

Starting the Journey Together:  
A Teacher Educator and Her “Students” Navigate  
Their First Semester in the Secondary English Classroom

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*My grade book program STILL does not work (I can't even log in!), despite two notes and six, no seven, emails to our tech guy— not a single reply to any of them. Despite this, I am supposed to be “keeping accurate records” and maintaining averages for every student . . . I have to do a “new teacher” portfolio, even though I did one the first year I taught. Neither my dept head, “mentor,” nor “buddy” have stopped by my room. Thank God I have not needed any of them. I am truly at a loss . . . I don't know if I can go a whole year and retain any sense of sanity.—Lisa*

*I think that this is what we all hoped wouldn't happen, but the truth is, it does. Remember watching that video of the first-year teachers in California in our methods class? We were so far detached from those problems; they seemed like they would never happen to us. It is obvious now why the teacher burnout rate is so high. But just think—if we are feeling like this, imagine how someone who didn't have the training we went through feels? Someone who has no one to talk to about these things? I couldn't do it. I know this year is going to be excruciating and challenging, but . . . you guys are some of the best teachers I've ever seen . . . we can rise above our circumstances and do the best job that we know how to, especially you, Lisa. In the meantime, hang in there . . . —Lane*

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## Introduction

The above e-mail exchange, written three weeks into the start of the school year, typifies a problematic reality: many novice teachers feel lonely and overwhelmed their first year in the classroom (see, for example, Johnson, 2004; McCann & Johannessen, 2004; Rogers & Babinski, 2002). Lisa's e-mail reveals an unsupportive environment at work—little assistance from support staff and disinterested colleagues, which causes her to question her efficacy and commitment. Though separated by nearly 1,000 miles, through e-mail Lane is close by to offer much needed support and encouragement. The irony of the featured online conversation is that Lisa is the “professor” and Lane is the “student.”

For personal and professional reasons, I (Lisa) took a leave of absence from the university to literally, and figuratively, return home—to my parents' house and to the high school English classroom. However, I was not alone. With recent program graduates in their first jobs, we (twelve volunteers and I) decided to take the journey together by creating an e-mail listserv to continue the dialogue initiated the year prior. The concept of the listserv arose from the successful use of Blackboard's™ discussion board feature during the first semester of my students' internships. Preliminary findings from discussion board transcripts suggest that online discussion may be a useful supplement to the existing scaffolds that teacher preparation programs provide (Kaplan, Scherff, & Faulkner, 2005; Paulus & Scherff, 2005).

Knowing that students found the online discussion board a supportive tool during their internship year, upon deciding to return to the high school classroom, I approached recent graduates with the idea of creating a listserv to continue our support network. Out of twenty-one, twelve volunteered to be members of the e-mail group. Listserv participants were located in five Southeastern states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. Jennifer and Lane, the two featured in this study, live in North Carolina and Tennessee, while I lived in Florida at the time. The collaborative study we offer here was an attempt for each of us, individually and collectively, to understand what we experienced as new teachers in order to improve our practice as educators and make sense of the complexity of teaching.

## Novice Teacher Issues

Despite good intentions and extensive planning by teacher education and/or induction programs, novice teachers frequently cite the first years

as unsupported and lonely. Feelings of isolation and being overwhelmed help contribute to the large numbers of teachers leaving the profession. In fact, nearly 50 percent of all teachers will quit within the first five years, dissatisfied because of low salaries, student discipline problems, lack of support, working conditions, inadequate preparation, and little opportunity to participate in decision making (Andrews & Martin, 2003; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Ingersoll, 2003, 2004; Kent, 2000; Veenman, 1984). Thus, the initial year in the classroom can be a critical part of a teacher's career with long-term implications for job satisfaction and career length (Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Hebert & Worthy, 2001; Lortie, 1975; McDonald, 1980).

