Responsive Not Reactive:
Addressing Crisis Cycles in Teacher Attrition
Through Systemic Change

A Commentary

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> I am incredibly worried about the state of teaching…the overall field is worrying me a lot. We are still in a phase post-Covid where we're having to cover classes much more often than before Covid. I work with undergrad [teacher candidates] too, and I know that they're very concerned…. Our class loads at the university level have been very low. I know that I have a lot of [K-12 teacher] colleagues who are thinking about leaving the field. They talk about it quite often. I'm incredibly worried about the needs of our students. Our district is in disarray.
>
> —Drea, Middle School teacher and Part-Time Teacher Educator

During the pandemic, as I taught teacher candidates, supported student teachers, and met with cooperating teachers and colleagues online from my home, while concurrently supporting my eighth grader doing remote learning and preschooler, going into kindergarten online, I began to wonder how I could authentically encourage the next generation of prospective teachers to enter a field that seemed only to get more challenging by the day. While I was initially encouraged by the idea that the pandemic might serve as a portal (Roy, 2020) to another possible way, not just for education, but for our world and relationships within them, the cynic in me wondered if it would just make teaching even harder, less support-

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ed, and less sustainable than the conditions that had caused me to leave my own eighth grade classroom almost a decade prior. Unfortunately, the cynic's forecast has seemed to come to fruition.

As schools entered the 2022-23 academic year, a heralded "return to normalcy" (or more similar pre-COVID teaching conditions), not all their teachers returned. Much attention was paid to education as a field impacted by "the Great Resignation," a massive wave of career changes that prompted job shortages in multiple sectors (Garcia et al., 2022; Walker, 2022; Walton & Pollock, 2022). While economists noted that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated or accentuated challenging working conditions (across fields), accelerating existing labor market trends of career shifting, the pandemic alone was not responsible for the elevated number of teachers and other professionals leaving the field (Fuller & Kerr, 2022).

Just as the pandemic itself didn't cause teacher attrition issues, it also did not, in and of itself, cause subsequent working conditions that continue to make teaching an undesirable and unsustainable profession. Nearly two years after "the Great Resignation" captured headlines, multiple crises persist related to teaching. One longstanding crisis pertains to teachers of color, who make up only 20% of the workforce compared to students of color, who comprise 55% of public-school enrollment (Learning Policy Institute, 2023; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Teachers of color are more likely to teach in more "hard to staff" and diverse school sites (Achinstein et al., 2010) as well as being more favorably perceived by all students (Cherng & Halpin, 2016), yet they often do not stay in teaching. While recruitment of teachers of color has nearly doubled, outpacing the growth in new White teachers entering the field, teachers of color also have a significantly higher turnover rate than their white counterparts, an issue often linked with working conditions (Ingersoll et al., 2019; Mawhinney & Rinke, 2019).

The research reflects my own secondary teaching experiences. As one of two Asian American teachers at the diverse urban public middle school site where I began my career, a site that served many local working class and immigrant families, I was volunteered to sponsor the Asian Pacific Islander Club in my first year, while designing curriculum that was standards-aligned and reflected the diversity of my classroom. I was also the only teacher in my small team of four teachers who successfully stayed in the classroom for the entire academic year. I cried from exhaustion every day when my students were at fifth period PE, wondering how I would face my challenging sixth period class. Despite this first year, I stayed in teaching for a decade, until a student passed away suddenly on campus and neither students nor staff on campus were offered extended support for this collective trauma. Instead, after two days, everyone was expected to return to business as usual and prepare for upcoming state testing. This incident pushed me into full-time university teacher education and out of the classroom, as I sought more systemic solutions that would help other educators in situations like those

I faced. Still, I have struggled with leaving the secondary classroom as a veteran teacher of color and with how, in good conscience, to continue to advocate for a profession that ultimately proved unsustainable for me.

