



## **Why Do I Stay? A Case Study of a Secondary English Teacher in an Urban High School**

**By Ye He, Jewell E. Cooper, & Christopher Tangredi**

Recruiting and retaining quality teachers in urban schools remains a significant challenge (Freedman & Appleman, 2008, 2009; Lee, Eckrich, Lackey, & Showalter, 2010). With a quarter of the teaching force leaving their classrooms after one year and almost half leaving within five years, teachers in high poverty, urban schools are even more likely to quit (Ingersoll, 2003, 2004). In addition, Donaldson (2009) found that White and male teachers were more likely to leave teaching compared to their female counterparts. While it is important to study why teachers leave the profession (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, & Meisels, 2007), we believe that studies on factors that motivate teachers to stay would also provide insights to administrators and teacher educators as they consider preparing, recruiting, and retaining teachers in urban school settings.

In the present study, we (two teacher educators) collaborated with one White, male secondary English teacher, Charles (a pseudonym), in exploring his journey from the teacher education program through his fifth year of teaching in an urban high school. Through his critical reflections on his journey over the last seven years, Charles not only shared his challenges and successes, but also offered insights regarding teacher education and teacher retention in urban settings.

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## **Literature Review**

Researchers have explored the role of teacher education (Burstein, Czech, Kretschmer, Lombardi, & Smith, 2009; DeAngelis, Wall, & Che, 2013; Sleeter, 2001; Taylor & Frankenberg, 2009), teacher induction and mentoring (Ingersoll, 2012; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Stanulis & Floden, 2009; Wang, Oddell, & Schwille, 2008; Yendol-Hoppey, Jacobs, & Dana, 2009) and teacher retention efforts (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006; Hahs-Vaugh & Scherff, 2008; Quartz, Thomas, Anderson, Masyn, Lyons, & Olsen; 2008) in an effort to better understand teacher retention in urban school settings. Specifically related to teacher retention in urban schools, Quartz and the Teacher Education Program (TEP) Research Group (2003) found that urban teachers, “the real heroes of urban schools” (p. 105), discovered ways to remain connected to their profession, their quest for social justice, their colleagues, their students, and their communities. Quartz et al. (2008) determined that it was important for urban teachers who came from their teacher education programs to continually challenge dominant deficit conceptions and perceptions of urban students and their families, and to question much broader societal inequality structures. Additionally, Olsen and Anderson (2007) explored why teachers stay in, shift from, or consider leaving urban schools. Of the 15 teachers studied, only three resolutely remained committed to teaching at their schools. The authors suggested that teachers will remain in urban school settings if they can adopt multiple roles within and outside the classroom, but they must receive professional support during their entire careers.

Williams (2003) interviewed 12 good teachers to ascertain why they endured in settings that drove their colleagues away, what their sources of inner strength were during their most difficult times, and what workplace dynamics contributed to their personal fulfillment and long-lasting success in the classroom. She found that these teachers were able to fulfill strong personal needs of autonomy and creativity in their classrooms. The teachers considered their rewards in teaching to be meaningful relationships with their students and they were certain they were making differences in their students’ lives. Additionally, feeling good about their work was tantamount to doing good work. These teachers were also resourceful, resilient, and fragile all at the same time; however, they knew when they needed to rest, reflect, and change their scenery for purposes of professional and personal rejuvenation and renewal.

Nieto (2003) also acknowledged that good teachers remain in urban schools for reasons that go beyond working conditions, disciplinary concerns, and administrative support. Through her interactions with whom she believed to be good teachers, Nieto found that teaching involved a journey of emotions, relationships, and understanding one’s self. The students, no matter what their circumstances, became centered in teachers’ reasons for remaining in urban schools. Though they acknowledged institutional and structural inequities, these teachers persisted because teaching was how they chose to live their lives and in doing so, they found

purpose, greater meaning, and satisfaction in helping to make others' lives better, especially for students whose daily circumstances were beyond their control. More recently, Freedman and Appleman (2009) found that teachers' sense of mission, their dispositions for hard work and persistence, their targeted teacher preparation which included academic and practical knowledge, the practice of reflection, the opportunity to change schools or districts and still remain in their profession, and sustained ongoing support and access to professional networks were reasons that teachers remained in urban schools.