One approach to combating stress and fostering encouragement among teachers is offered by membership in support groups. Research shows that support groups reduce stress and feelings of isolation while cultivating enthusiasm, competency, and reflection (Chubbuck, Clift, Allard, & Quinlan, 2001; DeWert, Babinski, & Jones, 2003). Online support groups (through e-mail and discussion boards, for example) offer the opportunity to provide support networks for teachers without the constraints of distance or time. Online support networks provide beginning teachers with "social, emotional, practical, and professional support" (DeWert et al., 2003, p. 319), moral support (Merseth, 1990), a place to make connections (Romiszowski & Ravitz, 1997), deeper conceptions of teaching and learning (Ferdig & Roehler, 2003-2004), and practice with collaborative reflection (Nicholson & Bond, 2003).

Nancy Robb Singer and Jane Zeni (2004) recently studied the use of a listserv for student teachers and illuminated the ways that the online community provided support and encouragement during the semester. Examining the talk among participants and the "walk" they shared in student teaching, the researchers added to the body of research on the growing use of technology in teacher education to provide support (see, for example, Bodzin & Park, 2000; DeWert et al., 2003; Hough, Smithey, & Evertson, 2004; Wade & Fauske, 2004; Whipp, 2003).

## Method

### ***Participants***

For this study, in January 2005 I queried two listserv teachers, Jennifer and Lane, regarding their interest in collaboration. I chose these two participants in particular because of their constancy in communication over the course of the fall 2004 semester. While many others wrote and/or responded to others' e-mails sporadically, Jennifer and Lane were consistent members, quickly offering advice or support when needed and

frequently posting their own calls for assistance. Below is participant and school demographic information (based on the time of data collection).

### ***Jennifer***

Jennifer is a married, twenty-two year old teaching at a suburban high school in North Carolina. While her school is nearly 80 percent white, she notes that “big city” problems are working their way into the suburbs, citing an increase in gang activity on campus. Her responsibilities include teaching ninth grade honors and tenth grade regular English classes, and sponsoring a service club. As an undergraduate, Jennifer completed a double major before the age of twenty. As her professor, I found her to be hard-working and dedicated; as her internship supervisor I noted her strengths as organization and planning.

Jennifer’s year-long internship was at a rural high school, where she taught tenth grade regular and twelfth grade honors English. At the beginning she had problems with classroom management due to her age and wanting to be liked by the students. However, by the end of the first semester, she gained confidence and her difficulties diminished. Jennifer was also active in extracurricular activities, sponsoring prom and the prom fashion show. Both her department head and the principal indicated that they would have hired her had she stayed in the area.

### ***Lane***

Lane, who is twenty-four, teaches tenth grade English at a new high school on the outskirts of a large city in Tennessee.<sup>1</sup> Drawing from an affluent part of the district, only 2 percent of its students are eligible for free or reduced lunches. During the internship, Lane was proactive in seeking a position at this school, completing program requirements, such as the electronic portfolio, early to submit her application materials to the principal.

As both her professor and internship supervisor, I found Lane’s work to be exemplary. During the year I observed her teaching, she consistently created interesting, standards-based lessons. My evaluation records note her as being conscientious and hard-working. Lane did confront some problems from male students (e.g., unwanted attention, being asked out) during the internship. However, she handled the situations with the maturity of an experienced teacher. In describing the internship year at that high school, Lane depicted her experience as wonderful.

### ***Lisa***

At the time of data collection and analysis I was a third-year assistant professor of English Education at a large university in the Southeastern

United States.<sup>2</sup> My primary responsibilities were teaching methods and action research courses, supervising interns, and advising students. My background includes six years as a high school teacher in Florida and, on my leave of absence, I was assigned to teach remedial reading and tenth grade English at a suburban high school in Florida. Unlike my first teaching position—at a school with a majority of Caucasian students—and second—with predominately African-American students—this position was at a predominantly Hispanic school. Like so many others in the state, as a result of the tremendous population explosion, this school (with nearly 2,600 students), faced large city problems, such as crime and gang violence.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

We utilized self-study as a research approach. As a methodological tool, self-study is aimed at improving practice and “the focal point for studying the intersection between theory and practice” (Russell, 2002, p. 9). Self-study offers “research that puts us in touch with who we are, what we do, and how we change . . . [so] we can grow as we continuously learn to teach” (Bass, Anderson-Patton, & Allender, 2002, p. 68). In choosing this particular methodology, my goal was to reflect on my time back in the classroom to inform my work with pre-service teachers while Jennifer and Lane were interested in improving their teaching. We agreed that analysis of and reflection on our e-mail communications would be a worthwhile endeavor to achieve these ends.

