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# The Balancing Act: The Personal and Professional Challenges of Urban Teachers

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## **ABSTRACT:**

While many urban teachers flee urban schools after a few years of teaching, many spend their careers in teaching in the urban environment. A series of biographical interviews was conducted with four "career" urban teachers; throughout the data collection and analyses and despite their decade or more in the field, the interactions between the teachers' personal and professional lives emerged as an important theme and challenge. The following questions are addressed in this article: How are urban teachers thinking about the challenges and/or satisfactions of their work, and in what ways do the teachers' professional lives influence their personal lives? The perspectives of effective teachers who persist in the field can inform administrators about teachers' experiences, aid in them in retaining more experienced teachers, and humanize the political discussion about school failure in the urban context.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Teaching in diverse, urban classrooms can be challenging for teachers; high percentages leave within the first five years of their careers (National Council on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF], 2008). The list of challenges reported by urban teachers includes inadequate resources, professional isolation, classroom management issues, lack of professional support, and feeling unprepared for teaching in diverse schools (Andrews & Quinn, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Sprague & Pennell, 2000). And yet, while many teachers leave urban schools after just a few years of teaching, others spend their careers teaching in the urban environment. This research explores the experiences and perspectives of four career urban teachers, specifically examining the challenges they continue to face despite their years in the field and the tension they feel between staying and leaving.

In 1932, Willard Waller noted, "Teaching makes the teacher. ... Teaching does something to those who teach. Introspective teachers know of changes that have taken place in themselves" (p. 375). This idea resonated throughout the conversations I had with the four participants as they described their jobs and their lives. There is a lot of discussion *about* urban teachers and urban schools, but the personal viewpoints and perspectives of the urban teachers themselves are often silenced (Montero-Sieburth, 1989). Throughout our conversations I was surprised by the ways in which, despite their years of teaching, the participants' described their work as affecting their personal lives. The frequent descriptions of the interactions of their professional and personal lives reinforced the idea that teaching is much more than an 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. occupation.

As a former teacher in urban schools, I became interested in understanding the experiences and perspectives of "career" urban teachers, those in the field for longer than 10 years. In this study, the label "urban" refers to schools located within a metropolitan area and primarily enrolling students from economically depressed neighborhoods with at least 50% of the student population identified as non-White or non-Native English speakers. Within this setting I conducted a series of biographical interviews with four urban teachers. The [R1] use of biographically focused interviews for this study allowed me to explore the perspectives of these experienced, urban teachers as they discussed the importance of the work in which they engaged; the impact of their work on their personal lives; and their decision to remain in or leave the urban school environment.

Throughout the data collection and analyses, the interactions between the teachers' personal and professional lives emerged as an important theme. Despite their decade or more in the field, these teachers continued to have experiences that led them to consider leaving the urban environment. Learning more about the lives of effective teachers who persist in the field can inform administrators about teachers' experiences, aid them in retaining more experienced teachers, and humanize the political discussion about school failure in the urban context.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Lives of Teachers and the Urban Context

Teachers in urban schools face numerous challenges in relation to student characteristics, school personnel, and the schools' structures and curriculum (Voltz, 1998). Adams and Adams (2003) described urban schools as having the highest dropout rates of all public school systems and educating "the largest number of students with physical, emotional, and mental disabilities," (p. 1). There is a significant distinction between the cultural and ethnic characteristics of urban teachers and their students. This cultural disconnect can lead to struggles and misunderstandings as teachers attempt to educate their students (Kozleski, Sands, & French, 1993; Gomez, 1993; Grossman, 1995). Urban schools are also more likely to suffer negative effects from poor performance on standardized testing (Kopkowski, 2008) and the problem of inadequate supplies continues to plague these schools (Kozol, 1991; Williams & Williamson, 1992). A study by Marston, Brunetti, and Courtney (2005) of elementary and secondary teachers also found the time-consuming nature of teaching to be a common complaint. Teachers reported that the need to take their work home eroded their family life and discussed the need to escape school and find ways to separate their work and home lives.