Sleeter (2004) advocated for teacher educators to do a better job in following up with their teacher education program graduates. By doing so, we can make improvements to our programs and keep up-to-date on the changing nature and needs of teacher education students. Longitudinal studies have been conducted related to first-year teachers' professional growth (Bullough, 1989; Bullough & Baughman, 1997; Bullough, Knowles, & Crow, 1991). For example, Bullough (1989) conducted a longitudinal case study on Kerrie, a junior high school teacher, and described her professional development during her first year of teaching. Using Ryan's (1986) stages of teacher development as an analytical lens, Bullough (1989) acknowledged Kerrie's most difficult problem as a first year teacher—planning for and dealing with issues of classroom management and discipline. Other problems included working through individual differences, student work assessment, motivation, and dealing and working with parents. Bullough shared the benefits of coping strategies Kerrie used and her understanding of teaching through metaphors and reflection of teaching as a profession. While comparing her first and second years of teaching revealed better management of day-to-day teaching tasks and responsibilities as well as increased reflection, Bullough acknowledged the powerlessness Kerrie faced with growing accountability, teacher mentoring, and teacher evaluation. Later, Bullough and Baughman (1997) reported Kerrie's professional development across an eight-year span. For example, by socially situating teaching and teacher development, the authors surmised that Kerrie's role as a teacher became even more complex and demanding. Through her teaching, Kerrie learned about herself, including the evolution, shifts, and changes in principles, attitudes and beliefs, which in turn affected her motivations about being an effective teacher and a professional. Additionally, changing school contexts and dealing with diverse learner needs in light of the pressures of accountability without adequate preparation and support led to increased intensified labor for Kerrie, which ultimately drove her to leave teaching after eight years.

Levin (2003) followed four elementary school teachers for 15 years to find out how their pedagogical thinking developed over time. Her teacher participants developed an understanding of how they thought about their students' behaviors, development, and learning. In addition, the teacher participants shared how their learning and teaching intersected with their personal and professional lives. While the teacher participants sought to more thoroughly understand children's development, they also desired professional assistance from their colleagues and other

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professionals in their ongoing reflections about the joys and struggles of their professional practice.

Similar to Bullough and Baughman's (1997) and Levin's (2003) longitudinal studies, we worked with Charles, a White, male secondary English teacher, for the last seven years through a longitudinal study. The study became mutually beneficial in that not only did Charles reflect on his professional development, but through his experience we were also informed on ways we could improve our professional practices and the teacher education program. In this study, we draw upon Charles' reflections on his professional development to address three specific research questions: (1) How does Charles' teaching experience evolve over time? (2) How does Charles perceive the shift of his roles and responsibilities as a teacher? and (3) What are the major factors that influence his professional growth over time?

## **Methods**

### ***School Context***

Charles was hired by the urban high school in which he student taught and has remained there for the past five years. During the longitudinal study, the high school was the school district's hub for culturally and linguistically diverse students and served as a professional development high school for the university. Students hailed from over 40 different countries and spoke over 40 different languages. Designated as a Title I high school, the school had experienced teachers, but a great number of teachers were novice in status and the teacher turnover rate remained high at approximately 25% at the time of the study. While the school struggled in reaching academic goals as defined by the school district and the state, it was well known for its athletic achievement and choral distinction. Furthermore, its most academically sound students were awarded millions of dollars in student scholarship funding.

### ***Researchers and Participant***

Charles is a White male who has worked in this urban high school for the last five years. He was born in the northeastern United States. The family moved to the South after Charles graduated from high school. Since Charles' father passed away when he was nine years old, his mother raised him and his elder brother. Charles considered his mother's strength during single parenthood and her acceptance of him being gay as loving actions that deeply impacted his values and beliefs. Further, Charles described himself as a very open-minded individual who prides himself on not making snap judgments about people. He also valued improving himself through education.

We first met Charles through the secondary teacher education program at a mid-sized university in the southeastern United States in 2006. Learning to become a high school English teacher, Charles not only took education courses in the pro-

gram, but also completed internships and student teaching in rural and urban high school settings as part of the program.