A second longstanding crisis (Little & Bartlett, 2010) is related to equity in the teacher workforce, with less experienced, uncertified teachers more likely to be placed in a school with more working-class students and students of color than in schools with predominantly white students and lower-poverty schools (Learning Policy Institute, 2023). Given that less experienced, uncertified teachers may have the least formal preparation and experience to meet the needs of diverse students, these statistics are important, particularly as research implies lower long-term retention rates for teachers who enter teaching uncertified (or through alternative certification pathways that provide very little teacher support) instead of through more rigorous traditional teacher education pathways (Freedman, & Appleman, 2009; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). I could relate to this as well, having mentored, supported, and worked with numerous colleagues at various stages of certification. Those who entered with less experience and without formal teacher education often struggled the most and left the site (if not teaching altogether) within a few years, if not a few months.

In this commentary, however, I focus predominantly on a third, but related, teaching crisis, that of deprofessionalizing and dehumanizing working conditions that push teachers out of teaching and how teacher educators, educational leaders, and policy makers can take explicit steps to reprofessionalize and rehumanize teaching, and to make teaching a more attractive and sustainable position for current and future teachers. This is a topic based on my own research and experiences like those of educators like Drea (pseudonym), shared in qualitative interviews in Fall 2023 and open-ended survey responses of a national survey of educators and former educators given at the start of the 2022-23 academic year. This research indicated that more than ever, teachers are feeling disrespected, that their professionalism isn't valued, and that their humanity is not accounted for (Hsieh, 2023).

When asked whether they had personally experienced a mental or physical health challenge that they attributed to their work in teaching, 83% of educator-respondents (N=665/796 survey respondents) said yes. These educators named specific mental and physical health concerns including diagnosed depression, anxiety, PTSD, high blood pressure, migraines, respiratory illnesses, kidney/bladder conditions, digestive issues, autoimmune issues, and repetitive pain. They also discussed undiagnosed symptoms of stress, burnout, exhaustion, phobias, disordered eating, addiction, self-harm, suicidality, and challenges within their families based on a sense of conflict between their commitment to their professional responsibilities and those to their own children. Many educators noted that rather than offering support during these challenging times, administrators exacerbated challenges, placing pressure on them to do more with less, failing to support them when parent or student issues arose, and gaslighting them when

they asked for help, saying that teachers themselves should "learn to manage [their] time better."

Educators felt that on every level they were facing disrespect. Societally, "learning loss" was blamed on teachers who were called to accelerate learning without the acknowledgement of collective trauma that students, families, and they themselves had faced. Safety concerns, both related to the COVID-19 virus and gun violence, arose for teachers as they were called to be "first responders" and "on the front lines" in relation to these public safety issues, but were told not to complain or that resources weren't available when they asked for measures to be taken to ensure student safety and their own. One educator reported being told that they should "use books and staplers as defense." Another educator described a close call with a student bringing a gun (which, fortunately, was unloaded) to school with intent to harm others. This educator did not have a properly functioning door to barricade to prevent an active shooter from entering their classroom and reported that they were in the classroom closest to the cafeteria which likely would have been the gunman's first stop. Families often blamed teachers for students not being successful, as teachers struggled to re-engage students in post-pandemic learning, and students themselves struggled to recalibrate to in-person learning, particularly in terms of meaningful interactions in class and work outside of class. On top of this, restrictive curricular pressures due to external challenges by parent advocacy groups, some of whom formalized their challenges after running successful school board campaigns (Sinha et al., 2023), have made many teachers feel like their pedagogical and curricular expertise is also under attack. Teachers, particularly those committed to bringing more diverse and representative texts into the classroom, communicated feeling particularly discouraged by these attacks, often focused on texts that center narratives of (or are authored by authors from) traditionally marginalized subgroups.

Many teachers in the study noted that while they knew teaching would not be a particularly high paying career, the immense stressors, numerous hours of unpaid labor outside of the classroom, and disregard for their professional contributions left them unable to imagine a long-term future in education, even when they had entered teaching with a commitment to a lifelong career in the classroom. Given my research, my work as a teacher educator who cares deeply about P-12 teachers and their well-being, and my ongoing connection to former teacher candidates and P-12 colleagues, the many concerns educators have expressed about their working conditions have been disheartening. In listening to these educators, I've often wondered, "What can I do to help the helpers? What can each of us who is committed to supporting teachers, whether as a researcher, teacher educator, or educational leader, do to make teaching more sustainable?"

