

# **Experienced Secondary Teachers' Perceptions of Engagement and Effectiveness: A Guide for Professional Development**

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*The purpose of this research is to describe a qualitative research study of experienced high school educators who have remained motivated and highly engaged in their teaching. Ten high school teachers who have been called "the best" by their administrators and fellow teachers were interviewed to ascertain common traits that can serve as a framework for providing professional development to assist teachers in the work force, as well as bring their voice to the National Reform Movement. The following themes emerged: teachers are ambivalent to administrative leadership as an important influence in their work; colleagues are their support network; and their commitment to the students transcends academic achievements. Key Words: Educational Reform, Secondary Education, Experienced Teachers, and Professional Development*

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## **Introduction and Background**

Former President George W. Bush has brought high schools to the front of the educational reform movement. This focus began with the No Child Left Behind of 2001, which provides an important framework and needed resources for improving all high schools and transforming those high schools with acute needs. The momentum<sup>1</sup> gained when the Department of Education launched the "Preparing America's Future High School Initiative" in October 2003. This initiative is designed to support state and local leaders in creating educational opportunities that will prepare American youth for finding success in post-secondary education and the work force, as well as becoming productive and responsible citizens (U.S. Department of Education High School Leadership Summit, 2003). The Office of Vocational and Adult Education hosted a leadership summit in Washington, D.C., on October 8, 2003. This summit brought education and policy leaders together to discuss innovative, effective methods for transforming high schools into top-notch learning institutions (Ed. Gov., 2003).

Because of this federal push on secondary education, individual states, foundations, and school districts are approaching high school reform in unique ways. These approaches support the underlying beliefs and assumptions that imposing mandates with limited resources and training, coupled with little consensus, will improve high schools. My firm belief, however, is that true reform can only occur if the people who are instrumental in implementing the mandates are at the forefront of change.

The most respected names in educational reform (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2000; Fullan, 1991; Hargreaves, 1994) have written about the importance of understanding

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mandates and change as they relate to the stakeholders. These researchers ask reformers to pay closer attention to the understandings of school practice as experienced by teachers. Unfortunately, the reality is that the stakeholders are rarely consulted, and the results are thwarted attempts to implement and institutionalize educational initiatives. I have studied teacher voice and educational reform over the last ten years. My most in-depth study and findings are reported in the co-authored book, *Teachers and Educational Change: The Lived Experience of a Secondary School Restructuring* (Nolan & Meister, 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to describe a qualitative study of experienced high school educators who have remained motivated and highly effective in their teaching. The following questions guided this study: How were these teachers able to remain engaged and enthusiastic over the course of their teaching tenure? How did these teachers experience professional growth? Who did these teachers view as their support for professional growth? How do their collective experiences support or thwart teacher voice as a way to implement reform initiatives?

### **Theoretical Framework**

I have spent the last fifteen years studying the change phenomenon as it impacts practicing teachers. This continued scholarship forms the theoretical framework for this research study. The literature presented reflects the research findings that underpin this study; that is, the change phenomenon as it impacts teachers. This literature also demonstrates the importance of including the tacit knowledge and expertise of experienced teachers.

#### *Understanding change*

Fullan (1991) writes that the problem of the meaning of change is learning how those involved in change can come to comprehend what should be changed and how it can be best accomplished while realizing that the what and the how constantly interact and reshape each other. He explains:

In order to achieve greater meaning, we must come to understand both the small and big pictures. The small picture concerns the subjective meaning or lack of meaning for individuals at all levels of the educational system. Neglect of the phenomenology of change--that is, how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended --is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most social reforms. (p. 4)

Barth (1990) records that schools are staffed with veteran, tenured personnel who have little horizontal or vertical mobility. Many of these teachers have the same classroom, the same books, the same curriculum, and the same colleagues for their entire teaching career. The only difference is their students. This routinization makes it even more difficult to change when teachers are expected to do more with less.

In order to understand the things teachers do, one must understand the teaching community or work culture. The uniqueness of an individual setting, thus, is a critical

factor in the implementation of change. In other words, reform is interpreted within a cultural framework. Webb, Corbett, and Wilson (1993) submit that, no matter how beneficial a particular reform might seem, its introduction into the schools will become part of a long history of innovative success and failure in that setting. Thus, Fullan (1991) argues the more that teachers have experienced negative attempts at implementing change, the more cynical or apathetic they may become toward new changes regardless of their merit

Culture, as Havelock and Zlotolow (1995) explains, is constructed reality that must be understood by all stakeholders:

A social system is a group of people who have pooled their resources to satisfy needs they have in common. These common things bind them together psychologically so that “mine” becomes “ours” and “self-interest” becomes “our common interest.” (p. 133)

Culture, thus, describes the way things are and gives them meaning and prescribes the way people should act (Rossman, Corbett, & Firestone, 1988; Hargreaves, 1994).