The teacher education program provided content majors (English, comprehensive social studies, mathematics, comprehensive science, foreign language, and classical studies) an avenue to earn teacher licensure. The 24-credit hour program included courses in literacy in the content area, educational psychology, diverse learners, instructional technology, specific content area methods courses, and student teaching seminar. In addition to coursework, teacher candidates were required to complete a 30-contact hour internship while they took the diverse learners course in their junior year, and fulfilled the requirements of student teaching during their senior year.

Charles took two teacher licensure courses with us: educational psychology and diverse learners. In the diverse learners course, Charles was placed in a rural school for his internship and later in the urban high school. The latter placement was made based on his desire to be in a culturally and linguistically diverse high school and the principal's request to "grow" an English teacher from candidates who student taught there. The second author visited Charles at the high school periodically during the past five years and served as a university mentor.

#### **Data Collection**

Working with Charles and his peers since 2006, we followed a small group of teachers from his cohort to track their development as teachers (Cooper & He, 2012, 2013; He & Cooper, 2009, 2011). Data for this study included autobiographies Charles completed as part of the teacher education program, annual interviews with Charles, written reflections, and focus group data collected over the last seven years involving Charles and his peers.

More specifically, during the required educational psychology and diverse learners courses, Charles completed an autobiography at the end of his junior year in which he shared his background, experiences, and vision for teaching. During his senior year, he revisited the autobiography and reflected on his growth as a teacher based on the internship and student teaching experiences. At the end of each academic year, Charles participated in individual interviews (see the interview protocol in Appendix A) to share his teaching experiences, his understanding of himself as a teacher, his understanding of his students, and his understanding of teaching in general. At the end of the first two years of teaching, he also participated in focus group discussions (see Appendix B) with other beginning teachers to share their experiences and insights. We also exchanged emails with Charles through his five years of teaching where he shared his thoughts regarding these aspects as well.

#### **Data Analysis**

We collaborated with Charles to analyze the data in a critical and interpretive manner (Denzin, 1997). All data collected over the course of seven years were

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uploaded to a secure online website for data sharing. Charles was asked to review the data and offer any additions or modifications.

We analyzed the data together with Charles to identify themes and patterns (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We analyzed all data chronologically first to summarize Charles' teaching experiences, his beliefs as a teacher, challenges he faced in teaching, and strategies he employed to overcome these challenges. In uncovering the challenges Charles faced and factors that impacted his persistence in teaching in the same urban high school, we served as "critical friends" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) to Charles' reflections on the data, asked for details and clarifications, and discussed the interpretations and analysis. Charles reviewed both the data and the identified themes and patterns and together we negotiated and discussed the findings and interpretations. The discussions were also audio-recorded and analyzed to enrich the existing data regarding Charles' journey as a teacher.

## **Findings**

Working with Charles since he entered the teacher education program, we tracked his teaching experiences from his internship and student teaching to his development from a novice teacher to an experienced teacher in an urban secondary school. In this section, we start with an overview of Charles' teaching experiences from entering the teacher education program in his junior year to his fifth year teaching. We then reveal the shifts in his beliefs regarding his roles and responsibilities as he gained more teaching experiences. Based on both his experiences and his beliefs, his professional growth as a teacher is also discussed.

### **Overview of Teaching Experiences**

Charles entered the teacher education program because of his life-long interest in becoming a teacher. While originally he wanted to become a science teacher because he found science, especially chemistry and biology, fascinating, his college experiences reignited his passion for literature. That was when he decided to become an English teacher.

When learning to become a teacher at the university, Charles interned and student taught at an urban high school that is known as one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse high schools in the state. Reflecting on his field experiences, he recalled many positive learning opportunities from both his supervising teacher at the school and the students he worked with. Even though some of the students may have had low test scores, Charles emphasized in his interview that "the kids themselves are great... a lot of them are very smart." He revealed that one of his major challenges was learning the English curriculum in the state. British literature was not included in the curriculum when he attended high school in another state. However, it was part of the state's high school curriculum requirement and it was what he would need to cover during his student teaching. In addition to becoming

accustomed to the curriculum, he was also concerned about establishing his teacher authority in the classroom, especially because he was a student teacher.

After successfully completing his teacher education program, he was hired by the same high school where he student taught. As a first year teacher, Charles taught 10th grade English and worked with three classes every semester. During the second semester, he taught a sheltered English class with English learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Most English learners Charles worked with were from Mexico, Vietnam, Cambodia, India, and several African countries.

