

## How Reasons for Entry into the Profession Illuminate Teacher Identity Development

By Brad Olsen

That which sings and contemplates in you is  
still dwelling within the bounds of that first  
moment which scattered stars into space...  
Yet if in your thought you must measure time into  
seasons, let each season encircle all other seasons,  
And let today embrace the past with remembrance  
and the future with longing

—Kahlil Gibran, 1923

As teacher educators better understand the recurved, holistic, and often deeply embedded ways in which teachers learn, they can better support meaningful professional preparation that serves teachers' careers, the students they teach, and the profession of teaching as a whole. This article uses the ecologically minded *teacher identity* as a useful analytic for understanding beginning teacher development. I am guided by a view of teacher development as a continuum rather than discrete, linear parts. That is to say that teacher recruitment, preservice preparation, inservice professional development, and teacher retention may be chronologically sequenced but, epistemologically,

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they are intertwined and continually loop back and forth to influence each other in mutually constitutive ways. Teacher development is circular even as it is also forward-moving: a teacher is always collapsing the past, present, and future into a complex *mélange* of professional beliefs, goals, memories, and predictions while enacting practice.

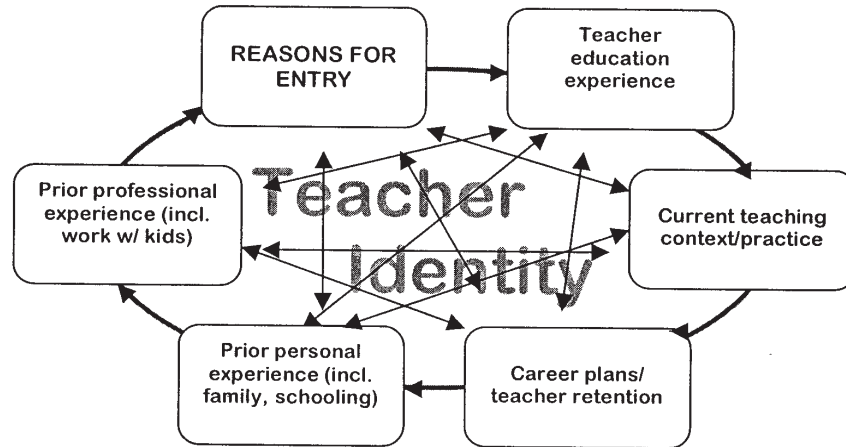
This article, then, considers how teachers rely on embedded understandings *of* and *for* themselves as teachers, which derive from personal and prior experiences as well as professional and current ones. These embedded understandings shape how teachers interpret, evaluate, and continuously collaborate in the construction of their own early development. Drawing on data collected from six first-year teachers from the same California university teacher education program, the article examines how multiple components of a teacher's professional identity mediate one another as each becomes intertwined within (and organized around) the teacher's understandings of teaching, teacher practices, and career plans. To present this analysis, I focus on ways a teacher's *reasons for entering* the profession illuminate teacher identity and influence teacher development.

### **What is Teacher Identity?**

I have adopted a view of teacher identity which combines related ideas from social psychology, philosophy, and sociolinguistics.<sup>1</sup> Drawing from Mead (1964/1932), Bakhtin (in Holquist, 1990), and Holland et al (1998), I locate teacher identity inside a "cultural studies of the person." This angle of inquiry departs from traditional psychological frames of identity, which treat individuals as autonomous, purposeful, and fixed. It also avoids the over-emphasis on macrostructural treatments of race, class, and gender which dominate many modernist sociological and anthropological framings. Instead, the lens I use derives from recent inroads made by sociohistorical perspectives such as social and critical theory (Bourdieu, 1991; Holquist, 1990; Lave & Holland, 2001), phenomenology (Heidegger, 1997/1927), and sociolinguistics (Gee, 1992, 2000; Linde, 1993). This sociocultural model of identity considers that people are both products of their social histories, and—through things like hope, desperation, imagining, and mindfulness—move themselves from one subjectivity to the next, from one facet of their identity to another, and can in some limited sense *choose to act* in certain ways considered by them to be coherent with their own self-understandings. Applied to teachers, this view highlights both the constraints/opportunities on a teacher deriving from personal histories and also the actual agency any teacher possesses.

There are several entrances into the construct of teacher identity. Picture a room with many doors, or consider Diagram 1 that follows. Each of the boxes acts as an opening into the holistic, circular mix of how any teacher's past, present, and future are linked; how the personal and the professional are in many ways inextricable; how context and self interact; and how each teacher component mediates

Diagram 1  
Teacher Identity as Dynamic, Holistic Interaction among Multiple Parts



(and is mediated by) the others. For example, one could start with questions around *teacher retention* (entering the circle via the lower right-hand corner of the diagram above). This entry would foreground a look at how facets of teacher identity affect whether a teacher chooses to stay in or leave the profession of teaching, or shift out of teaching into other kinds of education work (e.g., Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Olsen & Anderson, 2007). Or one could enter into an examination of teacher identity by way of the *teacher education experience* in the upper-right corner (e.g., several articles in this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly*). This article centers its analysis around *reasons for entry* as the entrance into teacher identity.