Hargreaves (1994) adds that, besides the norms of isolation and alienation, other kinds of school culture exist:

In general, these various cultures provide a context in which particular strategies of teaching are developed, sustained and preferred over time. In this sense, *cultures of teaching* comprise beliefs, values, habits and assumed ways of doing things among communities of teachers who have had to deal with similar demands and constraints over many years. Culture carries the community’s historically generated and collectively shared solutions to its new and inexperienced membership. It forms a framework for occupational learning. (p. 165)

Strong school cultures are built deliberately around tightly structured beliefs, values, and norms within a loosely coupled organization. Grimmatt and Crehan (1992) explain the strength does not lie in the “tight” and “loose” formulation, but in the fact that the beliefs, values, and norms that are tightly structured have a highly specific professional focus.

### *Implementing change*

Fullan (1993) writes people learn new patterns of behavior primarily through their interactions with others. Thus, change either does or does not work depending on the basis of individual and collective responses to it, implying that shared meaning and shared cognition, or “interactive professionalism” as Fullan (1991) has labeled it, play significant roles in the change process:

In the final analysis it is the actions of the individual that count. Since interaction with others influences what one does, relationships with other teachers are a critical variable. The theory of change that we have been

evolving clearly points to the importance of peer relationships in the school. Change involves learning to do something new, and interaction is the primary basis for social learning. (p. 77)

Barth (1990) submits that teachers make decisions hundreds of times a day; yet they are excluded from important decisions that directly affect them, which produces feelings of inefficacy and isolation that erode the profession. Furthermore, because teachers are not closely involved in the decision-making process, they are not committed to the goals. Instead, they continue to work alone, according to Stoll (1992), making it difficult for them to imagine collaborating with others. Gray (1989) reports that the most compelling evidence about omitting stakeholders from the decision-making process is that those with power to implement the decisions are excluded. Fullan (1991) concurs, noting that significant change consists of changes in beliefs, teaching style and materials, which can occur only through a process of personal development in a social context. Thus, Maeroff (1993) concludes that changing the school atmosphere usually depends on altering the informal rules by which teachers relate to one another.

Wideen (1992) writes that people learn, become inspired, and find their identity within the group; therefore, the group setting is a powerful vehicle for bringing about change. He adds, though, that certain norms, beliefs, expectations and support--such as ethos which allow for risk-taking and for slower paced implementation--are needed within the group setting for any change to occur. Fullan (1991) believes schools characterized by norms of collegiality and experimentation are much more likely to implement innovation successfully. Little (1981, as cited in Grimmett & Crehan, 1992, p. 56) reports that group work allows teachers to attempt curricular-instructional innovations that they probably would not have attempted on their own. Grimmett and Crehan found that it is not just the teamwork that creates the willingness to attempt new endeavors, but the joint action that emanates from the group's purposes and obligations as they shape the shared tasks and outcomes. Finally, Barth (1990) concludes that teachers working in a group are provided with a built-in support system, having someone to talk about their teaching and learning

Barth (1990) notes the following outcomes associated with collegiality: better decisions; better implementation of decisions; higher level of morale and trust among adults; energized adult learning, which is more likely to be sustained; some evidence of improved student motivation and achievement; and some evidence of more sharing and cooperating among students. Barth also notes that there are risks associated with collegiality because opening oneself to observation and communication means giving up something without knowing in advance what it may be.

Barth (1990) believes that most school districts operate from a "deficit" model of adult growth. In this model, staff development means workshops conducted by outsiders with little or no change evident in practice. Typically these workshops contain little interaction among participants and become simple attempts at group growth. Yet, staff development can be a strategy for basic organizational change in the ways schools operate. Better teaching and improved learning can only be realized when professional development is no longer viewed as a fragmented add-on to what teachers do.

