Saving Grace, Ourselves, and Profession: What It Means to Be a Reflective Practitioner in the 21st Century

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This qualitative case study explored the perspectives of two high school teachers who approach their work as reflective practitioners, capable of thinking deeply about systemic issues and teachers' work lives. Our research questions included: 1) how do the conditions of schooling influence an intellectual approach to teachers' work?; 2) how do narrowly defined evaluations of educators' work impact teacher morale?; and 3) how do differences in the work of teachers and administrators catalyze division with a school culture? Data illustrate the influence of professional landscapes and unearth how less-than-satisfying conditions are expressed in environments devoid of discourse that fosters an intellectual approach to teachers' work. Findings specifically address solutions and recommendations for supporting teachers through structures for dialogue and action.

From an outsider's perspective the conditions of public education are often portrayed as running the gamut. Educational institutions, and the "workers" within, often reside along a continuum. Included within the spectrum are snapshots of organizational dysfunction and the occasional human-interest story where "excellence" equates with lives of those consumed by "making a difference." These dichotomies in viewpoints often serves as a public barometer on the status of the teaching profession, and the quality of education provided. Subsequent conversations through the media, at the water cooler, or through tweets and message boards cast blame on any number of reasons why the *profession*, as a whole, is perceived as in need of a fundamental overhaul due to its inadequacy, subpar international standing, and downright broken status. Forgotten in the effort to resuscitate a system, are the teacher bystanders whose daily work remains constant as indicators of "quality" endure, as moving targets.

Data for this narrative were derived from a three-year chronicle of discussions with a group of educators who grappled with the reality of their work lives and the struggles they faced when confronted with mandates to standardize teachers' work. Initial conversations on the status of the profession bled into inquiries by two teachers determined to think deeply about their work.

A central finding of this study is the importance of acknowledging and nurturing dimensions of teachers' work that value them as intellectuals within school contexts. For teachers who regularly consider in-depth and sophisticated understandings of all that schools encompass (e.g., politics, economies, religion, gender, race, class), public or private platforms for discussions and critical reflection are typically limited or nonexistent. Study findings revealed the need for intellectual conversations rooted in issues that matter to educators, both practically and conceptually. Recommendations for others working with teachers include opportunities to "give back" as intellectuals including serving as leaders and educators within their schools and those affiliated with education communities (e.g., colleges and universities).

Literature Review

Factors that Impact Teachers' Work

A 2013 report by the Obama administration offers the most recent treatise on how to "fix" the U.S. education system. A Department of Education proposal for elevating and transforming the teaching profession appears in the Blueprint for RESPECT (Recognizing Educational Success, Professional Excellence, and Collaborative Teaching) (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). This byproduct of a *Who's Who's* among educational proprietors (e.g., American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Association of School Administrators

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(AASA), Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS), National Education Association (NEA)) offers proposals to meet teaching demands in the 21st century through seemingly fail safe tactics including increasing standards, strengthening evaluation, and transforming curriculum. As with past edicts from those distanced from classrooms, RESPECT offers a critique of teachers' work with accompanying recommendations for revival. The challenge related to these efforts is their distance from the daily work life in classrooms and schools.

Research on the profession of teaching, teachers' roles, and the manifestations of these intersections has been part of professional inquiry of teachers' work for the better part of the past century. Specific examinations of the profiles and daily work of educators address the culture of schools; the nature of teachers' work and the demands affiliated with assessment, standardization of the profession, and agendas for reform (e.g., Barth, 2002; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; Payjak, 2012; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). These factors, individually or collectively, saturate the fabric of life in classrooms and the educators inhabiting these communities.

Historically, teacher satisfaction has been linked to teachers' work including interactions with students, professional relationships, translating information, and impacting broad-based promises through systems change (Eisner, 1994; Jackson, 1986; Lortie, 1975). Myriad studies have further identified factors that contribute to teachers' experiences and long-term commitments (e.g., students, curriculum, teachers) and the interconnectedness of all that constitutes school communities (Barth, 2002; Nieto 2003; Schonfeld, 1990). As of late, however, the challenges placed on educators to measure, calibrate, and compete bring increasingly divisive obstacles to teachers' work, and ultimately, their long-term viability in the profession.