### Study Design

To examine relationships among teacher identity components and ways they both illuminate and influence novice teacher development, six secondary English teachers who recently graduated from the same California university teacher education program were selected. The sample was both random and purposeful in the sense that all thirteen secondary English graduates from this program were invited into the study and those who agreed became the study sample. (Yet the sample is perhaps subtly biased by a kind of self-selection: is there something special about teachers who choose to participate in research studies?) The sample mostly reflects the demographics of the overall population of the secondary teacher cohort of the program except for a slight bias with respect to gender: there are more men in the secondary program population than in this study sample. In the secondary English population of this teacher education program over the last four years, approximately 80% of students are female and 20% male; and the racial/ethnic breakdown is about

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80% White/Anglo, 10% Asian-American, 5% Latino/a, and 5% African-American. In this study, however, there were no men (both male graduates from the cohort declined to participate). Demographic information on the teachers in the study appears in Table 1 below.

Two rounds of semi-structured, hour-long interviews (fall, 2006 and winter, 2007) with each teacher were conducted during their first teaching year. Interview protocols focused on uncovering teachers' personal and professional histories, teacher education experiences, past and current work with children, perspectives on teaching and their school, and future career plans. Also collected were various teaching artifacts, documents about the preparation program, and published reports about the teachers' schools/districts. To study the data, I first analyzed the interview transcripts in order to create identity profiles of all six teachers, and then cross-checked the profiles against analytic categories including gender, career cycle location, self-descriptions of preparation program experience, prior employment, and current teaching context. This produced patterns and themes which I then studied once more—this time through the model of teacher identity introduced earlier in this paper and through teacher development literature cited throughout. Together, these phases of analysis generated the findings discussed here.

### **Reasons for Entry into Teaching**

The focus on reasons for entry was not originally intended, but appeared during data analysis. I noticed that participants often talked about teaching and themselves as teachers in terms of career expectations and conceptions about—or images of—teaching they seemed to have long possessed. When I probed for sources of these professional expectations and conceptions, the teachers often told biographical stories and/or returned to their reasons for entry. So, during data analysis I adopted a discourse analytic deriving from American pragmatics (Grice, 1975; R. Lakoff, 1973; Tannen, 1993) to examine how, in interviews, teachers were creating/revealing coherence from combinations of their personal histories, self-

**Table 1**  
**Demographic Information on the Teachers in Our Sample**

Name*	Prior Years Tutoring Kids	Age	Race/Ethnicity (self-reported)	Gender	Current Grades Taught
Kim	4	24	Chinese	Female	7th
Ann	1	24	White	Female	9th & 11th
Tara	0	26	White	Female	9th
Francesca	3	27	White/Anglo	Female	8th
Laura	0	28	White/Anglo	Female	9th & 11th
Roberta	0	49	White/Anglo	Female	9th

\* All names are pseudonyms

conceptions, teaching knowledge, and professional goals. They were employing kinds of logic that they believed accounted for their decisions to enter teaching; discourse analysis allowed me to identify and study these logics, or “personalized meaning systems.” Employing this life stories approach (Linde, 1993), I looked at how reasons for entry illuminate complex bundles of interactions among personal history, professional preparation, and current work to make visible some of the development processes that constituted teacher identity for these teachers.

I have organized the findings/discussion around six reasons for entry reported by the teachers.<sup>2</sup> Not all teachers reported all reasons, but at least three teachers reported each reason and, for all teachers, several of these reasons for entry combined with chance and circumstance to guide them into their teaching careers. I discuss the six reasons with an eye toward illuminating how complex clusters of personal and professional influences affect early teacher development. The first three reasons correspond to gender, and the remaining three correspond to a perceived personal compatibility with the job of teaching.

***Gender Played a Prominent (If Mostly Indirect) Role in Reasons for Entry***

All six teachers are women, and perhaps it is no surprise that gender emerged as a variable within their decisions to enter teaching. Although teaching as a gendered profession has been examined for decades (Cushman, 2005; Herbst, 1989; Lortie, 1975; Murphy, 1990; Johnson & Birkland, 2003), it continues to change because relationships between gender and the landscape of teaching (and professions in general) are forever shifting. Here, a gender analysis illuminated underlying identity aspects that connect the teachers’ prior experiences to their decisions to enter teaching and their emerging professional identities. This is not, however, a gender analysis in the general sense of how femininity is treated within research on teaching—dismissing or deprofessionalizing teaching as women’s work. Instead, gender is used as a thematic lever to open the door into deeper discussion of how personal history, preference, and schooling passions intertwined for these beginning teachers. Three gender-related influences on these teachers’ reasons for entry emerged: (1) as girls, three of the teachers grew up “playing teacher;” (2) four teachers reported as influence the fact that women in their family had worked in education when they were young (and family had long supported their teaching plans); and (3) four teachers talked about the schedule/structure of teaching as compatible with mothering.<sup>3</sup>