Maeroff (1993), Hargreaves and Fullan (1992), and Barth (1990) all believe professional development will become a basic component of the professional lives of

teachers only when schools become places where teachers learn formally and informally on a daily basis; when teacher development promotes self-understanding; when risk taking is promoted. Hargreaves and Fullan add another way is to provide teachers with the knowledge and skill development which will increase their ability to provide opportunities for the children to learn. Although knowledge and skills-based approaches can be criticized as top-down mandates that ignore the teachers' experience and voice, it can be beneficial if its use is limited to focusing on the methods that are understandable and usable by teachers in the classroom, as well as presented with ongoing administrative support. Joyce and Showers (1995) advocate programs such as peer coaching to alleviate the aforementioned problems by allowing teachers to practice and risk with each other by implementing an innovation, which, in turn, can build a community of teachers who continuously engage in the study of their craft, develop a shared language and common understanding that are necessary for collaborative study of new knowledge and skills, and provide a structure for follow-up training that is requisite for acquiring new teaching skills and strategies.

#### *Administrative support and leadership*

Maeroff (1993) writes that outstanding teachers report that their ability to succeed is enhanced by a supportive and understanding principal. These teachers tend to be risk takers and feel a sense of safety because their principals do not condemn failure that is connected to a sincere and informed effort on behalf of change. Lieberman and Miller (1984) concur, stating that teachers who view their principals as critical or punishing will not take risks. Wideen (1992) has concluded from his research that the principal's attitude toward professionalism and a vision of a better education for children appear to be the foundation that supports change.

There are several general characteristics of a good principal: negotiates solutions to problems, uses collegial management styles, takes risks, generates warmth and caring, has low personal control needs, juggles multiple priorities with ease, and puts relationships first (Robertson, 1992). Little (1981, as cited in Grimmer & Crehan, 1992, p. 56) found the ways to promote collegial relationships are closely related to four specific behaviors of principals: (a) states expectations explicitly for cooperation among teachers, (b) models collegiality, (c) rewards collegiality, and (d) protects teachers who initially engage in collegial behavior. Wideen (1992) writes that the principal in his study demonstrated support by providing release time for the teachers, finding money to support their efforts, and taking risks with them by trying out new teaching ideas. Thus, teachers perceived a fairness about him and a willingness to share decision-making. Corbett, Dawson, and Firestone (1984) report that building administrators can facilitate change by engaging in informal talks with the faculty, by discussing issues regarding the innovation at staff meetings, and by including staff progress toward the building or district goal on the formal evaluation.

Fullan (1991) writes effective change involves modification, both cognitive and behavioral, on the part of the students as well as the teachers, and all implementation comprises a change in the role relationships between teachers and students. Therefore, assessment must include the students' reactions to the change, as well as their learning outcomes. The paradox, however, is that student outcome data cannot be considered until

the degree of implementing the innovation is ascertained. Thus, Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, and Hall (1987) warn the need to identify exactly what teachers are doing with the innovation so they can be assisted. Evaluation as such aims for discovering the areas of improvement that must be addressed for successful implementation.

Havelock and Zlotolow (1995) submits that providing for continuing maintenance must be a built-in function of change; otherwise, there will be a rapid erosion of acceptance after failures begin to occur. Hord et al. (1987) explain:

After teachers start to use a new program or practice, monitoring activity can be influential in reminding teachers that their attention is required for the program. It helps teachers recognize that the improvement project is a priority, that a commitment has been made to it, and that somebody cares about them, about the change, and how it is occurring in classrooms. Monitoring is also a natural complement to consultation/reinforcement in that it provides valuable data about how individuals are doing and what their assistance needs might be. (p. 77)

Fullan (1991) adds two more reasons for monitoring. First, making information on innovative practices available provides access to good ideas. Second, this information exposes new ideas to scrutiny, which helps discard mistakes and develop promising practices. Havelock and Zlotolow (1995) report that this monitoring will assist evaluators for unanticipated outcomes, both positive and negative: (a) what does the project do for the morale of the group? (b) to what extent is it seen as something disruptive or exciting? (c) does it change attitudes or choices? and (d) are there effects on nonparticipants, parents, community, and/or administrators?

Research shows that the provision of opportunities for discussions about and reinforcement for continuing new practices is crucial to maintaining change (Corbett et al., 1984). Discussions should allow teachers to share their successes, failures, and ongoing concerns (Fullan, 1991). Group discussion has special advantages: it is less time consuming and costly than personal contact; it increases the feelings of safety and the willingness to take risks; it moves the individual user toward a deeper commitment to the innovation; and it legitimizes feelings of doubt (Havelock & Zlotolow, 1995). Hord et al. (1987) call this time period, Level 4: Routine and Refinement. During routinization, teachers need recognition and praise, as well as monitoring that they are properly implementing the innovation. During refinement, teachers need sanction and support, especially from peer observations, as they make shifts and moderate changes in their use (Corbett et al.; Havelock & Zlotolow; Hord et al.). This type of collaboration or school community further implements change by encouraging people at different levels of proficiency and achievement to work together on common priorities (Glickman, 1993, p. 79).

