane Ravitch (2013), and Jonathan Kozol (2005), trace this trend back to No Child Left Behind, an act passed in 2001 that required a uniform “assessment system used to measure the achievement of all students” and a system “enabl[ing] the results to be aggregated within each state, local educational agency, and school by gender, major racial and ethnic group, English proficiency status, migrant status, disability status...and economically disadvantaged students” (Bush, 2001, p.3-4). While No Child Left Behind “[made] the problem of the achievement gap visible on the national scale for the first time” (Goldstein, 2014, p. 192) it also defined an unprecedented type of education reform. As stated by Ravitch (2013), “[i]n this new environment, education reformers supported testing, accountability, and choice. Education reformers rely on data derived

from standardized testing. Education reformers insist that all children be proficient...or increase their test scores every year... or their schools and teachers are failures” (p. 21).

Maxine Greene (1988) discussed the stifling reality of the school’s response to “confronting some of the most tragic lacks in American society, some of the saddest instances of dehumanization, they offer promises of ‘career ladders,’ ‘board certification’... (p.13). She goes on to say,

“At once, teachers and administrators are helped still to see themselves as functionaries in an instrumental system geared to turning out products, some (but not all) of which will meet standards of quality control. They still find schools infused with a management orientation, acceding to market measures; and they (seeing no alternatives) are wont to narrow and technicize the area of their concerns” (p. 13).

Later in this paper I will discuss the existentialist concept of “freedom.” Maxine Greene touches on it here, implying that to be steamrolled by an oppressive status quo, or to allow an oppressive status quo to define one’s view of the world, is to relinquish freedom. The ability to see oppressive practices and systems as a barrier to justice is in itself a free act. The efficient, concretized school system designed to “process the young” (Greene, 1988, p. 12) effects its participants’ abilities to think and act freely, and imagine alternatives to the existing world.

### **EdTPA and Teacher Accountability**

This trend of using quantitative, scale data as the primary method of student and teacher proficiency evaluation has now moved from the containment of schools to pervade the landscape of teacher education. In other words, the “young” that are being processed are not just students anymore. In attending the 2015 American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education conference, I sat in on many of the presentations given



by active scholars in the field of teacher preparation. None of the sessions I attended attempted to question or resist the idea that this testing and accountability agenda should define the boundaries of our thinking. All of the studies that received significant funding utilized quantitative instruments to study teachers and their efficacy.

Perhaps most disturbing was an initiative that has been fully implemented now in 11 states, and partially implemented in 18 states (AACTE, 2015). EdTPA is an initiative designed by Stanford University and funded by Pearson, one of the national testing giants, to implement a “uniform and impartial process to evaluate aspiring teachers” (AACTE, 2015). EdTPA is the vanguard at the gateway of teacher certification. To be allowed access, a teacher must take (and pay for) a battery of tests that “prove” their knowledge in their subject area. Teachers must also submit to a blind reviewer “authentic teaching materials as a culmination of a teaching and learning process that documents and demonstrates each candidate’s ability to effectively teach subject matter to all students” (AACTE, 2015). These teaching materials include a video of the student teacher. In all, according to colleagues at Utica University in New York, the entire edTPA process costs the incipient teacher almost \$1000, and that is only *if* she can pass every test on the first try (Communication, 2015). If she fails, she must ante the money again or relinquish her dreams of being a teacher.

The ostensible goal of edTPA is to “protect and professionalize teaching and teacher education” (Madeloni & Gorelewski, 2013, p. 1), a goal that Gorlewski (2013) describes as “deeply insulting to those of us who have dedicated our lives to the art and craft of teaching” (p.1). Madeloni and Gorelewski call edTPA “an imposition that pushes aside work that matters deeply to education scholars. It narrows the possibility of

teaching and learning, distracts us from critical multicultural education, is an invitation for corporate encroachment, and restricts academic freedom” (p. 1).

I am focusing on edTPA because, despite criticism from within the field of teacher education, the current climate of our educational system has allowed it to relatively easily become a widespread adoption in our country. In fact, Dr. Madeloni received a nonrenewal letter from the University of Massachusetts- Amherst after exercising her freedom to support her students in refusing the edTPA field test (Madeloni & Gorelewski, 2013). This story highlights that the EdTPA initiative is a potent symptom and perpetuator of our teacher-targeting, data-obsessed country. Furthermore, given the adoption of edTPA in 11 states, many schools of teacher education, far from acting as critical sites of resistance and advocates for equity innovation, are allowing themselves to be buffeted by the winds of the accountability reform movement.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Up until now I have endeavored to provide context for the thousands of teachers every year who are consumed by their own profession. I would like to spend a moment examining the premise and philosophy of using quantitative data to measure teacher success, and then describe how this impacts the teacher and her goals.

In the 1990’s, a highly influential, completely data-driven model for measuring teacher efficacy was conceived. The Value-Added Model (VAM) drew on student demographic data in a given classroom to use the “best linear unbiased predictors for the effects of teachers on scores” (Ewing, 2011, p. 669). Essentially, this means that the value-added mathematical models attempted to account and control for variables such as student ethnicity, English language proficiency, gender, and poverty status in a given

classroom to calculate the influence a teacher should be able to render on her student's test scores. The model then compares the students' actual gains to their predicted gains, and judges the teacher accordingly. Value-added models supposedly create a level playing field on which to determine who are the most and least effective teachers.

On the surface, this looks like a potential triumph for teachers of at-risk students. According to the VAM, they are not being judged against teachers in wealthy, high-resource districts, but against teachers with in their own experience pool. There are, however, many problems with evaluating teachers according to their VAM scores.

The first issues I would like to address are technical. According to McCaffrey and Lockwood (2004), "[o]ne of the major concerns pertaining to all VAM evaluations of teachers is the possibility of bias from the exclusion of covariates, such as student background characteristics. In theory, the omission of covariates that contributes to outcomes can bias perimeter estimates when students are stratified by those covariates" (p. 94). In other words, no VAM can fully account for all of the variables present in a student's life. Simple things can affect the outcome of a test score, including whether or not the student ate breakfast, how the student slept the night before, and if the student has a crush on the person next to them. Therefore, even the developers of these models cautioned against using them too widely. They were a tools "based on a statistical model, and inferences about individual teachers might not be valid, either because of faulty assumptions or because of normal (and expected) variation" (Ewing, 2011, p. 669).

Other problems with VAM include the fact that it is virtually useless when evaluating team teaching, it can provide highly inaccurate results if student test data is

missing from previous years, it cannot be applied to evaluating teachers of subjects that are not tested, and it is subject to inflation (Ewing, 2011; Goldstein, 2014).

Unfortunately, the VAM was seductive to policy-makers, largely because of the “trend in modern society to place a higher value on numerical (objective) measurements than verbal (subjective) evidence” (Ewing, 2011, p. 668). This sentiment is echoed by Karen Armstrong (2009) who states, “our scientifically-oriented knowledge seeks to master reality, explain it, and bring it under the control of reason” (p. 5). In the new era of measurement and accountability, policy-makers were under immense pressure to prove that they were doing something about the achievement gap. Teaching, a profession concerned with human endeavors and the transmission of culture and knowledge, was now to be mastered, explained, and brought to the heel of reason. As a result, VAM is a pervasive measure included in teacher evaluations today (Goldstein, 2014).

While VAM has served to justify firing the bottom tier of teachers every year (Goldstein, 2014; Gladwell, 2008), proponents of VAM often fail to comprehend the full ramifications of these actions. One is described by Ewing (2011), who states that value-added models create a “distortion of the education experience, ignoring things that are not tested (for example, student engagement and attitude) and concentrating precisely on those things that are” (p. 668).

Another, largely unacknowledged consequence of VAM, due to the fact that teacher’s voices were absent from the development of this initiative, is that it narrows the focus of the teacher within teaching profession itself. It is like holding a single puzzle piece and predicting the whole picture. Although instead of predicting what the picture *will* be, the puzzle-piece holder has the power to predict what the puzzle *should* be, and

woe to the teacher who offers a different image. Combined with initiatives like edTPA, VAM has the capacity to strip away a teacher's autonomy, self-trust, and comfort with risk-taking.

One other difficulty with value-added modeling is the fact that the very tests on which these models operate, fail by their own criteria. No Child Left Behind called for standardized tests to be “valid and reliable for the purposes for which the assessment system is used and consistent with relevant, nationally recognized professional and technical standards” (Bush, 2001, p. 3). Validity in a measurement refers to the ability of the test to measure what it purports to measure. Reliability refers to the stability and consistency of the measure. Mahon (2010) calls into question the validity of standardized tests to accurately measure the skills of English Language Learners. She found, looking at our very own Colorado Student Assessment Program, that the test “required a certain level of English fluency, though fluency in English is not the targeted construct. Low levels of English language proficiency could be considered an ancillary skill, or a source of construct irrelevant variance” (p.481).

Similarly she refers to “cultural biases” of standardized tests (p. 480) that require the ancillary skill of cultural fluency in order for students to correctly navigate them. I experienced this difficulty of cultural fluency myself as an 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher in the South Bronx. In analyzing student data on a pretest, I noticed that there was a specific reading comprehension passage on which over 90% of my 102 students indicated zero correct answers. Curious, I flipped to that passage and discovered that it was an innocuous story about a farmer, a horse, and a paddock. This would have been an easily comprehensible story for the majority of New York State, which is largely an agricultural

and farming state, but for my inner-city students, the story was so far beyond the realm of their experience that it was practically gibberish. Nevertheless, according to the implacable data, my students were lacking, not a cultural or practical understanding of farms, but proficiency in developing inferences, sequencing, and simple recall.

Standardized tests, then, because they often fail to measure precisely what they are supposed to, operate with dubious levels of validity, but what of reliability? After all, the value-added model includes longitudinal data, so as long as the test is equally dubious every year, perhaps there will be some level of reliable analysis that we can pull from it.

Unfortunately, high-stakes test reliability is difficult to ascertain because the “Testing Industry’s Big Four” are not forthcoming about the processes they use to develop these tests (Frontline, 2002). Harcourt Educational Measurement, who owned 40% of the testing industry in 2002 teamed up with Pearson, who in 2002 owned 20% of the testing industry (Frontline, 2002), and assures us that they “collaborate with education experts to create test questions that undergo extensive review and field testing” (Pearson Assessments, 2015). They do not, however, provide details that allow the consumer to analyze the test development process. McGraw Hill makes similar claims, saying that it “maintains the highest standards for developing reliable and valid assessments that serve the needs of every educator and learner” (CTB, 2015). McGraw Hill, however, was the focus of a scandal in 2012 when they had to recall a test item called “The Pineapple and the Hare” which included a story so “bizarre” that it reportedly “stumped many, including *Jeopardy* star Ken Jennings” (Peralta, 2012). This test item was only recalled after virulent protests by many parents in teachers in New York. If this story managed to be approved by McGraw-Hill’s “highest standards,” it does not take insurmountable logic to

conclude that many sub-par test items that erode the concept of reliability slip under the radar of the public.

### **Compliant Students, Compliant Teachers**

Paulo Freire (1968/1986) cautioned the world against such a system of education where education itself “becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories, and the teacher is the depositor” (p. 58). This “banking model” of education “resists dialogue...treats students as objects of assistance...inhibits creativity and... in sum...fails to acknowledge men as historical beings” (p. 71). Data compiled from standardized tests, with its objectivity, its dissolution of context, and its remote origin in legislature, high above the learners themselves, represents exactly the type of “banking model” that Freire was worried about.

John Taylor Gatto (1991) was a schoolteacher in New York for 30 years, and in his 30<sup>th</sup> year was given the New York State Teacher of the Year award. In his acceptance speech, he excoriates the school system for creating a system of logic that teaches kids “it is better to leave school with a tool kit of superficial jargon... than with one genuine enthusiasm” (p. 33). Gatto describes the hidden curriculum of schools in seven lessons that he is forced to teach as an educator, the fifth and most pertinent to this discussion being “intellectual dependency;” he describes this saying, “ Good students wait for a teacher to tell them what to do. This is the most important lesson of them all: we must wait for other people, better trained than ourselves, to make the meanings of our lives” (p. 39).

I would argue that with the rise of uniform, standardized measures in the culture of teacher preparation, the teacher is in this case as much of a “depository” as she is a

“depositor;” she is as much in thrall to the hidden curriculum of schools as the students are, and worse, she is the unknowing, unwitting, and/or reluctant instrument through which these initiatives must pass. The standardized test regime, with its pervasive value-added evaluation models, do not allow for the kinds of creative, contextual, lessons that foster equity innovation and transformation.

### **Little Soldiers**

The legacy of empiricism, however, does not stop at the tests themselves or even the test-prep curricula that many schools impose. Increasingly - and notably in low-income schools districts - an entire school’s culture is manipulated to generate obedience, compliance, and Pavlov-like consumerism. The objective of this section will be to examine the psychological catalyst for these types of mindsets, unearth the fundamental deficit thinking embedded in these practices, and demonstrate how the philosophies underlying these militaristic and capitalist policies affect the teachers required to enact them.

In his book *Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, Jonathan Kozol (2005) describes these increasingly militaristic and capitalistic practices of schools serving at-risk populations of students. He states,

“Relentless emphasis on raising test scores, rigid policies of nonpromotion and nongraduation, a new empiricism and detailed lists of named and numbered ‘outcomes’ for each isolated parcel of instruction, an oftentimes fanatical insistence upon uniformity of teachers in their management of time, an openly conceded emulation of the rigorous approaches of the military, and a frequent use of terminology that comes out of the world of industry and commerce are just a few of the familiar aspects of these new adaptive strategies” (p. 15%)



This description of rigidity in schools is echoed by Brian Lack (2009), who conducted a research study on Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) schools, one of the most highly influential charter school models in the nation (Lack, 2009). Lack states baldly, “the KIPP movement is inherently undemocratic because of its unabashed endorsement of capitalistic and militaristic values” (p. 144). KIPP schools, perhaps because of their sensational and almost unanimously positive reception from society (Lack, 2009), have sparked a movement of similarly run, and similarly received, school networks in the country. An article by Kate Taylor (2015) described in glowing terms the Success Academy Charter School, which used tactics like public shaming, highly regimented procedures for body movements (such as sitting, walking in the halls, and eating lunch), and “incentives... such as candy for good behavior, and Nerf guns and basketballs for high scores on practice tests” (p. 1). Again, we see the Machiavellian militaristic and capitalistic philosophies that underpin these schools that are justified because the extended school day relentless demand for obedience has been shown to have a positive affect on test scores. These tactics are not exclusive to charter schools, either. As noted by Kozol, the “terminology of commerce” and “emulation... of the military” were also present in public schools nationwide as they strove to maintain favorable test score comparisons with their charter school counterparts. Goldstein (2014) and Ravitch (2013) also speak to this trend as pervasive throughout the school system, though both note that charter schools are often more egregious transgressors.

Wendy Kopp (2011), the founder of Teach for America and proud supporter of the “no excuses” legacy produced by KIPP and other national charters, justifies this hardline approach by claiming it is a proactive solution to changing poverty. Lack (2009)

responds to this by examining the hidden curriculum of the KIPP philosophy. He explains that their militaristic and capitalistic approach “conveys the message to urban students that failure in this society will solely be a reflection of not working long and hard enough, or mere complicity with rules set and enforced by authority figures” (p. 143). He also states, “by signaling to those who are systematically oppressed that to escape from poverty depends solely on their willingness to embrace pro-capitalist, pro-consumer values, the true sources of social stratification remain unaddressed” (p. 144). In other words, the “no excuses” philosophy adopted by highly praised charter schools, while they may raise test scores, also neglect to create meaningful, contextual learning that could help students see the larger societal forces that contribute to persistent poverty and racial injustices. To refer back to Greene’s (1988) terminology, these schools prevent students from having the space to “imagine a better state of things” (p. 9).

My concern, however, has as of yet gone unvoiced in the literature on that the hidden curriculum of these schools is affecting the attitudes, mindsets, and philosophies of teachers as much as students. Referring back to the description that Michael Apple (2012) provides of “collective amnesia,” one of the problems with teacher turnover is that “by 2007-2008... the modal teacher... was a beginner in her first year of teaching” (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012, p. 8). This means that new, young teachers (NCES, 2008) are beginning their teaching career under the auspices of these highly influential philosophies that define test scores as the highest form of academic achievement, and personal work ethic as the sole reason for success or failure. If schools are preventing students from understanding the “dire sociopolitical concerns” (Lack, 2009, p. 133) that come with this mindset, then so too, because of the “implicit encouragement of the tendency to accede to

the given” (Greene, 1988, p. 7), are the teachers prevented from understanding and exercising their imaginations to see alternatives, to “share with others a project of change” (Greene, 1988, p. 9) and to create a space and movement toward equity innovation in schools.

### **Scarcity Mindsets and Deficit Thinking**

Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) describe a phenomenon known as the “scarcity mindset,” which is an all-consuming obsession that results when a person lacks a particular physical or emotional need. There are benefits to the scarcity mindset, as it “concentrates the mind on pressing needs” (p. 1), but, according to Mullainathan and Shafir (2013), the drawbacks to a scarcity mindset can be “debilitating” (p. 1). They state, “it shortens a person’s horizons and narrows his perspective, creating a dangerous tunnel vision” (p. 2). They go on to argue that the scarcity mindset itself can perpetuate the exact problems that cause the scarcity mindset in the first place.

I believe that our high poverty districts, which often exhibit the lowest test scores (Ladson-Billings, 2006), has caused our nation to develop a scarcity mindset in relation to the quantitative data. This would explain our country’s “relentless emphasis on raising test scores” (Kozol, 2005, p.65) and its obsession with the achievement gap, which, according to Ladson-Billings (2006) is “one of the most common phrases in today’s education literature” (p. 3).

The concept of the achievement gap “has become crossover hit” that “has made its way into common parlance and everyday usage” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 3). It refers to the comparison of standardized test scores between Black and Latino students and White students in America, which in 2005 was a gap of 26 points (Ladson-Billings,

2006). There is, in this sense, a scarcity of high test scores in poor and minority districts, which I believe has caused “dangerous tunnel vision” in our public policy. Instead of taking a step back from this narrowed perspective and allowing ourselves to view it widely, as Ladson-Billings asks us to do, as an education debt, our country has clung tenaciously to the misdirected idea that raising test scores in high-needs districts is evidence that we are closing this achievement gap and thus creating a more just society. These “shortened horizons” have ruled out the possibility of widespread creative solutions that would truly help prepare students in high-needs districts to become self-actualized learners, self-advocates, and equity innovators.

One of the most persistent problems with this scarcity mindset is that it evokes a mode of thinking that is inherently deficit. Indeed, the idea of the achievement gap is predicated on deficit thinking (certain ethnicities of students *lack* test scores, knowledge, social capital, etc). This idea is not new in the literature. Many scholars have spoken out against the “achievement gap” asking us to reframe it instead as an “opportunity gap” (Da Silva, Hugeley, Kakli, & Rao, 2007) or an “education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Nevertheless, as referred to earlier, the “achievement gap” remains one of the “most common phrases in today’s education literature” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 3).

One strategy we could use to combat our country’s scarcity mindset and deficit thinking around marginalized communities is to employ a theory described by Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2013), which is to privilege the “funds of knowledge” harbored by every student. The “funds of knowledge” theory asks teachers to shake off the deficit, needs-oriented mindset around at-risk students and instead validate that student’s cultural and experiential knowledge as valuable in the classroom setting.