“Playing teacher” as a child figured prominently in the stories of both Tara and Ann. In both cases, when I asked “How did you decide to become a teacher?” their instant reply was to talk about wanting to be a teacher since elementary school when they would play school with younger siblings and/or neighborhood kids—acting like a teacher by laying colored pens on the floor, telling the younger children what to do, grading their subsequent scratches and scrawls. Ann said this:

I remember doing this kind of stuff with my little sister when we were younger—when I was 10, and she was 6 or something. I would make summer school for her, and

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she would actually do it. We'd have all these subjects and we'd go through them, and she used to say that I was better at explaining things than her teachers. Maybe that's because I was closer to her age.<sup>4</sup>

Both Tara and Ann said they were good at it, and said that this early success at teacher play (designated by whom? employing what criteria?) seems to have initiated teaching as an early career option. Both started playing teacher in elementary school (Ann in third grade; Tara in fourth grade) and wanted to be elementary teachers until high school preoccupations with both literature and the angst of adolescence shifted their teaching interests to high school English. As well, to explain in part why she entered teaching, Kim reported that friends always told her she was good at listening, diagnosing their adolescent situations, and proffering advice.

Gender appeared to play a part in these early role-play experiences. Tara, Ann, and Kim were young girls mimicking images of teaching they received from their own female teachers. Parents or other adults around them may have encouraged this “gender-appropriate” form of play. These girls were not role-playing the work of athletic coaches, principals, or corporate bosses; they were not playing firemen or cops-and-robbers. Only one of the six respondents (Ann) ever mentioned male teachers as either role models or teaching influences, but all talked frequently of female teachers. These early representations of teaching—deriving from school experiences, society, and perhaps family—may very well have planted in their young, developing identities some deep images of who teaches (and how, and why). It is probably not coincidental that Kim views her ability to give good advice to her friends as part of her teaching repertoire, and that now—as a middle school teacher (“because I like teaching life lessons”)—she privileges personal relationships with students.

As well, it can be hypothesized that these early teacher role-play experiences reinforced a stereotypical belief of what the work of teaching requires: issuing directives that must be followed, explaining things, evaluating student work, being the solitary leader. I suspect that these early conceptions partly formed the interpretive frame through which they viewed teaching and learning during K-12 schooling and formal teacher education experiences by acting as proxy for the profession they expected to be entering (Kelly, 1963; Lortie 1975; Olsen, 2008). Indeed, as Tara, Ann, and Kim grew up, chose teaching, and began the work of teacher preparation, they told me that they experienced a binary tension between the student-centered, constructivist teaching model of their preparation program and the relatively traditional conceptions of teaching they had long carried with them. In interviews, they talked about struggling to reconcile prior notions of teaching with current job realities. For example, Tara said this:

I remember giving fake quizzes a lot as a play teacher. It wasn't about discussion; it was about making fake report cards and having the power. Now, that stuff—quizzes, grading, etc.—is what I like the least about teaching. There's been tension as I started to realize that teaching isn't at all what I thought it was. Not disappointment, just surprise and wonder.

Tara and others talked about a conflict they faced in their teacher preparation program and first year of teaching as they noticed that several of their long-held expectations about teaching (didactic instruction, giving quizzes and short-answer tests, *explication de texte*) were mostly disregarded by their university instructors and school site mentors who instead advocated constructivism, group work, reader-response, and authentic assessment. Identifying and reconciling (or transcending) this contradiction proved to be a central concern for at least four teachers during both their preservice and first-year teaching years. For Tara, it was liberating, as she happily found her long-held image of teachers to be a myth and viewed the reality as freer and more student-centered. For Kim, it was frustrating, as she found the school culture, parental pressure, and district emphasis on test scores where she now worked to, sadly, reinforce her long-held image of teaching as didactic, teacher-centered, and test-focused, which contradicted both her program's philosophies and her own teaching goals.

Four of the six teachers reported having women in their family who had worked in schools—all reported positive memories about it. A typical comment was Ann's: "On my dad's side, a couple of his sisters are teachers. Not on my mom's side, but [everyone] was always really supportive of it." Another typical comment was Laura talking about her favorite teacher:

Mrs. K. was just inspiring in a lot of ways. She knew everything, and I loved my own mother, but there were times when I was, like, "Mrs. K. has such great stories!" I liked someone telling stories to me. And there are times in my own teaching that I feel like I just want to tell them a story—you know?—just like Mrs. K.