Reflections on why teachers remain or leave the profession include professional portraits of the tug-of-war between the goals and aspirations that led many to the profession, and the practical demands to validate and justify teachers' work. Contemporary examinations of the causes for leaving and retention solutions run the gamut and mirror those from the past (e.g., salary, status, autonomy) (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Dillon, 2011; Strauss, 2015; Trosclair, 2015).

The dilemma facing today's educators calls for masterful navigation of sometimes competing agendas for educators who thrive. Theoretically, the 2016 teacher must possess both broad-based conceptual dispositions, as well as refined skill sets viewed as necessary for quality teaching (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; Ingersoll, 2011; Pajak, 2012; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Tye & O'Brien, 2002). To manage, and flourish, mechanisms such as critically reflective practices allow teachers to consider both the skills for effective teaching as well as big picture considerations for reflection in action (Burbank et al., 2016). Inherent in a willingness to consciously reflect, is finding the time, spaces, and community where reflection is active, and sustained. For teachers to excel beyond today's proscriptive benchmarks for "success" and assumed formulae for motivation (e.g., pay Hulleman & Barron, 2010) where motivation and a commitment to individual engagement are central to teachers' agendas (Boston Consulting Group, 2014; Firestone, 2014).

Reflection

Examinations of reflection are long-standing (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983). In his seminal work on teacher thinking, Dewey (1933) suggested that substantive reflection requires open-minded and critically rigorous ways of thinking through deep understandings of relationships and connections between and among ideas (Rodgers, 2002).

For practicing educators, reflection may include examinations of justice, equity, and related themes that embed the political, moral, and ethical consequences of teaching actions. Other perspectives have emphasized that critically reflective practices must inform decision making related to curriculum and instruction in ways that change what is more typically accepted (cf. Brookfield, 1995; Fook, 2006). These practices are particularly critical to our focal teachers and their perspectives on remaining in the profession. Equally important is the role that peers play in providing a space and support for critical reflection (Burbank, Ramirez, & Bates, 2016) as fundamental to surviving *and* prospering in the profession.

While trends in teacher retention reveal relatively consistent patterns, those who leave, or stay don't necessarily fit a predictable profile in their reflective practices. Those who leave the profession are likely less effective due to multiple reasons including but not limited to work conditions, inappropriate assignments, and available resources (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010; Strauss, 2015; Trosclair, 2015). Simply put, those who leave or remain in the profession differ in substantive ways. What is less clear is how those who remain approach the work in ways that allow them to manage, and ideally, thrive.

Methodology

This case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2005) employed qualitative data and examined the professional stories of two educators in the Western United States. Notes and reflections on the stories of daily work, analyses of working conditions, and explorations of educational spaces unearthed the complexity of teachers' work that dilute the purpose of teachers' work. Data sources focused on participants' blog entries and data gathered as part of monthly conversations. Because of the open-ended nature of meeting comments, the researchers constructed a complex matrix to facilitate data analysis. Independently, research team members read the discussion transcripts and blog discussions through a process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), identifying initial categories for coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researchers used codes to create an improved matrix, which revealed similarities and differences between the two focal candidates, as well as kept data organized and manageable. All names are pseudonyms.

Participants

The stories of Mike and Wendy showcase the lives of two teachers who have remained in the profession for between 14 and 16 years, respectively. Their stories bring to life the complexities of remaining in the profession and illuminate challenges faced by educators within the current standards-based assessment climate.

Mike, a history teacher in his early forties completed an undergraduate degree on the east coast and graduate school and licensure at Western University. He played college sports and spent a portion of his career working for the Department of Justice. His current teaching assignments included honors and Advanced Placement history in a large western, US Title I high school.

Wendy, a secondary English teacher with a range of experience at middle and high schools, completed a bachelors and master's degree in the city where she teaches. Also, in her early forties, she has coached an athletic team for portion of her career. Both have been active in formal and informal professional development experiences including book clubs, district level trainings, and Friday night lamentations on the state of the profession.

The teacher education faculty researchers have been part of Western University for over 20 years. Donna, a professor in a College of Humanities and Bonnie, a professor in the College of Education, work as instructors, supervisors, and mentors of preservice teachers. As colleagues in teacher preparation, they have engaged in service and preservice teacher preparation with specific emphases on teachers' work in urban communities.