Data consisted of e-mail communications between August and December 2004 among all members of the listserv. I chose to utilize only those e-mails because the beginning of the year is often the most difficult. Prior to analysis, I cut and pasted our e-mails into separate word documents keeping the communication in chronological order. In some cases, I added another participant’s e-mail when its content was integral to understanding the exchange. I then sent Jennifer and Lane their respective e-mails, in chronological order, asking them to provide comments and reflections for every posting, directing them to return the document to me by the end of May 2005. Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) I read through all e-mails and reflections, making notes regarding what the three of us (1) originally posted on the listserv and (2) our reflections on those postings. Next, these were refined and transformed into themes and then grouped under broad headings. Once completed, the revised coding list was sent to Lane and Jennifer for member check. Even though both teachers are not experienced researchers, which created some minor problems in attempting to establish inter-rater reliability (and why I took

the role of lead author), it was important that they be included in all stages of the research process to address the missing paradigm of educational research—teachers' voices (Shulman, 1986). After this, I went back to the data and counted the total postings under each theme to determine the most significant findings.

### Results and Reflection

In looking over the themes, two broad categories emerged—those relating solely to new teachers and those that were universal to the three of us. In our discussions, we agreed that only they should be considered new teachers—those brand new to the profession—as my experience might mirror that of someone who left the profession (e.g., to raise children) and then returned. Interestingly, what did not emerge from analysis were issues with the English language arts curriculum itself but rather general teaching concerns. What follows in this section is a breakdown of themes with excerpts from the original posts and our reflections on them.

#### ***Themes Related to New Teachers***

Both Jennifer and Lane encountered two concerns closely linked to their new teacher status: the pressure to be a “super teacher” and the transition from intern to teacher. Both of these correlate with research concerning “reality shock” (Veenman, 1984) or praxis shock (Smagorinsky, Gibson, Bickmore, Moore, & Cook, 2004), the clash between the vision of teaching formed during the teacher education program and the harsh reality of the job.

*Pressure To be “Super Teacher.”* Early in the semester, both women struggled with the pressure to perform like veterans. For Lane, the foundation of this struggle was her students' ability level and the reputation of the school; Jennifer attributed her battle, in part, to her excellent preparation at the university.

As noted earlier, Lane actively sought a position at her school, a brand new facility in a wealthy suburb of a large city, because she wanted to work at a good school. However, working there as a beginning teacher demanded she perform as if she had had more experience. On August 2 Lane wrote: “With starting a new school, I know I am expected to take on A LOT more than what most first-year teachers are used to.” A few weeks into school, Lane e-mailed the group about her students:

So far I am amazed by the strengths of my kids. Even the standard level kids have intelligent comments . . . I can tell that they are used to working

hard and having high expectations. And OH. MY. GOD. The honors classes. These kids are sophomores and we have had discussions about books that I had in college. They beg to be challenged and are the most well-read, observant kids I've ever met . . . it is challenging me a lot, because it makes me want to go home and study my butt off just so I can give them what they need to be challenged and learn.

Working hard outside of class to teach students well is a responsibility of teaching. Nonetheless, that Lane felt pressured to do so two weeks into school is troubling because she also had the responsibility of attending numerous new teacher in-service and professional development workshops and sponsoring the dance team.

At Jennifer's school a large number of students came from wealthy families; others were bussed in from the poor side of town. Her school "has long been established as 'the' school. Its jobs are coveted, and all parents want their kids to go there" (Jennifer). However, the burden to perform like a veteran teacher, in her eyes, came from her administration's perceptions of what she produced during her teacher education program. She wrote the group on August 12 about this issue:

I'm feeling really stressed right now because the principals think I'm the "shiznit." They fell in love with the [electronic] portfolio and think that I am super-special because of it (They had never seen one before). Everyday I have to hear, 'Hey, that's Mrs. Ollis- we snatched her up before Clark did. They sure are mad!' (Clark's being the supreme school in the county- and very miffed that I declined their interview). I feel like I have to do something awesome every day and it is really wearing me down.