All four teachers shared positive memories of being around schools and of having learned about teaching from female relatives. They reported that their families always supported their plans for becoming teachers (something far less common when the children in question are male [Olsen and Anderson, 2007]). Laura told the following story when I asked, "Did you ever think about being a teacher when you were a kid?"

I did. Totally did. My mother was the Guidance secretary at an elementary school and was an aide in preschool. She never got any kind of credential or anything like that. She [initially] came into the school system as a secretary and [simultaneously] started as an aide at a Sunday School then taught Sunday School found a job as an aide in a Guidance Office. Then a new school started and she became the Guidance secretary. I was always in schools because she had to work until 4:00 and so my after-school time was at school playing with other teachers' kids on the empty playgrounds because we lived in a rural area where the kids were bussed to and from. There was no urban area—no kids walking around. It was desolate. And when you [hang out after school all the time], you end up hanging out with all the teachers as they finish their stuff. So many of the elementary school teachers were surrogate moms to me. I can still remember their names and what their classrooms looked like.

This biographical influence on Laura's reasons for entry sharpened as she finished the story:

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And then my father died when I was eight. My mom worked at the elementary school at the time, so when that happened all the other teachers came down like locusts. I had, like, surrogate mom, surrogate mom, surrogate mom. Surrogate moms everywhere. So that was when my interest in teaching came about.

A poignant and perhaps extreme example, Laura's story reveals how a young person's early, positive experiences with teachers—especially when connected positively to family, extending outside classrooms and past school hours, and deepened in the face of tragedy—can become a strong, lasting motivator. And the fact that Laura was a young girl and the caring educators around her were women should probably not be discounted. As Laura narrated the rest of her biography she revealed how various personal relationships and circumstances led her from the East Coast to the West Coast, and from “dead-end jobs” to a teaching career. Though there is not space to share it here, her whole story offers a strong example of how life, learning, and social relationships combine to form the conditions within which an individual makes the decision to become a teacher.

With this personal history in mind, we might draw biographical meaning from the facts that now, as a teacher, Laura emphasized supportive personal relationships with students; believed many of her students were experiencing delicate, existential crises as teenagers; and often focused our conversations on three of her students whom were going through difficult times at home. Laura said this:

The students I really connect with are students that are like me. You know, I feel like I'm reaching out in a lot of ways to the students who don't fit in: the drama kid, the geeks, the girls who like comic books—it's those kids.... Sometimes I kind of stop in the middle of the lesson and go: “All right, you know, guys? Sometimes there's going to be things in life that are going to get you down. And you got to laugh it off, because everybody's going to take you down. You've got to be your number one fan because nobody else is.” Stuff like that. I don't know necessarily where it comes from—my own life, I guess.

Four of the six teachers revealed a perception of teaching careers as compatible with mothering. Laura said that, “If I need to take a year off to I have a baby, I can do it, and make teaching work around raising the kind of family that I want—being able to devote that kind of time to it. I like this profession because I can do that.” Ann, too, hoped to balance motherhood with teaching though she worried about finances some: “Eventually [I might leave teaching] if, when I have kids, money becomes an issue. Then I may need to look for a higher paying job, or somehow negotiate more pay as a teacher.” This is not to disparage either mothering or women's careers in teaching: alongside scapegoated dimensions of the “mommy-track” in professional/occupational careers sit legitimate concerns, supports, and positive life-work balances that can bond teaching with parenthood (Quartz et al, in press). The chauvinistic history of teaching as “women's work” marked by low pay and patriarchal control, and teaching as solely about caring or “soft” pedagogies on the one hand, is intertwined with career contours compatible with parenthood on the other hand: easy in/easy



out jobs; front-loaded salary structures, work opportunities most anywhere; and a calendar matching that of school-aged children. Each strand seems to reinforce the other and over time they have braided together into tangles of cause and effect, truth and fiction, sexism and opportunity that for many women (and men) influence a career in teaching. Though perhaps not a significant influence on their early career development, this theme frequently emerged as the teachers talked about mid-career plans and their views of whole careers in teaching. All four teachers predicted that their teaching careers, in part, would be shaped around parenting.

***The Remaining Reasons for Entry Focused  
on a Perceived Personal Compatibility with the Job of Teaching***

As they discussed their reasons for becoming teachers, five of the six described specific talents or capacities they possessed that they believed suited them well for teaching. For example, several talked about always having been good at “explaining stuff,” or “telling people about things.” Ann said, “I think [teaching] is something that I’ve always kind of been good at. Explaining things—I was always good at explaining things to people.... I think I just kind of had a natural affinity towards that.” Kim talked about being known by friends for always giving the best advice. Laura said that her off-beat sense of humor and interest in storytelling—characteristics that alienated her as a teenager—help her to connect with students now and engage them in the curriculum. In an interesting way, these examples echo previous research (e.g., Fuller & Bown, 1975; Lortie, 1975), which discusses how young people self-select into teaching by employing professional criteria that they, themselves, have generated. In a kind of tautology, children and young adults may decide what teaching is as they are simultaneously deciding what they are good at, allowing for a self-confirming circle of reciprocal reinforcement. This circular reasoning may hinder alternative views of teaching from entering into a beginning teacher’s professional perspective. In this way, prior and personal views of teaching may overpower programmatic ones during teacher education—akin to Rust (1994) describing university teacher education as merely “a patina of beliefs layered over a lifetime of learning.”