While the attrition of ineffective, ill-prepared teachers could possibly be beneficial to urban students, it most often negatively affects these students who are continuously taught by the most inexperienced teachers (NCTAF, 2008). Work is ongoing concerning the making (Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McKinney, Haberman, Stafford-Johnson, & Robinson, 2008; Polk, 2006) and retention (Adams, 1996; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 1995; Hanushek & Pace, 1995; Ingersoll, 2001a; Ingersoll, 2001b; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004) of effective urban teachers; this study contributes to this body of work.

### Teacher Biography

Teachers' life histories provide a richer source of details and perceptions than can be provided by survey data (Muchmore, 2001), and teacher biography is increasingly being used to record the perspectives and experiences of teachers (Ball & Goodson, 1985; Brunetti, 2001; Dingus, 2008; Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996; Huberman, 1993; Lawson, Parker, & Sikes, 2006; Marston, Brunetti, & Courtney, 2005; Muchmore, 2001). Biographies provide a space for teachers' voices to be heard and an understanding of their perspectives on teaching within the context of their lives "...from the perspective of an *insider* looking in" (Muchmore, 2001, p. 89). The life history becomes an account of a person's life in her own words (Langness & Frank, 1981; Plummer, 1983; Watson & Watson-Franke, 1985) thereby allowing her to reflect on her lived experience within a specific context (Grbich, 1999; Heidegger, 1962) while still leaving room for interpretation. The stories contextualize and humanize the structures and power in policy and practice (Armstrong, 2003; Goodson, 1992; Goodson & Sikes, 2001) and in this case, in urban schools and communities.

Narratives allow for new and unexpected findings to occur as individuals' experiences are placed within the wider context of meaning (Llewellyn, 1999). Hargreaves (1996) expressed concern that biographical research could portray an individual voice as a voice for all teachers and cautioned against the oversimplification of perspectives. The risk of oversimplification is balanced by the value of such research to explore individual perspectives in greater complexity than other methodologies. Teacher biographies highlight the experiences of individuals and speak to greater societal structures as these experiences are situated within a socio-political context.

## METHODS

### Sample

Given the personal nature of the study and the level of commitment to the interview process required of the participants, it was important to carefully select a small group of participants who had persisted in the urban school environment over time; were recommended by their principals or colleagues as being effective teachers; and were willing to participate fully in an in-depth interview process. All of the participants were teachers in Title I schools in the same urban district, and each had taught at least 10 years in an urban setting. All of the participants were White females; all were mothers and had children ranging in age from 11 weeks to adulthood. Kathy and Susan became qualified to teach through a Master's program after spending time working in other fields. Michelle and Veronica both went into teaching immediately after earning their bachelor's degree in traditional four-year elementary education programs.

Sample sizes tend to be quite small in biographical research as data gathered through life history interviews is dense (Cole & Knowles, 2001). "Although an in-depth life history study of the beliefs and practices of a single teacher has little value for making generalizations about other teachers in a statistical sense, it can be extremely useful as a vehicle for elaborating an understanding of one's own beliefs and practices" (Muchmore, 2001, p. 105). These studies provide a depth of insight and perspective not often achieved through other methods.

## **Data Collection & Analysis**

The research was conducted in three phases. An initial meeting and day of job shadowing provided an introduction to the teachers and the contexts in which they work. The second phase consisted of the interviews and data gathering. Finally, the teachers and I engaged in reflection. Not all of the teachers participated meaningfully in this final phase. All read their stories for accuracy and affirmed or commented on their findings, but not all chose to spend time reflecting together. Life history interviews were conducted once weekly to biweekly over a period of two months dependent upon teacher availability. I met with each teacher 3 to 6 times, and the interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours. An interview protocol was used (Appendix A), but interviews were largely emergent. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

The interviews began with asking teachers to discuss their lives, families, upbringings, and beliefs. Their concerns, successes, the context of their work, and current experiences were then discussed. Cohesive stories were pieced together from the series of interviews conducted with each participant. Member validation was used to ensure the accuracy of the participants' stories (Creswell, 2009). Only the portions of the transcripts relating to the intersections of their personal and professional lives are included herein. As much as possible, the participants' words were used to allow them to tell their stories and to allow others the opportunity to draw their own conclusions regarding the significance of their stories.