Charles described his first year teaching as “exhausting but positive.” In addition to teaching, he took on many departmental and administrative tasks. He was able to help the school to raise students’ passing rates for the 10th grade writing test. His first year teaching efforts were rewarded with the recognition as his school’s Rookie Teacher of the Year. Although he was acknowledged for his students’ achievements on test scores, he felt his major achievement was seeing the growth of the students not only in academic content, but also in personal maturity—being prepared for the real world:

Overall they [students] are learning. They are making connections with what they’re learning to the real world. I feel like I’m making a positive impact on them, not just in the classroom but also outside of it as well.

He commented that the actual classroom teaching is the part of teaching that he enjoyed the most, and he also felt rewarded being appreciated by parents.

Gaining more experience in teaching, Charles considered his second and third year teaching at the school “much easier than the first.” During the second year, he taught eight classes—three of which were 10th grade with 25-30 students. One class was Honors and the other two were college-preparatory (CP). He also taught two CP classes to 11th graders and one Advanced Placement (AP) class with 19 students. His last two classes were English 11, which had 20 students, and an English 10 class that was comprised of 30 students. Similarly, in the third year of teaching, he taught six English classes—one AP 11 class, one Honors 11 class, one CP-inclusion class, two CP classes, and one Honors 10 class. Unlike his first year of teaching, his students were predominately African American and Hispanic. Charles believed his students responded to him better in his second and third year because he was not a new teacher at the school. Charles also was convinced that he had a “built-in respect” which allowed him to have better interactions with his students.

Becoming an experienced teacher in his fourth and fifth years of teaching, Charles reported that he taught the same English classes as he did in previous years. While he was always cognizant of his novice teacher status in the school district during the first three years of teaching, at the end of his fourth year of teaching, Charles was officially promoted to a career status teacher. For him, “it was a relief to know that I finally had a sense of job security.” He went on to state: “now I can

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just focus on making sure my students are learning as much as possible and not on whether or not I am getting a pink slip at the end of the year.”

He enjoyed teaching at his school because of the diverse student population. He expressed pride in the academic performance of his students at the end of the academic year. He was especially proud of two students during his fifth year of teaching. He remembered:

They came to me not even knowing how to write a paragraph. When they were writing, it was just like little blocks of writing. They really didn't have any supporting details; grammar was shaky. Working with me all year, they kept doing what they needed to do. They were motivated. They, too, were able to pass.

Being given more responsibilities to mentor preservice and beginning teachers during his fifth year, Charles embraced this role. Reflecting on his own experiences and his work with new teachers, Charles advocated for early field experiences “because the more interactions with students that you see, and the more teaching strategies that you see from teachers, the more comfortable you're going to be.”

#### ***Teacher Roles and Responsibilities***

Even though content area instruction is one of the key responsibilities of teachers, especially secondary teachers, Charles always held the belief that being a teacher is more than just teaching the content. Given his experiences interacting with students and teaching in the secondary school setting for over seven years, Charles developed the perception of his teacher's role as an advocate, facilitator, and role model for the students he works with.

During the teacher education program, Charles expressed his desire to become a teacher who teaches more than just the specific content. As he recalled:

I want to become a teacher because I have had many teachers in my past that have been more than just teachers of their specific content area; they have been role models as well. Ultimately, I want to become a teacher that students can learn from and trust; I do not want to limit my teaching to just the literature that we will be reading. ... My role as a future English teacher will be to recognize that not every student learns in the same way, and I intend to try to help these students find his or her own methods of learning at some point along the way.

After working with students through internship and student teaching, Charles emphasized that his role goes beyond content area instruction. He wanted to prepare his students to be “ready for the real world and just get them ready for dealing with different people ... for different diversities.” He commented that being a gay man himself, he was sensitive to students' comments such as “oh, that's so gay” or “oh don't be such a faggot.” He wanted to make sure that his students “respect each other, me, and everybody else around them.”