Setting and Scene

Reaching Out. For nearly a decade following graduation from Western's teacher education program, a subset of humanities graduates kept in touch with their preparation faculty. Requests for graduate school recommendations, e-mail conversations, shared links to news stories on teachers' work, and periodic coffees to keep in touch have been part of these long-term relationships.

Our project began with a call from a community middle school English teacher to her former university advisor. Her request was filled with urgency regarding the plight of teachers and the profession. Much like her approach as a student in the teacher preparation at Western University, and in her work as a middle school English teacher for the past 16 years, she was sensitive to the tenor of national and local conversations on the teaching profession. Attentive to the often times undeserved swipes at teacher education, she often asked, "Have you seen the *Times*?" She went on, "We need to do something to get out the word on why we need teacher education programs." Her interest and a subsequent set of e-mail exchanges planted the seed for an informal forum for conversations on educational issues among educators worn by the negative portrayals of teaching within their school communities and those across the nation.

In response to a grassroots invitation to reflect on the teaching profession, two faculty with ongoing relationships with their program graduates wanted to know more about what sustains teachers in today's classrooms. They were particularly interested in how teachers engage in their daily work amidst what appears as a continuous pummeling of their work lives.

The university faculty and a cohort of middle and high school teachers embarked on a two-year journey as part of the forum Question, Educate, Support, and Teach (QuEST). Discussion topics for the forum included queries into why these teachers remain in the profession. Our goal was to examine of how this particular group of teachers cope in environments that are less than ideal for some, intolerable by others, and "just fine" for many.

Over the course of their discussions, the format and intensity of conversations varied. Initial topics centered on the urgency of dealing with stressors of teachers' daily lives within the context of highly scrutinized environments. Discussion themes ebbed and flowed over the course of discussions from class size, mandated curricula, to a focus on the political climate in the U.S. and its impact on the teaching profession.

For the university faculty, deliberate attempts were made to steer teacher discussions from what felt, at times, like bloodletting sessions. Instead, they helped to "organize" the conversations to refocus discussions sometimes saturated in commiseration. Following a series of conversations across time, the two-university faculty decided to hold an event, invite people, and serve refreshments; as only those in the academy can appreciate. This event was intended to promote panel discussion on the climate in education, quickly turned into litany sharing of the burdens of teachers' work.

A Fork in the Road. An opportunity for educators to come together to discuss difficult issues (e.g., equity for students, teachers' role is responding to increasingly diversity student communities) seemed like a reasonable way of building a professional community committed to on-the-ground problems in education; it was assumed that providing an invitation for candid conversations about prejudice and privilege would offer a platform for bands of teachers to rally. While the concept of a public space made sense, what ensued were tears, by some, and philosophical divisions expressed by others among a panel of educators including the standard conscience cleansing that often surfaces when teachers unite to explore injustice and a hand-wringing about "what to do" to rescue the profession (Brown, 2013; Thompson, 2003).

What became painfully clear following the education panel was that even among individuals who self-identify as progressives, not all teachers hold the same views regarding their roles as educators, their work, and how best to respond to the increasing scrutiny about what constitutes effective teaching. Following the panel, and over the course of a year, QuEST participation dwindled with myriad reasons for discontinued participation.

Disparate perceptions of factors impacting student failure or success in classrooms were revealed as panel members discussed the conditions of schools (e.g., the role of racism and privilege and their impact on student success). For some, the seemingly obvious barriers of power, control, and compliance were topics viewed by others to dwell on the "negative" with no solutions. This unearthing seemed less satisfying to some and prompted discontinued participation. That is, the public forum of the panel made explicit, historically privately held beliefs about teachers' perspectives that were now brought into the open. Coupled with the demands of teachers' works lives QuEST participation slowly died off after the panel presentation. From a subset of the original group of 12 teachers, a cohort of four teachers continued to meet regularly during year two, with numbers falling further during year three, to two teacher participants. Our regular meetings with these two teachers, and the weekly blog posts they composed, formed the basis for the observations reported here.