As her e-mail suggests, aspects of the teacher education program, like the electronic portfolio, led administrators to assume she could do it all. Because Jennifer appeared competent, they assumed she did not need any support. After being probed about the situation from other listserv members, she wrote the next day: "It is hard to get assistance from the administration . . . because they say I am 'resourceful.' I guess what I really meant to say is how do I politely point out that I can't be super-teacher?"

In their later reflections, both women noted that these feelings did not subside over the course of the school year. Fortunately, Jennifer and Lane, like new teachers in other studies (DeWert et al., 2003; Singer & Zeni, 2004), felt the online community provided encouragement and assistance to get through this problem. Likewise, they were supported by their administrators, with Jennifer being "reassured that it is okay to have a less than stellar day. On occasion, it is okay to suck—but only once or twice a year" (May 2005).

*Transition from intern to teacher.* Both new teachers also encour-

tered problems in the transition from intern to teacher. While many interns complain about the intern label, most realize the safety it provides. Jennifer noted in her first e-mail of the semester: "It is kind of unnerving to know that it is now all me, and I take full responsibility for everything that I do. I can't hide behind 'intern' any more." Part of her difficulty in the role as teacher was her age. Because Jennifer is only twenty-two (and looks young, too) some parents misjudged this for lack of experience, something she noted after her first open house.

Lane, similarly, tried to establish her teacher persona but felt conflicted over what that was. For her, being an intern offered the day-to-day confirmation from her mentor that she was doing things correctly, but it also imposed constraints on what she could do on her own. Now that it was her classroom, she questioned herself. "My only question is, 'Is it ok to be a different teacher with different classes? I just don't put up with the crap I did last year, and maybe I feel like I can be like that now because I don't have the label of 'intern.'" Near the end of the first semester, Lane articulated the transition from intern to teacher:

The hardest part has been coming to the realization that I am not a kid anymore—in fact, I'm not even that half-breed kid/adult anymore. I am a working person who has a mortgage and bills and who goes to bed at 9 every night, which usually I define as an adult. At least last year we were reminded every Monday night that we were, in fact, still students. We got to live the double life; it seems as if I have fought this adult/teacher creature tooth and nail. Through many weekends in my classroom, leaving school at 8 p.m., and many, many bottles of wine, I feel as if I am slowly coming to terms of acceptance with the life I [have] chosen for myself. (December 2004)

In May, with only a few weeks left of school, Lane reflected on her transition, writing to me: "The most important part of this actualization is that I saw that this is what I had chosen for myself; it didn't just happen to me, and I needed to not only accept that, but take responsibility for it."

### ***Universal Themes***

Most surprising were the number of issues common to all of us over those related solely to Lane and Jennifer's novice teacher status. We find it both interesting and troubling that despite the geographic and demographic differences among our high schools, that we were facing the same issues. Three shared concerns bound us together over the course of the first semester: perceptions versus reality, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and the accountability measures that accompany it, and feelings of stress/wanting to quit. Moreover, each one of these areas also contributes to the



much chronicled reality shock, which is ironic since I have six years experience as a high school teacher.

*Perceptions Versus Reality.* For all three of us, the difference between perception and reality was a shared concern. Jennifer and Lane experienced this in terms of how they positioned their students, and for Lane and me, it was the first impression of our schools in opposition to the reality of working there.

Unlike some past research (Bullough, Young, & Draper, 2004) noting novice teachers' concerns about relationship-building with students, for Lane and Jennifer the issue more closely related to their perceptions of students. In other words, neither was concerned about *what* students thought of them personally, but rather the premature assumptions they made about their students. For example, Jennifer came up with names for one particular class period, calling them "hell-raisers," "gangsta's," "wangsta's," and "little shits" only to later find that once she incorporated literature that connected more closely to their lives that they became a totally different group of students.

Lane experienced the opposite situation—because her initial perception was that the students were wealthy and intelligent, she overlooked other issues which became clearer later in the semester. In October, after a listserv discussion about the rebel flag, she wrote: "It seems as if they [students] don't care about anything, save for video games and gay bashing. I'll never understand it—how someone can go to church every time the door is open and still speak such awful things about people they don't even know, or care to know."