Again, this theory is not new in the literature. Many scholars have written about the benefit of taking a “surplus” approach to at-risk students. In fact, a quick database search of the term “funds of knowledge” results in over 11,000 hits. Conspicuously absent from this literature, however, is the strategy of applying the “funds of knowledge” theory to the teachers themselves. If at-risk students are operating in a highly controlled, militaristic, consumerist school environment, then equally controlled, manipulated, and disempowered are the teachers in those environments. In some ways, the teachers must actually bear a larger burden, as they are required to act as the instruments through which this environment is forged and maintained. As voiced by a teacher in Kozol’s study of the effects of standardized tests on public schools, “This [highly structured teaching methodology] puts me into a dilemma...because I love the kids...I know that my teaching is a charade, [but] if I don’t do it I won’t be allowed to teach these kids” (p. 86). These sentiments are echoed by other teachers in the book who face similar dilemmas. Many teachers state that they love their students and their jobs, but that the environment in which they teach acts as “an intellectual straightjacket” (Kozol, 2005, p. 85) and denies them authenticity as educators.

### **Why Teachers Teach**

Teachers state that they leave their profession within three years overwhelmingly because they feel unsupported. In the previous sections I have described the reasons for and effects of teacher attrition in addition to giving context of the current teaching climate. In this section I will endeavor to provide further context for teacher attrition by analyzing the disconnection between an incipient teacher’s motivation to enter the profession and the reality of the teaching once she begins.

Kozol (2005) mentions that many of the young, intelligent, curious, compassionate individuals that he interviewed ultimately left teaching because it asked them to enact policies or versions of the self that they did not truly believe in. This implies on some level that teachers feel the need to align their classroom practices with their beliefs, or in other words, that teaching is an enactment of self. This sentiment is also echoed by Parker Palmer (2007) who stated, good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10).

Brad Olsen (2008) conducted a study on early-career teachers to determine both their motivations for entering the profession, and their challenges once they became teachers. The findings that emerged from his study indicate that the teachers entered teaching from a love of the content, a love of working with kids, and “aspirations to make a difference in the world” (p. 33). Of these three main findings, Olsen found that two of them were stymied by external factors imposed by the state. While the teachers remained fulfilled in their capacity working with youth, they felt that both the academic content they loved and the social justice they were aspiring for “were incompatible with the district’s emphasis on high test scores” (p. 36).

Rots, Kelchtermans, and Aelterman (2012) describe this phenomenon on a broader scale. In a study on student teachers’ adjustment into the role of being a teacher, these researchers describe not just specific cases of challenges and disappointments, but the mindset and identity shifts that happen while student teachers are “learning how to be a teacher” (p. 9). This study determined that,

“Although the technical aspects of the job (grasping content knowledge, mastering effective teaching skills, etc.) were in the forefront of the teachers’ concerns at the start, they

quickly turned out to be far less intrusive and pervasive than the emotional labour required to deal with normative, emotional, and social aspects of teaching” (p. 9).

Paul Michalec (2013) refers to these “normative, emotional and social” aspects as “the inner core,” which he defines as “a constellation of teaching qualities that characterize the inner life of teachers” (p.29). These qualities include love, heart, courage, resilience, authenticity, and a sense of calling. Similar to Rots et al.’s description of a contrast between the “emotional labour” of the job and the “technical aspects” of teaching, Michalec (2013) contrasts the inner core of teaching with the outer core, which he defines as “general efforts in teacher preparation and professional development that seek to describe effective teaching as standards, teacher competencies, performance-based evaluation protocols, accountability, and standardized tests” (p. 29).

One aspect of the inner core is a sense of “calling” (Hansen, 1995) which refers to “summons or a bidding to service” (p. 1). The teachers in Olsen’s (2012) study described a need to work for social justice; many teachers will describe their path to teaching as a decision that came to them from outside of the self (Alston, 2008) or even as something “spiritual” (Valtierra, 2013). This “deep sense of purpose” (Valtierra, 2013, p. 35) is a necessary force for teachers if they hope to weather the turbulence of their jobs, but a sense of calling alone is not enough to ensure that a teacher will remain in the profession long term. The supports that teachers claim to need, but do not receive, calls for teacher education and induction programs to pay greater attention to the existence and legitimacy of the inner core.

As Rots et al. stated, “the most fundamental learning agenda in training for teaching remains learning how to ‘*be a teacher*’” (p. 9, emphasis added). This implies that

teaching is not simply what someone *does*, but that it is fundamentally tied to identity. This is echoed by notable minds like Parker Palmer (2007) who claims that, “we teach who we are” (p. 7). This validation of authenticity in teaching is often overlooked, or only obliquely recognized, by teacher evaluation protocols, induction programs, and teacher education programs.

### **A Philosophical Approach to Teacher Formation**

This idea that teaching is an exercise in identity brings us to the primary philosophical framework of this paper. The question, “what supports do beginning teachers need?” cannot be answered without first addressing the question, “what changes to first year teachers experience and what are the reasons for those changes?” The specific nature of those changes may differ from person to person, but the reasons behind the changes, I believe, can be found in philosophy, and primarily in Existentialist philosophy which concerns itself with concepts like doubt, transcendence, angst, choice and identity formation (Noddings, 2012). All of these concepts are relevant to the changes experienced by the novice educator.

Humans are hardwired to create meaning from their lives and their experiences. Many philosophers have wrestled with the perceived dichotomy between the physical self and the ineffable consciousness that guides and often confuses the physical, rational self. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1981) described this phenomenon as a tension between materialism and idealism; Jean-Paul Sartre (1966) described it as a human struggle to understand and reconcile both facticity and transcendence; Martin Heidegger (2004) uses the German term *Da-sein* to capture the unique human experience of living simultaneously with physical reality and consciousness, or self-awareness. Karen



Armstrong (2009) describes it as dialectic between logos and mythos. To these philosophers, the meaning we find in life is tied inextricably to this tension between the physical self in a physical world, and the transcendent consciousness. Paul Michalec (2013), as described earlier, brings this concept into the realm of education by describing the mutual dependence between the inner and outer cores of teaching. In this case, the outer core corresponds to facticity and the inner core corresponds to transcendence, self-awareness, and consciousness.

Karen Armstrong (2009) states, “the desire to cultivate a sense of the transcendent may be *the* defining human characteristic” (p. 17, original emphasis). Transcendence, in this case, indicates an experience that brings one outside of their physical, rational self. It is an “attempt to construct meaning in the face of the relentless pain and injustice of life” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 16). Transcendence is not necessarily a religious construct. The non-religious (and many Existentialists were), may deny the existence of god, but they do not deny that human existence has the potential to be deeply meaningful.

For the purposes of this paper, “meaning” will be defined as a construct of individual human reflection and experience. In other words, humans have the capacity to create their own meaning, which is a concept related to the fundamental tenets of choice and freedom in Existentialist thinking. In discussing the Existentialist philosophy, Nel Noddings (2012) states, “By planning, reflecting, choosing, and acting, people make themselves” (p. 63). She goes on to say that, according to the Existentialists, “the capacity to reflect, to plan, to choose, and to become is the fundamental work of human existence” (p. 65).

This study is interested in the ways a first-year teacher constructs her perception of herself, her profession, and her teaching philosophy. In this way, the first year of teaching is the making of oneself. A person (the teacher) is placed in an unfamiliar, often chaotic, responsibility-laden environment that demands she achieves certain nonnegotiable outcomes from other human beings (the students). Despite having training prior to teaching, teachers cite feeling “praxis shock” by unexpected demands of the job (Rots et al., 2012, p. 2). This is related to the concept of absurdity in Existentialist philosophy. Noddings (2012) addresses the Existential concept of absurdity saying, “Those looking for a rational plan of life handed down to human beings from God will be disappointed. There is no such plan. Life and human *being* are absurd, without a priori meaning. What meaning there is in life, we must create” (p. 65, original emphasis). In the same way, there is no “a priori” teacher. The meaning that one gleans from the identity of teacher is driven by the weight a teacher gives to her beliefs and choices while operating in the capacity of an educator.

Gaining awareness of an existent state of freedom and responsibility results in anguish (Noddings, 2012). For many teachers this initial anguish is rooted in the technical, or, the logos- the facticity half of the dichotomy- but is quickly replaced by deeper, Existential questions about the meaning of teaching. Let us return briefly to Rots et al. (2012) who found that,

“Although the technical aspects of the job (grasping content knowledge, mastering effective teaching skills, etc.) were in the forefront of the teachers’ concerns at the start, they quickly turned out to be far less intrusive and pervasive than the emotional labour required to deal with normative, emotional, and social aspects of teaching” (p. 9).

What they are describing here is exactly this classic dichotomy between material/ideal, facticity/transcendence, the logos/mythos, the inner and outer core. Teachers quickly move from anxious concerns about their technical ability to teach, to deeper, more profound questions that generate doubt around the relational, emotional aspects of what it means to teach and become a teacher. Rots et al go on to state, “teaching is never a neutral endeavor, but encompasses deeply held beliefs on the values and norms that make up good teaching. When these deeply held beliefs are questioned, teachers feel that they themselves as a person are called into question” (p. 2). It is in this transition from the technical to the existential that that a teacher begins to form her identity (as opposed to her skill set) as a teacher.

Doubt itself can be highly generative. Kierkegaard (2001) posited that doubt is essential for cultivating consciousness, or reflection, and that it cannot be overcome merely through objective thought. Doubt, he believed, “is the beginning of the highest form of existence” (p. 378).

In relating this to teaching, I believe that an openness to doubt is the difference between a reflective practitioner and one who Maxine Greene (1988) would describe as a person who fails to “name alternatives” (p. 9), or, someone who perpetuates the status quo, either personally or on a larger societal scale. Doubt and humility dwell in the same space, and without them the teacher is severely limited in her capacity to grow. The passionate teacher who eschews doubt has become an influential archetype in the world of teacher preparation. Wendy Kopp (2011) the founder of Teach for America describes her personal opinion of exemplary teachers saying, “[they] were each obsessed with understanding where their students were against *their goals* at any given point” (p. 32,

emphasis added). The ambiguous pronoun (“their”) is particularly poignant in this quote. The reader is unsure of *whose* goals the teachers are so obsessed with. Given the fact that the stated goals Kopp mentions is a class goal of “80% class mastery” (p. 24) on teacher-created assessments, we can be reasonably certain that the goals these teachers are so obsessed with do not, perhaps, reflect the students’ values. Kopp also describes these exemplary teachers as being confident and unwavering in their methods and motivations, which were entirely centered on boosting student test scores. She even describes these teachers as being “on a mission” (p. 32). While, clearly, it is important to have high expectations for students, these “obsessed” teachers infused with “missionary” zeal, with their overpowering passion but unwillingness to admit doubt, were operating with a relentless forward-thinking attitude and allowed very little time for the reflection that Kierkegaard believed to be so necessary for growth. This is not always the teacher’s fault. Again, she is operating in a milieu that has low tolerance for mistakes, places a high privilege on test scores, and has convinced her that high test scores indicate achievement and a move toward greater societal justice.

However, this scenario that Kopp describes is redolent of the banking model of which Freire (1968/1986) cautioned us. First, the goals and instruction was almost entirely set by the larger system in which the educator worked. Secondly, the classroom and all of its functions derived validation entirely from deferred goals. Students were learning, not because learning itself can be its own motivation, or because it was relevant to their own lives, but because they needed to achieve a certain score on a test or assessment and eventually go to college. Again, these are important goals and I believe every teacher should hold the conviction that all of their students can achieve great

things. But this tunnel-vision approach to teaching disavows learning for its own sake, ignores the individual goals and aspirations of the students, and creates a breed of teacher immune to existential doubt, which is necessary for growth and long-term development. The teacher in this scenario then is not cultivating a long-term teaching identity, but wringing herself dry in the name of progress.

This archetype of this confident, doubtless, heroic teacher who beats the odds (Kopp, 2011) is a compelling figure in today's society because, as referred to earlier in the discussion of the "no excuses" mindset, it places the burden of progress and equity directly on the shoulders of the individual teacher. As a larger consequence of influential reformers holding up this archetype as a prototype, our society looks askance at doubt, uncertainty, and mistakes in the teaching profession. The stakes, society says, call for immediate attention at any cost, and are simply too high for teachers to take the time and space to learn their trade, grow as educators, name alternatives, make mistakes, and work for equity innovation both within and beyond their classrooms.

### **Teaching in Bad Faith**

The process of becoming a teacher involves a shedding or drastic alteration of the preconceptions with which the novices enter the field. Dan Lortie (1975) documented this phenomenon in his seminal work *Schoolteacher*, which was a large-scale study of new teachers in the profession. He characterizes the extensive preconceptions with which teachers enter the field as "the apprenticeship of observation." This refers to the fact that, unlike any other profession, student teachers have spent innumerable hours outside of training- from grade-to-grad school- observing their own teachers. As a result they come into the profession with a priori ideas about what it means to teach, but they find, upon

receiving their own classrooms, that there is a whole side of teaching that remains hidden from those “on the other side of the desk” (p. 61).

When entering the profession, new teachers carry with them an image of the role a teacher should play. When they begin enacting that role, they realize that *being* an educator is very different from *enacting the preconceived role* of an educator. It is with this realization that novice teachers begin the transition that Rots et al. (2012) noted: switching their concerns from the “technical aspects of the job” to the “emotional labour” (Rots et al., 2012, p. 9) that rests in the realm of the “inner core of teaching” (Michalec, 2013). Unfortunately, this teacher-in-transition is operating, not just with her own image of a teacher, but within the strict protocols and expectations of teachers that were formed before she ever entered the profession, and remain the benchmarks by which teachers are evaluated. In Colorado, this includes an exhaustive list of behaviors and outcomes aligned to the Leading Effective Academic Practice (LEAP) standards. While I am not suggesting that teachers should be completely free of any evaluation system, I am suggesting that the current system for many districts, which is eerily similar to the “unwieldy” and “fragmen[ing]” process-product studies described by Korthagen (2004, p. 79) has the potential to lead teachers into in what Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/ 2004) would call “bad faith.”

According to Sartre, someone acting in “bad faith” is either denying his true nature or deceiving himself about his true nature. Bad faith can be manifested in what Sartre (1943/2004) describes as “play acting” (p. 380), which means that a person assumes a role for which she has no authentic affinity, and so plays that role by what he

believes the role should look like to an outsider. The example Sartre gives is of a waiter.

He states:

“take for example this waiter in this café. His movement is quick and studied, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward patrons with a step a little too quick...there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton...” (p.386).

Sartre describes the societal function of this playacting by stating,

“This obligation is not different from that which is imposed on all tradesmen. Their condition is wholly one of ceremony. The public demands of them that they realize it as a ceremony... The grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer, because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer. Etiquette requires that he limit himself to his function as a grocer” (p. 386).

These impositions, as such, are

“a matter of abstract possibilities, of rights and duties conferred on a “person possessing rights.” And it is precisely this person *whom I have to be* (let us assume that I am the waiter in question) and who I am not. It is not that I do not wish to be this person, or that I want this person to be different. But rather there is no common measure between his being and mine. It is a performance...for others and for myself, which means that I can be the waiter only by ‘acting his part’” (p. 387, original emphasis).

A teacher, similarly, may feel the obligations imposed both by her preconceptions of what it means to be a teacher and the scrutiny of external accountability measures to act out the image of a teacher. This can cause her to neglect, doubt, and/or suppress her own evolving understanding of what it means *for her* to truly be and become a teacher. Parker Palmer (2007) elicited from a number of different students a description of a “bad” teacher, and one student offered up an image of a teacher who resembled cartoon character. That student felt that everything the teacher said or did seemed to be filtered

through an incomplete lens, removing the teacher's actions and words from the immediacy of the classroom. This sounds like a description of a teacher who is teaching in "bad faith." This teacher, instead of living an authentic, or what Parker Palmer describes as an "undivided" life, is instead a rendering of a teacher playing a predesigned role, and existing within the drawn lines of an unreal, remote conception of a teacher.

### **Transcendence in Teaching**

Teaching in "bad faith" will ultimately stultify and nullify the deeper struggles that teachers contend with to enact their sense of calling. For a teacher to grow into her truest expression, she requires transcendence beyond the concrete, the observable, and the imposed. Armstrong (2009) defines transcendence as "a satisfaction that goes deeper than merely 'feeling good.' It is what the Greeks call *ekstasis*, a 'stepping outside' of the norm" (p. 4, original emphasis). Sartre (1943/ 2004) refers to transcendence as any experience beyond those that can be physically manifested.

In adding on to both of these definitions of transcendence, I believe that the consequences of experiencing transcendence come to reside in the deepest regions of the self. Ultimately, a transcendent experience "teaches us to discover new capacities of the mind and heart" (Armstrong, 2009, p. 4). Thus, while a transcendent experience may seem to take place somewhere beyond us, the actual result of experiencing transcendence is a change in the very fabric of self-knowledge.

The inner self, then, is the focus of this study. I agree with Michalec (2013), that effective teaching involves input from both the outer, technical realm and from the inner realm of the teacher. The inner realm, however, is largely uncharted. Parker Palmer (1997) references this inner realm, exhorting us to "open a *new* frontier in our exploration



of good teaching: the inner landscape of a teacher's life" (p. 15, emphasis added). Palmer alludes to the fact that, while the outer, technical realm of teaching, encompassing observable skills and outcomes, has been extensively explored and documented, the inner realm remains largely mysterious to the field of education. In addition, while many educators have discussed the importance of heart (Palmer, 2007), resilience (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelley, 2007), caring (Noddings, 2003), reflection (F Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005) and calling (Hanson, 1995), very little of this body of research has been explicitly applied to teacher induction and teacher retention. The truly fundamental changes experienced by novice teachers can only be fully absorbed and understood if we give voice to the inner realm of the teacher. As Palmer (1997) explains,

"Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror, and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge-and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject" (p. 15)

Transcendence, which occurs at that moment at which the mirror is held to the soul, is a necessary condition for growth, for the discovery of "new capacities of the mind and heart" (Armstrong, 2009, p. 4). This paper posits that the courage to look into the self and wholeheartedly reflect on and live the changes experienced by the self is a necessary attribute for a teacher to fully realize herself.

### **“Now What?” Moments: An Invitation to Transcendence**

A large portion of this study, then, will be identifying moments of transcendence in the classroom. Under what circumstances is a teacher opened to new capacities of the mind and heart? Where can we find these soul mirrors? Is it possible for a transcendent moment to backfire, to generate a crushing doubt instead of self-awareness? After all, stepping outside of the norm is not a gentle, comfortable activity. Allowing for and creating personal change involves the shifting or even destruction of internal boundaries and understandings.

Teaching narratives indicate that, when recounting their life in the classroom, teachers will highlight both soaring successes and crushing defeats with their students. What is important to note is that the soaring successes will almost always be a result of acting upon and reframing of crushing defeats (Alston, 2008; Baldacci, 2004; Codell, 2009; Michi, 1999; Tompkins, 1996). It is these moments or times of deep struggle and doubt that propel the teacher into greater awareness and greater effectiveness.

“Now what?” moments are a concept central to this research study. I define a “now what?” moment as an emotionally charged, disruptive and unplanned occurrence (or series of occurrences) that result in deep, existential doubt for the teacher. I believe the existential doubt, in this instance, means that the teacher is rendered so uncertain by the events that she questions her identity and rightness of fit as an educator. This is similar to what Rots et al. (2012) defines as “task perception” (p.2), which refers to the teachers’ internalized perceptions of their jobs. So closely knit are the teacher’s beliefs of self and profession, that, as Rots et al. (2012) state, “when these deeply held beliefs

are questioned teachers feel that they themselves as a person are called into question” (p. 2). It is my hypothesis that “now what?” moments call into question these deeply held beliefs, and as a result, cause a teacher to “[step] outside’ of the norm” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 4). “Now what?” moments invite the teacher to transcend her accustomed actions and thought patterns, internalize the experience, and ultimately cause the teacher to change the way she views herself and her profession.

“Now what?” moments will, by definition, generate a painful amount of doubt. Doubt, because it resides in the same space as humility, is crucial to engendering change in the teacher, but it can also have the opposite effect of causing the teacher to retreat more emphatically into her familiar and comforting patterns and teaching habits. Gordon and Maxey (2000) describe this as “a set of restricted teaching methods” (p. 8) that result from a teacher living in survival mode (note the similarity between this mode of thinking at the theory of scarcity mindset as described by Mullainathan and Shafir (2013)) Malcolm Gladwell (2000) describes this phenomenon in terms of panic. He states that when a person experiences panic, he/she focuses obsessively on only a single, often detrimental solution to the problem. A “now what?” moment in the classroom often results in a public display of doubt and uncertainty, that can result in panic or extreme self-consciousness in the teacher experiencing it.