### *Researcher's perspective*

My interests, values, and experience with the research problem are a source of motivation for this study. Having taught in a public high school for nineteen years, I experienced educational reform personally and witnessed the way it affected each of my

colleagues. From this experience I know that I am predisposed to the belief that teachers' needs and concerns must be addressed so that change can be implemented successfully. As a teacher, I found that most innovations began as top-down mandates often made by school administrators with superficial or no input from faculty. It was especially frustrating to witness the complete disregard of the collective knowledge of experienced teachers. These teachers have been at the forefront of implementing new initiatives and understanding the nuances that are germane to successful execution. Because of this lack of cooperation, what I call "teacher voice," teachers often do not implement the mandate for various reasons. First, many teachers do not have the know-how or the self-motivation to learn how to implement the change successfully. Second, many teachers resent the administration's disregard for their professional knowledge and insight. Third, veteran teachers believe that the innovation will be discontinued if no one is monitoring the implementation.

In my twelve years in higher education, I have studied educational reform from its theoretical underpinnings to the various practices occurring in our nation's schools. Through this scholarship, I have become increasingly aware that teachers are being asked to implement reform initiatives without having a solid understanding of the change or proper training in the skills needed to implement it. Again, experienced teachers' knowledge is being left untapped.

With the No Child Left Behind Act driving the impetus for high-achievement in high school students, my hope was that teachers had become equal partners in preparing for change. It was also my hope that better planning and training before implementing the initiative, as well as administrative support, would have become the norm.

### **Methodology**

This study is based on the assumption that it is possible to discover how people formulate meanings in their lives. As we determine credibility through our own experience and the repeated experience of others, we come as near as possible to knowledge about other human beings. By focusing on the teachers' experience, I rooted this study in phenomenological inquiry, a form of interpretive inquiry that focuses on human perceptions, placing attention on perception itself and the feelings that are immediately invoke (Willis, 1991). Research in the phenomenological mode attempts to understand the meaning of events and interactions of ordinary people in particular situations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Patton (1990) explains that interpretation is imperative to an understanding of experience and the experience includes the interpretation. Therefore, phenomenologists focus on how people put together the phenomena they experience in a way to make sense of the world, thereby developing a worldview.

### *Participants*

Purposive sampling of teachers is central to this study. According to Erlander, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993): "Purposive and directed sampling through human instrumentation increases the range of data exposed and maximizes the researcher's ability to identify emerging themes that take account of contextual conditions and cultural

norms” (p. 82). Modeling my work after others who have examined the practices of individual teachers (e.g., Gitlin, Bringham, Burns, Cooley, Myers, & Price, 1992; Wasley, 1991), participants were initially identified by administrators and department chair people who defined them as “the best.”

However, the participant pool widened when teachers identified other possible participants. After the PSU Internal Review Board approved the study's protocol, I made contact with potential participants, explained the study, and secured their informed consent. All possible participants completed a short survey to ascertain the number of years they have taught, the grade level and content areas they have taught, and their education and work experience. I then conducted an in-depth interview with each of the teachers (see Appendix A) who met the criteria and were available.

Before I was able to choose my participants, I needed to define the term “experienced” teacher. Researchers have used various terms to define these teachers, using most commonly the word “veteran.” These researchers have different criteria to define a veteran teacher. Aligning myself with Lieberman and Mace (2009), I define experienced teachers as those who, through years of practice, have the knowledge and ability to reflect on their work and speak to the complexity of teaching in the world of educational reform.

Ten secondary teachers with experience from 21 to 38 years of teaching were interviewed. The majority of the teachers were teaching in suburban settings, although two were in rural districts and two were in urban districts. The two urban districts were located in New York City and outside Boston, Massachusetts. One teacher, a former social studies/guidance counselor, had retired from 30 plus years in one school district and was now employed as a guidance counselor in a rural vocational-technical high school in Ohio. The remaining participants were teachers in Pennsylvania.

The subject areas that they taught were as following: physical education, Italian, Spanish, English, Latin, and math. In addition, two were former social studies teachers who are now guidance counselors. Another participant is a former Spanish teacher and now the school district's staff development director. Two of the other participants teach and supervise their departments.