This also again, like the example about “playing teacher” as commanding students in didactic ways, raises the existence of a conflict between the authoritarian pedagogies embedded in their prior images of teaching and the constructivist model privileged in their teacher education program. I found that most of these teachers struggled some with a perceived dichotomy between control and constructivism. From prior experience and personalized ways of experiencing their teacher education program, they had constructed a zero-sum game between strict, authoritarian, didactic, and controlling forms of teaching on the one side, and student-centered, empathetic, “cool,” teaching-for-understanding forms on the other. To favor any characteristics from the first side, they believed, sacrificed valuable student-centered learning associated with the second side. Part of the reality shock of beginning teaching for them required confronting this binary. This conscious (and, according to the teachers, difficult) process

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of addressing the perceived contradiction focused on the realization that “strict” does not have to equal “mean,” that group work does not magically produce classroom community, and that teaching is more than giving and grading daily quizzes.

All six teachers talked about being good at reading and/or writing, and having done well in high school English classes. Their love of the subject matter (specifically conceived of as a passion for studying classic literature and doing creative writing) figured prominently in their decision to teach and/or teach high school English. Kim said: “I really liked to read and write, and that’s a lot of what you do in English.” Tara put it this way: “So I used to think it would be elementary [school], teaching them how to read and write, but then when I was in high school, I really liked high school English, and I liked the books we read, so that’s why I decided on high school... books like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Jane Eyre*. I loved Shakespeare.” Laura said:

[I knew I wanted to teach] English because I was really good at it and I thought, well, the only good thing I can do is read books. That’s the only thing I really like to do—read books. I’m not even that great explaining them, but I can learn that, you know? But I like reading books, and [thought], ‘Let’s turn that into a career!’ I knew I was a good student, so why not?

Since considerable research has been conducted on differences between knowing academic content as a student and knowing it as a teacher (e.g., Grossman, 1990; Wilson, Shulman, & Richert, 1987), I do not need to repeat what has previously been found, though this theme raises an interesting chicken-or-egg argument: as high schoolers, did these young women like English because they were told they did it well, or did they excel in English classes because they liked reading and writing? Most likely it is both—some complex inter-relationship among interest, motivation, and achievement (Schiefele, 1991)—but whatever the cause, this association highlights the power of teachers’ judgments about their students’ academic achievement on students’ subsequent reasons for entry into teaching. The data reveal that at least four of these six teachers are English teachers in no small part because their own English teachers had praised their academic work along the way.

Another contour of this subject-matter-based reason for entry caused some trouble for five of the teachers. Specifically, what brought them into the profession was a love of literature—specifically canonical literature—and yet they found that in practice their own teaching work (with the exception of Laura) was dominated by basic literacy, expository writing instruction, standardized test preparation, and knowing good books not as literature but as cultural signposts—not deep, intellectually engaging discussions about, for example, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Jane Eyre*, or Shakespeare. Much to the dismay of these beginning teachers, their students did not leap onto desks to recite poetry like in *Dead Poets’ Society*. Four of the teachers talked about this tension, saying it became apparent during their teacher education year and had since become a primary frustration. They had mostly been good students in good school systems and their English classes appear to have been honors

or Advanced Placement courses. Yet, the available teaching jobs, the administrative tendency to give new teachers academically low-tracked courses, and these teachers' own social justice desires to find communities where they believed they could most "make a difference" meant they were not teaching English the way they expected. Furthermore, they were teaching in a policy context different from the one in which they had been students. Their apprenticeship of observation about what it meant to be a teacher (occurring before *No Child Left Behind*) very likely did not include top-down policy mandates, prescriptive curricula, and strict teacher accountability measures. They had expected to have autonomy and control in their classrooms and had been professionally prepared to teach as they thought best, yet three of the six found themselves teaching in places that mandated curriculum, enforced particular pedagogies, and/or emphasized standardized student testing.