Michalec (2002) describes a powerful experience in his teaching career that resulted in an extreme “moment of pedagogical doubt” (p. 8). Early in a semester he walked into class and, upon launching into his discussion questions, discovered that the majority of his students had neglected to complete the readings for the week. He states that in that moment, “my core teaching values are being challenged” (p. 7). He wrestles

with two main forces that are pulling him in opposite directions. There are, foremost, his own teaching principles which he describes as “student-centered” (p. 7), and which are urging him not to “cover for my students and go on as if being prepared is an optional activity” (p.7). There is also the question of how he should behave as a professor. In this unstable moment of pedagogical doubt, the question easily morphs back and forth between, “what should I do?” and “what would a real professor do?” Again, this mythical “real professor” is an echo of Sartre’s waiter who acted in bad faith, playing the role he believed a waiter should play instead of living into the role in an authentic way.

Another way to look at this conundrum is to see a tension, and sometimes an outright antipathy, between the values held by the self and the expectations imposed by external measures. Michalec (2002), who felt out of his depth in this situation, states that in that moment “I begin the process of looking inward for answers...My mind begins to reel and I feel my body sagging under the weight of uncertainty as to how to truthfully address the puzzle my students are offering me” (p. 8). He goes on to say, “I calm myself and focus on the advice from my inner teacher, which in this moment of pedagogical doubt is the only solid piece of ground I can find” (p. 8). Despite being uncertain about the possible consequences, Michalec ultimately listens to his principles and dismisses the class excepting the two students who had completed the readings. In the long term, his decision to stay true to his values led to a higher level of trust and intellectual engagement from the class, but at the time, Michalec had no “assurance that [his] actions [would] lead to enhanced learning” (p. 8-9).

Doubt, as pointed out by Sartre (1943/ 2004), has its origins in the word “two” in the majority of Western languages. A “now what?” moment in the classroom can lead to

the teacher adopting one of two primary courses of action. A “now what?” moment is an *invitation* to transcendence, not a chauffeured vehicle to transcendence. When a teacher is confronted by a “now what?” moment, she can either open herself to the new experience, or she can shut it down and contain it.

Another example of what I am defining as a “now what?” moment, which may be more cogent to K-12 teachers, comes from Gregory Michi (1999), who taught in the 1990’s in inner-city Chicago. He describes an experience with one of his most disruptive and troubled students while chaperoning a camping trip. Michi discovered on his pre-bedtime rounds that a student, Hector, had picked a fight with a student from another class. He says, “I stopped in at one of the boy’s cabins for their nightly bed check... There was Hector kneeling defiantly on the top bunk, sneering at ... a high-school senior who was at least 3 times his size” (p. 30). Hector had accused the other boy of “messing with his covers” (p. 31) and the situation was rapidly escalating toward violence. Michi knew that it was his responsibility to diffuse the situation, but he was paralyzed, unsure of what resources on which he had to draw.

Michi first tried to tell Hector firmly and publicly to come out of the cabin with him. Hector refused and continued hurling profanities at the other student. In this moment of disrespect and tension, Michi described his thought process, “I wasn’t in the mood for a shouting contest...I went over to his bunk and lowered my voice. ‘Hector, I need to talk with you about this outside. Right now’” (p. 31). Hector grudgingly followed Michi outside, and they sat down together side by side on the cabin stoop. Michi says he began by asking Hector questions, and when Hector did not respond, Michi and Hector sat in silence. After awhile Michi looked over and saw that Hector was crying. In silence and

space of that setting, Hector opened up to Michi, telling Michi that his sister was sick and he was scared because he did not know what would happen to her. Michi says, “With those words, Hector shrank before my eyes. I suddenly remembered that this person sitting next to me was a child. A frightened, 12 year old child. I had become so caught up in the... front he maintained that I forgot there was a real person under there” (p. 32).

In the moment he found Hector, Michi had two very distinct choices. He could form an imperative in his mind, exercise his authority, incite a power struggle, and move towards punishment and punitive consequences. His other option was to form a question in his mind, (“now what?”), open himself up to the paralyzing panic, draw on his inner teacher, and see Hector’s actions as more than just a threat. The first option, which, as Brian Lack (2009) described in his article, is a model widely adopted in influential charter schools. It has the effect, however, of often shutting down lines of communication and erecting walls against mutual trust. Michi chose the other approach, which was swallow his pride, set aside his ego, and attempt to listen to the implicit message, as opposed to the explicit message, of Hector’s behavior.

Ultimately, this approach led to a breakthrough in their relationship, uncovered the deeper threads of Hector’s life, and became a critical step to creating reciprocal trust between the two of them. When Michi embraced the tension in that “now what?” moment and sat down alongside Hector, he allowed both of their roles to shift in his mind. Instead of a teacher and a student, he was a listener sitting on the same plane as another human being, and in listening he was reminded of the Hector’s fragility and humanness.

Thus concepts of humility and doubt can combine to create a moment of transcendence when they are fully explored and acted upon. Both Michalec and Michi

experienced transcendence, or a stepping outside of the norm, when their students failed to comply with their expectations. Coming back to Palmer (1997), teaching takes place in “the dangerous intersection of personal and public life” (p. 18). In a moment of disconnect from the expected, the teacher can choose to operate along the public course that has been vetted and approved by the external standards detailing what it means to be a teacher, or she can choose to take a pedagogical and personal risk and allow herself to be vulnerable, wholehearted, and true to her principles. It is important to note here that humility is a necessary component to this risk. A teacher acting for the gratification of her ego is much more likely to fall into the first, imperative category of actions.

The result of taking a personal risk in the midst of a “now what?” moment is often heartbreak, which is not always as terrible as it sounds. There exist, according to Palmer (2009), two ways in which a person can have his/her heart broken: “one is to imagine the heart broken into shards and scattered about... The other is to imagine the heart broken open to a new capacity... in the tragic gap between reality and possibility, this small, tight fist of a thing called my heart can break open into a greater capacity to hold more of my own and the world’s suffering and joy, despair and hope” (p. 178).

The more hopeful scenario is the teacher who can lean into this heartbreak, as Palmer advises, and learn to “faithfully [hold] the tension between reality and possibility in hopes of being opened” (p. 178). In holding the tension, which Palmer acknowledges is a thoroughly uncomfortable exercise, the teacher can allow her heart to be broken open as opposed to shattered. This opening allows space for new ways of knowing to enter, take root, and become cultivated.

## **Teacher Retention: Living in Good Faith**

Because teaching exists at the “dangerous intersection of personal and public life” (Palmer, 1997, p. 18), teachers necessarily internalize their job as a part of themselves. To live in bad faith as a teacher, then, is to simply live in bad faith. The current educational climate, especially in reference to high-needs districts, prioritizes and validates predetermined, measurable teaching practices, enacts punitive policies toward teachers who do not fall into an accepted definition of “effective,” and looks warily upon “mistakes.” It expects the novice teacher to walk into the classroom fully formed, like Athena from the head of Zeus. As a result, it provides very little support for the immeasurable, unquantifiable, existential changes that the novice teacher experiences upon gaining her own classroom. The teacher feels pressured to exist as though she was fully formed instead of embracing the natural process of growth and change that, with the right supports, will ultimately allow her to reach her truest expression. Many teachers leave their profession because they are pressured to teach in “bad faith,” which asks them to live and perpetuate a lie. In contrast, this study seeks to understand how to support new teachers so that they can live and teach in accordance with their values, philosophies, and identity and find harmony between their evolving personal and professional selves.



## **Methodology**

I would like to briefly revisit the research questions of this study:

1. How does a first year teacher's view of teaching evolve over the first year, and what are the factors that shape this evolution?
2. How does the first year of teaching affect the teachers' perception of themselves and their identity?
3. How does the teachers' philosophy of teaching evolve through the first year of teaching?

In order to answer the research questions, this study used primarily hermeneutical phenomenology with an influence from Portraiture. These two qualitative approaches complement each other in ways that will allow me to best represent the existential nature of novice teaching. Because this study is exploratory in nature, an open-ended, qualitative approach best served the purposes of this study.

### **Hermeneutical Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is concerned with distilling "individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of universal essence" (Creswell, 2013, p. 85). For this research study, the phenomenon in question is the first year of teaching. The goal of this study is to thoroughly understand the universal internal changes experienced by a novice

teacher, with the ultimate objective of identifying supports that will sustain the teacher through these changes.

Hermeneutical phenomenology is concerned with the lived experiences of the participants and interpreting the “texts of life” (Creswell, 2013, p. 90). Unlike transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutical phenomenology emphasizes both description *and* interpretation of the data, which allows the researcher to dwell on the meaning of the participants’ lived experiences. This focus on interpretation allows the researcher to be present in the act of researching and analyzing, which is in congruence with the qualitative approach of Portraiture, which I will discuss later in this section.

My research questions, because they grapple with metaphysical concepts like identity, internal change and growth, self perception, and personal values, are highly philosophical in nature. Therefore, I need a foundational qualitative approach that allows me the freedom to explore concepts that are at their core abstract, unquantifiable, and subterranean. Phenomenology itself rests on two highly philosophical concepts: that of “intentionality of consciousness” (Creswell, 2013, p. 91) and of essence. “Intentionality of consciousness” refers to the shape-shifting constructivism described by many educational thinkers like Dewey and Eisner, and Existentialist thinkers like Sartre. It is, in short, the idea that a person constructs the meaning of her own reality, and that “reality of an object...is inextricably related to one’s consciousness of it” (Creswell, 2013, p. 91). “Object” is a confusing term here, as it is usually construed as something concrete and observable. Creswell is referring to an “object” as any human experience. In the context of this study, the object in question is the phenomenon of the first year teaching.

**Essence.** “Essence,” an enduring concern of Existentialist thinkers, is given short shrift in the Creswell (2013) text. He briefly describes it in parentheses as “a grasp of the very nature of the thing” (van Manen, 1990, p. 177). For the sake of this project, and given my Existentialist theoretical framework, it makes sense to dive more deeply into the concept of “essence.”

In fitting with the concept of phenomenology, “essence” in Existentialism, as it refers to humans, is something that is not fixed, but continuously becoming, or, always in the process of evolving (Cooper, 1999). Given the constructivist view inherent in phenomenology, the fact that “essence” is constantly being shaped by the person’s consciousness of and reflection on her own life is a helpful tenet to understand before conducting research. It may be, then, that there is not a single “essence” to first-year teaching, but multiple phases of an evolving essence.

There is a concept in Existentialism, notably rendered material by Karl Marx, that “essence” is “coming to grasp the world as an extension of itself” (Cooper, 1999, p. 31). This means that humans develop their most authentic essence as “free, creative producer[s] who cooperate with [their] fellows in lending form and meaning to their world by transforming it through work” (Cooper, 1999, p. 31). Cooper goes on to say, “we ‘humanize’ the world... by making it into one whose contents bear our stamp and reflect back to us our scale of values and significance” (p. 31). The source of our human alienation is a separation from our essence. When we engage in what Cooper refers to as “alienated labor” (p. 31), the world that is reflected back to us is not a personalized stamp, but someone else’s agenda. If the classroom (including the curriculum, the classroom environment, the methods of evaluation, and interactions with students) is a

microcosm of the teacher's world, it has the potential to subjugate and subvert her very essence if it reflects, not her own personalized stamp but the demands of an external system.

According to Cooper (1999), phenomenology has its roots in philosophy, and is most closely affiliated with Existentialism. Martin Heidegger, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Edmund Husserl, all thinkers in the Existentialist tradition, have written about the meaning, applications, and problems of phenomenology. Husserl believed that phenomenology is not “a science of facts, but of...essential being...which aims exclusively at establishing “knowledge of essences””(Husserl, 1962, p. 40). He also believed that the essence of something cannot be established empirically, but needs to be grasped through what Cooper (1999) described as “a non-perceptual type of *intuition*” (p. 41, original emphases). Again, in examining the research questions of this study, many of the explorations I wish to embark on are non-sensory in nature. Therefore a research approach that inherently validates conclusions drawn from the ineffable perception of reality is a valuable addition to this methodology.

While phenomenology, with its roots in philosophy and its focus on essence, is a necessary frame for my study, it is limited in that it does not explicitly call for a deep, internal knowledge of the subject at hand. As a former (and hopefully future!) educator, my life is inextricably tied to schools and educational settings.

### **Portraiture**

Maxine Greene (1995) reminds us that the arts have a capacity to instill “growth, inventiveness, and problem solving” and can “move the young to imagine, to extend, and to renew” in the face of “the human condition in these often desolate days” (p. 378). The

arts have a capacity to resist narrowness and restrictions, instead inviting openness, an acceptance of possibility, and, as described by Greene, renewal. It is precisely this reason that I've chosen to augment my methodology with Portraiture.

Portraiture is an artistic and creative method of rendering that imparts an experience in all of its “texture and richness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 7). It is concerned with “intimate storytelling” with a “focus on narrative, ...[and] use of metaphor and symbol...to address a wider, more eclectic audience” than the “academy’s inner circle” (p. 10).

There are a number of reasons why I am choosing Portraiture as an influential methodology in this study. The first is, quite simply, Portraiture’s validation of artistic representation. Again, my research questions explore a topic that defies didactic presentation. Portraiture, in its “dual motivations...to inform and inspire, to document and transform, to speak to the head and to the heart” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 243), will allow me to represent metaphysically the exact tensions that I will be witnessing in my participants, who work in the “dangerous intersection of personal and public life” (Palmer, 1997, p. 18). Portraiture will allow me to exercise my own affinity with artistic writing while holding me fast to the standards of rigorous research. I believe that the freedom that comes with the exercise of artistic representation, as described by Maxine Greene (1995), will inform my observations as well, allowing me time to “attend carefully” (Eisner, 1997, p. 67) to what may seem like baffling, irreconcilable nuances.

Secondly, in keeping with the tenets of hermeneutical phenomenology, Portraiture acknowledges that I, the researcher, will be present in the study. Portraiture recognizes that meaning-making is a dialectic process between the researcher and the participants,

and that “individual characteristics and experiences shape the portraiture’s voice” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 66). It requires, however, that to achieve success I “balance personal predisposition with disciplined skepticism and critique” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 13). Thus it gives gravity and responsibility to the activity of “creating the narrative” (p.13), while still validating and encouraging my own voice and perspective on the experiences.

Thirdly, portraiture is “an intentionally generous and eclectic process that begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). Teachers, especially new teachers, often labor under a system that provides gimlet, punitive scrutiny. As discussed earlier, the very nature of the ubiquitous value-added evaluations are based on a deficit model of the teachers. I would prefer to approach teachers from the perspective offered by Portraiture, which assumes the best of them while being attentive to imperfections and flaws. I believe that an approach that assumes the best of my participants will give them the space and trust to be honest with me so I can see truly into the heart of their experiences.

Lastly, Portraiture is explicitly aligned with phenomenology and the distillation of essence. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) state that they wanted this work to “convey the authority, wisdom, and perspective of the subjects, but I wanted them to feel – as I had felt- that the portrait did not look like them, but somehow managed to reveal their essence” (p. 4). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain that, with its emphasis on creatively rendering the lived experiences of the participants, and on the dialectical process of making meaning from those experiences, it is “framed by the

traditions and values of the phenomenological paradigm” while still “pushing against the constraints of those traditions and practices” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 13). It is, then, a complement to the phenomenological approach while allowing me to transcend the boundaries of that approach and go deeper into the abstract meaning of my participants’ lived experiences.

The reader will notice that this writing is not purely Portraiture, but that the creative, evocative writing is woven in with more clinical descriptions of the findings. It was my intent to use Portraiture as an enhancing methodology and not the primary one.

### **Study Design**

**Site Proposal.** The sites in this study were four public schools, one elementary, one middle, and two high schools, located in and around Denver. Each site is described in more detail under the pseudonym of the participant.

**Participants.** Creswell (2013) suggests at least 3-4 participants for a phenomenological study. In keeping with his guidelines, this study followed four first-year teachers of diverse backgrounds, ages, locations, genders, ethnicities, routes-to-the-profession, and teaching subjects. To protect the identities of the participants they were asked to choose pseudonyms.

To recruit participants I cast a wide net, seeking leads through contacts at the University of Denver, Aurora public schools, and Denver Public Schools. Ultimately all four participants were referred to me either directly or tangentially through colleagues, friends, and faculty.

**Paloma:** An unlined, youthful face framed by long dark hair and sparkling eyes, Paloma looks always like she is on the verge of laughing. She is a high school Spanish teacher in

one of the most ethnically diverse urban districts in Colorado. She is in her mid twenties and had come to teaching through an alternative licensure program. Her voice is highly expressive, often dropping in volume and pitch when she is annoyed and rising in pitch when she becomes passionate about a topic. Unfailingly positive, her speech is interspersed with laughter, often at herself but just as often when she recounts or witnesses the antics of her students. Her voice sing-song, with a slight accent and one gets the feeling that Spanish, her native tongue, is never far from her speech. She is a first-generation Colombian American and was the first in her family to attend and graduate from college.

She teaches at a large, sprawling public school in a suburb of Denver known for its ethnic diversity. The school roughly describes a honeycomb layout with each of the two floors circling back on each other around a large cafeteria, but branching off into innumerable hallways and by ways. The hallways teem with students during passing time. 44% of students at this school qualify for free or reduced lunch. A single glance at Paloma's classroom demonstrates it as a microcosm of the school and community. The classes that I observed, according to Paloma, contained students of all grades, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds. Light and dark faces bent over desks, looking up at Paloma, swiveling suddenly to respond to a comment, smiling, bored, grimacing, laughing. Faces the color of coffee, of café con leche, of almonds, of caramel, and white faces as well. The students seemed crammed into the space, making it seem smaller than it is (I also conducted interviews there, and when it was just the two of us the classroom seemed large). Knees that didn't quite fit under desks, young people who seemed too large, too vibrant to be contained. I was struck by how dynamic the classroom seemed, a



riot of movement and sound and color. The students were never still, turning to each other, walking around the room, waving their hands, calling out, creating side conversations, laughing, sometimes moving in impromptu dances. The tone in the classroom was always light. Paloma did not seem phased by the movement and noise, in fact she seemed to thrive on it. In one observation I wrote,

“Teacher has a lively demeanor as well. Laughs with students and diffuses some situations (like one with young woman who speaks out) with humor. Doesn’t react or become negative...Has time/space/bandwidth to carry on side conversations in transitions.”

In Paloma’s interviews, the one unbreakable thread that wove through all she said was that she truly and deeply cared about her students. I saw this enacted in numerous ways from this one instance I witnessed: “[mouths] ‘I love you’ and sketches a heart to the student next to her- the student who was acting up. Asks students to speak up because she had trouble hearing last time and wants to make sure they get all the credit,” to another observation where I wrote “Laughs as students cheerfully correct each other during their oral exams. Doesn’t laugh AT students. Seems to enjoy them, sees their mistakes as an honest effort. I think this makes her delight in them. Students have a good attitude about mistakes- correct each other, try again, are a little sheepish.” This was a classroom that nurtured trust and risk taking. Students make attempts, make mistakes, laugh, accept feedback from peers and teacher, and try again. There were very few negative interactions that I witnessed, and these Paloma quickly diffused in the moment, but even when she followed up with these students the conversations were laced with

care and understanding. I saw her after class having a conversation with a student who had acted up. She lectured the student but then afterwards checked in to make sure the student understood she cared and the conversation ended on a lighter note. Paloma was an earnest, positive, energetic role model who clearly connected with and delighted in her students.