Through interactions with students, Charles not only learned about their perception of family, schools, and their favorite movies and video games, but also



some of their challenging family situations. For example, Charles shared that “I had one student who lived in a halfway house and then ran away halfway through the year. . . I had another student who informed me that he had to send his mom to rehab for crack.” Even with such disturbing accounts, Charles was quite proud that he developed very positive relationships with his students. His students were willing to share with him and, in fact, some students actually came to him for advice in terms of handling relationships or negotiating family issues and concerns. Having the opportunity of knowing more about his students during his first year, Charles was challenged to take on an advocate role in working with students beyond being the facilitator of the content knowledge:

One of my major roles as a teacher is obviously to be a facilitator of content knowledge, especially when it comes to writing. . . . Another major role that I feel that I should have is to be an advocate for them, whether it has to do with trouble at home or in the school.

Charles’ perception of himself being both the teacher of content and an advocate for the students was made salient in his interview after his second year teaching where he commented that he thought of himself as “an advocate for the students, even if it’s just a confidante for the students.” He provided an example:

I had a couple of girls, in particular, who were having a lot of problems at home. One actually attempted suicide at the age of eight because she was molested by her father. Then I had another student who was constantly getting sent around to group homes because she did not fit in and wanted to go back to her mother’s. . . . Sometimes these kids really need that person to vent to or just that person to give them that guidance and unfortunately they can’t find anywhere else to go.

In addition to being the content teacher and the advocate, he also described himself as a “super nanny” because he needed for some of his students to know basic discipline, a value taught to him by his mother and one he continued to practice. Specifically, he yearned for his students to be disciplined enough to be knowledgeable of the difference between “a time to talk and a time to listen.” He acknowledged that over time his students became better at recognizing their timing in knowing when to do one or the other. If they could learn this distinction, he believed they could be better prepared for the real world. Even so, his main regret related to his roles and responsibilities as a teacher was not having time to call parents. He woefully said, “I just didn’t have the energy to do it.”

Continuing to believe that he needs to teach beyond the content and be an advocate for the students, Charles’ belief of his roles and responsibilities as a teacher remained consistent in his third, fourth and fifth year of teaching. As a more experienced teacher, he stressed that he serves as a “facilitator of knowledge and a role model” in working with students. It was important for him to make sure his students were “ready for the real world.” As a role model, Charles wanted to instill “respect, responsibility, and accountability” in his students. He also modeled acceptance of his students, for

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he accepted them as they were. He was determined to assist his students “in one way or another” and teach them “whether it has to do with English, or real world problems at home.” He admitted that his students learn from him and he learns from them because the students teach him how to work with them.

#### ***Journey of Professional Growth***

Both the teacher education program and Charles’ professional experiences in his five years of teaching prepared him to become a more confident and competent teacher in the classroom. Sustaining in the teaching profession, Charles experienced growth beyond classroom instruction as well. Through his journey, he revealed how he was able to not only develop confidence in classroom instruction, but also to negotiate the relationship with school administration and educational policy, and balance his professional responsibilities and personal life.

*Classroom Instruction.* With the teaching belief that teachers need to prepare students for real world application of the content, Charles has always strived to bridge the content to students’ real world. In order to do that, it is important that he knows his students and differentiates his lessons for various students’ needs. He probably experienced the most growth in terms of differentiation during student teaching. He admitted that at the beginning of student teaching, he would use the same lesson plan with students at different levels. However, toward the second half of student teaching, he started to make conscientious efforts in differentiating his lesson plans to best meet the unique needs and learning styles of each group of students. Through his first and second year teaching, Charles further adapted lesson plans to meet students’ needs and shared how he intentionally attempted to learn about his students. Making himself available for his students, he said that “from day one, I let my students know that I am always there if they need to talk about anything that may be on their minds.” In addition, being an English teacher, Charles learned about his students through their writings, classroom discussions, and he also engaged students in informal chats in the halls or at lunch to learn more about them. Charles felt he had a lot of similarities with them because of their small age differences. This realization helped him to connect the English content to movies or TV shows students may be familiar with to assist them in visualizing the content.

Charles’ confidence in teaching increased significantly after his first year. He felt that he became a “much more confident teacher” and “more comfortable in front of a classroom full of students” even though he still believed that he has much to learn in regards to content knowledge and discipline. When comparing his second year of teaching to his first year, he eagerly admitted, “I’m definitely more confident in front of the classroom, especially in looking back to interning or student teaching.” His classroom management had also improved with more teaching experiences. Charles felt like he knew what he was doing after teaching for two years. He said during the third year interview:

I don't let things bother me nearly as much as I did the first year of teaching. I know how to handle and diffuse situations a lot better, especially if I see that a student is frustrated. ... Now that this is my third year, the word about how I teach has gotten around to the students. They know that I am more laid back and that they can trust me to be somebody who listens to them ...