All of the interviews were transcribed and coded. Transcriptions were primarily analyzed through the use of the grounded theory development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); codes emerged from the data and were then compared to those of other studies. Spradley (1979) discussed two methods of coding data: inductive and emergent. In this study, it made sense to do both. Codes emerged from the data and were then compared to those of other studies. Codes were generated each time something on the primary record seemed to respond to one of the research questions. The codes were then analyzed and grouped according to larger themes and higher-level codes were constructed. The themes most relevant to the research questions were explored in greater depth.

## **RESULTS**

Each teacher cared deeply about her students, and each shared moments of triumph and despair from her career as an urban teacher. As a former urban elementary school teacher, I had an empathetic understanding of the challenges these teachers experienced. I expected urban teachers to discuss some of the challenges and pleasures of their work, but I failed to anticipate the degree to which their professional lives have continued to influence their personal lives despite their years of experience. The situations they shared with me led me to examine more closely these intersections between the professional and the personal and provided the basis for the following discussion of their challenges and sense of purpose in teaching.

### **Challenges and Purpose in Urban Teaching**

All of the participants reported stressors that undermined their career satisfaction. The teachers' conversations alternated between frustration and exhilaration dependent upon the story being conveyed. Most of the issues that emerged from the discussion of their work as urban teachers corroborated the challenges of student characteristics, school personnel, and school structures and curriculum described by Voltz (1998). For example, they described feeling a lack of parental support and mentioned their students' cultural disconnect with school. Several of them described having received physical threats from students and parents and/or having to contend with an excessive number of discipline issues. Their complaints concerning school personnel focused primarily on their frustration with ineffective professional development and isolation from other teachers either for collaboration or support. Finally, their complaints of exhaustion, emotional turmoil, or being "spread too thin"; and feeling limited by administration, funds, or policy indicate problems within school structures and curriculum.

Several recurring themes from the teacher interviews did not easily fit into Voltz's (1998) categories; these concerns could be categorically labeled "professional recognition" and "quality of life." They specifically complained about receiving little or no recognition of the difficulties experienced by teachers in the urban environment and the failure of others to recognize teachers as professionals. They also worried about their safety in the community around the school, the increasing cost of their commute, and the difficulty leaving student concerns at school. While the commuting distance and safety of the surrounding community had not changed significantly in their tenure as urban teachers, Kathy and Susan repeatedly voiced concerns about the decreasing respect for teachers on a societal and political level and the increasing bureaucratic tasks that continued to extend their work days. All of the teachers confessed to difficulties transitioning from their work day to their personal lives as they continued to be preoccupied with their work long after the school day ended.

While it was common for them to focus on the negative, all four teachers made it a point to express how meaningful and important their work was to their students and to society. When asked about the purpose or mission of their work, the links between their history and their mission was evident. Having a sense of purpose and efficacy was an essential feature for the participants of this study. They had developed identities as teachers and as "urban" teachers specifically. Three of the four

participants chose to teach based on a series of professional decisions resulting from their interests, talents, and preferred lifestyles; Veronica, Michelle, and Susan felt a sense of efficacy and satisfaction in their choice although they occasionally questioned their ability to indefinitely continue teaching in urban schools. When asked about the purpose of their work and the mission of their jobs, it was quite simply to teach children: Susan mentioned critical thinking and problem solving as a priority; Veronica said it was to “take the children where they need to go” academically; and Michelle focused on teaching to the standards.

Kathy was more reflective in her approach discussing public education as it related to the foundation of our democracy. She described the critical need to prepare children for their rights and responsibilities as citizens and public education as an issue of social equity. She emphasized the right for all children to a high quality education:

That's what I think is equal protection under the law. It should be the same here as it should be in the high rent zip code. That's what I think; and until we get that sorted out, it's not going to be equitable in this country. We just can't. The world is always going to be the “haves” and the “have nots”; and, yes, there are a lot of things about the family background and the family support, but you shouldn't come into an urban school and find an inept teacher.