**Isaak:** is a white male in his early twenties. He came to the profession through a traditional teacher education program. He teaches middle school social studies in a public school in an ethnically diverse, urban district in Colorado. 75% of students at his school qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Isaak is young and moves with an unconscious athleticism. It was no surprise to me to discover in the course of our interviews that there wasn't a sport Isaak hadn't mastered. Our interviews always took place on Fridays when he wore a casual school t-shirt and jeans and answered my questions in between bites of the school lunch that came on the timeless white Styrofoam trays that for years have been the hallmark of the school cafeteria. Isaak had grown a beard, he explained, because it made him look older. In our interviews he spoke slowly and clearly, allowing himself to fully process my questions verbally and internally. He was earnest and thoughtful and thanked me a few times for giving him the opportunity to reflect on his practice and the meaning of his work. His thoughts wandered to the edges of my questions and often spiraled around the topic in unexpected ways, revealing much more about his experiences, values, and thoughts than I had ever expected or hoped to learn.

The school itself was (to me) a bewildering maze of branching, twisting hallways. Even after successfully finding Isaak's classroom more than once I still took wrong turns

every once in awhile. Once the AP actually escorted me to the classroom because I'd ended up in some unknown part of the building. The school spoke of space and room and light, with many windows and opportunities to see the world outside.

Isaak's classroom is painted a light blue. Paper chains hang from the ceiling. Isaak explained that every time a student mastered a skill they made another chain in the link, so their progress was represented visibly in the classroom. He explained these skills were sometimes academic and sometimes social. Student work hung on the walls: essays, drawings, quotes. The room seems spacious. Behind the desks, which are arranged into five L shapes around the room, is a carpeted area that I later learned was for the daily community meeting.

**Lindsay:** is a white woman in her late twenties. She came into the profession through an alternative licensure program. She teaches Special Education at a turnaround elementary charter school in a large, urban school district in Colorado. 95.6% of the students at her school qualify for free or reduced lunch. Of all the schools, hers is in most danger of being considered defined by the deficit or scarcity mindset. As Lindsay explained to me, the school was on probation and if they did not raise test scores by a certain degree that year the school had the potential to be taken over by the department of education, which could result in massive layoffs. Her phrase "taken over" reminded me of our country's dark legacy of imperialism. Perhaps, I thought, our government has shifted from "taking over" space to taking over its own offspring: the public schools. That this school happened to have a diverse non-white population only served to reinforce that analogy of imperialism.

Lindsay's school is located in a high-poverty suburb of Denver. I described the inside of the building briefly saying, "Large hallways, industrial gray carpet, cinderblock walls painted unrelieved white." Of all the schools this one had the tightest security, with the front desk asking me to deposit my ID for a visitor's badge and requiring Lindsay to come to the office and escort me to her classroom (though once she sent a small, bright-eyed little boy who chattered all the way down the hall). Lindsay's classroom was located internally with no windows. She nevertheless made it cheerful and welcoming. I described it in my notes saying,

"Windowless room in the bowels [of the building]. Made cheerful with posters, rug of the world map... This school- in a poorer part of the city. Industrial cinderblocks. On the wall in the hallway: 'what if we could plant a garden' a garden perhaps is a distant reality."

I went on to describe the classroom saying, "[the working] desk is a semicircle with small chairs placed around it. Teacher's desk is overflowing (doesn't look like she spends much time there). Close to Valentine's day so chocolate and red hearts on desk. Bags with bright tissue paper . Stuffed animals on desk." There was also a carpeted area, as I alluded to in my notes, strewn comfortably with beanbag chairs, books, and more stuffed animals.

When I met Lindsay her hair was shoulder-length, but a few months into the school year she cropped it very short in a style that suited her practical personality. She had glasses and was taller than me. For the majority of the time I knew her she was pregnant, but carried the extra bulk easily and with grace. She seemed to have incredible

physical strength and presence, but never in an intimidating way. She was open and honest, and despite the challenges she faced over that first year attempted to always point out the positives of her situation without being disingenuous or obscuring the rough times she endured.

**Ruth:** Ruth is a Latina woman in her mid forties who teaches high school English Language Arts. She came to the profession through an alternative licensure program. She teaches at a large charter school in an urban district in Colorado. 51% of the students at her school qualify for free or reduced lunch.

In all of the time I knew Ruth she never wore make up. She had warm, intelligent, dark brown eyes and, before she began chemotherapy, her hair was wiry and black shot through with gray. At the end of the year she had lost her hair, but never wore a hat or headscarf. She seemed very comfortable and honest with herself, a trait that I believe the students picked up on and responded to.

Her school, like the others, was large and sprawling with many seemingly random entrances and exits. Even during passing time it never seemed as crowded as Paloma's school, perhaps due to the fact that Ruth's school served 700 fewer students and perhaps also due to the fact that the layout was a straightforward grid and encouraged multiple routes between classes (I spent time thinking about the different school layouts because I have a terrible sense of direction and appreciated when they made sense).

Unlike Paloma, who invited me to observe her most challenging class, Ruth was hesitant to let me observe any class but her first period, which she described as the class least likely to be distracted by my presence. She was justly concerned that my presence

would disrupt the “sacred space” of those classes. I described the classroom on my first observation saying,

“Classroom is sunny at 7:30 in the morning. Walls have a cheerful clutter- big artistic posters evenly spaced defining literary techniques. Handwritten posters on chart paper, colorful marker with sentence starters for different ways of thinking and writing (prediction, compare and contrast).”

During another observation I wrote,

“I came in 10 minutes before the bell. It’s the Tuesday after daylight savings so while it’s 7:22 it feels much earlier. The sun is just coming up, but the khaki brown shades are drawn against the chilly morning. Posters of chart paper labeled “the American Dream” are taped to each window shade with wrinkled white duct tape. There appears to be one for each class period. Post-its covered with a variety of handwriting styles show quotes complete with page numbers, presumably from a class novel. The walls have a ‘full’ look without being cluttered.”

One notable aspect of Ruth’s classroom, that I believe is indicative of her straightforward, academics-focused philosophy, is that there were no personal artifacts in the room. Everything displayed in the room was for the purpose of enhancing skills and academic knowledge. Unlike Lindsey, who had hung a picture of her family on the wall and placed some decorative paintings around the room, Paloma who had placed “purple

flowers in a white stoneware vase on the desk. Vase is decorated with blunt, abstract petal-looking design,” and similarly had decorated her walls with Latin American cultural objects, and Isaak who used in his community meetings a talking stick that his mother had brought back from Tanzania, and who had a couple of unfurling little plants on his windowsill, all of Ruth’s decorations were practical and strictly related to her English Language Arts curriculum. This approach, as I will discuss later, is reflected in her classroom management style as well.

### **Data Collection Methods**

#### **Data Collection Timetable**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Observations</b>
<b>Paloma</b>	11/24/15: 40 min 1/14/16: 55 min 4/8/16: 35 min	4/29/16: 1 hr 5/6/16: 1 hr
<b>Isaak</b>	12/10/15: 30 min 3/11/16: 30 min 4/22/16:70 min	1/22/16: 1.5 hrs
<b>Lindsay</b>	11/29/15: 45min 12/16/15:45 min 3/11/16: 55 min 5/19/16: 25 min	2/12/16: 1 hr 4/26/16: 1 hr
<b>Ruth</b>	10/13/15: 25 min 1/15/16: 45 min 5/20/16: 15 min	2/19/16: 1 hr 3/15/16: 1 hr

**Interviews:** I utilized interviews as the primary data source for this study. As I was concerned with exploring the lived experiences of the first-year teacher participants, I was interested in recording their perceptions, feelings, intuitions, and thoughts. The interviews were all 1-1 and semi-structured (Seidman, 2006). As my goal was to distill a

phenomenological essence from the four participants, I endeavored to ask similar questions in each round of interviews, but I also discovered that the teachers themselves landed on many convergent themes with very little prompting from me. Each participant recorded close to three hours of interview data over the course of six months, with the exception of Ruth who was diagnosed with cancer in the middle of her second semester. I have close to two hours of interview data with her as she became, understandably, increasingly difficult to schedule time with.

**Observations:** Because of portraiture's requirement that the research be done "in context" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 11), I included an observation component to the study. As obtaining permission from each of the three participating districts was a very slow process, I was only able to schedule 2-3 observations for each participant between the months of March and May. The observations act as a supplement to my interview data and were critical for me to watch for manifestations of the participants' philosophies and strengths.

**Data Analysis:** I used the method of qualitative data analysis described by Creswell (2013) of open coding, using codes to identify themes, and spiraling back many times to search for new patterns and themes that I may have missed the first times I looked, listened, and felt.

To ensure validity in the qualitative data analysis, once I was in the final stages of analyzing the data I sent the entire results section to each participant for member checking. I asked them to read through their sections and let me know if I had accurately captured their voices and beliefs. All participants responded positively with the exception of Ruth who had a generic away message posted on her email account. As she had been



undergoing chemotherapy and recovery cycles when we parted in the spring, I did not follow up except with a card and some flowers.

**Possible Limitations of the Study:** One limitation I experienced for this study was that of time. I was working full time during the school year of my data collection and was therefore limited in my freedom to observe and conduct interviews. Given the busy schedules of first year teachers (as is detailed further in the findings section), it was often difficult to coordinate times to meet. Isaak, as is depicted by the data chart, was particularly difficult to coordinate with. Additionally, as I was working with three different school districts, gaining approval to observe in all four schools was an extremely slow process. As a result I was only able to use observations as a supplementary source of data, which made context, a critical tenet to Portraiture, more difficult to examine in all of its nuances. Given these setbacks, I believe that the data I did gather were rich with meaning and potential for answering my research questions.

Another possible limitation of this study is its size. While my participant pool was diverse (representing a wide variety of ages, ethnicities, backgrounds, experiences, philosophies, genders, and locations), the study was undertaken with relatively few participants and no external funding. While I endeavored to find a universal phenomenon (or multiple universal phenomena) in the study, and while Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) insist that “in the particular resides the general” (p.14), I understand that this project is a pilot and will at best suggest avenues for future, more comprehensive research.

## **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore the personal, professional, and philosophical evolution of a first-year teacher. In undertaking this study I was transported back many times to the ungoverned emotions, doubts, worry, and exhilaration of my own first year in the classroom. I was by turns inspired, saddened, frustrated, enthralled, and humbled by my participants' recounting of their experiences over the past year. I was also impressed by the number of similarities that occurred in their stories despite the diversity of my participant pool. I present my findings here with the hope that they will help inform our views of what it means to be and to become an educator.

Let me briefly return to my research questions:

1. How does a first year teacher's view of teaching evolve over the first year, and what are the factors that shape this evolution?
2. How does the first year of teaching affect the teachers' perception of themselves and their identity as an educator?
3. How does the teachers' philosophy of teaching evolve through the first year of teaching?

One part of my hypothesis was that growth would occur in these areas through "now what?" moments that would cause the teacher doubt and create invitations for him/her to transcend his/her established assumptions, mindsets, frameworks, and

perceptions. Given the limited amount of time I was able to observe, I did not witness a clear “now what?” moment over the course of this study. I did find, however, that these “now what?” moments existed for these teachers not as encapsulated, observable snippets of time, but as long-term questions that they wrestled with (often when they should have been sleeping). In the interviews the participants described many instances of doubt, worry, guilt, and reflection that helped change their perceptions and views of themselves and their professions. For future research, it may be important for me to frame “now what?” moments not always as an instant of time in a classroom, but as any profound and enduring question that an educator must struggle with.

Another part of my hypothesis was that the testing and curricular requirements could act as impediments to the teachers forming an authentic, fully-realized version of themselves in the classroom. Data from three out of the four participants corroborated this hypothesis, with Ruth seeing the tests as necessary, if sometimes unpleasant, measures that did reflect the skills she was imparting in her lessons.

As a note for my findings, I organized my data according to theme, as is typical in phenomenology. Portraiture resides in the rendering of the participants within each theme.

### **Philosophical Evolution**

I found two overarching themes when exploring the teaching philosophies of my participants. The first is that each of the participants in this study saw their job as an educator as an opportunity to engage with their students and connect their students to the greater world, and the second, which was not explicitly perhaps known by the participants but that I found buried in their statements, is that they sought out teaching as

a way to address their own pasts and ameliorate challenges for this next generation that they'd endured at a similar age. Another significant aspect of their philosophies was that each of them described valuing student curiosity, discovery, and intrinsic motivation.

I also discovered, to my surprise, that none of the participants described an evolution in their philosophy of teaching throughout the year. Rather all four participants found a deepening and entrenching of the philosophies with which they entered the profession.

### **Teaching beyond content:**

*“...the freedom achieved can only involve a partial surpassing of determinateness: the limits, internal and external, experienced by restless, preoccupied, rebellious women, the neglect and indifferent suffered by the outsider or the immigrant; the discrimination and inequitable circumstances faced by the minority group member; the artificial barriers erected in the way of children trying to create authentic selves.” (Greene, 1988, p. 9)*

Isaak, Ruth, Lindsay, and Paloma all understood viscerally the human struggles that each of their students experienced on a daily basis. They all believed and understood that the point of teaching transcended content mastery. While each in their own way attempted to use content as a vehicle for developing human values and socio-normative awareness in their students, all of them found that content requirements acted, as Maxine Greene described, as barriers to the true stuff of teaching. While all four were clearly invested in teaching their content, and Paloma and Ruth in particular were truly inspired and motivated by their content areas, none of the four teachers saw facilitating proficiency in the common core standards, for example, as the most important part of their job.

Sitting across from Ruth in her classroom, empty now of the energy and solid physical presence of her high school students, she radiates composure and self-assuredness. The desktops between us are a smooth, ambiguous slate color and bolted to metal legs. I shift on the hard chair seat, strangely ill at ease in the face of Ruth's quiet composure. It, the composure, sat between us, solid, like a wall. I felt an interlocutor in her orderly classroom, a thief of time. I filled my lungs and spoke, my voice sounding reedy and uncertain to my ears next to Ruth's low, lyrical voice. I persevered and asked her about her students and her motivation to teach, immediately, I felt a shift in the energy. Ruth's voice became animated, rising in volume and warmth and certainty. Ruth did not strike me as someone who would allow herself to be swept away by emotion, and her answer was as she was, grounded and practical. She said, "...school is the gateway to your professional life, and if it's just about coming into class and turning in assignments it's much more than that. That's not what work life is like. So they have to be taught how to live in the world." She believed that teaching should be "relationship-based," and stated, "I believe that [building strong relationships with the students] is the foundation for academic success... is being able to feel like there is somebody in your corner who wants to help you along, so I strive for the relationship with all students." She believed it was the act of forming strong bonds with the students that would allow her to help them academically and as a person.

Similarly Isaak, in describing his philosophy of teaching, stated, "it's kind of like a lot of projects and hands on stuff mixed with being good people... it's... a different approach stemming from the same thought and the thought is we need to just be human to each other." He saw teaching as an opportunity to connect the students to the outside

world and to help them shape their futures. When I asked him about his motivation to teach his eyes took on a faraway look, as if he was looking beyond himself and toward himself at the same time. His voice rose in volume as he progressed into his beliefs, “I don’t expect them to remember Hammurabi’s code in 40 years. There are other more important enduring understandings. But a lot of those I think are social and emotional. And we don’t spend enough time on that...I honestly believe that middle school students produce thought -provoking work...I enjoy working with them and grading their work and helping them grow. And watching them grow. And making them conscious of the world around them and bringing in contemporary issues.” He believed it was critical for his students to be aware of the outside world in order to enact change when they went out into it.

I witnessed this philosophy enacted in Isaak’s classroom through one of his daily rituals that he calls his class meeting. In one observation I was invited to join the class meeting, which occurred in a separate designated space the back of the room. When Isaak called his class to their meeting students, who were wiggling in their chairs on a Friday morning, shot up and began making their way to a circle of chairs in the back. I was already sitting back there and received friendly curious looks from most of the students. A few asked, “mister, who’s she?” Isaak invited me to join the circle and I closed my laptop self-consciously, reluctant to disrupt the presence and joy that seemed to emanate from the circle as all the students took their seats. I committed to memory the shy, proud, reluctant, excited faces of the students I turn as they described what they were going to do that weekend. We all sat in a circle of chairs; there were no physical barriers between us. We passed a carved wooden scepter around the circle. It was wrapped in thread that

was soft, worn, and bright, blue, green, red, yellow, each color changing abruptly into the next. A handle resolved into a bulbous gourd. When asked about it, Isaak told me it was a talking stick that his mother had brought back with her from Tanzania. Whoever held the talking stick in the circle was the designated sharer. He mentioned to me that the scepter itself held a lot of meaning for him and that, because it was authentic, it lent gravity and legitimacy to the meeting. Privately, I believed that the gravity and legitimacy of the meeting came from Isaak's clear belief in its power. It was very much, as he told me in one of his interviews, his favorite ritual of the day. He said that at one point his administration had asked how the class meeting tied into the larger goal of the lesson, so he changed some days to practice talking about content. He seemed torn about this decision:

“half of the time I'll tie the lesson into the meeting and we'll practice vocabulary or have a Socratic seminar type discussion about whatever the lesson is for that day. But then the other half of the time it will be like what we're doing today. Just a check in. just a time for us to build up our own little community in this door. And I still don't know which one I like more. I don't know. From what you're saying you just made me think of just setting that time aside for community building and to get to know each other. And it does make it a more warm place in here. Because otherwise if we're practicing vocabulary and stuff

then not everyone enjoys that meeting. But if they're talking about themselves they love the meeting.”

While I was there I witnessed one of the community-building circles, and it was a sacred space. Students, while sometimes squirmy and giggling, were always keyed in to the speaker and were able later to remember what each person had said. Isaak described this class meeting saying, “it’s not even related to the warm up or the essay that we’re going to read after the meeting. It’s just a space in class for us to check in with each other. And we’re talking about what’s going on this weekend and students are sharing news. And it’s a great way to build community.” He states that the class meeting is often simply a break in the day to allow students, and Isaak himself, to mention what is happening in their lives. He ties it into social skills that include active listening and responding and thanking each other for sharing, but he emphasizes that the meeting is a way for them to all to get to know each other as human beings. In one meeting he invited all of his students to one of his rugby games, and at another learned about some of the extracurricular activities of his students. The circle, as a sacred space that allowed students to look into each others’ eyes and sit level with their teachers and peers, was a direct reflection of Isaak’s philosophy. Isaak, having space to live into his philosophy in the context of his class, was one of the most fulfilled teachers in this participant group.

In one observation I noted of Isaak that “he is remote when at the front of the room. Seemed much more present when sitting in a circle.” I went on to write, “Comes alive: in circle, when working with small groups. Seems to shrink when...at front of the room. When disciplining students.” This is further reflective of Isaak’s philosophy. He told me that he sought to cultivate a student-centered classroom and lectured only as



much as he had to. I don't believe he saw himself as an authority figure so much as a guide.

Paloma's philosophy contains many of the same elements as Isaak's. She states, "I feel like I'm not only teaching these students about school and academic, but I'm also teaching them just how to be human. How to be members of society. Like what's acceptable and what's not acceptable and why." She also described the importance of forming strong, respect-based relationships with her students: "I think that if you treat your students with respect and honesty they will help you teach them. So they'll eventually learn to trust you and respect you because you respect them...If you can get the students to trust you and respect you by respecting them and trusting them then I think you'll go far and that's how you can teach them the best."

I observed Paloma's philosophy at work both in the classroom, and perhaps more poignantly after her class had ended. I happened to observe one of the classes she described as most difficult to manage. It is a level one Spanish class and, as she described it, "[the students] have to be there." She often found that particular class lacking in motivation. It also contained a group of students who had known each other since their middle school and were often disruptive in her class. Despite the fact that she describes this class as her most difficult to manage, in my observations of her I use the words "cheerful," four times, "smile," seven times, and "laugh" 23 times. Paloma clearly delights and finds joy in her students, and through that joy she holds true to her desire to get to know her students and model being respectful, kind, and positive.