While Charles referred to his students' pass rates on state tests as one of the major indications of his teaching effectiveness during the first two years of teaching, he stressed more on his pride in individual students' successes during the last three years. In his third year, he especially loved his inclusion class because the students were "constantly trying to improve their writing and reading skills."

Not surprisingly, we witnessed the development of confidence and comfort in his classroom instruction as Charles gained more teaching experiences. It was also evident that he developed strategies to get to know his students to further differentiate and adapt his lessons. Even though testing scores continued to serve as one of the major indicators of his teaching effectiveness, Charles shared more and more about his pride in individual students' growth, regardless of whether they were considered successful as was measured through state tests.

*Perceptions of Administration and Policy.* Beginning with his first year, Charles wished that he could have more consistent support from school administration when handling student disciplinary issues. In his first three years of teaching, he stated that his biggest challenge in teaching was dealing with "bureaucratic nonsense from the administration and discipline issues." To focus on his own teaching responsibilities, he admitted that he did not interact with the administration. He believed that his "hands-off" approach—physically positioning himself far away from administration—had worked for him. Instead of relying on administrative support, Charles chose to be more than just the classroom teacher for the students through additional one-on-one interactions.

The overall student and teacher morale is another concern. After the first two years of teaching, Charles felt that "a lot of the decisions are made without any teacher input." However, he recognized that there were changes in the school that resulted in positive improvement from when he was completing his student teaching there. He explained:

We have seen improvements, mind you. The morale itself as far as the kids are concerned is definitely increased. The teachers' morale has gone up; although there are definitely not as many teachers transferring from when we were student teaching, more than last year—granted the economy probably helped with that too. But overall, I don't think there would have been as many teachers leaving this year because I think overall things are slowly starting to turn around little by little.

In addition to school administration, Charles was also challenged by educational policies that influenced the overall educational context and demand on teachers.

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During his first four years of teaching, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act was implemented. Charles confessed that to sustain his passion for teaching he would prefer that NCLB would end. He adamantly acknowledged that he was “sick and tired of treating students like numbers and having administrators treating teachers like numbers as well.” He believed that education should be a “five-prong make-up—teachers, students, parents, administrators, and legislators.” However, teachers and students are oftentimes blamed for anything that goes wrong. He believed that NCLB is the bane of the education system and that students are not going to be adequately prepared for college or the real world unless the system changes and stops passing students who have no business passing in the first place.

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were adopted in the state to replace NCLB during Charles’ fifth year of teaching. Charles received a lot of professional development workshops related to CCSS. Charles learned that “literacy is a shared responsibility. It’s not just supposed to be all on us to get students to read and write. It’s supposed to be everybody.” Charles believed that instituting the CCSS at his school will “really pay off.” Even though Charles was happy to see the change of policy and was optimistic about the impact of the new standards, he admitted that CCSS was “a lot of work” for teachers.

Charles’ perception of administration and policy probably is not idiosyncratic. Many teachers working in urban secondary school settings may face similar challenges. Charles’ negotiation with school administration and his reaction to educational policies provided further insights for administrators, teacher educators, and policymakers in terms of both the implications of educational policy and the support teachers, especially beginning teachers, may need to remain and become successful in the teaching profession.

*Professional Demand and Personal Life.* Over five years of teaching, another theme that became salient in Charles’ professional growth is the challenge of balancing professional demands and his personal life. Like many first-year teachers, during his first year, Charles reported that planning, teaching, grading and other responsibilities that he accepted occupied all his time. He stated:

I was exhausted my first year, completely and totally exhausted almost every day because I was forever taking home essays or quizzes or tests to grade. . . . I was just completely shutting everybody else out. I became quite a hermit. . . . I would just be home for the most part grading or doing things, preparing for the next week.

Charles set goals for himself to better protect his personal life from work and to have some personal time during his second year teaching.