She was adamant in her desire to provide justice for her students through educational opportunity.

I think they need to understand that they have options that are self-directed... This is a society where nothing, their pedigree and their socio-economic status is not going to be a barrier like it would be in many other countries.... In Germany for instance, at the age of seven, you are channeled into a pre-vocational track. Here, we are all heterogeneous in our school system, so if you want to go academic or whatever your career choice is, you can really be the captain of your destiny in that respect.

All of the teachers reported knowing they were good at their jobs, feeling a sense of ownership in their schools, and deriving satisfaction from making a difference in the lives of their students. They each felt joy in being part of a child's learning. Each teacher described their work as professionally stimulating. They had no immediate plans to leave their urban school, but all of them mentioned “deal breakers” that could result in a decision to transfer to other schools, including issues with administrators, disliking curricular changes in the school, and, for Veronica and Michelle, finding their work life negatively impacting their ability to parent their children at home (i.e. emotional exhaustion). Each described their work as being the same as that of every other teacher in the United States; yet each also felt teaching in the urban environment was distinct from other contexts. Each was proud of her work.

## **Professional Lives Influence Personal**

While the influence of the participants' personal lives on both their decisions to become teachers and their ability to teach effectively in an urban school was not surprising, the degree to which teachers' professional lives negatively influenced their personal lives was an unexpected theme emerging throughout the interviews. While Kathy and Veronica reported their careers as having little or no negative influence on their personal lives, Susan and Michelle reported their work significantly impacted their personal well-being. None of the teachers had been specifically asked about this topic yet examples of the difficulties their jobs presented continued to emerge from their stories and discussions.

**Susan.** Throughout the interviews with Susan, she often repeated that teaching was not what she expected; she did not feel respected by parents, students, or society for her work and, though rewarding, she was not certain the rewards outweighed the difficulties presented by the job. “It's the most difficult job I've ever had and I held different jobs, so I have a different perspective instead of just being an educator, that it is the most difficult job,” Susan explained.

Susan also complained that she felt that her students' parents weren't partners in their children's education and described other parents as being extremely needy. Those parents tended to call her home at inappropriate times and required a lot of energy beyond the school day:

I wish these parents had some--more of a resource that really helped them. ... I try to start conversations, like, I care about your child. I want to help. And that, that can be exhausting, too—because then, you know, I have one parent once who called me at home every single night and absolutely wore me out—10 o'clock every night with all the personal problems and stuff and so—but I wish that we had more resources for those parents to know that, yeah, education has to be a priority.

Susan wanted to be understanding and supportive, but found the effort exhausting. Some parents used her for emotional support, but Susan felt other parents considered her to be an enemy. She became visibly upset when she described being called a “racist” when trying to talk to a parent about concerns she had with a child's behavior.

She felt that teaching in a high-needs environment led her to have difficulty separating her work from her home life to a

degree that was uncommon in other fields:

Other jobs, when I left, I didn't take them home. This one you take home every single day. You take home the paperwork. You take home the worries. You might just take home worrying about one child, but you take it home with you. You take some of the things you can't solve – you take the frustration home with you a lot of times, and that is very difficult. And you may do that in other jobs but not to the extent that I think you do in teaching.

She blamed these frustrations on the struggles she was having with her long-term partner at the time of this study explaining that she would often take her frustrations out on him.

I don't think the teaching part ever really ends. It's just, if you are a really good teacher you are constantly, I cannot read a newspaper without cutting out something for school or a magazine. I can't go anywhere that I'm not asking a farmer, 'Can I have some of your cotton to take back to the kids to see?' It is just constant. It's just, maybe it's just me, but to me it's just a constant thing. And it just seems like the paperwork, you know the grading, the papers, looking for new things in new ways, it just seems like it never ends.