The two-university faculty who facilitated the QuEST group wondered why Mike and Wendy continued in their discussions. Why did *these teachers* continue to meet? They too were busy and had other priorities. They too were underpaid, underappreciated, etc. Despite diminished membership and constant pulls on collective time, Mike, Wendy, Donna and Bonnie believed continuing conversations was a priority. The goal was to share stories and understand the viewpoints of those who have remained in the profession, year after year.

The newly constituted QuEST group continued to meet monthly for a year. A 2012 wiki blog served as a conduit for conversation with Mike and Wendy as a starting point for monthly dialogue. The lives of Wendy and Mike reflect the stories of many educators who grapple with who they have become as a result of the "profession." The relationship of Mike and Wendy as colleagues within the same school, their personal friendship, and their long-standing connection to a former university instructor contributed to the durability of the work with Donna and Bonnie. The semi-structured nature of QuEST allowed for a continuation of their dialogues. But this time, the content of conversations delved deeper.

Wendy

I was hired for my first teaching position…to teach "basic" English in an urban junior high in the Sugarville School District… By my third year, I was named teacher of the year for the district. I was a contender for a state award but could not be considered because of the five years of experience required for eligibility…I became a teacher because it is what I do. It is my 'inner-nature', as the Taoists would say. I just teach. I am also what they call 'a believer'. I believe in public school. I believe every student is capable of learning and not just learning how to read and write but learning how to be a productive and contributing member of society. I believe it is my

job to make the world a better place by teaching students how to communicate and care. This is my 16th year believing that what I do matters, and that what matters, I do...We have just finished the chapter where the beloved windmill gets blown up by the enemy, again. I asked my students to write about a time when something they loved was destroyed, and that's when I realized, my job is my windmill. My windmill has been bulldozed by the standardized testing imposed by legislators. Its foundation has cracked under the weight of unbearable class sizes and inadequate funding. It has been blown up by poor administrative decisions and negative public opinion. My windmill, my teaching, my job and my inner nature have taken a beating these last few years, and I have had to rebuild it again, again, and again to withstand and accommodate the enemy. It feels like war, and my only weapon is my resiliency.

Mike

I grew up a world traveler following along on the coattails of my military father and at times reluctant mother. I come from a long line of educators. Several of my family members have been involved in education in one form or another…One could easily say that education is in my blood although it took a while for it to take hold…Nowhere was education or teaching in my sights, my entry into education was delayed as I put my emphasis of public service into a different area….Like Opus stepping out of *Bloom County* and into *Outland*, my journey would take an incredible ideological and philosophic twist. I enrolled at Western University with the intent of simply getting a teaching endorsement, however, a chance meeting with an advisor sent me down an enlightening path…the advisor suggested enrolling as a graduate student, thus moving closer to an MA in education [that]…shaped a philosophy of educational commitment to social justice, educator professionalism, and personal and institutional accountability...I have been teaching for fourteen years in public education and raging against the machine ever since.

Both Mike's and Wendy's narratives reflect the layers of influence leading to their roles as educators. Both identified the core beliefs that inform their teaching and the impact of life experiences on their fundamental beliefs about their work. Their stories are unique in their focus on the dilemmas faced by educators whose professional lives are mired in the institutional conditions that influence their views and guide how they respond to their work circumstances. Meeting themes and subsequent stories of Mike and Wendy reveal what we

have come to understand to be the fallout of the current climate within public education. Our findings address the following questions: 1) how do the conditions of schooling influence an intellectual approach to teachers' work?; 2) how do narrowly defined evaluations of educators' work impact teacher morale?; and 3) how do differences in the work of teachers and administrators catalyze division with a school culture? The themes that have evolved from these questions address the conditions of schooling and the challenges of approaching those conditions as an intellectual; the simplification of teachers' work; and the tensions faced by teachers when the administration fails to value teachers beyond their ability to transmit and assess.

Findings

The Conditions of Schooling

A longstanding feature of school communities that has considerable impact on teachers' satisfaction centers on the culture and climate within individual schools. These features are particularly critical in dictating the ways in which teachers are expected to approach work and their roles within schools and classrooms (Barth, 2002; Deal & Peterson, 1999; DuFour, 2004). Examinations of school culture, for example, have specifically teased out the impact of leadership, academic mission, and roles of teachers within school systems as factors impacting teachers' work and their reasons for remaining within the profession (Shen et al., 2012).