As researchers, it is critical to listen humbly, amplify the voices of teachers, and highlight conditions that are making teaching unsustainable. In the research community, through research presentations at professional conferences, commen-

tary pieces like this, and pieces in professional journals (Hsieh, 2023), the voices of teachers should be elevated so that decisions about teaching are informed by research that centers teachers. Research centering teacher voice and experiences is critical in policy and practice conversations with others working on pathways for diverse teacher candidates and with state legislators themselves. It's important that research on timely relevant topics like this be available to others in research, educators themselves, teacher education practitioners, educational leaders, and policy makers.

As teacher educators, preparing teacher candidates for the realities of teaching, maintaining community with teachers in the field, and offering support and strategies when teachers face institutional challenges are of tantamount importance given current contexts. Teacher educators must help prospective teachers and teacher candidates be prepared for current challenges in the field. One way to do this might be through being in regular collaboration with partner P-12 educators who can share from their experiences what the ever-evolving daily realities of teaching are. Teacher educators might also design elements of courses that help teachers to understand the socio-political contexts in which schools are embedded and how curricular decisions are made, while supporting teachers to develop social and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005). These forms of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) can empower teachers to advocate for themselves and their professional decision making. Finally, teacher educators and teacher education programs can work with partner districts to co-design induction support around the establishment of professional community. Avoiding isolation and establishing strong professional communities can be a key factor in teacher retention (Koerber et al., 2023).

Administrators and educational leaders, who work most directly with teachers themselves, also have a critical role to play. P-12 educational leaders have a responsibility to listen carefully and respond appropriately, trusting teachers to know their needs and understanding that unsustainability is systemic rather than individual. As such, solutions must also be systemic. Recently, a third-year teacher from a large urban district (at a site with high teacher turnover and predominantly working-class students of color) told me about the well-intentioned but misplaced support her administration gave a brand-new teacher, hired midyear, who was struggling with curriculum. Instead of individualized mentorship and curricular guides, the administration told all teachers at the grade level to immediately pivot so that the grade-level team could co-plan an entirely new unit and debrief the unit at weekly professional learning sessions. This plan took all grade-level English teachers out of their classrooms during the same block of time each week. Although this administrative team should be acknowledged for trying to respond in a timely manner to the needs of their newest hire, with a strong model of professional collaboration, it did so in a reactive way that interrupted the units of other grade-level teachers and impacted key instructional time for the

same group of students weekly. Instead, individual coaching (through a site or district-based induction mentor) and a short interim unit (which might have already been developed by a grade level team coordinated by a department or grade-level lead) could have provided support for the new teacher in ways that were far less disruptive. This type of intervention would have required investment in ongoing supports for educators but would have allowed for an easier transition for new teachers entering mid-year.

What researchers, teacher educators, and administrators do individually is important but insufficient. Across each of these roles, well-intentioned and thoughtful individuals become reactive when they lack resources. Researcher, teacher educators, and administrators are embedded in systems that fail to understand the intense professional training necessary to support teachers at all stages of their careers and encourage professional learning that is responsive to a changing field. Often their professionalism and expertise are also undermined. Change that centers educators as a key part of student learning will require an extensive restructuring of education itself, and a shift in values in our society, away from efficiency and reactiveness, and towards development, trust, and humanity. While the pandemic did not provide the portal hoped for into a new future grounded in relationality, perhaps there is an opportunity to turn ongoing crisis into systemic reimagining and transformation. However, for this to occur, in each of our roles, we must advocate for a recognition of the root causes of crisis in systemic unsustainability, deprofessionalization, and dehumanization, and fight for an educational system that all students and educators deserve, one which nurtures and affirms them as much as it challenges them, providing fertile ground for growth, learning, and development.

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