When asked if she considered leaving, she reported that despite the challenges she rarely seriously considered it: "I'm a creature of habit, so to transfer, or to leave like many of my colleagues are doing this year, from here—I couldn't make that leap—I just couldn't make that leap, because I've been here so long."

**Kathy.** Of the four participants, Kathy's personal life seemed least affected by her profession. When asked about her decision to become a teacher her family was generally supportive. Only her son expressed a small concern.

I was talking about it one day and my son probably was in fifth or sixth grade, he said, no mom, we don't want you to do that [go to work as a teacher], then you won't be home when we're coming home from school [laughs]. I was surprised that they, that they had made that observation and, and my husband—he didn't really care if I worked or not—he was fine without it—so they were neither objecting or really hyping it, so it was just sort of my decision.

Since she began her tenure as a teacher, each member of her family has supported her decision in one way or another.

I remember all of my children at one spot or another have dropped in. My son who is a musician has appeared two or three times just to demonstrate to children what a stringed instrument is, and he did that without any prompting. He just appeared one day [laughing], and he was awesome. And my daughter, when she decided to go into speech therapy, she came and I got permission and she did field work with us...And then my other son he came once when we were doing a spring musical and play and helped set up the backdrops and stuff. And my husband, anytime I've had a program or something, he's always on deck.

Having adult children, stable financial circumstances, and feeling personally and professionally invigorated by her work seemed to provide some fortification from the daily stressors with which the other participants struggled.

**Michelle.** Michelle had a 2 year old son and had given birth to a second child just 11 weeks prior to our first interview. She expressed concerns with how having children had altered her priorities and made it more difficult to put as much time into teaching as she once had.

Right now my life revolves around them. Before my life was working out, hanging out with my friends, teaching—teaching was a big part. I was always playing school when I was single with no children. And then when I started dating it was still dating, nightlife, and friends, but teaching was still what my world mainly revolved around... now that I have children that's changed.

She continued to discuss how time and energy constraints created a distraction from her formerly more intense focus on work.

I mean I still try to, to be a good teacher and to be involved in the school building and in the school environment and the community around the school ... but just where I was doing it a hundred, a hundred and ten percent before ... Now it's just I have to pick and choose a lot more.

This shift in her level of involvement had created some feelings of inner conflict. Michelle wanted to be the best possible teacher for her students, and also the best mother to her children. She had to become less involved in after school activities and planning sessions:

Now I just can't physically do it, and emotionally do it—you know, just wore out. And, because of my children and not

wanting to take away from their childhood, but I also want to be the best teacher that I can be—by giving the best part of me here, but not lose the best part of me at home either.

She had recently changed from teaching kindergarten to taking a math specialist position. This change allowed Michelle to reduce the amount of time required for lesson planning.

I mean, my thoughts were always about school ... just having those 24 kids that I was always responsible for, making sure that they were at level in all areas or above. You know, that was my, that was what I lived for. That's what I did. As a kindergarten teacher, there is so much to do with—just kindergarteners aren't independent at all so you have to do so much for them. Where this way, ... being a special area teacher, yeah I still have my kindergarteners, so I still get my kindergarten, first-grade fix, but I just have to do that one specific thing for them all week, really.

Michelle didn't make this decision easily, but she felt her own children had to be the priority. At this point in her career, she felt like maintaining a position as a regular classroom teacher left her emotionally or physically exhausted by the end of the school day.

And, as much as Michelle could not imagine teaching anywhere else, she continued to struggle with her decision to remain a teacher at her school of employment.

I'm not just an educator—that's why I'm here, I don't want to just teach, you know, the kid down the street from me—but that also is—some days it's very wearing—I've kind of started saying in the last couple of years—this is where I've always wanted to be, but I don't know how long I can be here—I've always wanted to be here and this is what I've wanted to do, but now with my life and my children and just getting older—damn, I don't know how long I can do this. Just because, it's, yeah, it's tiring and it's just weight, heavy weight on your shoulders. I hate to think about the kids and [the challenges they face]—and not that I totally want to be oblivious to the real world, but to deal with it on a daily basis—it can be wearing for a person.