In order to improve his understanding of the content, especially analyzing rhetoric, Charles decided to pursue a Master’s degree during his third year of teaching. He believed that earning a higher degree would assist him in being “better prepared to handle what’s coming in the next five years.” He felt professionally strengthened through his work on a Master’s degree. He readily admitted that the

Master's degree in English has helped sustain him in teaching and specifically aided him in becoming more confident in teaching rhetoric. However, this additional load also made it more challenging for him to balance all his responsibilities during his fourth year teaching. To complete his Master's degree by the following spring, he was taking four classes during the fourth year. In addition, Charles started serving as the lead writing teacher for the school and as a member of the Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) Team. Added to this load were unexpected family deaths that occurred during second semester. Charles wearily confessed he "had a hard time trying to balance everything." He said that he would feel much more relieved once he completed the program:

I'm not going to have this giant weight [completion of the Master's degree] on my shoulders constantly pulling me down. I can actually focus on what I want to do with my students. I am actually really, really excited about being able to change my focus. . . I will finally have time for them [his students] to actually use what knowledge I got from the Master's or to teach different things that I like to teach, literature or writing.

Given the enormous requirements from both his teaching responsibilities and going to school, Charles believed his motivation to teach is sustained by "definitely not bringing it [situations that anger or disturb him] home." Charles also kept in touch with his friends who are not connected to school. Further, he unequivocally recognized the strong support of his family.

In addition, Charles credited his on-site teacher educator (OSTE), or cooperating teacher, who is also his novice teacher mentor, as impacting him greatly since he began student teaching. He regretted not having as much time to spend with her since she was department chair and a teacher of seniors. Nonetheless, he sought her out for assistance at times. He also asked for counsel from his departmental colleagues and informally engaged with them outside school during special outings. Furthermore, Charles disclosed that keeping in contact with his former professors was a source of professional support for him as well.

Charles credited his five-year survival as a teacher in an urban school to patience and fairness. He clearly understood that students come from very different backgrounds. Therefore, he attempted to take students where they are academically and socially, including everything that comes with them from their homes and communities.

## **Discussion and Implications**

Charles' experiences do not represent all secondary teachers working in urban settings, but his journey is not idiosyncratic either. The findings of this single case, longitudinal study provided insights for teachers, administrators, and teacher educators in terms of teachers' professional development, school induction and mentoring programming, and university teacher education programs.

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Over his five-year teaching career, Charles became attuned to understanding students' backgrounds in an effort to differentiate instruction, bridge the content to students' real world, be available for students beyond offering academic support, and advocate for students. While he taught different classes and different groups of students, his core belief as a teacher, which was student-centered learning experience beyond content instruction, did not change over time. In fact, when asked about why he stayed in teaching given some of the challenges he faced and frustrations he experienced, he responded that "it was the students," a finding corroborated by previous studies of urban teacher retention (Nieto, 2003; Quartz, et al., 2004; Williams, 2003). Research on teacher beliefs tells us that these beliefs not only guide teachers' classroom decision making (Bullough, 1989; Bullough & Baughman, 1997; Chant, 2009; Chant, Heafner, & Bennett, 2004; Cooper & He, 2013; Cornett, Yeotis, & Terwilliger, 1990), but also form their identity as teachers and impact teacher retention (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000). Ongoing reflections on personal visions and beliefs can empower teachers in negotiating challenges in teaching and help build teacher resilience (Fairbanks, Duffy, Faircloth, He, Levin, Rohr, & Stein, 2010).

In addition, Charles' experiences working with administrators, and negotiating national mandates and local policies clearly illustrated that becoming a teacher is much more than classroom teaching (Cooper & He, 2012; 2013; He & Cooper, 2011). Teachers' ability to negotiate the "beyond teaching" aspects sometimes determines teacher retention and teacher success, especially in more complex teaching settings such as in urban schools. In secondary teacher education programs, while the traditional focus has always been on content knowledge and content pedagogical training, it is important to include opportunities for teacher candidates to learn about those aspects beyond teaching before they enter the teaching field. Charles attributed his success today to some degree to his extensive internship and student teaching experiences in rural and urban school settings. The unique professional development school connection between the university teacher education program and the secondary schools where Charles completed his field experiences also allowed for more meaningful experiences and preparation. For both secondary schools and university teacher education programs, continuing to strengthen such collaboration is critical in not only preparing preservice teachers for secondary school settings, but also in engaging inservice teachers in ongoing professional development.