### *In-depth interviewing*

The purpose of an in-depth interview is to understand the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 1991). An interview is a useful way to obtain large amounts of data quickly, but the pertinence of the information can only be ascertained if the researcher has conducted meaningful, thought-provoking questions (Erlander et al., 1993; Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Having conducted in-depth interviews over the years, I knew that teachers love to talk about their work. I had no doubt that teachers would be honest and frank about their perceptions, but I also knew that it would be difficult for them to put their perceptions into the larger context of school reform. Thus, I probed as much as possible and allowed the teachers to sometimes talk in stream of consciousness to allow them to reflect on their daily work.

### *Data analysis*

My first step of the analysis was to utilize the data, called “open coding” by Strauss and Corbin (1990). I followed Lincoln and Guba (1985), who write that a unit must meet two criteria. First, it must reveal information that is relative to the study and stimulate the researcher to think beyond the particular bit of information. Second, the unit should be the “smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself—that is it must be interpretable in the absence of any additional information other than a broad understanding of the context in which the inquiry is carried out” (p. 345).

I began by reading the interview transcripts two times to familiarize myself with the data. The third time I bracketed sentences and paragraphs and placed code or idea words in the right margin. Following Strauss and Corbin (1990), I asked questions to start identifying concepts and developing them in terms of their properties and dimensions. During the fourth reading, I put the units into categories of ideas, using labels I devised for quick reference. Many of these categories were generated through my reading of the literature on school reform or by words and phrases repeated by the participants.

My second step was to axial code, which means to put the data back together in new ways by “making connections between a category and a subcategory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I conducted this part of the coding by rereading each cut unit and recording its contents in a type of shorthand of key words and phrases, which I kept in a loose-leaf notebook for easy manipulation and reference. If a unit looked like or felt like the previous one, I recorded it on the same sheet of paper as the previous one. If not, I listed the contents on a new sheet of paper. I put the units that no longer seemed to fit a specific category into a miscellaneous pile, as suggested by Merriam (1988). As I continued the process, old categories disappeared, and new ones emerged.

Selective coding naturally emerged from the axial coding. I now read the units that were categorized in the notebook to review all the properties again. At this time I checked that the categories were internally consistent with each other but externally distinct from one another. I also followed Patton’s (1990) method of prioritizing themes according to salience, credibility, and uniqueness.

After completing these three methods of coding with each set of interviews, I then conducted the three-code process again using the categories from the three sets. After I completed this process, I formulated themes and implications for theory, practice, and future research. The findings concluded that teachers are ambivalent to administrative leadership as an important influence in their work; colleagues are their support network; and their commitment to the students transcends academic achievements. These three findings became the basis for reporting the research results.

### *Establishing trustworthiness*

Qualitative data do not profess to be replicable. Instead, the researched purposely avoids controlling the conditions and concentrates on noting the complexity of contexts and interrelationships as they occur (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Lincoln and Guba (1985) write that trustworthiness can be established by these four characteristics: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Member checking gave me the opportunity to establish credibility. I conducted informal member checks throughout the duration of the study. I was also able to verify interpretations from the data and “test” themes and categories as they emerged from the individual interviews. The thick description that follows in the “findings” section of this paper provides for transferability by consumers of this study.

I left an audit trail, which leads to dependability and confirmability (Erlander et al., 1993). I kept the following materials: raw data of interviews, field notes, data reduction and analysis procedures, categories established in the loose-leaf notebook, and final categories.

## Findings

Most of the participants always wanted to teach and followed the traditional path of certification through a Teacher Education Program in a college or university. A few of them came to teaching by following a more circuitous path, either returning to school to receive teaching certification or embarking on other career paths before entering the teaching field. All the teachers discussed their own professional development as a self-journey. Few spoke about the school district’s success at providing meaningful professional development. Instead, they spoke being involved in professional organizations and reading professional journals. When asked about the professional development programs at his school, Emilio, who teaches Italian in Massachusetts, explained his self-journey to professional growth:

Well some activities are imposed by the administration. They believe that everyone can grow under the same roof. I don’t think so. I am particularly lucky because we’ve become involved with the Italian Advanced Placement Program. ...That particular program is helping me grow and stay in touch. I do a lot of reading on my own. I dabbled in movies as a community activity. It keeps me in touch with the changing language, even changing customs.... Most of the universities in Boston teach Italian and therefore there is always something going on in terms of workshops, presentations, lectures, and I stay in touch that way as well. (pp. 4-5, lines 171-198)