Managing to balance her need to do her best work with her need to be her best as a parent weighed heavily on Michelle. She did remain at her school for another year, but was making this decision one year at a time.

**Veronica.** While Veronica did not mention work-related stress affecting her personal life, she was also struggling with being a mother to a young child. Her concern was primarily due to her long commute to school and how this impacted her ability to be present for her son. She explained, "I'm a parent. My mother watches my child and so my personal issues are what's making me think about leaving now." She does not look forward to changing schools.

...[B]ecause of this renovation [the school is undergoing a modernization] I don't want to leave at least for one more year because I want to see it—I want to see what it looks like and I want to be part of it, but I am considering leaving now because I have such a long commute, and my son is getting ready to go to pre-K[ kindergarten] so he'll be involved in [the school system in her hometown]. I am applying and seeing what's going to happen. My husband, really, is wanting me to move, too, to try to get a job closer to home for our child, too. So, this is the biggest possibility of me leaving that's ever happened ... and I think I will sooner or later but I just don't know when.

When asked if she considered having her son ride with her and go to her current school she paused thoughtfully before explaining that she didn't feel it was fair to ask her son to commute such a long distance daily. She later added that she didn't want her son to go to school in an urban environment, wanting a gentler experience for her son's schooling. She did not want her son exposed to the student misbehaviors, attitudes, and bad language that she frequently observed. "The language and the fighting, I just don't want him exposed to that."

Veronica did leave the school at the end of the school year and relocated to a rural district closer to her home.

## DISCUSSION

Each of the participants shared their reasons for and concerns with remaining as teachers in the urban environment. While each mentioned some commonly cited complaints such as student behavior, inadequate resources, and a lack of parent support (Gomez, 1993; Grossman, 1995; Kozleski et al., 1993; Walters, 1994), those types of issues were not the primary concerns of the teachers. Three of the four focused much more on their difficulty creating a work-life balance that would allow them to be great teachers at work and also be caring, present family members at home with their children or significant other. This struggle motivated Michelle to change teaching positions within her school and Veronica to leave the system entirely for a school closer to home.

How to help urban teachers manage significant life changes needs to be more thoroughly researched. Perhaps it is beyond the scope of a workplace to support teachers during these life transitions, but if schools could find ways to sustain employees during these times more teachers may choose to remain in urban schools. Small changes such as allowing teachers more flexibility in the organization of their work could help reduce stress and challenges; for example, they could work with colleagues through departmentalization or co-teaching to decrease their professional isolation and increase planning time. Additionally, empowering teachers to create change on the school and community level could possibly improve teachers' work satisfaction and contribute to increasing student achievement and parental involvement in schools. Administrators and policy makers should also consider the well-being and professionalism of teachers as they propose and implement school reforms. Supportive "well-teacher" programs providing opportunities for socializing and supporting one another or offering exercise and health programs to help combat stress could be a consideration for encouraging the retention of experienced teachers in urban districts.

Susan and Kathy complained of feeling disrespected by students and parents, and by society in general. Each believed she was a strong and competent teacher, and their principal concurred; however, government rhetoric and policy continues to generally criticize teachers and undermine teacher efficacy. They felt that policy makers and individuals without experience in urban schools failed to appreciate, except in theory, the work of urban teachers and failed to acknowledge the difficulty of working in a high-needs environment. However, neither wanted lower standards for teachers nor were they against teacher evaluation. They believed increasing the amount of required preparatory education and providing higher salaries for teachers would increase the general respect for the career path and encourage stronger candidates to pursue teaching as a profession.

Finally, the urban teachers could have benefited from an increased understanding of the community in which they worked and from further interrogation of the deficit perspectives in which they often were viewing students and parents. While the word "urban" is used intentionally as a descriptor for the participants' schools, and most scholars understand this term as having significant racial and economic meaning, throughout the interviews there were elements of unexamined "color blindness" and privilege undergirding some of the teachers' perspectives. Some were more disposed than others to focus on the strengths of the students, but all believed the families and community were in some respects detrimental to their work and the academic success of the children. Developing faculty learning communities in which teachers had opportunities to reflect on theory within the context of their work and investigating race and class consciousness may further empower them in their teaching and allow them to connect with their students and students' families in more culturally appropriate ways.