For Charles, the "beyond teaching" aspects included recognition of his need to engage in activities that would be professionally enhancing and emotionally relaxing (Bullough, 1989; Bullough & Baughman, 1997; Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Nieto, 2003; Olson & Anderson, 2007; Williams, 2003). After his first year of teaching, Charles felt his exhaustion and realized he had to have greater balance in his professional and personal life. Not only did he teach, Charles volunteered for other professional roles in his school and maintained professional networks with his mentor and professors from his teacher education program. Additionally, he

desired to become better as a teacher of content through his attendance in graduate school. Earning a Master's degree in English better prepared him for his students and his own professional growth. He was also intentional about spending time with friends who were not teachers. Moreover, he learned how to create opportunities for renewal and revitalization. Charles' journey can provide insight to teacher educators and school induction and mentoring programs by assisting novice teachers in helping them decide upon and discover strategies for balancing their professional and personal lives (Cooper & He, 2012; He & Cooper, 2011).

For our part, we have learned that teachers genuinely appreciated the opportunity to discuss their experiences and reflect on their teaching beliefs. Specifically, during the past seven years, Charles enjoyed meeting with his former classmates (now his colleagues) to discuss the joys and challenges of the teaching profession and to share advice on how to handle various situations within their particular school settings. Charles' participation in this longitudinal study afforded him a vehicle by which he could share with his former classmates over time. Similarly, both teacher education programs and school induction and mentoring programs can provide novice teachers with other opportunities to self-reflect and share with others immediately and regularly, especially during their beginning years. By doing so, teacher education programs and teacher educators can better support their graduates as well as to improve their programs and teacher educators' professional practice (Sleeter, 2004).

Finally, engaging in the process of longitudinal studies with teachers greatly benefited us as teacher educators. It was through the interviews, observations, and focus groups that we began to learn more about the school context, administrative structure and support from teachers' perspectives, and be aware of unique challenges teacher candidates may face in this particular urban school setting. The concrete and current examples allowed us to provide better scaffolding and support for preservice teachers, and also offered us insights in supporting the induction, mentoring and professional development programming at the school. Longitudinal research study is challenging to conduct, but it certainly offers reciprocal-learning opportunities for both researchers and participants alike.

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## **Appendix A.**

### **Interview Protocol**

1. General Teaching Experiences:
  - a. How is your teaching this semester?
  - b. Which grade level? How many classes? How many students in each class?
  - c. How would you describe the diversity in your classroom and your school?
2. Understanding of Self:
  - a. How would you describe yourself as a teacher now?
  - b. What do you perceive as your major roles and responsibilities as a teacher?
  - c. What are some of the experiences you had in the past influence your current classroom teaching?
  - d. What kind of teacher do you think you want to be?
3. Understanding of Students:
  - a. How do you get to know your students?
  - b. What do you know about your students' background? How do you know that?
  - c. What do you know about the families? How do you know that?
  - d. Describe the interaction you had this semester with one of your students or their families that really impacted your teaching or who you are as a teacher.
4. Understanding of Teaching:
  - a. Comparing yourself and your students, do you see many similarities or differences? What are they?
  - b. How do you feel about your relationship with your students and their families?
  - c. How do you feel about the effectiveness of your instruction? What is the ideal impact? How do you know if your instruction is effective?
  - d. If you were to be placed in an ideal classroom, what would it look like? How could your teaching be different from what you are doing now?

## **Appendix B.**

### **Focus Group Protocol**

1. General Teaching Experiences
  - a. What is the most exciting thing that happened to you in your classroom this year?
2. Understanding of Self
  - a. What are some of your achievements as a teacher?
  - b. What are some of your goals as a teacher?
3. Understanding of Students
  - a. What have you learned about your students and their families?
  - b. What have you learned from the students themselves?
  - c. How do you plan on getting to know your students and their families? Given what you already know now, how do you plan on doing it better next semester or next year?
4. Understanding of Teaching
  - a. How do you like teaching?
  - b. What aspect of teaching do you enjoy most?
  - c. If there were one thing you would want to change about your last year's teaching, what would it be?