All six teachers talked about their affinity for working with youth as a primary motivator into the profession. They raised it in differing ways, but two common components emerged: the "natural honesty" of kids, and students' "positive energy." Notice how Ann combines her biography, an affinity for working with children, and a favorable estimation of their honesty: "I've always had an affinity for working with young kids. I was a nanny all through college. I wanted to go baby-sit when I was five years old. I was ready to baby-sit when I was that young! I just enjoy relating to younger people, I guess. I feel like they're more honest." Ann and Tara had a similar chronology with teaching: the older they got, the older the students they wanted to work with (does this explain middle-aged teachers leaving the classroom for teacher education work and/or the professoriate?). They worked with children when they were kids, worked with kids when they were adolescents, and wanted to work with adolescents now that they were young adults. Roberta, Francesca, and Laura on the other hand were always focused on secondary school students—an age they considered sufficiently optimistic (or "untainted" as one teacher put it) yet cognitively developed enough for taking personal responsibility and participating in "deep discussions about literature."

This raises questions. From where do these beginners get their knowledge about what students are like? Are they projecting (idealized) memories of themselves or their peers onto their conceptions of students? Is this linked to Fuller and Bown's (1975) "preteaching concern" in which young teachers—often anti-authority in orientation—awkwardly resist the more "adult-like" authority dimensions associated with teaching? Is this about recent college graduates feeling closer in age and culture to high school students than to older adults? And what kinds of race, class, and language complexities separate their own personalized notions of students from the often Asian, Southeast Asian, and Latino working-class students these teachers were teaching?

Connected to teachers' desire to work with the positive and honest energy of youth is a kind of social justice, or equity, theme.<sup>5</sup> All six teachers reported aspirations to make a difference in the world as part of the draw for teaching. For example, Roberta's reasons for working with youth, and the type of youth in which she was interested, link up with her ideas about social service. To bridge her prior

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career in banking with her entry into teaching, she talked about her own schooling and about public service:

My school experience was very rewarding for me, so when I started in banking and I became a manager and could use my resources where I wanted to, I tried to do things to stay involved in education whether it was to judge a speech meet or track meet, or provide a luncheon honoring teachers. I just felt that public education was a great service and I needed to repay the honor associated with it. That's when I first started thinking about the young people [here].

Whenever possible at the bank, she hired youth from the mostly Latino community in which she lived and worked, and yet was frequently surprised to find herself having to teach them basic writing and professionalism. This realization, and the desire to do something about it, combined with stagnation in her current job and a yearning to continue her education, and formed her decision to teach high school English. She was very clear that her desire to work with Latino teenagers from low-income families was the crux of her teaching interest. Given her experiences at the bank, then, it comes as no surprise that when Roberta talked about her teaching goals, her educational philosophy, and her views of subject matter she often talked about functional literacy, independent thinking, and employment preparation for English language learners.

For Francesca, it was heeding her grandfather's more general call for service that linked social change with teaching:

I have this grandpa and he's always—he's one of those grandpas who never makes small talk; he always gets straight to the point: "So what are you doing that's helping the earth right now?" And I never really had a good answer, so I think it was in one of these conversations with him one time that I just decided that it might be better for humanity if I was a teacher instead of a French translator.

In the cases of all six teachers, characteristics of their viewing teaching as social justice work appeared in their teaching philosophies. Entering her teacher education program, Roberta possessed a detailed image of the students she expected to teach, and considered herself relatively familiar with their needs, contexts, and learning demands. Her incoming conceptions influenced what parts of her preparation program resonated with her, and how she personalized her teacher learning. Though, upon graduation, she wanted to teach in the Latino community in which she lived and had student-taught, it did not work out that way, and Roberta subsequently reported difficulty adjusting to the whiter, higher socioeconomic educational environment in which she began teaching. Her school agreed and, after her first year, she left this placement and accepted a new job teaching in the Latino community where she had initially desired to teach. Similarly, Ann's struggles as a high school student with attention deficit disorder influenced her reasons for entry and corresponded with how she talked about making a difference in the lives of her current students. Her focus (not solely but centrally, it appeared) was on individual students like she had been—those who felt ignored by school, those with learning difficulties, students

who did not have college on their radar. Tara, too, had a difficult time adjusting to a school culture (dominated by a leadership vacuum, student violence issues, low academic expectations, and a stifling bureaucracy) so different from her own schooling experiences—and was questioning her decision to teach there.

These examples raise the multiplicity of ways to conceive of social justice teaching, and their biographical sources. When speaking about ‘social justice,’ a teacher can be emphasizing academic achievement or radical social critique (or integrating both); focusing on students as individuals, certain “types” of students, or whole student populations; pouring one’s politics into increasing opportunities to learn, championing multiculturalism, or transforming the establishment. A teacher might conceive of social justice as teaching in communities urban, rural, suburban, or some combination—and in places personally familiar or not. In these data I found that the teachers’ views of “social justice” in teaching derived largely from each person’s personal history and prior experiences working with children. These influences had mediated their teacher education experiences and job choices and, now in the first year teaching, were still actively interacting with other aspects of their development.