When she needs to discipline a student she does it in a way that still upholds that student's humanity and dignity. After class had ended I witnessed her pull a few students

back from the mob at the door. With each one she debriefed an episode that had occurred in class that day. She was initially firm and serious but also continually checking in with the students to ensure that they understood where she was coming from. Their discussions revolved around moments of disrespect she had witnessed during class, and through discussion with the students she was able to lead them into an understanding of why she had been concerned with their behavior. The why in this case revolved around her expectations for them while in school and her concern that their behavior would curtail greater opportunities in life both professionally and personally. The students did not protest her discussion but listened and entered into it abashedly. Through that interaction I could see that they trusted her judgment and were willing to accept feedback. There was clearly a reciprocal trust at work between them that I believe stemmed from Paloma's self-described love and care for her students. This echoes Ruth's belief that building holistic relationships with students is the only way to reach them academically and personally.

Lindsay's philosophy of teaching also addressed the need for schools and teachers to prepare students for the larger world. She stated, "[my philosophy] really is that belief in every student that they can do anything that they set their mind to. Hopefully that's a positive thing, and hopefully I can guide them to that. But really just have something for them to believe in for the future in themselves. And have pride in themselves as a person." She also stated, "I really truly believe that every student has the ability to go to college and graduate high school even if they don't see it themselves they have it. They just need somebody to believe in them. And sometimes that's just me. That's why I wanted to be a teacher."

As an elementary school teacher Lindsay had fewer explicit opportunities to connect her students' behaviors to their professional futures, but I witnessed many examples of her care for and her belief in her students. Two specific examples struck me as significant. In my observation notes I wrote,

“Talkative student gets frustrated at a math problem. Throws up his hands and says ‘I don’t know!’ [Lindsay] talks him through it; talks him out of his frustration and he gets cheerful again, his body relaxes and he smiles. Gets math problem correct and high fives.”

And at another time:

“Leans over loud student in a warm way. Hard to explain. Almost like a hug without actually touching him. Then reaches around and places a light hand on his hand and focuses her eyes on the work. Redirects him with presence and touch. Asks patient questions, as soon as he begins to find the word himself she moves away, leaving him to it.”

For context, the students Lindsay works with are placed in special education because of learning disabilities and behavioral disorders. They are often the most neglected and powerless students in the school. Lindsay’s philosophy, that every student can succeed and that she will support them and believe in them despite the implicit negative messages the students receive externally, was clearly manifested in her classroom. In all of my observations I never saw her give up on a student when he or she was struggling. She corrected them often and gently led them to the right answers

through questions and modeling. When her class was over students often dawdled at the door or ran over to sit for a moment in the cozy reading area she'd created off to the side of the room. More than once students asked if they *had* to go back to their other class.

There is remarkable congruency across each of the participants' stated beliefs about their philosophies. They saw their role in their students' lives as connected to the students' future success as a human and a citizen. It is notable that none of the participants mentioned that their end goal as educators was to teach students content; rather they viewed the content as a vehicle for teaching more global skills and mindsets. Each teacher saw him or herself as an important catalyst and guide for their students' growth as a human being.

### **Testing and Intrinsic Motivation**

Isaak, Paloma, Ruth, and Lindsay defined teaching as transcendent of content, but the grounded companion to transcendence is facticity. Beneath the mythos and ideal of teaching is the logos and material world. For each of the fleeting moments of transcendence that these teachers experienced there existed the perpetual fact of content, which culminated in high stakes, standardized tests. All four participants were critical of the testing culture in their schools. I believe this is related to another finding: each participant was highly appreciative when their students displayed intrinsic motivation to learn. Each of the participants valued their student's curiosity and inquisitiveness and became motivated by spontaneity and unexpected student questions. In returning to Greene, the mandatory nature of the tests, which in Lindsey's case pervaded her entire curriculum, was often antithetical to values such as discovery and curiosity and almost always worked against the philosophies of that each teacher held sacred.

Of all four participants Ruth was most sanguine about the tests. She believed they were reflective of the content and skills she was teaching and understood the value of objective academic measurements. But even she stated explicitly that the requirements expected of her and her students hindered relationship building. She stated, “part of that excitement is them letting you in so that they can see your view of what can happen. And so that is where, that’s my motivation as far as support, it’s tough. Because you are required to have grades and testing and there’s a lot of things that teachers have to do that sort of stand in the way of building a relationship.” Later, on the subject of tests she added, “I understand the purpose of assessments. I understand that districts need data. I get it. I’m just saying that what it leaves me with is this broken little being that you kind of have to put them back together so that they can do the things- because assessments don’t teach them the skills they’re going to need for the next three years.”

Ruth accepted the tests and the need for objective measurements of academic knowledge, but she also believed that tests themselves would not prepare students for the work they would need to be prepared to do in life. She described an ideal class period in terms of student ownership and motivation. She stated, “I’ve had some [ideal class periods] and it’s usually a Socratic seminar that is just: they’re in charge. They are having deep, genuine conversations around a really important topic and I’m just sitting there watching. That to me is an ideal class. Any time when it’s when you see like that fire and they’re just going and moving with it that’s awesome to me.” She went on to state, “To me engagement is passion and discovery. When they have the discovery they’re able to take the lead and engage in something like that. I want kids to be curious and I want them to feel.” These statements illuminated the spectrum that one human being could

encompass day to day. The same students who demonstrated the desire and ability to hold “deep, genuine conversations” were also the “broken little beings” that needed to be put back together before they could begin to learn and engage again in Ruth’s class.

Isaak teaches a subject that is not tested by the state, but he found that the content “sometimes I’m restricted by that curriculum... And it’s like you need to learn Hammurabi’s code, and we can’t talk about your social emotional well being.”

Isaak was not vehement on the subject of tests specifically, but he does describe a revelatory experience while talking to the head of the social studies department at the nearby high school that brought the subject of student intrinsic motivation to the forefront of his mind. Isaak describes the head of the social studies department as a “pretty straight edge guy. Straight shooter. They’re all about the data. In test scores and stuff once they get to that level.” He and his colleagues asked the department head what they should be doing to prepare the students for high school social studies. Isaak describes his experience listening to the man’s response:

“His answer blew me away. I thought it was going to be summarizing. Or annotating. Or maybe not annotating but these skills that you really need to use in high school social studies, like literacy skills. And like, inferring what the author is trying to say and all these other skills. NO. His answer was: do something fun so they’re actually excited to come into social studies class. Because he has all these kids who don’t even show up. Or don’t even want to walk in the door because they have this bad taste in their mouth about

either school in general or social studies in particular. And I was like DONE. That's awesome! You know? That was so good for me to hear.”

This seemed to be a profound experience for Isaak, who soon after that recommitted himself to the class meeting described earlier, and began to include extra-curricular items in his lesson plans. These pedagogical adjustments are also intertwined with his personal and professional growth, which I will discuss further in the next section.

In congruence with the manner in which he received the department head's advice, Issak explicitly stated that he values intrinsic motivation in his students. He revealed this after I had brought up a phenomenon I'd witnessed while observing his class. My observation notes state, “Comes alive: in circle, when working with small groups. Seems to shrink when remote- at front of the room.” I noticed that Issak seemed to light up when he was talking to students in smaller groups or running his class meeting. When I brought that up to him he responded, “So part of that is connected to my philosophy of just wanting students to be in charge of their learning and wanting them to be in the driver's seat. And I just want to facilitate and guide them through that but I don't want to be standing up there for any longer than I have to.”

Paloma discussed student intrinsic motivation in the same way but from the other side of the experience. She found in her entry-level classes that she, “wasn't expecting the lack of effort that students would be bringing to the classroom. And I think that the lack of effort, what's the word, I lose motivation. I'm like why am I going to put so much effort and care so much and put so much energy when I know they're going to leave my classroom and not look at this again?” She explicitly mentioned testing too, stating,

“Especially in a district like ours you’re just trying to get these students to pass tests. Not that that’s anyone’s fault, I just think that for some reason this generation, there’s a gap. A huge gap in what they can do and I don’t know why. But they struggle a lot and are... there’s no foundation there. But I think right now it’s just all about testing, the standardized testing.”

Paloma found not only that she was motivated when “[the students] ask great questions,” she was highly demotivated when her students, who “had to be there,” indicated that they were not engaged in or fully embracing her lessons. This reciprocal relationship between teacher and student motivation, and the students’ responses to mandated curricula or classes, could have profound implications on how we view and address mandatory curricula and state testing.

Of all of the participants Lindsay’s curriculum was most affected by state tests and most emphatic in her criticism of them. As a teacher in a turnaround school, she describes the immense pressure that she was under to help her students pass the state test, She disclosed that her school:

“is flagged for next year. If we don’t show enough improvement on next year’s PARCC scores we get turned out by the district and a charter school could take over. So they could get rid of the whole staff and all this business. So there’s a lot of pressure for our test scores, so there’s also a lot of pressure to teach to the test. But teaching to the test is



not teaching. Teaching how to take a test so my kids aren't getting all the content they need."

I have almost an entire single-spaced page of notes that detail Lindsay's response to the tests, and I will include a series of excerpts here that give an overall picture of how the testing affected her and her students. In one she describes how the pervasiveness of the testing prevented her from actually helping her students grow academically:

"there's a two-week session of testing every other month. You don't get a lot of teaching done during that time. The kids are stressing; the teachers are really stressed. And it's hard. I feel like if I could teach my students really with just where they're at and push them a little bit instead of having to reach of this almost unimaginable bar."

She describes how the testing affects her curriculum: "So I feel like because of the way testing is, [the students] don't have that ability to be able to delve deep into an area. And really get that understanding and richness because you have to teach to the standards and the test." And she also mentions on multiple occasions how the students' test scores are linked indelibly to teacher job security. At one point she said bluntly, "...as test heavy as we are...you make your students grow and if not then, bye. That's kind of a feeling that every teacher has. Especially doing the state standardized testing."

Lindsay, her students, and her colleagues were profoundly affected by the testing requirements. Because her school was labeled as "turnaround," it was under scrutiny from the state. A "turnaround" school is one that has been targeted by the city as one that needs "significant interventions and supports to dramatically turn around student

achievement at persistently low performing schools” (DPS, 2014, p. 3). Turnaround schools that do not perform to a certain level are in danger of being overhauled by the state which would include massive teacher layoffs. This was, at least, the message imparted by Lindsay’s administration. The pressure for Lindsay and her colleagues to teach students to perform well on the test manifested itself in her school leadership acting as “watchdogs.” She stated,

“they have really high expectations on the teachers to achieve this particular bar for your students. And it’s very stressful on the staff. Overwhelming. Exhausting. But then there’s not necessarily this support on how to achieve that. Just do it. But then if you do something that’s kind of out of the norm it’s looked down upon.”

So Lindsay and her colleagues were under immense pressure to teach their students to pass the state tests but they weren’t given the support, space, guidance, or time to achieve that goal. Her description of doing things “out of the norm,” which included students reading aloud to stuffed animals to work on their fluency and a math obstacle course relay race, demonstrate that Lindsay was working to, in Maxine Greene’s words, “name alternatives” and “imagine a better state of things” (p. 9). These exercises in ingenuity largely suppressed by her administration, though I had some insight into their trepidation about new practices when I read through the school turnaround document. It states that a reason for one school’s failure was that “teachers created and implemented their own curriculum based on a social justice model. Teachers did not use a research-based proven curriculum” (DPS, 2014, p. 16). Given that the district, acting

from a scarcity mindset around failing schools and test scores, handed down strict requirements about using only a “research-based proven curriculum,” was scrutinizing turnaround schools for evidence of non-valid curricula, I can understand why the administration passed on that scarcity mindset and was wary about condoning creative and unvetted practices. This points to a much larger problem in the district’s approach to low-performing schools which essentially wrings dry any opportunities for creativity and innovation on the part of the teachers. In this light, Lindsay’s dedication to creating some fun and innovative practices for her students can be seen as a courageous and subversive act.

Lindsay, like the other participants, valued student intrinsic motivation very highly. When I asked her how teaching differed from her expectations going into the profession she stated, “I feel like something that I thought would be just a magical thing where I got to see those light bulbs go off all the time with the students and see them interested and want them to raise their hands and being inquisitive and wanting to learn. I don’t see that. It’s very rare.” She went on to say, “learning should be fun! And the kids should want to learn more after your lesson is done. You know have that intrinsic motivation to discover more. And hopefully there’s that little nugget that makes them want to do that.”

Unlike the other participants, Lindsay experienced her administration as restrictive, punitive, and unsupportive. She valued her students’ creative light bulbs and wanted to create innovative lessons, but these lessons were grimly suppressed by her administration. As she describes here, “sometimes I have to change it up in the middle of a lesson because sometimes it doesn’t always work you know? And you get dinged for

having to go off on the fly because you didn't stick to your lesson." When probed, she described "getting dinged" as:

"you tend to get talked to when [the administration] comes in and observes ... if you don't necessarily stick to that all the way, because it's supposed to be insanely detailed, you get talked to because you didn't stay on pace, you didn't ask these questions, you actually didn't go down this avenue that you had planned. But sometimes in teaching you just have to be able to go with the flow of what the kids are interested in and where they're staying."

Lindsay experienced the amount of oversight by her administration (and, extrapolating that, by the district's deficit approach to low-performing schools) as antithetical to her values around student intrinsic motivation, joy, and curiosity.

Throughout the ups and downs of the first year of teaching, all four of the participants in this study maintained their teaching philosophies as constant and unwavering guides. Their philosophies all encompassed a belief that learning is a process that happens on a human level as well as on an academic level. All four participants discussed that part of their motivation for becoming educators was to address challenges they'd faced in their own past at a similar time in their lives. This implied a motivation to ameliorate these challenges for this next generation. These findings indicate that the decision to become an educator is a deeply personal commitment that extends beyond a desire to impart content, and that being an educator is a deeply personal choice that is most fulfilling when they are allowed to enact their philosophes in the classroom. All

four participants highly valued student motivation and were to varying degrees critical of the top-down mandates that they were required to implement. In extrapolating that, the findings suggest that top-down requirements regarding tests or mandated curricula are often antithetical to fostering the intrinsic motivation in students that the teachers value so highly. The significance of these findings I will discuss in detail in the next chapter. I will also address, from these findings, the question of what type of curriculum encourages students (and teachers) to be the best versions of themselves. Certainly Maxine Greene, who believed this happened when people were given the space and freedom to explore themselves and their interests, has given us a strong foundation for exploring this question.

### **Teaching to Address their Past**

*“The wound is the place where the Light enters you”*

*-Jalaluddin Rumi*

Rumi’s quote reminds me of Parker Palmer’s (2009) image of a heart being broken open. As I came to know Ruth, Isaak, Lindsay, and Paloma, each disclosed that they had had difficulties at the time of their life that I noticed directly corresponded to the ages they were teaching. It is my belief that these first year teachers were seeking a way to ameliorate challenges or trauma in their own pasts, and that returning to reach and guide students at a age that had given them the most heartache in their own lives was perhaps an exercise in healing and “paying it forward” for this next generation. Each had, on some level they were not fully aware of at the time, his or her heart broken open earlier in life, which left a fullness and a space for them to love and care for their students on a deeply personal level.

One of Isaak's students burst into the room, then stopped short when he saw me. Completely collected he smiled jauntily, leaned against a desk and introduced himself. Short and plump with dark skin and lively, sparkling eyes, he asked about an upcoming assignment, cracked jokes until Isaak laughed, then politely said goodbye to me. Isaak watched his retreating back and the smile faded. His eyes became serious and he said, "that kid has one of the worst home lives of any of my students." He fell silent. Then said, more to himself than to me, "drugs. Abuse. Neglect. Violence. He acts out a lot. But then he comes in here and is so polite and nice." He looked at me finally, "I went through a lot of traumatic experiences when I was in middle school. And didn't have ... coping strategies, like losing family members and stuff. And turning you know, to violence and other things. And every student here has a story. I mean, that's one of the reasons I love to work here."

Part of Ruth's reason for becoming a high school English teacher was to expose her students to a validating opportunity that she had not received in high school. She stated, "one of the reasons why I'm here is because I wanted to work with a diverse population because that's where I came from." She also stated, "part of my motivation is that it wasn't until I was a senior in college that I ran across my first Hispanic, or Multicultural Lit class. And I thought to be 21 years old and to finally see my own heritage reflected in my curriculum is a little bit ridiculous."

The other participants addressed challenges in their past on a more social-emotional level.

Paloma, who teaches high school, stated, "high school was such a tough age for me, just remember being that age and I would love to help kids get through that. I don't

want to just teach them Spanish. I want them to know how to work on these obstacles that they're seeing every day. And how to use education to get through that.”

Finally Lindsay, who teaches elementary special education, stated,

“I had never worked with students with special needs before, but a lot of the students that I work with come from low income, situations...that are familiar to me as well. Growing up in an unorthodox household. And I feel like I have a lot on a level that's similar to them that they can relate to and see a higher outcome for themselves.”

At one point in the school year Lindsay was asked to give a speech to the students about her childhood. She recounts,

“And I wrote a short story about my childhood that showed all of the grit and perseverance that I had to go through being abused and being raised by my grandparents. Left some of the more shady parts out. But just kind of talked about all the things that I had to go through and decide I want to get out of this I want to be a better person; I want to go to school to show the kids that I could overcome that.”

Lindsay had talked to me about these experiences. She remembers vividly the time she spent at a bar after school as a child. She said she was practically raised in that bar. I imagined a dark space filled with the noise of clinking glasses and rough voices and a young, blond, earnest girl bending over her homework by the dim lights. “I practically raised my sister,” she said, “because my mom wasn't there to do it.” When she smiled it

was sad. “I chose education,” she said. “My sister chose a different path. I don’t want that for my students.”

The meanings that each participant found in their profession described a wide arc that encompassed the futures of their students and pain buried in their own pasts. Each participant connected themselves fully with their work and found motivation in the hope that by returning to the age at which they had faced the most significant challenges or setbacks, they would be able to help ameliorate those same challenges for their students. I discovered that through teaching and getting to know their students these teachers experienced such connected and profound personal and professional growth.

Significantly, each participant retained his or her philosophy intact for the entire year. Despite the personal and professional growth that they experienced, their philosophies regarding the purpose of teaching remained constant. Their beliefs when entering the profession regarding the deeper meaning and purpose of the profession were entirely unchanged at the end of the year. This, I believe, is a highly significant and unexpected discovery and one whose implications I will explore further in the next chapter.

### **Personal and Professional Evolutions**

I combined these categories because I found that they were intricately connected. Each of the participants’ personal growth was manifested in the classroom in various nuanced ways, and in turn their professional growth had a noticeable impact on their personal development. I will attempt to parse out the participants’ growth according to the two categories I established in my research questions, but also want to respect their connected nature. I suspect, given the nature of teaching as a deeply personal endeavor



enacted in a professional realm, that the deepest meaning of this research may lie in the fact that each participant's personal and professional growth was symbiotic and inseparable.

The data shaped themselves into two large categories: "factors that contributed to change" and "results of the change." Within the first category I found that colleague attitude, culture set by school leadership, and the related themes of stress, sleeplessness, and care for students all contributed to the teachers' respective evolution. The results of the changes included increased empathy, higher levels of confidence, and deepened relationships with students, along with occasional estrangement from personal relationships outside of the classroom.

## **Factors that Contributed to Change**

### **Colleague Support**

All four participants cited their colleagues as the most critical component for surviving their first year. Colleagues for three of the participants provided guidance, feedback, wisdom, validation, and advice that helped them grow into a more fully realized version of themselves as teachers. Lindsay had fewer supportive colleagues at her school and, in fact, encountered colleagues that were actively unsupportive. Of all of the first year teachers in this study, she had the most doubts about her ability to remain in the profession.