Lane and I also struggled with making premature assumptions about what we thought our schools would be like versus their real climates. Lane presumed that because her school was new and surrounded by wealthy neighborhoods that it would be "the kind of school that materialize[d] if we all started one" (August 2). Nevertheless, she quickly realized that with such a school comes a particular set of problems; in her case it was "super-nosey parents" who questioned and complained about what and how she taught. At one point, Lane wished she was at a school like her internship site where parents were under-involved (personal communication, February 2005).

My perception/reality problems were a result of feeling misled when I was hired. My initial impressions were that the school was "great" (July 29) and administrators were "proactive" (August 6). (These statements resulted from merely two sets of goodie bags filled with supplies and one daylong in-service session.) Shortly thereafter, though, I found that the reality of my situation was entirely different—as the excerpt at

the beginning of this manuscript shows. Beyond that, though I was promised small class sizes and a curriculum, I found myself looking at thirty faces with no books or materials provided for me. As I wrote in an August 27 e-mail:

My administration lured me with the promise of less than 20 students in each remedial class—I have a minimum of 30—and it grows every day . . . never mind the fact that I was promised a curriculum. I have 0, zero, nada. I have no textbooks, reading program, or curriculum guide. The [computer] reading test has been down since school began and it will be at least another two weeks until it is up and running.

Each of us, thankfully, was able to reflect on our experiences with perceptions and come to some conclusions to enable us to improve our practice. Jennifer learned an important lesson about students and teacher attitudes that some never discover: “These kids are teaching me ‘their’ ways so I can get where they are coming from . . . a lot are actually doing fairly well in my class and are working hard. I think too many teachers are giving up on students . . . a lot of previously unmotivated students can do well.” Similarly, Lane realized she made the mistake of judging a situation too quickly: “I also jumped the gun on the honors classes. Granted, they are extremely bright and self-motivated, but at times whiny and self-righteous . . . a lack of modesty does not exist in the lower level classes; those kids are humbled. They come into it thinking the complete opposite.”

What both new teachers experienced and came to grasp is important because, first, research shows that new teachers most often get the classes no one else wants to teach (i.e., lower track) and those students deserve as much chance for success as those in the highest tracks (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Finley, 1984; Oakes, 1986). A second related facet is the role of perceptions and their relationship to achievement. Teachers often perceive “higher track” classes as better and the students “desirable” (Finley, 1984, p. 235) and research shows that such students receive a comprehensive education, both in breadth and depth (Goodlad, 1984; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Page, 1989, 1990). In turn, students recognize differential treatment, sometimes resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy—academic success or lack of it—depending on the teacher (Wittrock, 1986).

My own reflection and realization was not as positive as Jennifer or Lane’s; however, it has unquestionable impact on my work as a teacher educator and researcher. For me, I “realized that I did not have to do that [work in a toxic environment]. I do not know why it seemed so important. What that school taught me is that there are a lot of people who don’t want

to be saved, and you can't make them." Going through this negative experience showed me the reality of some schools and what teacher education needs to do to help pre-service teachers be ready for anything and everything they might encounter. I use my goodie bag tale as an example of fluff over substance, substance being the day-to-day work climate. More importantly, I learned that to leave a situation is not the same as quitting—and this is a message we have a responsibility to share with novice teachers, or any others, who feel like they are drowning in their jobs.

*NCLB and Accountability.* Each of us, in varying degrees, was affected by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. We found various ways our schools and districts addressed the multiple and myriad requirements set forth by the federal government. Because Lane and Jennifer interned during full implementation of NCLB, they were more prepared to face its stipulations. Working at a school that was struggling to meet state and federal demands, I noticed a proliferation of paperwork that was now the responsibility of classroom teachers rather than administrators, guidance counselors, and special education staff. I noted this in a September 12 e-mail: "I am more and more amazed at the amount of "CYA" work that administrators force on teachers on a daily basis. I get new stuff each week that is, inevitably, due the next week."

Jennifer's frustration was not due to paperwork but the constraints in disciplining students related to NCLB. In her school, it seemed that administrators were hesitant to hold students responsible for their actions (or inaction) in an effort to maintain attendance numbers. As she indicated, "I'm sick and tired of this keep them in school because of NCLB—even if they set a kid on fire! Yeah that kid is still in my class—lighter and all."