Shen, et al., (2012) suggest that while the influence of a principal is central to the organizational structure of a school, the characteristics of a principal vary considerably, and are influenced highly by the role of teachers as central to how school systems operate. Taken historically, then, Shen, et al., (2012) define "school process" variables, (e.g., working conditions, collegiality) as having a more profound impact on overall teacher satisfaction and impact significantly teacher sustainability.

More abstract concepts of school culture include "empowerment" and ownership defined in terms of achievement, recognition, opportunities for advancement and levels of creativity that allow for growth (Moye et al., 2005). Moye, et al. (2005) suggested that the roles of empowerment and ownership, as well as having colleagues and professional relationships, contribute profoundly to feelings of belongingness and professional gratification.

Cognizant of the goals that drew them to the profession as novice teachers, an internal battle remains within a climate that stifles critical reflection, problem framing and evaluations of practices that inform teachers' work. Mike's and Wendy's experiences make evident how and why they navigate systems in unintended ways when professional lives lack attention to the core needs of educators who explore their work in-depth and through reflections on daily life in complex contexts. Fueling these scenarios, are pressures linked to the state of education, solutions that are simplified, and tensions between leaders and their subordinates.

The dilemma when trying to understand how thoughtful educators react to school contexts is the challenge of teasing out the impact of the immediate work demands (e.g., writing plans, instructing, assessing) with examinations of systemic challenges that stem from custodial oversight designed to "fix education." Wendy writes,

> For the last 15 plus years, I thought my peers (well, at least most of my peers) were...this will sound mean...smarter…I really thought everyone was staying late or taking work home. I thought everyone was using backwards design to plan lessons. I thought everyone made their own worksheets to ensure the right amount of white space to optimize student learning. I thought everyone woke up in the middle of the night, at least one night a week, sweaty and panicked that tomorrow's lesson was going to bomb. Apparently, not. (wiki post, October 2011).

The roots of Wendy's reflections are complex and somewhat veiled. Specifically, it is difficult to ascertain whether Wendy's reactions are commentaries on the conditions of schooling, on those who enter the profession, or general frustrations with an inability to impact change. Wendy's reactions appear to be fueled by her critique of those who are not thinking and working hard enough (i.e., planning, presenting information, making content interesting). What is less clear is whether this "working hard" equates with an intellectual endeavor (e.g., Why even use Backward Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) in the first place)? Wendy's comments reveal the interrelatedness of these tensions and feelings of helplessness that border on hostility.

For Mike, the conditions of teachers work not only devalue educators, as a group, but create situations where knowledge types are valued differently. He writes,

> That the impact of NCLB and the intense focus on English and Math has drastically impacted one segment of educators and left others in a barren wasteland of neglect. From the standpoint of social studies, nobody really seems to care what we teach. I guess there is an assumption that we are following the core given that in history, it's rather simple becuase the core, both state and district are in essence timelines. We aren't tested by any kind of…district/state benchmark. In fact, the SAT and ACT don't test any kind of social studies knowledge; only skills that are associated with reading, writing and vocabulary (wiki post, November 2011).

For Mike, this division on whose knowledge counts is further exacerbated in the media, "when news organizations publish or report shocking statistics about what children don't know, usually it's geography and history that are used to illustrate just how stupid kids are and thus how are schools are failing society." (November wiki). The challenge is therefore finding a place to matter. When legislative mandates that govern teachers' work emphasize certain types of knowledge (i.e., reading, math, and science) and communities possess what Mike describes as a negative stereotype of content that is then used as the barometer of educational quality (e.g., knowledge of geography and history often cited in the media), it's no wonder teachers are frustrated.

What it means when you are a really smart teacher – A license to outsmart?