Most of the participants did not view their administration as a positive or negative force in their teaching career. Some spoke of good leadership; others spoke of poor leadership. Since they have all taught for such a long time, they have outlived several of their school’s principals, department heads, and central administrators. They simply saw the administration as part of the organizational structure that had little impact on their daily workings. They seemed resigned to the fact that change would be constant without teacher input. They also believe that, as long as they can have autonomy in their classrooms, they can shut out the rest. Katie, an English teacher in a rural high school whose farms are quickly being turned into large housing developments and changing the faces of the community, said,

I have always maintained I am happiest when my door is closed and I can be with my students. It is because of my students and my interactions with them, both professionally and personally, that keeps me enthused about teaching which makes me say I can't imagine doing anything else. Because when I look back over the 21 years and think about the number of kids I have watched grow from high school kids to young adults I realize how lucky I am to be a teacher and how lucky I've been to spend some time with some of these kids who are just incredibly talented individuals and wonderful human beings. So it is because of the students that I continue to do what I do. It is not because of the administration. (p. 13, lines 551-560)

Emilio reflected,

I've gone through one, two, three, four, five—this is my sixth principal in my career. And when I was having a discussion with my fourth principal, I mentioned something that I think is extremely true. The administration comes and goes, but the people in the trenches are the ones that are staying behind; they are the ones that are here for the duration. ...So the leadership doesn't quite reside with the principal. I think it resides in the critical mass. Clearly the principal and the rest of the administration have to have a function in the school—they have to have a goal, establish an educational policy—but it is really the critical mass that implements these decisions. (pp. 8-9, lines 312-328)

The most important people in their work are their colleagues, who they all described as their friends. Sue, the gifted teacher at a suburban high school, said,

My colleagues, the young ones, they come to me to talk or they call me at home because they want to talk about things. I love being at this point in my life, being 58 [years old], where they think I have all the experience and they want to hear what I have to say or they just want to tell me something they experienced. (p. 13, lines 590-593)

Bob, the Latin teacher from Massachusetts, explained why colleagues are important,

[Talking to colleagues is important] because it is not this isolated conversation that you have with your colleagues in talking. There is a community of conversation that doesn't have to happen every day but something that happens as a kind of natural response but after a year or two years or three years there is a natural engagement and what you have is a stored up energy or kind of information bank that you can borrow from at any time in your own memory bank and talking to these people give you a better perspective about what you are doing. (p. 8, lines 359-366)

Because of their longevity, the participants did not have specific concerns in terms of struggling with the same kinds of issues as new teachers; that is, managing classroom behavior, differentiating instruction, and assessing student learning. They all did, however, still struggle with managing the paper work, both generated by them and by the administration. They also spoke about the intensity of the work in terms of the constant need to be “on stage” and to deal with all the routines and distractions that can occur each class period.

When asked how their work has changed and been affected over the course of their tenure, the participants cited several changes in society and mandates that are wearing. Many of them spoke about violence in the schools and the idea that schools may not be safe for children or teachers. Lorraine, a math teacher and department head in a large urban high school in New York City, said,

I’ve been threatened. A kid threatened me, and I had to call the police. I had to have protection and I had to have it taken care of. That is frightening because you have to go back in that building every day and you just never know what can happen. I mean you are no longer talking about kids who are model students. This kid had a record a mile long. (p. 7, line 271)

In addition, all the participants expressed that all the mandated standardized testing, mostly a result of *No Child Left Behind*, has drained them. They felt their curricula were being narrowed and that schools were using a narrow yardstick to measure student achievement and school effectiveness. Finally, the participants believe that young people today have many issues that are difficult to cope with in the confines of a school day and environment. Students are coming to school with a long list of criminal offenses, with no backing from parents or family, and with little respect for or understanding of authority. Although this group may make up a small segment of the school’s population, all that are directly involved in their learning feels their presence.

When asked what made them continue in spite of the research that points to a high attrition rate among teachers in their first five years, they all talked about their strong connection to their students. They all were involved in extracurricular activities at some time during their tenure and believe that this connection outside school helped them establish their teacher identity and credibility. From coaching to directing school plays, from advising clubs to sponsoring school trips, all the participants understood the need to become an active member of the school community outside the time confines of the teaching day. Nancy, the Spanish and world languages department head outside Boston, talked about hiring new teachers who demonstrate their desire to be a part of the community outside the school day. She herself talked about her cherishing the relationships outside the school day. When asked to respond to the most positive experiences during her school day, Nancy explained:

It has been the times that I have been able to travel with kids particularly to the Dominican Republic because it was such a unique experience for them. I took them to a very rural edge on the Haitian border for ten days, no running water, electricity only one-third of the day, and they lived with

families. We did everything from thatching roofs on houses to painting schools to digging for water or digging to plant trees. That was a real educational experience. Nothing like it! ...And so many of them afterwards went into the Peace Corps and came back and said this was the best. For me that is what true education is and it was always meaningful because we were establishing relationships with people and showing this humanistic bond that all human beings have aspirations and people don't always have the same opportunities. (p. 12, lines 524-549)

Asked to discuss how they established their professional identity, most spoke about modeling themselves after their best teacher or after a colleague. Regina, a former social studies teacher in Massachusetts and now a guidance counselor in a suburban high school in Pennsylvania, probably explained it best,

You need to establish yourself, look at your kids and look at yourself and look at how you want to appear to those kids and be consistent about it and have a certain way. In fact, I think one of my books I still keep [from teaching preparation courses] is, *If You Walk Like a Duck and Quack Like a Duck, Then You Are a Duck*. (p. 29, lines 1325-1329)

When asked how they have grown over the course of their professional lives, the participants did not talk about the knowledge and skills they have honed. Instead, they talked about the dispositions that have made them better, wiser teachers. Bob, the Latin teacher, said, "My devotion lovingly to teach has not changed. I would hope that I have grown in that thing called wisdom and grace. It is more than just learning. It is basically looking at learning and seeing it from many sides" (p. 6, lines 236-239). Lorraine, the math teacher from New York City, said, "I am definitely not as gullible but I am more neurotic. I want every kid treated as if it was my kid, and I would never want a kid to fall through the cracks and, therefore, I don't want to be responsible for another person's child to fall through the cracks" (p. 7, lines 314-318).

All the participants used some form of the word *humanity* to describe their work, their strong trait. When asked if he would consider the teaching profession again, Emilio said, "This is what life is all about. This profession allows you to stay in touch with humanity" (p. 14, lines 620-621).

Lortie (1975) described well the uncertainty of teaching in terms of one's positive effect on students. The participants in this study mirrored that uncertainty, questioning if they were having a positive effect and noting that it takes several years to know. Katie, the English teacher, commented, "I still struggle on a daily basis to whether or not I am making any kind of impact on kids. ...But I think if you are dedicated to the teaching profession, you are constantly asking yourself this question" (p. 3, lines 131-133). Lorraine, the math teacher and department head from NYC, said,

I just think it is great when you can make a difference in your kids' lives. I tell people if you can do that for just one kid, you have done an amazing job. ...One of the greatest things to me was getting a Mother's Day card

from a kid and said I was the more of a mother to her than her own mother. (P. 6, #236-245)

Lindley (as cited in Preskill and Jacobvitz, 2001) espoused that the best teachers proceed through three stages as professionals. They begin as novices, struggling to meet the demands of all students and to turn their content knowledge into solid instruction. In the second stage they have come to understand the needs of their students and the best practices to impart knowledge. Many teachers end at this stage, but some are fortunate to reach the third stage to bring their own identity to their work and to thoroughly enjoy their interactions with their students. Finally, Lindley adds a fourth stage of teaching, which is the art of letting go, of celebrating the students' separation from the teacher. Lindley explains it this way:

For the teacher there is the quiet, unheralded satisfaction that comes from knowing that you had something to do with the helping of a student become an independent learner. But the process is so subtle and imperceptible that the student does not acknowledge the role of the teacher. (pp. 205-206)

In this stage the teacher gives without any expectation of anything in return. Through their reflections, all the participants had reached this fourth stage of teaching. Serendipitously, Bob actually verbalized what it feels like to reach this stage. When asked how he would like to be remembered as a teacher, Bob replied,

Very simply I would love to be remembered simply by being forgotten. ...The greatest humanistic DNA of the world is to have students be able to say—even if they forget your name and forget the subject and the knowledge details—the biggest thing would be for them to be able to say I was in a classroom once--where there was a time in my life once when the most important thing within that classroom, that time I was studying with this particular individual, where learning was the most important thing I the world. (p. 14, lines 616-622)

### *Implications for professional development*

These findings are not new to the extant literature in educational research. This fact is alarming in that we have not changed the way teachers of the last fifty years perceive their work. Teachers remain plagued and rewarded by the same issues of those who predated them. Other than the concern of school violence and mandated testing, the teachers echo the studies of their predecessors: ambivalence to administrative leadership as an important influence in their professional work, colleagues as their major support network, and their commitment to the students beyond their academic achievements. Perhaps, then, it is time for these perceptions to be taken seriously, especially in the way professional development is approached.