Examining Kim’s entry into teaching underscores this link among biography, reasons for entry, and teaching for social justice. Kim reported she had always wanted to “help people” (part of why she initially pursued a career in medicine). While in college, she gave up premedicine because of the difficult coursework and uncomfortable competition, and shifted to psychology because her friends said she gave good advice and because many of her premed/biology credits transferred. Upon graduation, she took a job working in an after-school tutoring program for middle school students. This experience politicized her teaching and set her desire to work with middle schoolers:

Everyone was telling me that middle school kids are horrible—the worst age to teach. But I went in and had a really good rapport with the students. I had 30 students for about three hours every afternoon...kids in sixth and seventh grade dealing with gangs and a lot of those issues that go on in junior high and middle school but that adults dismiss as petty, [so] I decided to change the after-school program into more of a social justice program. We researched our community in terms of stereotypes about race and gangs. It went very well, and after that whole experience, I realized I was actually good at something. I felt like I wanted to do this forever.... But then I thought that I wanted to reach more students, and I worried about [inconsistent funding for programs like this one], so I gave up my goal of directing after-school programs and [turned to classroom teaching instead]: I believed that social justice didn’t only have to be taught in an after-school program.

Kim talked about her after-school tutoring job as having been one into which she sort of unintentionally fell: moving with a boyfriend to a new city, not sure what she wanted to do, looking for jobs on internet job boards in the community. Yet, she found that the job satisfied her, and mapped onto her past experiences, she believed. This led to her decision to become a middle school teacher.

Embedded in this personal-professional experience was a transformation that

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fundamentally shaped Kim's professional development. She considered herself a social justice teacher, and related this to her prior work in the after-school program: she talked about her politically oriented after-school supervisor, about listening to students and fashioning a curriculum out of their very immediate frustrations with school and society, and about inhabiting an us-versus-them binary in which she aligned herself with students against the teachers: "During the after-school program I developed a bad impression of teachers because, [listening to students, I learned that] a lot of the teachers there were not the type of teacher I wanted to be. So when I [decided] be a teacher, I had this idea of being the cool one, being more on their side than the teacher's side." These particular views of teaching, however—being friends with students; raising topics like race, bias, and hegemony; striving to be the "cool one" at the expense of 'typical' teachers—became problematic during her first year teaching:

Now I'm finding that it's really hard to draw that line where, even though students and I have a lot in common, like [a love of] video games, it doesn't mean that we're automatically going to be friends, even if we get along well outside the classroom: 'In the classroom I'm still your teacher, still an authority figure. Just because you're goofing off and I think it's funny doesn't mean you're going to get away with it.' For me it's been really difficult this year and really difficult for students to realize that I'm the teacher and not their friend. It's hard for me to set them straight sometimes because my [tutoring] background allowed me to be a friend and I think I like that relationship better, but as a teacher I can't do that.<sup>6</sup>

Once she began teaching, Kim's particular orientation to informal and social justice education manifested itself in three particular frustrations. One is that she had difficulty reconciling her internal tendency to be a fun friend to students with her professional role as their authority figure. A second is that she felt hoodwinked by the school that hired her: she told me she had been very clear about her social justice emphasis, had been assured by school administrators that this was just what the school desired, and yet she found otherwise. She reported that both the school and parents were uninterested in taking on issues like racism, global politics, and student activism with students. And the third frustration is that Kim believed her social justice commitments were incompatible with the district's emphasis on high test scores. The mandated focus on academic standards and test scores left almost no room in the curriculum, Kim believed, for her social justice interests. In the final interview, Kim told me she felt frustrated working at this school and did not know how long she would remain there.

### **Conclusion:**

#### ***Making Teacher Identity Development Visible***

Investigating the collected data illuminated how a teacher's reasons for entry bridge *prior events and experiences* with the kind of *teacher one is becoming*. Though space limitations precluded extending this analysis very far in either direction, I found that, for each teacher, clear lines of influence could be drawn across the various teacher

identity components to suggest answers to several analytic questions. As this article presents, several of those questions were related to difficult tensions about the kind of teacher each was becoming. For example, Kim's incoming conception of social justice teaching put her at odds with how her school was framing social justice teaching, and this frustrated her. Roberta found herself working with students unlike those who initially brought her into teaching—a fact that precipitated her move to another school. More optimistically, Tara reported professional growth as she worked through the conflict between her incoming view of English teaching as about giving and grading quizzes and the freer, more constructivist reality she actually encountered.