In his seminal work on the intellectualism of teachers, Henry Giroux (1985) examined the impact of school and community cultures on teachers' work. He argued that anti-intellectualism within the profession creates institutional constraints that limit teachers' ability to think beyond the technocratic minutia that pervade bureaucratic systems. This treatise is particularly relevant in the current educational climate where levels of scrutiny and calibration in instruction and assessment have led, some would argue, to a workforce of automatons, tethered to brightly colored websites and standardized protocols for excellence. These themes are manifest in the stories of Wendy and Mike, highlighting teachers' reactions to conditions in the field; the sometimes-tenuous relationships between administrators and teachers; how some survive in a terrain of mistrust. The challenge is managing these often-competing goals. As Mike reported in a November 2012 blog,

> I don't think I am smarter than anyone else, only that I take pride in my profession and make a concerted

effort to be prepared and versed in a mind blowing amount of information and loath those who don't. AP, US History and even World Studies require that you know not only people and dates but authors, book titles, scientists, philosophers, poets, military men and tactics, art, theories, trends, politicians, cultures, races, on and on and on… As such, I can come off sounding intelligent in almost any setting and as a result, many people think I'm super smart. Here is the irony though, none of what I know and have come to value is reflected as a value in these [times of] high stakes testing. So, while what I know positions me, intentionally or not, as a 'smart guy (ass)', the tests and curricular focus of NCLB and the state totally ignore that body of knowledge.

We again see the impact of the assessment pecking order of value in Mike's response. As in his discussion on the value of knowledge as measured through NCLB criteria, teachers outside of the core may be, as he also wrote in the November blog, "social studies teachers have been the ugly-stepchild of education for some time."

The Simplification of Teachers' Work

A focus on "teacher proofing" curriculum is not new (Ben-Peretz, 1990). Many curriculum developers and policy makers view the strategy for improving teaching and learning as rather simplistic where teachers are provided with a checklist of necessary ingredients for quality teaching. What is lost in this process is a legitimate appraisal of how a presumed recipe for "success" plays out in practice in ways that interact with meaningful learning (Remillard et al., 2011). In Wendy's words as part of a February 2012 blog,

Last weekend, I woke in the middle of the night in a cold sweat worrying about my classes. It was midterm and I still needed to finish reading *The Tao of Pooh*…, assign their outside reading book project, and get them going on their research projects…I also had the [district test] to give this term, as well as getting the kids through registration for next year. I was losing one day to the ACT test, 2 days for registration, 3 days…for [the district exam]. You can see why I wasn't able to go back to sleep…I was frustrated and furious. I have not taught my classes in 6 days because of standardized testing and…will then only get one day of teaching before my classes get interrupted again with more registration business. I will then have three days of teaching before I have to give the next standardized test. I will then have three weeks to prepare the students for another standardized test.

As shared in Wendy's reflections, the "merits" of a streamlined list of to-dos only appear to complicate her workload and the affiliated juggling of curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy. In a September 2011 blog on the culture of her school, Wendy noted,

… I feel like we, both teachers in general and Sugarville School District teachers, are under attack for no real reason. Starting with the district, our new superintendent is returning to an age-old metaphor of schooling as a business and that we have to "compete" under a business model. The suggestions to improve education are always centered around high stakes testing, technology, lower class size and better teacher education. None of that will work if the parents are not invested in their child's education. Why do we think that all teachers should care more when some parents could care less?

For Wendy, the "mechanics" of schooling force an approach to work that demands an expense of energy on everything but teaching. Increasing mandates for "success" are accompanied by formulae for instruction, assessment, and curricula that are sold as the silver bullets for excellence through tightly defined criteria and technology-based showcasing of performance. What is typically lacking is a fine-grained analysis of what these efforts imply about the daily work of educators and the profession, in general. Too often, the recipes for excellence are as neatly packaged as the online training programs through which they emerge.

During the course of our year together the district issued some mandates about the ways in which teachers were expected to use technology to enhance student success. Both Mike and Wendy lamented this initiative numerous times and for a variety of reasons. Their frustrations focused on the problems of expecting all teachers to do the same things the same ways and, as Mike points out, the hidden problems of assuming that this initiative would help all students. Mike writes in March 2012),

As a result, he [school administrator] wants to basically push a digital classroom with our lessons posted online with all materials available for download. While I already do this, to make it mandatory and to think that it is equitable, is criminal. One, it fails to recognize the dynamic of the teacher in the classroom connecting with students, a dynamic that most reputable educational literature supports. Two, it illustrates a classist view, that ALL students have access to computers.