Since teachers view student success, both academically and socially, as the most important part of their work, administrators need to use this knowledge to create ways to

engage teachers in professional development. Wood (2007) argues that professional learning communities can become a new infrastructure for the status quo unless the community is structured to give teachers more control over their work to share tacit knowledge and expertise, develop critical judgments, and take fuller responsibility for student learning. The difficulty arises in initially structuring professional learning communities to entice teachers to participate. This contrived collegiality (Hargreaves, 1994) includes soliciting volunteers to pilot the community, training teachers in the use of protocols and group skills, and providing the time and place for on-going collaboration. More importantly, however, is to encourage teachers in their communities as they struggle through the beginning stages of any new initiative. Fullan (1991) clearly explains that teachers need help in the implementation stage of a new initiative so that they do not revert to old ways of knowing and doing. If school personnel manage the contrived congeniality and “implementation dip” in a professional development model, the outcome of a learning community that fosters true collaboration can ensue. This management includes yearly supervision and evaluation plans that value the professional development and the uncertainty that teachers face when embarking on a new endeavor.

In tandem with participating in professional learning communities, teachers must be allowed to connect with the professional communities of their academic discipline. The majority of secondary school teachers feel more closely aligned with colleagues in their academic discipline than with their grade-level colleagues. These secondary school teachers view their subject areas as a conduit to reach their students. It is not unusual for subject area teachers to view their class as more important or relevant than others. Understanding and respecting these content-specific biases are critical to allowing teachers to create their own professional growth. To ignore the differences in a high school configuration only leads to more isolation and resentment, which are often masks for feelings of being devalued and unappreciated. Acknowledging differences validates voices that can share new ways of knowing and doing while all supporting a common goal—student academic and personal growth.

Finally, teachers need a community of friends. Nancy, the world languages department head, said, “If you are a younger teacher, you are looking for community and the communities I had I was fortunate that there were a lot of young teachers that became my friends and we did everything together” (p. 6, lines 270-274). These communities of friends are often a product of a school’s culture and norms. They certainly cannot be contrived or mandated, but perhaps they can be encouraged through successful models of collaboration in the school day.

As schools continue to be pressured to show student achievement by standardized measures, teachers remain at the forefront of making that success happen. Currently, achievement is measured with input-output data. That is, achievement is being examined through the narrow lenses of new initiatives implemented and the resulting testing results. The missing component is that of the teachers who know and affect what occurs in the classroom on a daily basis. Their voice can show what occurs in the classroom in the time between the input and output data. Their voice can explain what they need for the reforms and initiatives to transfer to successful practice in their classrooms. When given a voice at the table of reform, teachers will receive meaningful professional development.

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## Appendix A

### *Interview Protocol*

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself and why you wanted to become a teacher.
2. How happy are you with your career choice?
3. Have you been involved in extra curricular activities?
4. How would you describe your school district to someone who is not familiar with it?
5. How would you describe your school to someone who is not familiar with it?
6. Starting with your first year of teaching, tell me about your teaching career to date.
7. What have been the most positive experiences during your career?
8. What have been the most negative experiences?
9. How have you changed as a teacher over your career?
10. How do you stay up to date in your field?
11. What is it like to teach the same grade level/subject matter year after year?
12. What is the easiest thing about teaching?
13. What is the most difficult? What would you say is your most-used teaching style? (probe—lecture, discussion, group activity, discovery learning)
14. How would you describe the leadership in your building?
15. What impact has administrators had on your ability to maintain enthusiasm and to grow as a professional?
16. What roles have students played in maintaining your enthusiasm and to grow as a professional?
17. Who do you consider your colleagues?
18. What role have they played in maintaining your enthusiasm and to grow as a professional?
19. Research shows that teaching is inherently stressful. What is the most stressful part of your job?
20. How were you able to overcome any plateauing or stagnation in your career?
21. A critical incident is a key event around which pivotal decisions revolve. If successfully coped with, they constitute opportunities for learning and developing. Can you recall an incident that became a turning point for you?
22. Has there been an “educational” change (federal, state, or local) that has significantly influenced your working life?
23. How do you understand/define teaching and what role has it had in your life?
24. What adjectives would you or your students and colleagues give to describe you as a teacher?
25. If you were to start over again, would you choose teaching as your profession?
26. How did you establish your teaching identity?
27. Who or what do you turn to in times of “crisis” in teaching?
28. How do you renew yourself?
29. How do you want to be remembered when you retire from teaching?

Is there anything you want to add that I may have forgotten to ask?

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