As this article has framed teacher identity as both process and product, this final discussion considers implications for both. Generally, I hope this article encourages teacher educators to find explicit ways to make teacher identity more visible to novice teachers so those new teachers can, themselves, learn to identify and adjust what (and how) they learn from their pasts. Specifically, this study revealed that many first-year teachers experience fundamental identity conflicts as they work to reconcile long-held expectations with current teaching realities, and merge their personal self-understandings with their developing professional identities. The beginning years of teaching are often marked by demanding, emotional identity work, and yet the teachers in this study were left to attend to these personal-professional concerns mostly by themselves. As teacher educators more formally address teacher identity conflicts, patterns, and phases within preservice preparation, they can offer some initial paths of approach for when their students confront them—both during and after the teacher education experience. Some concrete possibilities include the following:

- *Learning-and-teaching autobiographies* that each student creates and returns to all year—revisiting and revising them with peers and professors as their development progresses. These teacher identity autobiographies could travel with students across courses, into student teaching, and even become the basis for the final teaching statement/portfolio/philosophy that accompanies completion of many programs.
- *Explicit conversations about contradictions* in the contemporary landscape of teaching. There is a fundamental paradox at work presently in which teacher education often prepares professionals to freely design, enact, and measure student learning and yet the current policy culture increasingly demands scripted curricula, standardized practice, and heightened teacher surveillance. How to openly acknowledge and strategically navigate this inconsistency should be a formal part of teacher education.
- *Professional conversations about choosing the right schools* for individual teachers. Particular teacher identities fit better with particular school situations. Many of the teachers in this study accepted the first job they were offered, or privileged commute time or salary over professional alignment



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between self and school. As a result, three of the six teachers were unhappy with where they were teaching. Helping novice teachers diagnose their expectations, needs, and future goals, and foreground those as they apply for jobs, interview with schools, and choose their professional sites should increase fit. This in turn should increase teacher quality, teacher satisfaction, and teacher retention.

- *Addressing the many roles of tutoring* in early career teaching. Tutoring opportunities guide many young people into the teaching profession (including three of the six teachers here), yet tutoring's subtle dissimilarities to teaching should be addressed. Teacher education programs may wish to create their own high quality tutoring programs not only to augment learning opportunities for local K-12 students, but also to recruit preservice teachers. But if so, they should offer explicit guidance on how student teachers can simultaneously rely on and distance themselves from tutoring work as they construct their teacher identities.

- *Paying formal attention to personal, emotional effects of identity transitions.* Emphasizing teacher identity as learning frame encourages attention to holistic dimensions of beginning teacher development often hidden from view in purely technical, academic, or cognitive orientations to professional preparation. An identity focus allows teacher educators and novice teachers, together, to consider how the whole person is always negotiating new identities and self-understandings around their teacher development. Teacher educators should attend to the emotional challenges associated with learning to teach: informing students that they are not alone in experiencing identity conflicts, that these conflicts are often resolved incrementally, and that teacher identity construction is forever ongoing.

Generally, I hope these recommendations encourage teacher educators to get to know their students' reasons for entry, better understand each teacher's developing professional identity, and make the mostly implicit identity processes I have described visible to beginning teachers. In its extreme form, I realize this would be neither ethical nor possible: teacher educators have no right to pry into students' personal histories, and getting to know all students this well is unreasonable. Instead, I suggest employing strategic ways to encourage students, themselves, to become more conscious and in control of their own embedded, holistic professional development processes and effects.

Finally, a word about research: I believe teacher identity as analytical frame, and the ecological research models that surround it, offer promise for others interested in investigating the situated, ever-changing ways in which teachers are forever "becoming." Methodologies like teacher interview/analysis, ethnography, narrative analysis, and action research—along with critical, holistic modes of analysis that



foreground identity studies—should continue to deepen our understanding of how teachers actually develop, and how who one is as a person has a lot to do with who one is as a teacher. In these ways, I believe teacher identity offers promise.

### **Acknowledgment**

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed explication of teacher identity as theoretical method, see Olsen (in preparation).

<sup>2</sup> These were the six “reasons for entry” categories that dominated interview coding, though they were named differently. The gender grouping and the phrasing of the themes happened during analysis.

<sup>3</sup> Depending on how broadly one defines “influence,” arguments could be made that *all* the findings in this paper—even the study as a whole—are about gender (Apple, 1986; Belenky et al 1986). I would not disagree. But for purposes of this analysis, I tried to limit gender coding only to self-reported or prominent connections to gender.

<sup>4</sup> I have edited interview passages for flow, deleting most false starts and pause fillers unless directly related to the meaning of the passage.

<sup>5</sup> I use “social justice” and an “equity agenda” in teaching synonymously as broad terms to describe a view of education work as part of larger sociohistorical struggles for equity and transformation that extend outside classrooms and schools and therefore overlap with established, expansive social change agendas.

<sup>6</sup> And consider that this interview of mine with Kim (and the other teachers) was itself a pedagogical intervention in her development. Here, I was pointing her toward ways her personal past influenced her professional present—probably posing some methodological slips, and yet also having a powerful conversation about her development. It is likely that she had never had a conversation like this one: a teacher educator leading her in a Socratic style of questioning through the ways her past affected her professional development. This suggests, and the conclusion details, a way in which teacher identity is useful as a pedagogical technique.

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