In a different vein, Lane faced the pressure of keeping test scores up to maintain a good reputation. In November she commented: "I think my pissiness is directed to NCLB. My district is only obeying the policies set up by the nat'l gov't. I just wish I could teach what I want, when I want. The days when I throw out the lesson plan and teach what I want are the best days in my classes where the kids seem engaged and excited to be there."

Sadly, none of our perceptions regarding NCLB have improved. If anything, we have resigned ourselves to the fact that standardization dominates the curricula. Lane and Jennifer learned to cope by throwing out the rule book when they could. It didn't work all the time, however, as Lane later reflected: "I think one of the hardest challenges to endure . . . is the metamorphosis from the free spirit, intellectual English teacher into a strict, stressed-out, and struggling micromanager."

As a teacher educator, it is my obligation to prepare future teachers

for the classrooms and schools they will work in, and this includes training them to help secondary students pass mandated tests. The key is to arm them with a depth and breadth of knowledge so they don't totally break down, surrender, and create test-prep classrooms. If accountability issues are not addressed, the field will suffer a devastating loss of teachers. In a recent study, over fifty-five percent of those surveyed indicated an "overemphasis on testing" as influencing their decision to leave the profession (Hirsch, 2006, p. 8).

*Stress/wanting to quit.* The most shocking commonality among the three of us was the level of stress that came with teaching and the ensuing urge to quit, which came very early in the semester and at a specific moment. Ironically, we each indicated our desire to quit in response to one particular September 21 e-mail from another member of the listserv.

*Lisa's prompt:* There have not been many emails so I am assuming that:  
1. You are all swamped with work and don't even have time to email.  
2. That you have found some free time and it is devoted to relieving stress (i.e., going to the gym, spending time with loved ones, drinking heavy amounts of alcohol, etc.).  
3. That you are doing pretty good and don't need to write to us.

*Response:* It's like, even when I do have a "free" (I won't really call it free..) moment, my head is spinning, I'm nearly asleep, I'm busy, and just plain brain dead all at once. Does anyone have any time saving tips for grading, keeping up with paperwork & e-mails, contacting parents who think their child is a hard-working genius, attending meetings or getting to work? I mean, maybe I could figure out a way to put in a shower & bed in my classroom, maybe a little kitchen nook. Not that I want to live there, but i'm all about conserving TIME, since i have none. Does anyone plan to retire an old english teacher? I think in 5 years I must decide what I might want to do next and get prepared for it. I may love teaching and do it forever, but I doubt it. I don't know about everyone else, but most often the teachers I see retiring are the teachers I don't want to be. It seems like if we're going to work our hardest and do the best possible, we just can't last 25 years. No one has enough energy. Teaching is too damn hard and too draining. The teachers I see who stay for years and years are often the ones who are like "sit down, shut up" "read the chapter, answer the questions" "watch this movie" and so on. Maybe I'm wrong . . . but this is what's gone through my head. Planning is taking the bulk of my time, I just can't plan for three preparations when two of the same class are totally different and one of the preps has freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and you guessed it—seniors in it. So, some can read, some hate it, some can write... it's not like it's one prep altered for everyone, it's literally five or six preps. Well, I'm going to study the *Crucible* some more. . . ho hum, another day, another day. . . the weekend is coming.

This one e-mail prompted all three of us to reply with ideas of leaving the profession. My September 22 response was:

I feel your pain! I completely understand. Maybe you all will understand how I had to leave after six years to do something else . . . now, after only six weeks . . . I have had it! Yes, that's right. I am going back to the university in the spring.

Jennifer answered September 24 with: "I am losing steam." Lane's September 23 reply was much more troubling:

You guys, I just don't think I can take it. I'm dying here. I have made myself physically ill with stress this year. I have been to the hospital three times for tests seeing what is wrong . . . it looks like stress-related IBS . . . I mean, seriously, WHAT IN THE HELL WERE WE ALL THINKING WHEN WE DECIDED TO DO THIS?