Mike's analysis of the requirements of teachers' work illustrates a level of dissonance when a one size fits all approach is applied. Efforts to define teachers' work through mechanized efficiencies fail to capture the individuality, independence and self-reliance valued by many teachers.

Tensions between leaders and their subordinates

The influence of bureaucracies and their institutional counterparts on teachers' work is significant (Boyd, Grossman, Ing, Lankford, Loeb, Wycoff, 2011). As the stewards of policy, administrators' viewpoints typically focus on issues of school organization, sound resource management, and policy. Alternatively, teachers' eyes are more appropriately cast on individual student growth, healthy classroom life, and efficacious instructional practices. The juxtaposition in perspectives, at times, appears to leave success and empowerment simply out of reach for teachers. And, after all, someone needs to be the villain when feelings of powerlessness pervade.

Much of the content of Mike's and Wendy's blog entries and discussions during monthly meetings was devoted to descriptions of their growing "feud" with administrators. Consider Mike's thought processes in the context of a September 2012 blog regarding recent district-mandated policies for cutting costs:

> Do I channel Jefferson, Paine, X, Thoreau? Is this the moment that real, powerful activism begins? Can we openly resist this kind of leadership without falling on our swords? What good am I to my stu-dents, school, or co-workers if I am 'surplused'? If I'm not here, I can't resist and fight? What does this Civil Disobedience look like?

Mike's views illustrate a prototype among a select group of educators who remain in the profession and continue to kick. For some, their perseverance is fueled by an effort to maintain identity. For others, behaviors reflect a lashing out; and at times, a drive to do what's best for students in classrooms. The challenge is managing these often-competing goals. As Mike reported in a November 2012 blog,

> Starting with the district, our new super [superintendent] is returning to an age-old metaphor of schooling as a business and that we have to "compete" under a business model. I won't go into my own issues with this approach, but it is a fallacy in that business run via competitive markets driven by MOTIVATED consumers and the demand they create.

Over the course of our conversations, Mike's attention was directed at the new administration. He struggled over and over again with the frustration of feeling like the new administration wasn't taking good teachers, and their history together, seriously. This excerpt, taken from the blog early in the year, captures much of his thinking: "I seriously believe that our leadership thinks that we have been duped.....that we are going to see this as an honor and just "soldier" along. I was literally tortured over attending or not, I sent an email to admin saying I needed greater notice and wouldn't attend."

For both Mike and Wendy, the goal of keeping their students central allows them to continue in their daily work even when working amidst conditions that sometimes feel as though making a difference is compounded by too many variables that underscore a system stranglehold; at times, though, the pressures became too much.

In a 2012 blog Wendy reflected on the unlikelihood that she was making a difference for her students. Within this narrative she describes a level of self-awareness that when two students Wendy described as "status quo, white, middle-class, one of them…conservative kids" shared how their experiences in Wendy's classes had impacted their worlds.

> …while I thought it was my goal, my mission, my damn calling to 'help' the dispossessed, I was in all reality making a huge impact on how they [all students in her classes] saw the world… That's what keeps me coming back, knowing that I may never see the successes, the changes, the victories, but rather that I may in some way have a subtle impact on [all] students that will in turn empower them into becoming agents of change.

Wendy's insights reflect an all too common struggle for many educators committed to "making a difference." Within the mix of working toward reform and related do-gooder antics, the big picture of impact may be lost when educators become fixated on saving and serving or as Mike shared, "fighting the machine." Where educators are cautioned is in committing to work toward systems change that lacks attention to a holistic view of impact.

QuEST, and subsequent conversations with Wendy and Mike, provided a relatively safe venue to exercise their intellectual commitments to the profession and to re-claim a sense of passion that may get lost when professional triage takes over. Discussions with Mike and Wendy helped to frame practices within their school communities beyond contexts, relationships, and the mechanics of their work. Instead, we unearthed perhaps

inherent dimensions of these teachers that when acknowledged, keep them moving forward. So, we asked, What keeps you kicking?

What keeps us coming back? Yesterday, my answer was different from today.