In our first interview I sat across from Ruth both of us seated in desks where so many different students had sat before us. The windows were open and a wintry, late afternoon light was seeping through the window glass. A man walked in, short and bearded with teeth showing in a smile through the dark bristles. Without preamble or an

introduction to me he launched into a series of questions and suggestions for the upcoming week. Ruth smiled and answered back, slowly and calmly as was her way. Eventually Ruth indicated me and introduced us. The man gave me a nod and a smile, but resumed talking to Ruth. Their conversation felt both easy and energetic, and I remember being impressed by this man's focus on Ruth and her needs.

In our interviews Ruth's gratitude for the support she received from her colleagues was manifest and recurring. She mentioned that her teacher lead, the bearded man, was extremely helpful and available. She stated, "he does my peer observations and support and he's also on my intro to lit team, so we co plan." She also stated, "that's really nice to be able to co plan with other teachers that are doing the same thing that you are. It kind of takes off that sense of having to think of everything for yourself and just the bouncing off of ideas. You start thinking about new things." Ruth, who was diagnosed with cancer halfway through the year, was not as forthcoming about her personal and social-emotional needs, but focused primarily on the ways that her colleagues supported her professionally. In our interviews I often witnessed cheerful, breezy interruptions from other teachers. She had an easy, open manner with them. They talked about students and usually told jokes and laughed about something. From these interactions I inferred that overall Ruth had healthy and supportive relationships with other people on staff. Though she didn't mention how they helped her socially or emotionally, she stated explicitly how much her discussions with her colleagues helped her grow as a professional.

Similar interruptions occurred while I was sitting with Isaac. At one point a solid African American man with joyful crow's feet etched at the corners of his eyes stopped at

Isaak's open door and introduced himself. He asked after Isaak and told a funny anecdote about a student. Isaak mentioned that he was the counselor, but often counseled the teachers too! At another point Isaak's assistant principal found me wandering lost in the halls (I have a terrible sense of direction) and took time from her day to walk me to Isaak's room. The whole time she chattered to me about the school and asked probing questions about my work. When the kids burst into the hallway during passing time I noted that they seemed cheerful. She replied, "they're middle schoolers. They're always cheerful." My notes on Isaak's discussion of colleague support fill almost an entire single-spaced page. He was extremely grateful for the culture of support at his school. He stated, "first and foremost it's just the attitude of if you need anything knock on my door. We just have really good relationships here on our team. Even if you just need to go to the bathroom I'll watch your kids. If something comes up. Or anything at all. So that's just a foundation." In a discussion about whether or not he would want to move across the country closer to his family he stated,

"I probably wouldn't be able to do this job especially as a first year teacher in another building if I, you know, it's a big if, but I'm just saying because of what I've already said about my principal and the leadership, and not just the principal but my deans and my counselors.... We get along super well and that level of support is huge and so it's not like I could just go to another school."

This comment emphasized that Isaak perceived his school environment as unique and critical to his success. He recognized that the relationships he had built with his colleagues were not necessarily transferrable to another location.

Paloma also emphasized the importance of colleague support. She discussed first how they helped her grow professionally stating,

“What I do have actually is a lot of support here. And the reason my lesson planning is getting better is because the other two teachers that teach the same as me are letting me observe their classes in my off periods. So I get an idea of what they’re doing, how they do it, and then I adjust it to maybe what would work best for my class, or just do it exactly the same, or don’t do it at all if I don’t like it. But that way that’s where I figure out my plan, and that’s what I do. And I see how it goes, and I reflect on it. And I talk to them about how it went. Did it go well? Why didn’t it go well? You know. Or ask them why did they do that?”

She also discussed how her colleagues helped her navigate some of the challenges of being a first year teacher. The following is an excerpt from one of our interviews:

Researcher: How important is the support of these veteran teachers?

Paloma: I would be lost without them. Without them I don’t know if I would have made it this far to be honest.

Just of how overwhelmed I was when I wasn't [observing them in my off periods].

Researcher: What other ways have they supported you beyond content?

Paloma: to tell me it's ok to mess up. To remind me that, just even mentally they remind me of the importance of not bringing my grading home every night, not bringing everything home, time for myself. There would be days that I would feel so guilty because I would just go home and lay down and not grade or have my papers done within the week. And they were like that's fine! You don't have to. The students can wait.

Ruth, Paloma and Isaak emphasized the different ways in which their colleagues supported them professionally, and Paloma and Isaak described how their colleagues helped them maintain their social-emotional health. By contrast, Lindsay's initial experience with her colleagues was negative. I interviewed her immediately before winter break, which was a time she described as her "all-time low." In this interview she stated,

"I think the other thing that makes me doubt myself, particularly right now, is the team that I work with I feel like an outsider. We're all new to the school and two of us are brand new first year teachers, however the most senior special education person, there's like five of us on the team, they're three that are really cliquey and get along really

well, and two of us that are not a part of that group. And I don't feel like I get the same level of support from the senior special education person who is supposed to be my mentor as the other person, which is really kind of frustrating. So that right now in particular the last couple of weeks has been stressing me out and, like, wondering if I should continue to teach because I don't feel that collaborative piece."

Because of my hypothesis that doubt is an invitation to transcendence, I was highly attuned to the word "doubt" when it arose in the interviews. Oddly the word only came up in Lindsay's. Not Isaak, Paloma, nor Ruth mentioned doubt, nor similes like "uncertainty," or "unsure." Lindsay mentioned it twice though. Once here when she described how lack of colleague support caused her to doubt herself and her decision to teach, and once when she discussed how, if her students did not comprehend her lessons even after multiple iterations, she would doubt herself. It's possible that many factors contributed to Lindsay's sense of doubt, but it seems that overall a lack of collaboration and support in Lindsay's school environment caused her to doubt her rightness of fit for the teaching profession.

Lindsay described multiple examples of her coworkers' indifference to helping her. On multiple occasions she asked her special education mentor for help in writing an IEP. She described the conversation:

"I asked what were some best ways I should probably group some of my students because I'd never grouped students before. And it was well, it's up to you. You have their IEP's.

You can decide. Well, I don't KNOW how! This goal on the IEP is written kind of funny, to me, what's the way that, what should I do because I don't think I can accept this IEP the way it's written. Well go ask this person. Or no response."

The lack of active support from her colleagues was enough to make her doubt her place in the teaching profession. Luckily Lindsay was able to form a strong relationship with another team of teachers. She described the importance of that: "if I hadn't had some of my coworkers in the building, not necessarily on my sped team but some of the other teachers that I work with that my kids have class with if I didn't have them I don't know if I would have made it through the year. They really allowed me to come lean on them."

Both Paloma and Lindsay mention that support and guidance from their coworkers was critical in helping them survive the school year. Isaak recognized the uniqueness and importance of the specific colleague relationships he had formed within his school, and Ruth described how helpful it was to co plan and learn from the other teachers in her school. All four participants described colleague support as an extremely important aspect of their jobs, and the one teacher who did not receive fulsome support from those around her experienced deep doubt as to her ability to remain in the profession.

### **School Leadership**

*"A leader is a dealer in hope"*

*-Napoleon*

The data in this study revealed that school leadership, specifically in reference to the philosophy and actions of the administration, had an impact on the school culture and, in turn, the participants' freedom to grow as educators. Three participants felt supported and validated by their administration, but one teacher, Lindsay, felt she could not trust her administration to help her.

Ruth described her administration as "approachable," saying, "My administration is very approachable and they let you know that all the time. You know, come talk to us. And it's not just wind-speak. They actually mean it. And he's been really supportive and yeah I think the environment is really good. It's been good for me."

Isaak formed a close relationship with his principal and found that to be an important part of the enjoyment he took from teaching. His principal held periodic meetings for all of the first-year teachers in the building and Isaak described how this allowed for the space to have deep conversations about difficult subjects. He stated,

"I just had a meeting with the principal and other first year teachers the other day after school. And that's one of the meetings I consider highly valuable .... And he looked at [an African American teacher] and me and we're both from the same TEP program, we were both student teachers last year in the building, the exact same credentials essentially. Same qualifications. And he said this in front of everyone: I hope no one would say [the African American] teacher got the job because of her skin color. And we're talking about that kind of stuff openly and as a staff. So that's yeah it gets



really deep and it's stuff that I like to be a part of. And I can't speak for any other schools because I don't know if they're having those kinds of conversations or not, but I'm just glad to be a part of it here."

He said that his principal's openness to having conversations about difficult subjects allowed him, Isaak, the space to become vulnerable as well. I want to include a rather long excerpt that demonstrates how Isaak's principal set the tone for his teachers to create space for meaningful conversation:

Isaak: he's the principal. And talking about his own journey through teaching but also his own journey through life and his personal family. And he brings all that up in front of us and that's just, you know, now that I'm thinking about it that's rubbed off on me too. ...the fact that he's had those conversations with us and like deep, emotional conversations whether we're talking about race or teaching at a diverse school or whatever the conversations have been about, bringing in his own personal story has been a huge part of it. I don't know it just rubbed off.

Researcher: so your administrator has allowed himself to live into the human aspect of the job and that in turn opened doors for you to feel more comfortable?

Isaak: yes and to live into my role in this job also. We have different roles you know, ... But behind closed doors with

the eight of us ... first year teachers in the building you know it's like a whole side of him that's been (pause) It just makes me respect him more as a leader.

Isaak's principal, by allowing his teachers to see him as human with a journey and a past, provided a model for Isaak to use in his own classroom. It created a space for Issak to become open to vulnerability, which, as I will explore later in this chapter, transformed his teaching practices.

Paloma did not talk explicitly about her school leadership as tone-setters, but she did mention on numerous occasions that her assistant principal provided helpful professional support. She talked at one time about how her administration provided models for sample lessons, helped her navigate the standards, and helped prioritize her evaluation rubric to prevent her from becoming overwhelmed by it. At one point she said, when discussing standards, "I do not understand the Colorado standards. If there's one thing that I am just like I pray to god I come back next year because I don't get these standards! My [assistant principal]...went over them with me. He told me not to worry about some. He told me I could upload or we talked about the ones I need to worry about." In another conversation Paloma mentions, "[my assistant principal] is telling me that I'm ok to be partially proficient in certain things. I'm proficient in some and partially proficient in others and he said that's fine. He showed me the ones I need to improve on but not to worry too too much because he's sure he'll see them when he comes in for his informals." While Paloma doesn't explicitly say that her assistant principal set a helpful and approachable tone, the subtext in this conversation is that her assistant principal was working to remove some of the pressure of her evaluations. He clearly communicated his

priorities, told her not to worry, and expressed faith that she was meeting the requirements. Paloma by her own account also had extremely strong colleague support, so she may not have needed as much administrative support as other teachers.

Lindsay, who was working in the highest-needs school of any of the participants, had a very different experience with her administration. She found them to be punitive, rigid, and unsupportive. At one point she described them as “watchdogs.” At another time she stated,

“the school I’m in is considered “turnaround” and it’s in its 5<sup>th</sup> year. So [the administrators] have really high expectations on the teachers to achieve this particular bar for your students. And it’s very stressful on the staff. Overwhelming. Exhausting. But then there’s not necessarily this support on how to achieve that. Just do it. But then if you do something that’s kind of our of the norm it’s looked down upon.”

So Lindsay didn’t feel that her administration provided support or reassurance, and she of all teachers felt the most doubt about her ability to continue teaching.

Lindsay’s statement corroborates Headden (2014), who found that teacher attrition could be attributed largely to the fact new teachers didn’t believe themselves valued by their administration. It seems clear that a first-year teacher’s experiences and growth and determined in part by the culture and tone set by the leaders at their school. The three teachers that worked with open, trusting, supportive leaders had overall a much more positive experience teaching in their first year. The teacher who experienced her

administration as punitive and unsupportive was highly discouraged and described her first year as overwhelming and exhausting.

### **Stress and Self Sacrifice**

*“Sometimes I’m surprised my hair’s not on fire.”*

*-Lindsay*

One potent theme for each participant was increased levels of stress in their lives due to teaching. All four of them discussed how their responsibilities bled into their free time and informed their lives outside of the classroom. The constant worry and accountability of teaching affected their personal relationships and in some cases their health. Notably the phrase “can’t turn it off,” as in, they could not filter out thoughts of students and school, occurred independently in interviews from each of the participants, as did the word “exhausting” in all of its forms. Each participant also described elements of self-sacrifice that occurred throughout the year.

Ruth used the word “chaotic” to describe herself. She stated, “I am constantly thinking about school. Constantly thinking about the kids, constantly thinking about what I need to do. I’m more chaotic than I’ve ever been.” In another interview she described a professional development opportunity she had participated in. It addressed the concept “compassion fatigue:”

“they were talking about this cycle of always being there for your kids that you develop something called compassion fatigue. And when they put it up there I was like THAT’S what this is called? I had no idea there was a name for it but it absolutely is exhausting. And it comes right towards that

winter break I was like I don't know... I'm just really struggling every single day." Ruth also discussed the element of self-sacrifice saying, "I didn't become a teacher to be grumpy. It's not about me. It's about them and I kind of put myself to the side until I get home. If I need to have a cry or a glass of wine then I do those things. But it is exhausting."

This statement was a sliver of a window into some of the difficulties that Ruth experienced in her first year. In our interviews she was very positive, and student-focused. For her to admit to being exhausted and having the need to cry was a remarkable and vulnerable moment.

Ruth did not talk much about her personal growth; she believed her personal self remained relatively constant throughout the year, but she did mention in an interview that she was learning to let some things go. She stated,

"at home it's just a case of I feel like I'm always working. And I had to allow myself to not be as in control at home as I normally am, and start pushing responsibility off on other people so that I could do this. I was used to being the person at home who does everything. And now it's more of a case of I can't do this and being able to let go of that."

The feeling she was always working, Ruth's identification of compassion fatigue, and her experience of having to relinquish control in some aspects of her

personal life demonstrate some of the personal challenges that she experienced in her first year of teaching.

Isaak also found that teaching had a tendency to pervade the rest of his life. When discussing the stresses of teaching he focused primarily on the self-sacrifice aspect of the question. Sports, spending time with his friends, and being outdoors were extremely important to him, but he discovered that teaching made it difficult to participate in those things. He stated, "I've been very athletic in the past and that's been taken away now because of how much time you have to put in to being a good teacher." He went on to discuss the self-sacrificial aspect of teaching, saying,

"My social life has been hurting a little bit for sure... that's been a hard line to balance this year though is social life versus professional life. Because also too I'm like well, my life doesn't really matter, you know? I'm here to serve. And that can be a dangerous attitude too because if I'm not healthy then what I'm doing won't be good."

He further describes his difficulty balancing personal and professional boundaries saying,

"If I'm exhausted at the end of the night and I don't want to finish the paper I was writing for grad school . Ok. Go to bed. Take care of myself. Now it's like I have to get this back because those grades are going to be sent home tomorrow and so and so's parents are going to kill him if I don't put this grade in because it's going to show an

inaccurate reflection of what he's done in my class and that's not fair to him. So I do stay up that extra hour. And that selflessness is just exhausting.”

Isaak also discussed how he was unable to “turn it off,” and how that developed over the course of the year as he gradually opened up to his students. This was tied closely to his personal growth, which I will discuss in greater detail in the next section, but I believe it's important to include here because it demonstrates a connection between opening up to the students and the amount that teaching pervaded personal aspects of his life. He stated, “But I just can't shut it off anymore. And I think that's because I just opened myself up.” With this statement Isaak was implying that the better he got to know his students and the more he opened up to them, the greater significance they took on in his life beyond the classroom. He made another statement that corroborates that inference:

“it's almost letting [the students] in and letting myself open up like that for good or for bad has had its impact on me now. And I think I spent a lot of the first half or three quarters of the year trying not to let that happen. So when that bell rings I can go have my own life. But I totally feel what you're saying about that being- just being apprehensive about that. It's hard when it consumes you like that and it's hard because you care so much.”

Paloma also experienced this phenomenon of constantly caring and worrying about her students, which affected her energy levels and ability to sleep. She stated,

“So personally, I am much more tired than I normally am. I can’t sleep. I have a lot of anxiety from just teaching and my kids. And I worry. And they think I’m kidding when I tell them that I’ll miss them, but I absolutely love all my students even the ones that drive me crazy. And I worry about them and their grades and my lesson planning. I’m up all night sometimes.”

In another interview she stated, “And worry. I worry. There are students that I go home and I do worry. And I sometimes can’t shut it off.” And again in a separate interview she stated, “I knew [teaching] was going to be a lot of work; I didn’t think that I would have the anxiety that I have about my students. I knew I would care I just didn’t know I would care this much. So I was ready for the planning and the grading and all that but I really wasn’t expecting all the anxiety.” She discussed being worried that the anxiety she experienced and concern for her students would lead her to burn out at some point. She stated, “So I think right now the reason I’m afraid I will [burn out] is because I stress so much about [teaching].”

Paloma also described what she saw as the need to sacrifice elements of her personal life in order to be a good teacher. She stated, “It doesn’t matter if I’m stressed out about my bills. I have to come in and it doesn’t matter if I only slept 2 hours the night before. If I’m not there as a whole it definitely affects [the students]. And I see it.” She also said bluntly at one point, “I feel like I have no social life.” Teaching also affected her personal relationships. She early in the year she described not being able to see her



boyfriend as often as she would like: “My boyfriend. I still make time to go out with him because I don’t really get to see him that much.”

Paloma, like Ruth, found that she needed to be willing to let some things go. In one interview she mentioned, “I’m learning that there’s not enough time in a day. I’m learning that I have to accept the fact that I won’t get everything done and that’s going to be ok. And I almost feel like it’s never ending. Yeah I have a break but I need to start planning what am I going to do next week.”

Lindsay experienced the same strain of being overworked and needing to work in her free time to keep up with the demands of the profession. When I asked about her impression of teaching so far in the year she replied,

“it’s a LOT of work. Even over this break we had a whole week off and I was still lesson planning, thinking about what I’m going to ask the kids on Monday when we come back. Especially being special education there’s a lot of legal paperwork that you have to do, and it has to be- there are all sorts of due dates.”

She also saw a decrease in social activities that were important to her. She stated,

“But I don’t get to see my friends as often. I’m constantly on my computer lesson planning, or having to say sorry I’m doing this for work. I can’t come tonight. I have PD! I have this! I have that! And so for me it’s been really hard. I went from seeing my friends every couple of weeks to maybe once a month maybe now if that.”

When I asked her what supports she was receiving she described, as hypothesized by the literature review, that she was receiving technical, professional support but very little social-emotional help. She stated, “I feel there’s a lot of support around PD and how to teach and how to be a teacher, but not necessarily a lot of support around you as a person. It’s not there.” And to corroborate that statement, in our final interview when I asked what external supports she wished she could have had, she replied, “I didn’t have any district level support for social emotional anything. Even though we talk about teaching the whole student and doing that social-emotional learning for the student, there’s nothing there for the teachers.” At one point Lindsay just said simply, “I feel exhausted.”

Teaching had a significant impact on each of the participant’s personal lives. All of them described working and/or worrying in their off times from work. All of them described feeling exhausted. All of them gave up something important to them or sacrificed their belief in their right to self-care if they perceived it to come at the expense of their students. This is an important finding that demonstrates the porous nature of the educator’s boundaries between their personal and professional lives.

### **Results of these Changes**

The data indicate that all four participants experienced three primary professional and personal changes by the end of their first year teaching. The first was that they had formed deep and more meaningful relationships with students. The second was increased levels of confidence, and the third, experienced more strongly by the younger participants but still identified by all four, was a questioning and eventual solidifying of their identity as educators. One finding I believe is also important to note is the two youngest

participants, Isaak and Paloma, described gaining more of a capacity for empathy, compassion, understanding, and vulnerability.