### The Ending?

Lane and Jennifer survived the first year. However, I left in December and gratefully returned to my university position. Both teachers felt better about teaching at the end of the year and returned to their schools for the 2005-2006 school year. Nevertheless, a price was paid, as Lane's e-mail, immediately below, and later reflection (May) show.

Fri, 17 Dec 2004

I might have some conclusive end-of-the-year thoughts once I finish grading the mound of compare/contrast essays that my county requires . . . That's why I dragged my ass in this morning on the last day of school at 5:00 to get all of those finished. I'll be damned if I am going to grade over the break.

I feel as though I'm slowly leaning towards burn-out, too. I don't know though—I can't decide if it is just plain desensitizing or burn-out, but either way, I'm hoping to find my spark again with some rest and free time. If Christmas break feels this good, I can't imagine what freedom and relief I'll be feeling come May...

I am going to stick with it though, at least for a while. I am having more "teacher" moments than I did earlier in the year, which reassure me that I haven't turned into a cold, heartless hag. I feel like in some small way that I am making a difference. My town is really small, so I run into all my kids and their parents just about every day. It really makes me think when they say, "Oh, yes, I've heard about you. So and so talks about you all the time..." Really? The last time I checked he or she was asleep on his or her desk. —Lane

I remember writing this e-mail after the kids had left the last day before Winter Break:

It was a good feeling to know that half of my first year was under my belt. I definitely wanted to get everything out of the way so I could free up time during Christmas break. I was very surprised during that week of exams by several students who brought me gifts and cards. One in particular shocked me. It was the last day, and I checked my mailbox on my way out the door. In it was a card from a student, who had not only given me trouble all semester, but he and his mother made my life a living hell, and there is a complaint in central office to prove it. But in this card he wrote, "I'm sorry that I have been difficult to work with this semester. I really like going to your class, and when I am having a bad day, going to your class puts me in a good mood. Thank you for being so patient with me. I hope you have a Merry Christmas!" The teacher I was last year would have cried, but the stone that I had turned into was just stunned. It didn't register to me that this student would have the heart to do this. It really was a wake-up call to me that I had become so hardened by the pains of teaching that I couldn't enjoy the pleasures of it. (May 2005)

### Discussion and Conclusion

We did not enter this study expecting to discover some new theory, or figure out the answer to the teacher attrition rate. Nonetheless, what we did is valuable, not only for ourselves but for others. For Lane and Jennifer, it was a chance to reflect and regroup. Both (as of January 2006) are much happier in their careers and have forged their own teacher identities. Moreover, working on research has given them the chance to be students again—both are considering doctoral work in teacher education. As a teacher educator, I cannot stress the importance of going back to the classroom (and not just to observe). Experiencing the first year with students was invaluable. Living and breathing high school teaching, again, gave me new insights into how to be a better professor, mentor, and advocate for both preservice and inservice teachers.

We have numerous suggestions for teacher education programs. Some, like using experienced, willing teachers as mentors, is well-documented, despite whether it is practiced or not. So, instead we offer a few specific ideas for teacher preparation programs to make teachers' transition, or re-transition to teaching, more successful. Jennifer and Lane believe that:

- (1) Student teachers should spend a full year in the schools during their internships. Seeing school from the very beginning, and how teachers get their classes under control and running smoothly, was invaluable.
- (2) Practicality trumps theory. Hands-on work done in our methods class—actually trying the lessons and creating the

projects to use with students—made us more prepared than other new teachers. We especially like texts such as *Bridging English* (Milner & Milner, 2003).

(3) Programs should (a) create a “basic school politics” class where preservice teachers can learn about the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders (school boards, guidance counselors, deans, etc.) and (b) incorporate role playing or case studies so teacher candidates can learn how to interact with parents, especially in confrontational situations.

Even if not always feasible, I echo the above suggestions; however, my strongest recommendation is that teacher educators go back to teaching, even if for one semester. Things have changed since we last taught, and conditions continue to change at a rapid pace. Teacher education does not exist in a vacuum, and we must be current and knowledgeable about what our candidates experience each day if we are to prepare them for long-term careers in teaching.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lane married in July 2005.

<sup>2</sup> During data collection I was on leave from the University of Tennessee, which also provided partial funding for this study.

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