Tomorrow, I suspect, my answer will be again entirely different. Yesterday, I was riding a wave of student learning. Last week's lessons had gone well (at least to my standards) …So, this morning, I was feeling good… This morning I felt like I was making these kids be better thinkers...Then first period happened… the lesson could have been an awesome outtake from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* or a *Saturday Night Live* skit. The reason I am still kicking is because…I am a 'believer'…A believer is someone who can see the big picture, the whole ball of wax, the student through the forest...whatever...I honestly believe that I NEED, on a cellular level, to help these kids think critically and for themselves. I have to keep kicking because not everyone here is a believer. (Wendy Interview # 3)

Why do I keep kicking? …this is a question that is commonly asked of me…I used to give a rather canned response… 'I went into teaching because of summers off and I can surf.' The reality is, it is much deeper, at times disturbing and more personal than maybe even I want to admit…I once told a professor…true teaching was a calling. Like ministers, teachers teach because of the connection to students like ministers to their parishioners. Teachers, like preachers, are believers in what they offer and do. Those 'believers' are called not only to the classroom but the 'religion' the 'ideology' and the labor of education for the sake of education. We believers truly believe in the transformative nature of the educational process and as such, its impact on the lives of those who learn and pursue knowledge. We, the believers, practice what we preach. We can't get enough of it, we are troubled by the lack of time in the day to read, engage, create and collaborate. (Mike Interview #3)

Discussion and Conclusions

Findings from this study identify key factors and their influence on teachers' work. Specific observations from our findings include responses to the following questions:

Data from our study underscore teachers' reactions to the multifaceted and complex nature of their experiences in classrooms and schools. The challenge for contemporary educators is maintaining a persistent commitment to meeting the goals and dreams envisioned when they entered the profession. This test is particularly daunting when faced with the internal struggle of simultaneously managing the technocratic elements of teachers' work with individual goals for entering the profession.

The current barrage of measurement and the "banking" of skill precision only exacerbate an environment that challenges intellectualism within the profession (Giroux, 2005; 2002; Rubin, & Kazanjian, 2011). The complexity of educational contexts makes evident the need for support systems among communities of educators with unique and sometimes differentiated roles. Classroom teachers and their counterparts in teacher preparation are central to these efforts.

The profiles of Mike and Wendy reveal the impact of school cultures and institutions on both the work of educators and their professional identities. Within their communities, they hold the potential to serve as leaders and catalysts for in-depth examinations of the daily work of teachers.

For teacher educators and those working with in-service teachers, the venues afforded these community outlets challenge vigilant attention to the impact of the climate and cultures of schools on teachers' professional identities. These linked goals are particularly critical for K-12 teachers committed to an intellectual stance when approaching their work. To honor teachers as intellectuals requires honest, perhaps blunt, conversations about the ways in which teachers contribute to superficial and sometimes perfunctory responses to the conditions of schooling.

Contemporary professional development offerings such as Professional Learning Communities (e.g., DuFour, 2004) offer *possible* platforms for professional conversations and action planning. However, education professionals are also cautioned when intentions to support teachers turn into discussions that focus solely on bloodletting or opportunities to relive and re-create the stressors in their work. Clearly these structural mechanisms provide guidance and an acknowledgement for problem identification and problem solving. Of equal importance are opportunities for educational discussion and conversations that include dedicated mentoring informed by personal experiences and idea sharing across the PK-20 continuum. Within these contexts educators must be provided with experiences and dedicated alliance building through choice, intellectual rigor, autonomy, and support where feedback is specific, in-depth, sustained, and linked to broad-based goals (Boston Consulting Group, 2014; Gavish, & Friedman 2010; Hannan et al., 2015).

At Western University, graduates of its program have informed multiple dimensions of its teacher education program. In their roles, alumni serve as course instructors, onsite recruiters into teacher education, members of admissions committees, and program evaluation feedback providers. In their role as consultants to teacher preparation, they are seen as experts with the knowledge, experience, and insights that can inform teacher education based upon life in classrooms and a knowledge base that matters. As professionals who collaborate, K-12 colleagues inform, interpret, and benefit from a reciprocal process that acknowledges them as professionals and as intellectuals.

Without platforms to dissect the intersections between teachers as people, the challenges of teachers' work, and leadership styles and mandates, teachers may be left with limited opportunities for productive conversations for furthering their teaching. Creating spaces to remember, through public expressions of intellectual commitments and passions, may be critical to long-lived successful teaching careers.

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