### **Student Relationships and Vulnerability**

*“We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection.”*

*-Brene Brown*

All four participants identified the importance of getting to know their students as whole people within and beyond the context of the classroom, which, as they stated, required a tremendous amount of vulnerability. I am defining “vulnerability” as willingness and courage to open up and allow others to see unguarded parts of the self. It can often create a reciprocal consequence, with the individual experiencing increased vulnerability to inspire others to greater levels of vulnerability as well. In other words, the teachers and students created symbiotic relationship in which they experienced themselves and each other as human, not just, as Sartre would have described it, as a role or a label with a relationship governed by policies and norms. For at Paloma, this openness to vulnerability extended beyond the classroom to other people in her life. I also noted in my research journal an observation that as the year went on and I spent more time with each of the participants, they all to varying degrees became more open and unguarded with me.

A recurring word for Ruth was “genuine.” When discussing relationships with students she clearly valued authentic and meaningful interactions. She stated,

“And so I’ve had some really great genuine conversations.

And just being able to take that relationship and apply it to

the academic part of our relationship so when I tell them I know you can do this. They believe me. And they make that attempt as opposed to saying no I can't and just shutting down."

She went on to say in another interview, "my desire to connect with them is genuine and always will be. I just know what it takes some days it's not as easy to make that connection. But it doesn't mean I'm like I'm 100% in regardless of their behavior. Regardless of what's going on in their life because that's what I believe in." And in yet another interview, when discussing a fight that had broken out in her class, I asked her what upset her the most and she replied, "it was a general and genuine caring for their wellbeing."

Ruth made a poignant comment about a success story she had experienced by the end of the year with a specific student: "I have one student and I tell her now when I first met her I'm like you were a tough cookie and she said yeah I was. I said how many months do you think it took me to make you smile? And she was like I don't know miss, like 6? And to me, to have that conversation now that makes me feel successful as a teacher."

This comment was significant because it showed that Ruth measured her personal success by her interactions, deepening relationships, and honest conversations with her students. She is clear that she defined student success in terms of academics, but that her personal success is demonstrated by how genuine her relationships were with her students.

One moving conversation, which was actually off the record, stemmed from a highly courageous and vulnerable act on her part. I had finished the interview and turned off the recording and was on my way out the door when she stopped me with a small smile I'd never seen before. She spoke haltingly, saying she'd been diagnosed with cancer. She didn't go into detail, and, like Lindsay, stayed determinedly cheerful when discussing it saying, "I'm going to beat this this thing." She assured me she believed in the importance of our study and still wanted to be a part of it, but that she couldn't always predict her schedule because, between chemotherapy and recovery, she didn't always know when she'd be in the school. At one point she also smiled at me and said she was extremely grateful that I was conducting a study for first year teachers because it was a necessary and there wasn't enough out there for them. I don't believe I have words to describe how awed and humbled I was by her grace and ability to remain selfless, positive, and even grateful.

Relationships with students were and important, recurring theme with Ruth, and a further indication that Ruth had worked to create an open, vulnerable space with her students is her description of the progress she made in developing relationships with them. She mentioned that by the end of the year she'd "had some really great genuine conversations." She went on to say, "And just being able to take that relationship and apply it to the academic part of our relationship so when I tell them I know you can do this. They believe me." These and her description of her "tough cookie" helped me understand how she forged personal relationships with students and defined her own success in terms of caring for them, helping them, and getting to know them. This, she believed, was the most important element to reaching them.

Isaak discussed both how important it was for him to get to know his students as people, but added that he saw the relationship as reciprocal. Over the course of the year he allowed his students to get to know him as a person as well. He mentioned that at the beginning of the year he was hesitant to let his students into his personal space. I'm including a section of the conversation here:

Researcher: ...Allowing the students to embed themselves in your emotions and your heart. And they asked me what's going to be the hardest thing about coming back and working with kids again and I was just like. I said because I know that they're going to open me up and by the end of the year I'm going to care so much about them. And putting your heart on the line like that, what I'm hearing is that's what's happened with you over the course of this year.

Isaak: now that you put it in those words it's making me reflect on how I've been maybe intentionally trying to resist that. Because I want to have my own life outside of school. And at this point it's like I can't."

The change that occurred for Isaak was that he allowed himself the space and vulnerability to see his students, not just in the role of students but as whole people. This evolution in Issak allowed his students to reciprocate in kind and allow themselves to see Issak as a whole person and not just as someone occupying a role or authority and professionalism.

Another evolution I noticed with Isaak was, as he became more comfortable opening up to his students, he also gradually opened up more to me. In our last interview he was courageous enough to describe some of his background and family context:

“I don’t have any emotional males in my family and I have a pretty big family. The males in my family a good chunk of them don’t even cry at funerals...I mean that’s exactly what I’m talking about that it’s hard for me to open up to and accept in a classroom, but it’s something I want to try and do more. Is show that yes I’m a hard man and I play rugby and we talk about rugby in class. I was just talking about it with my last class because I have a big game coming up this weekend. But at the same time you can be a multifaceted man and show emotion even though you’re like a barbarian rugby player. You know it’s not just one or the other.”

This quote is significant because it shows deep reflection and growth on Issak’s part. He began breaking away from the precedent and models set by the men in his family. He said also, as mentioned earlier, that he noticed a change in his students when he allowed himself to be vulnerable:

“But I think when I allow myself to get vulnerable and let that shield down whether or not the students allow themselves to be vulnerable too at least they can just see me as human. And I think it builds mutual respect. Like I start to respect them more when they see me and treat me as

another human rather than as another authority figure that they have to be obedient for.”Isaak’s relationships with his students progressed to greater and greater depth as he allowed himself to open up to them. The students noticed and responded to that by opening up to him as well.

One other thing Isaak mentioned was the extracurricular aspect of building relationships. As shown in one of the above quotes, he mentioned that in his weekly meetings he would invite his students to his rugby games. At one point he said he “an hour of playing pickup basketball with [my students] after school will help with behavior for like a month and a half.” At another point he mentioned going to one of his student’s football games: “It was like great. And then it just helps in so many different realms too. Like I’m sitting with the students’ parents getting to know them while we’re watching them play football.”

Isaak found that spending time with his students, both within and outside of the classroom, allowed him to see them as multifaceted people and allowed for the students to see him in contexts outside of the classroom. This can take courage on the part of the teacher, as interacting outside of the classroom means that there aren’t rules and policies governing the relationship. While it can be uncomfortable, it can also lead to stronger, more whole relationships between teacher and student.

Paloma was very vocal about how much she cared about her students, a philosophy I saw enacted over and over again in her classroom. Echoing Isaak, she said she also found it difficult to have real conversations with her students during her lessons. She believed that much of the relationship building happened outside of the lesson. To



this point she stated, “I think whatever I do do for my philosophy is just my own personal... and I can’t even do it in my classroom. I would have to keep students after. What’s going on? I’ve noticed you’re upset about this. How can I help you?” She also mentioned attending sports games and theater productions. She had said it was difficult to motivate herself to get out and do things after school. She said, “If I *do* do something I go to the high school play. I go to the high school basketball game. I go to the high school football game.” Though Paloma was perennially exhausted, she found joy in interacting with and watching her students in venues outside of the classroom.

When describing a success story she also brought up a conversation that happened outside of the lesson itself. She described it saying, “There was definitely one student who one day she came in to get extra help and her and I started talking and we realized that we had a lot in common. She wants to study linguistics. I studied it. Her love for language is the same as mine. She’s really smart. And she really opened up to me.” Both Paloma and Isaak mentioned that their own personal and shared interests with students’ lives allowed them to connect with the students beyond the prescribed teacher-student role relationship that is often enacted in the classroom.

Like Isaak, however, Paloma described trepidation about caring for her students as much as she did. She stated, “And I’m glad I can build relationships with so many of my student but then you just care about them so much and I don’t know.” An interesting fact about Paloma is that she experienced personal growth that extended beyond the classroom and her student relationships. She mentioned that “I think I’ve become more patient. I’ve become more understanding of others. Even if they’re adults.” This is

significant because it demonstrates that through teaching she experienced profound internal and lasting change in her life outside of work.

Lindsay also described the importance of building relationships with her students, and how connecting as people was critical for reaching them academically. To that point she stated, “They get to see me as me as a teacher but me as a person as well, which is great for them to see.” She described its importance saying, “Building relationships is key for me. I love building those relationships with the kids. [If] you don’t have that you don’t get far.” And in a separate interview stated,

“If you don’t love your students as a person it’s kind of hard to want to teach them! And if you don’t have that relationship that trust with that student there’s not going to be any learning going on in that lesson. The first week or week and a half I usually spend getting to know my kids. Every lesson I spend 2 or 3 minutes checking in with all of my kids. How’s your day, how’s your weekend.”

Like Isaak and Paloma, Lindsay mentioned heightened abilities to connect with students because of shared experiences. She stated, “I grew up in not so nice circumstances so I’m able to connect with the kids on some of those levels as well....But I know it and I can connect with them on a different level than just teacher/student. Which I think is a big key factor as well.”

All four participants discussed the importance of building relationships with students and connecting with them in a deeper way than teacher-to-student. Two of the four- it is perhaps worth noting that these two were unmarried without kids of their own-

described attending extracurricular functions and spending time with students outside of school as helpful ways to build relationships with students. All four believed that having stronger relationships with their students allowed them to reach their students personally and academically.

### **Confidence**

*“What if I fall?  
Oh, but my darling, what if you fly?”*

*-Erin Hanson*

When I walked in, Lindsay was seated at a table the shape of a half-donut. She sat in the donut hole, and four students were seated around her on the outside of the donut. She was smiling and when she stood up I could see the bulge of her belly that presaged the entrance of another life in our world. The students were bent over their papers. One, a chubby African American boy in a green sweatshirt, had pushed his chair way back from the donut table and was perched precariously on the edge. He had propped himself up on his elbows and held his pencil in a firm grip very close to the tip. He jiggled his foot up and down up and down and hummed to himself. One girl with caramel-colored skin, a small pixie face, and dark hair scraped into two high pigtails was watching Lindsay with large, serious eyes as she wrote on the board. After a moment her face broke into a smile and her hand shot into the air. Lindsay answered her smile and asked “yes, what is it?” gently. The pixie (I came to think of her as “the pixie”) said, “we did that with our teacher yesterday.” Lindsay’s smile widened and she said, “yes you did. I know.” And she asked for the answer.

This was my last observation in Lindsay’s classroom. There were three weeks left in the school year. When I walked up to the building that morning even the gray industrial bricks seemed warmed and cheered by the spring sunshine. The ubiquitous schoolyard American flag rippled in the breeze, and the trees, which had looked so stark and naked throughout the winter, were blooming with young leaves. The last testing cycle had been endured and completed and the building itself seemed to have let out its breath.

No longer the drawn, tense woman who had struggled to hide her doubt and misery that past December, Lindsay bloomed as well in the space and habitat of her classroom. What’s more, I saw this easing of tension in all four participants, as if each had carried a burden a long, long way, put it down, and were surprised at the lightness and straightness of their spines.

All four of my teachers said their confidence levels had shot up by the end of the school year. Two participants, Isaak and Paloma, acknowledged that this confidence helped them relax, become more flexible, and open up more to their students. This led me to understand that for Isaak and Poloma especially, confidence and relationship-building were related growths. For all four participants, confidence allowed them to become more authentic in the classroom.

In our final interview when I asked Ruth about her professional growth she responded,

“I think I’m more secure in my practice. I definitely feel-  
I’m not always second-guessing myself. I feel like when I’m  
making an instructional move it’s the right one. It’s based on

prior experience and therefore I'm doing it for a reason. And then I feel like as that shift occurred then I am more relaxed as a teacher in front of my students. And am able to engage with them differently because it's not so much about this is the lesson I had planned and this is what I expect us to do, it's where are we going to go with this."

This quote is significant because it demonstrates that Ruth shifted from perceiving herself as being fully responsible for the lesson to being a collaborator in the lesson with her students. As she relaxed her control in the classroom she also added flexibility in her own practice and her role as a teacher, as demonstrated by the following quote: "...you have to be able to adjust who you are and what you do based on what they start to show you." To allow that shift to happen takes confidence and a willingness to allow for ambiguity or unknown outcomes because it gives the students a more prominent role in shaping their learning. When Ruth began to engage the students in collaborating with her in real time during the lessons it broke down traditional roles of teacher and student and allowed them to function in a more authentic, symbiotic way.

Issak's professional shift was apparent in two different quotes from interviews at different points of the year. He shifted from having a sense of running on a constantly accelerating treadmill to shaping and taking charge of the material he introduced into his classroom. In our first interview he stated,

"but I find myself so concerned with what am I going to teach tomorrow. And I prepared for tomorrow. What do I need to do right now. And I don't stop to think well what

have I done so far, what have I gone through to get here, what have my students gone through, what have we already done, I'm always looking forward and not really reflecting."

In our final interview, when discussing his professional growth he stated,

"now I've figured out what I can do and what's my style and what works for me. And the first half of the year was a lot of taking from other teachers. Taking material, taking ideas, and then regurgitating that as my lessons. And as the year has gone on I still accept and like to collaborate and I even collaborate more in a sense now, but that's because I can offer ideas and I can offer new material that I'm creating now."

While Isaak does not explicitly use the word "confidence," the fact that he became more comfortable shaping himself and his lessons in a way that "worked for him" implies that he gained confidence in taking ownership of his teaching and learned to begin the process of defining himself as a practitioner and teacher.

Paloma explicitly stated that she felt much more confident by the end of the year and that that had a direct impact on her relationship-building with students. To that point when I asked in our final interview how she'd seen herself evolve professionally she replied, "I am way more confident as a professional. I walk in I know what we're going to do I know how it's going to be done and that confidence has allowed me to get to know my students a little bit better."

She also described the same phenomenon as Isaak in that she became more comfortable incorporating others' materials in her classroom in a way that seemed authentic and right to her. At the beginning of the year Paloma was spending one free period every day observing a veteran teacher and implementing that teacher's lesson plans in her own classroom. After awhile she got a sense of the teacher's sequencing, "And because I did that I don't have to go observe his class as much because I can already tell what she's going to do next. So I kind of stay and look at the book and think ok this is how I want to do it. So I've been able to go on my own a little bit because of that." I think the phrase "go on my own a little bit" is particularly meaningful. For me it calls to my mind a child's first steps. They are wobbly and usually still monitored, but regardless, the child is independently mobile for the first time in her life. It is the foundation for exploration and independence.

Lindsay also stated clearly, "I feel more confident at the end of the year than I did at the beginning of the year." She also described becoming more relaxed with her lessons, stating, "But I feel more alive and joyful in my room during those on the fly moments than if I'm just trying to go by the lesson plan. Yes I like to have a guideline of where I would like to go for the lesson but I don't think especially in sped with small groups it needs to be detailed." This quote demonstrates a phenomenon similar to Ruth's: that having complete control over the trajectory and outcome a lesson is less desirable than allowing for student discovery and unexpected moments within the lesson. Similar to Ruth as well, it requires confidence and a knowledge of one's students to let them explore topics "on the fly" in the classroom.

## **Identity**

By the end of the year each participant had described teaching as an integral part of their identity. This was especially true for Isaak and Paloma, who were younger than the other two participants and I believe were struggling more with the existential question of who they were and how they could use their unique talents and gifts to impact the world.

At 24 years old, Isaak was the youngest of the participants. Throughout the year he held rich conversations, both internally and with the people in his life, about his values and desires in life. His commitment to his students and his desire to continue to improve as a teacher were clear, so as well was his love of the outdoors and his draw to see the world. Regarding the reflection and questioning that teaching caused him to undergo he stated, “I think other ways that I’ve grown have really just been like peeling back the layers of why I do what I do. And why I got into this career and in my first year I think about that a lot.”

The conjunction of his questioning seemed encapsulated by the two divergent lives of Isaak and his brother. Isaak described this first in an early interview saying,

“I’ve had this conversation with my brother because he’s traveling all over the world and doing these amazing things, and then he’s searching for deeper meaning now. And I’m like I don’t have that problem...when it comes to leading a meaningful life, that’s not even an issue right now for me. And I’m pretty stoked to be able to say that at a young age, that like at the end of the day, or at the start of the day,



getting out of bed, you know I have 150 reasons why here.  
Because of my 150 students. And it's pretty easy to find  
meaning in that and feel good about what I'm doing.”

This wasn't the end of Isaak's questioning though. In a later interview he brought it up again in more detail. Again, I believe that as the year went on Isaak became more comfortable opening up to me. The excerpt from this interview is long, but I want to include it in its entirety because the length and depth metaphysically mirror exactly how difficult it was for Isaak to reconcile his conflicting desires and values:

“[my brother and I] talk almost every day, and sometimes I'm like dude don't even call me right now I don't want to hear what you're doing. Because it makes me so jealous. He'll be with a group of professional skiers up in the alps or British Columbia and getting paid for it right!? And he's there because he chose to be not because he's super skilled at something you know? That's what he wanted to do so he went and grabbed it. And he's had to climb the ladder to get there and it's not been easy for him. But it's like it wasn't easy for me to become a teacher either. We made those choices to go different ways. And now we're both here. This is my first year this is kind of his first year really in that career...And that's kind of like selfish or whatever but...I'll be in this little nasty 12-year-old- boy bathroom on my break ... and get a picture of him on top of some mountain

or in the Keys or wherever he is ... and then I'm like what...am I doing here? But then the flip side of that is he's expressed to me how sometimes he's like, 'man I feel like I'm just running around from point A to B and yeah I'm snapping some photos here and I'm meeting cool people here and there, but I don't have any real meaning.' And that's something that I'm not lacking at all. If I have trouble getting out of bed in the morning I just start thinking about all the you know I have a 120 reasons to get out of bed if you know what I mean? He is trying to think of one reason to get out of bed. And then I go back to well I love what I do."

Isaak discussed this for another few minutes, and then in an offhand comment mentioned that because of teaching he has difficulty relating to other peers his own age. This thought led him back to affirming his choice to be a teacher, but revealed a theme that occurred as well with Paloma: both began to experience difficulties relating to other peers in their lives. For Isaak it was his friends and for Paloma, as I will demonstrate presently, it was her partner. Both felt that teaching had given meaning to their lives, but it also carried responsibilities beyond what others in their immediate peer group could fully understand. Isaak stated,

"I'm 24 years old. And my friends who are 24 it's like such a different life. And I try to hang out with them on the weekends and stuff and I'm just like you guys don't

understand or maybe I don't understand! Because we're just like you know at such different points. And the things they're stressed out about versus the things I'm stressed out about! You know I'm like you don't understand! But maybe I don't understand. And there's like 100 things that make me want to leave this job and 101 things that make me want to stay here and I just keep going back and forth. And at the end of the day I'm super happy to be here and I'm definitely going to come back next year and then I start thinking after that? I don't know. Two years from now? And it's not because I've had any type of bad experience it's just because of like what do I want to do? What else? It's so meaningful, this job. But then I start to think selfishly."

For Isaak, teaching caused him to deeply question his own values, desires, and motivations. The weight and responsibility of teaching caused him difficulty relating to his own peers, and the exciting life his brother led caused him what the existentialists refer to as "anguish" when thinking about his own life in a city. But he kept returning to the fact that teaching created deep meaning in his life, which was enough to tip the balance in favor of him staying with the profession, at least for one more year.

Through teaching, Paloma was also better able to define her values and desires in life. And, like Isaak, her experiences teaching made it more difficult for her to relate to the people in her life. She mentioned how she and her partner broke up that year because he could no longer relate to her. She recounts this saying, "I was stressed a lot of the

time, but a lot of it was that he just couldn't relate. He would just tell me turn it off, turn it off, turn it off. And I'm like well, it's hard to turn it off because these are humans, these kids that I'm thinking about. This is their future." She went on to describe a coworker's similar challenges saying, "it's interesting because one of my coworkers who is my age and this is her second year teaching she's also very picky about who she dates, and teaching and the profession is number one for her. It's her number one priority and so she struggles to find someone who can understand that."

After discussing how teaching helped her define what she would want or not want in a partner we had the following conversation:

Researcher: so would you say that teaching has allowed you to further or more strongly define yourself?

Paloma: yes

Researcher: and in defining yourself have you been able to better define what it is that you want in your personal life as well as your professional life?