Until urban districts find a way to retain their best teachers, urban students will continue to underperform academically. While many researchers have considered the challenges new teachers face in the urban environment, experienced teachers also continue to struggle in urban schools but for different reasons. Each of the participants had a sense of their work having a larger purpose and hinted at social justice for their students, but only Kathy, who was the least affected by the challenges of the urban environment, discussed the role of urban teachers within a larger democratic society. Perhaps helping teachers understand their work on a societal level, setting more flexible policies to provide them with a sense of agency within a school system, and providing assistance during life's transitions would increase the retention of urban teachers and create a more stable educational environment for urban students.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Questions

Can we begin by your telling me a little about yourself?

- What do you do outside of school? Are you a member of any groups? Do you participate in any activities? What are your hobbies?
- Name 5 labels you give to describe yourself. Which of those 5 labels seems to stand on its own to most closely describe who you are without other description? Why?
- When other educators describe you, what do you think they say about you?
- How does this compare with what you want them to say?
- How do you think your students would describe you? Would their description feel accurate to you? Fair?
- When you are away from school and other teachers, how would other acquaintances describe you?

Would you tell me about the school where you teach?

- What grade and school do you teach?
- Would you describe the demographics of your school and classroom?
- What are the strengths and challenges your school faces?

Would you discuss how you felt about school when you were a student?

- Would you discuss your status in school when you were a student?
- Were there any teachers to whom you felt especially close or who were influential to your adult life?
- Are there any teachers you consider to be a role model to your own teaching?
- What were the similarities and differences between the schools you attended and the school where you teach?

How did your family influence how you feel or felt about school?

When did you decide to become a teacher? How did your family feel about your career decision?

What were your expectations of your teaching job before you entered the classroom?

- How were these expectations met or not in your first teaching experience?
- Would you tell me about a couple of experiences you had during your first year of teaching?

How did you come to work and teach in a diverse, urban school?

- What factors influenced your decision?
- Did you have any expectations specific to teaching in an urban school?

What have been some of your successes?

- Of what are you most proud in regards to teaching?
- Of what are you most proud of in "life"?

Why do you continue to teach in an urban school?

What do you enjoy about teaching in an urban school?

Were there any failures?

- Would you tell me about one or more of those?

What challenges do you face teaching in an urban school?

What do you do when you face a challenge?

With whom do you discuss your challenges and successes? Why?

Do you ever feel “burned out?” What do you do when this happens?

Were there ever times you wanted to leave teaching or teaching in an urban school?

How would you describe your position or role within your school?

- Are there ways that you take a leadership role?
- In what ways?
- What impact have they had?

Can you discuss what your “normal” classroom day looks like?

What are some challenges you face on a daily basis?

Would you discuss your relationships with your students?

Would you discuss your relationship with the parents and families of your students?

Do you feel like these relationships are similar to that other teachers in your school maintain? If not, how so?

In what ways do you feel supported as a teacher by your family?

In what ways do you feel supported as a teacher by your friends?

In what ways do you feel supported as a teacher by your students?

In what ways do you feel supported as a teacher by your students’ families?

In what ways do you feel supported as a teacher by the school faculty?

In what ways do you feel supported as a teacher by society?

Are there ways you don’t feel supported? How so?

What are some of the lessons you have learned through teaching?

At what times do you feel most like a teacher?

Are there times when you don’t feel like a teacher?

- Would you discuss these times?

Why do you think some people leave teaching in urban schools and others stay?

Is teaching a profession you would recommend to your own child(ren)? Why or why not?

Can you think of a time when you could foresee leaving the classroom? What might result in your leaving?

When do you most enjoy teaching?

What do you do to reinvigorate yourself when you are tired or stressed by your job?

Are there times when you want to think about something other than teaching? What do you do that distracts you?

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