Paloma: most definitely. Yes. Without a doubt. That's exactly what I was trying to say. I'm happy about it you know? I was kind of tired of living where do I want to go what do I want to do and having jobs and hating it and so I like that I feel secure and confident. And I love what I do. I'm constantly learning, constantly challenged, which I love.

Researcher: it sounds like it was really a grounding experience.

Paloma: yeah. Definitely. I thought I was going to lose my mind but I survived! (laughs)

Teaching, then supplied Paloma with direction and grounding in life. It allowed her to more fully define herself and her values.

Neither Lindsay nor Ruth experienced identity questioning to the extent that Paloma and Isaak did, but both of them did mention that teaching was a part of their identity. Ruth stated, “I’m a wife, I’m a mom, and I’m a teacher. I take all of those things very seriously.” And Lindsay, when I asked her what changes she’d experienced this year she replied, “I finally view myself as a teacher.”

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of a first-year teacher from an Existentialist philosophical framework. I wanted to explore the idea that teaching and the process of becoming a teacher represented a deeply personal journey of challenge, change, love, and perseverance. This hypothesis was corroborated by the data.

While many of the findings were significant, there were, I believe, five main discussion points that the data point to. The first two, teaching in good faith and the concept of transcendence, involve a return to the literature review. The other three conclusions were more granular and embedded in the data: one is that environment and culture of a school has a tremendous impact on the teacher's well being. The next is that the first year of teaching forces teachers to withstand a tremendous amount of anxiety and stress, which in turn affects both positive and negative changes in their personal lives. The third finding is that teachers enter the profession from a desire to enact meaningful change in others' lives. This ability to help and guide others is potentially a healing experience, as the teachers all described being drawn to an age group that reflected times of significant struggle and trauma in their own lives. Tied into that finding, which is related to teaching in good faith, is the implication that many of the educational policies and mandates, especially for the participants in high-needs schools and heavily-tested subjects, could stand as a barrier to the teachers enacting ideal classroom spaces.

## **Teaching in Good Faith**

“Good faith,” as a quick reminder, was a concept posed by Sartre referring to understanding and living into one’s true nature. If I am living as someone “whom I have to be” (Sartre, 1943/ 2004) and not someone whom I choose to be or even, simply, whom I am, than I am living in bad faith. The participants all conceived ways to live into their integrity, but often encountered challenges in reconciling personal values and philosophies with their teaching environment. Three of the four participants mentioned that they were able to enact their philosophies most often outside of the classroom environment.

Teaching in good faith occurs when the classroom teacher exists in harmony with the values, philosophies, and beliefs of the self-who-teaches. Throughout this study we saw examples of the participants creating space for themselves to teach in good faith. For Paloma and Isaak this was sometimes as simple as adapting other teachers’ lessons to fit their own style and values. For Paloma this meant pacing the lessons in a way that allowed her to make time for teaching the social skills she found so important to living a meaningful adult life, and for Isaak this meant molding the lessons into a more student-driven, collaborative style.

These practices were not always endorsed by the schools that the teachers worked in. Lindsay in particular, because of the restrictive and prescriptive nature of her school, struggled throughout the year to maintain her integrity and teach in good faith and also meet the requirements set by the district and her administration. Some of her authentic practices designed to make learning fun and accessible to her students were looked at askance by her administration and resulted in, as she described it, “getting dinged.”

In corroboration, Isaak stated explicitly that he believed the curriculum pushed out space to address the social-emotional needs of his students. To reiterate a particularly poignant quote, he stated, “the home life is crazy with so many of my students. The majority are in broken homes. And why don’t we address that in school? And ways to deal with it? ...stuff that they can actually grasp on to. And we don’t... sometimes I’m restricted by that curriculum too. And it’s like you need to learn Hammurabi’s code, and we can’t talk about your social emotional well being.”

Paloma also mentioned that she had to make time outside of class to fully live her philosophy. The content and curriculum needs took over her classroom space, and as a result, she said, her most meaningful interactions with students occurred on her own time. Isaak as well discussed how his relationships with his students deepened when he began making time to see them in contexts outside of the classroom. He even said that, especially in the beginning of the year, he would almost refuse to allow the students’ emotional needs to disrupt or disturb his classroom space. But upon reflection he asked, “Lindsay mentioned how important it was to her that students knew they could call her any time day or night if they were having problems. She even gave out her cell phone number to students who she did not teach in her classes because she was worried about them. These teachers’ philosophies all centered on holistically and genuinely caring for and developing their students, but they often found that all of the technical, curricular requirements of their profession severely hindered them from enacting their philosophies during the time they were in class. This indicates to me that if we are to create healthy, supportive schools for teachers and students we need to acknowledge that schools are political and social spaces and allow for well-being to be validated and encouraged in



classrooms. Right now, especially in schools like Lindsay's but even in schools like Isaak's, there is such a dogged focus on hitting content standards in ways that are district-vetted-and-approved that there is very little space given for teachers to create warm, caring classroom communities that welcome and validate deeper student needs. Teachers are expected to form these relationships and practices on their own time. In turn, this diminishes the teacher's wellbeing and ability to live out her philosophy in her profession. Powerfully influential voices have shaped our perception of "effective teaching" to define it as content-driven, outcomes-oriented, and quantitatively measured. But what if the stuff of teaching was something deeper, more subtle, more true, and more messy than these voices would like to admit? If we changed our focus from developing practitioners to supporting and nurturing the inner beliefs and values of our new teachers we will have created a radical space that blurs the boundaries of this "dangerous intersection of public and private life," (Palmer, 1997, p. 18) and allows the sustained living and being of the teaching profession.

### **Transcendence**

The other concept from the literature review that I believe is threaded, if subtly, through this data is the idea of transcendence. Transcendence, as described in the literature, stood in contrast to the facticity of grounded, mundane experiences. Transcendence was experienced when one was lifted up and outside of his or her everyday mindset and given a chance to live beyond the normal or rational. Transcendence, which is often predicated by doubt or difficulty, is a highly metaphysical concept that is difficult to see. The instances where I believe I saw glimpses of transcendence in the data were when teachers described their success stories. Each of the

success stories referred to a student with whom the teacher initially had a difficult time connecting but then experienced a breakthrough in their relationship.

The breakthroughs in their relationships occurred either at a specified, identifiable time, such as was the case with Paloma and Isaak, or over the whole course of the year, as with Lindsay and Ruth. Each teacher's success story referred to a deepening in their relationship with a particular student which allowed them to understand and relate to the student in a different way than they'd done previously. Each success story came after weeks, if not months, of doubt and struggle with that student, and the breakthroughs were either subtle and gradual or a moment that the teacher could point to.

For Paloma, as discussed briefly in the last chapter, this moment occurred when a student who had been disengaged came to see her after school. Paloma had thought the student was disengaged because she disliked the class, but in this unstructured time after school Paloma discovered that the student had struggles with her family and home environment which were keeping her from school. When they got to talking they discovered that they had a lot in common. After that, Paloma and the student formed a close relationship, with the student seeking out support and guidance from Paloma and reengaging herself in the Paloma's class.

Isaak's breakthrough happened when he allowed himself to be extremely vulnerable in class and showed an inspirational spoken word poem that, as he described it, had nothing to do with the curriculum but that he found personally meaningful and inspiring. One student who he had struggled to connect with all year had been moved by the video and took time privately to tell Isaak so. This was close to the end of the year and, while Isaak and this student did not form as close a bond as Paloma and her

student, Isaak was able to see this student in a different way which allowed him to have more patience and empathy toward this student in and outside of class.

For both Ruth and Lindsay success came after months of working with one or two particular students, not giving up, and staying open to the progress that they made. Ruth mentioned that her breakthrough occurred when she was able to get her “tough cookie” to smile, which took six months of persistence and caring. Lindsay nurtured two students, finding and encouraging their strengths and delighting in them when they began to emerge from their shells. She created a safe space for them to be successful, and by the end of the year they had outstripped their classmates in both academics and personal growth.

These success stories demonstrate how the participants and their students were able to transcend their every-day types of interactions and, through extraordinary interactions, forge meaningful relationships together. One common factor to this transcendence was that regardless of how often or for how long they were rebuffed, the teachers continued to draw on their inner resources and values to not give up on those students and to continue to offer invitations to growth, vulnerability, and connection. These times occurred, either incrementally or all at once, because the teachers invited in and were open to reflective experiences within and beyond their normal, every day curriculum-oriented interactions with students.

### **Environment**

One thing that remains clear is that a supportive environment is crucial for first year teachers. All four participants discussed how helpful it was to have colleagues and administrators that they could turn to for help. All four participants described how

administrators helped to set the tone for the entire school, and three of the four school administrations were supportive.

Lindsay's administrators also set a tone for their school, but it was more negative and deficit-oriented than the others. Of all of the participants, Lindsay felt that she had the least amount of colleague support due to the politics of her school. She described her administrators as "watch dogs." This punitive environment made her reluctant to reach out for help in case she appeared incompetent or weak. By contrast, Paloma, Ruth, and Isaak all described their administrators as approachable and helpful. I don't believe it's a coincidence that these three participants, whose administrators were supportive, also experienced their colleagues as generous, welcoming, and supportive. Of all four of the participants, Lindsay was the only one who expressed real doubt that she could make it through the year, and she attributes her success to her own incredible tenacity, her love for her students, and to the single grade team that was supportive and welcoming of her.

All of the other participants mentioned that without the support of their colleagues they wouldn't have made it through the year. Isaak, though he highly values both time spent outdoors and time with his family, expressed reluctance to move schools either out of the city or closer to family because he had such a supportive network in his building. This further supports the idea that building culture and the tone set by administration are absolutely crucial for helping first year teachers stay in the profession and feel successful.

I also do not believe it is a coincidence that the school that offered the least amount of support, Lindsay's, was also the one most hyper focused on test scores. It was the highest needs school in this research pool with almost 100% of its students receiving free or reduced lunch. As a turnaround school, the staff and leadership were operating

under a threat of charter-school take over and a complete overhaul of the staff and administration if test scores did not rise a certain percentage. The fact that it was the least supportive school helps corroborate the idea that that a scarcity mindset, in this case a scarcity mindset around test scores, significantly diminishes the teachers' autonomy and authenticity in their classrooms. These latter elements are important in that they more fully allow teachers to gain confidence, reach their students, and find fulfillment in their work.

It is significant as well that the scarcity mindset exists at levels higher than the school administration. This points to a need to address the values set by higher levels of administration in the school system including the superintendent, the school board, and if possible at a national level as well. If Jack built a house, it would be the current educational system: Teachers and students, especially those in the most at-risk areas, are often in thrall to a strictly hierarchical system that has no built-in feedback loop or access to two-way communication. The more at-risk the students, the stricter the sanctions and the more the scarcity mindset defines how and what should be taught. This results in a restriction of a teacher's growth and development and often means they are teaching in ways antithetical to their values. This, in turn, has the potential to create a largely constricted, uninspiring classroom experience for the students, which diminishes curiosity and intrinsic motivation, which, as the data indicate, nurture the most joyful and sustaining teacher-student interactions. The overarching deficit mindset that governs high-needs, "low-performing" schools implies that there is something "wrong" with the teachers and the students, that the problem needs to be "fixed" and the measure of its repair is test scores. There is a pervasive value judgment placed on test scores that defines

teachers and students as “good or bad,” “worthy or unworthy.” Struggling against this tide are the teachers of these students who see their charges as inherently worthy of respect, pride, and humanity. The more administrators have the courage and capacity resist the pressures to privilege test scores and teaching to the test, and the more they can set a tone of care, vulnerability, support, trust, belief in their staff, and positivity, the more sustaining, honest, and innovative, and downright pleasant the school will be.

To conclude this section, my findings illuminated how different teaching environments can either foster or stymie the realization of good faith. The more teachers were able to develop themselves and grow their confidence, the more they allowed their students to truly see them on levels deeper than simply the teacher-student roles, which helped them form stronger relationships with their students (which helped the teachers guide them academically as well as personally). This is a very important cycle and one that I believe should be roundly addressed, examined, and upheld in discussions of district, school, teacher, and student needs.

### **Love and Stress**

One of the most cogent findings was that the participants saw school as a place to foster and guide holistic growth in their students. Teaching content, while important, was a secondary concern. All four participants believed that their ability to effectively teach content was directly related to the strength of their relationships with their students. All four participants believed that teaching content would be next-to-impossible without first developing trust with the students and getting to know them as people.

This coin I am describing: the relationship building, the love and care my participants had for their students, has another, more side to it. Deeply caring about their

students also meant that the teachers were constantly thinking about them: turning over complex problems in their heads, agonizing over grades, and feeling guilty for never doing enough. This darker, more painful aspect of relationship building is, I believe, the place on which teacher prep programs and induction programs need to focus if they're to create long-term educators. The guilt, the sleepless nights, the fact that even on weekends and breaks the teachers were still worrying, wondering, and working took an enormous toll on them personally. Their personal relationships suffered and in one case, severed. Their sense of well-being suffered. One participant described needing sleeping medication to be able to sleep at night despite the fact that she was exhausted all the time. They felt selfish taking time for themselves because of the sheer amount of stuff they had to do at any given time and the amount of learning they still had to do to improve their practices. Feeling constant doubt, guilt, and worry is an immensely draining way of life and one that none of the participants was fully prepared for.

This begs the question: can anyone be fully prepared for an experience like this? The answer to that, I think, is no. There are some things that one must experience to fully understand. But the way in which someone enters a challenging situation is critical. If the teacher is fully prepped and ready to feel exhausted and guilty, if the teacher has induction supports that address and validate these social-emotional changes to help the teacher frame herself not as a failure but as a caring, hard-working, connected human being, this would make the entire journey more meaningful, profound, and rewarding.

### **Teaching as Healing**

Teaching and the process of becoming a teacher is a deeply personal experience. One of the most heart-catching findings of this study is that each participant entered the

teaching profession to ameliorate for this next generation the trauma and challenges that they experienced in their own past. Each teacher even returned to the age group that mirrored their own age when they experienced profound struggle or trauma. It is my belief that returning to teach the age group at which they had struggled the most was a journey to understand and heal some of their own past pain.

Each participant described how they wanted their students to be able to come to them when they, the students, were doubting, hurting, confused, or in pain, and all four participants coached students through struggles that they were having at home or in other parts of their lives. The participants acted as mentors to the students with one, Lindsay, going so far as to give her number to kids she had never even taught just so that they would have a safe adult to talk to if they were in trouble.

Isaak resisted this role for the first part of the school year, believing and rightly so, that as soon as he let his students in they would take over his heart and soul. And by the end of the year, once he'd begun allowing himself to be more vulnerable, he was attending football games and dance recitals on his personal time. He wondered aloud in our final interview why there wasn't more time and space in school for students to talk about their social-emotional needs. How at the beginning of the year he would shut down any discussion of that in his classroom. By the end of the year he was embracing those conversations and just trying to help his students "be human to each other." Paloma was explicit about her philosophy of teaching being to help students become responsible, critically thinking, empowered members of society. She mentioned having a difficult time in high school and wanted to help her kids use education for self-improvement and social mobility. Ruth, who never saw her heritage reflected in her teachers' curricula,



sought to create a course of study that validated her students' experiences and empower them as writers, scholars and people.

The significance of this finding is that it corroborates and helps elucidate the work of thinkers like Palmer, Michalec, and Korthagen. Teaching and the process of becoming a teacher is a profoundly personal and meaningful journey. When someone seeks to address past trauma and pain by giving guidance, care, and love to the next generation so that they can have the support that had been denied to the one giving, that person's priorities as a teacher are going to extend far beyond concern for content mastery. When viewed in this light teaching is elevated to a courageous act of self-giving, strength, and personal growth. However this type of motivation, though it serves as the foundation for all that a teacher does, is not touched upon, explored, or validated by teacher education and induction programs.

I realized while writing this dissertation that my entire research process mirrored the journey undertaken by these four incredible teachers. In formulating my research question I was drawn to the first year of teaching because that stands in my mind and heart as the absolute hardest year of my life. Teaching in the Bronx brought me face to face with the realness and violence of poverty and deprivation.

As a white woman teaching all-minority students I was also brought into abrupt contact with my own immense privilege. For the first time in my life, working in the south Bronx and living in east Harlem, I began to understand what it felt like to be a minority. Three years later, when I moved to an ethnically heterogeneous neighborhood in Brooklyn, I felt as though a weight had been lifted from me. I no longer had to steel myself for the stares, heckles, and softly murmured expletives I would receive every time

I stepped outside my door. I no longer needed to take the train five stops to the wealthy upper west side to find fresh vegetables. I did not need to be on my guard for barbed wire hanging at face level, pick my way gingerly around ice and dog feces caked on the sidewalk, or walk in the street around looming buildings just in case kids were throwing lethal 2-liters from windows 20 stories up. It hit me, walking around my Brooklyn neighborhood, that I had the privilege to retreat somewhere that felt safe, where I could be myself and dress in ways I wanted without worrying about harassment or harm. It hit me at the same time that my students did not have that privilege. Teaching, and especially my first year, indelibly changed my internal make up. I was 23 when I began, much like Paloma and Isaak: seeking an identity, a use for myself in the world. And much like Lindsay, I had never in my life been so exhausted, depressed, inadequate, and doubtful of my own abilities. Throughout this study Lindsay's stories were the ones that brought back echoes of those long, tense, bleak days because I also had a harsh, relentless administration that took a hands off, sink-or-swim approach. And in some dreams they weren't the watchdogs but the sharks in the water.

That first year set the tone for me as a teacher. I remember my first spring break. I couldn't afford to go anywhere and plus, I was behind on my grading. It was a blustery March and one of my colleagues and I took the hour and a half train ride to Coney Island because I'd never been there. The beach was cold, damp, and deserted. We walked for miles leaving footprints behind us, saying very little, leaving furrows where our toes had dragged. We rode the old, rickety Cyclone and were grateful for the *frisson* of fear that leapt into our spines, grateful to feel something again other than dread. Grateful to let our guards down and scream and fully feel the weight of the responsibilities we'd undertaken

and our hopelessness of ever being good enough to fulfill those responsibilities. It's a wonder I made it through a second year, a third, a fourth. Something kept calling me back until I felt hollowed out, like I had nothing left of myself to give. Then I knew it was time to move on. And now I am returning, years later, to the scene of the first year, palette of emotion and change: frustration, anger, joy, exhaustion, inadequacy, love. All of the things I was too tired, too busy, and too afraid to reflect on while they were happening. I read old journals from that time and they're luminous with pain and wonder and small, small victories.

In the same way that we take a decidedly deficit mindset to students in the ways we evaluate them and talk about them in the literature (achievement gap, below proficient, not on grade level) we take a deficit view toward novice teachers as well. When I first got into teaching my mentor teacher told me that she understood I didn't have time to be creative, that I was just to focus on survival. We see them as below or partially proficient (which is the section of the LEAP evaluation rubric where evaluators expect new teachers to fall) especially regarding technical skills and classroom management. But what if we began to view first-year teachers with the respect and awe that they so often deserve for their passion, their care, their creative problem solving, their openness to growth, the hard work and dedication they pour into their work, for their hope and their perseverance? And then what if we took it another step further?

I believe that as a society we need reset our assumptions around the purpose of education to one that privileges the humanity and holistic development of both students and teachers. There needs to exist a two-way flow of communication to allow for the

values of the teachers and students to be acknowledged and reflected in all tiers of the system, from the national platform all the way down to the students and their families.

If we truly want to serve students, we will create the type of environments that allow for teachers to live into and explore their values and purpose for teaching, which will lead to continual personal growth, stave off burn out, validate them as humans and educators, and foster diverse, innovative practices. We should strive to reinvent our beliefs around education to make it more than a series of tasks to be checked off and instead develop for all students and teachers a space that encourages discovery, curiosity, joy, and growth. Because it is happening anyway; it is just a whole lot harder than it needs to be.

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