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WE CAN'T DANCE EVERY DAY: NEW TEACHERS SEEKING BALANCE

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my family; whether or not our bond is through blood, your love has sustained me and made me who I am. I would not be where I am without you.

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I want to thank my committee for guiding me on my educational journey. I will always be grateful for the ideas you introduced because they changed me for the better.

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Abstract

Dedicated and competent teachers are essential to the success of public schools. However, due to the various pressures on teachers, from both the top down and the bottom up, many new teachers struggle as they enter the profession. This qualitative study highlights five areas in which six new teachers, all within their first five years as secondary English/Language Arts public school teachers, seek balance. Through interviews with these teachers, I gathered data on their struggles and successes and found that they focused on balancing: 1) their relationships with students and academics, 2) their relationships with students and classroom management, 3) their instructional aims with students' interests and outside pressures, 4) the needs of all students, and 5) life and work.

Chapter One: Introduction

“The best and safest thing is to keep a balance in your life, acknowledge the great powers around us and in us. If you can do that, and live that way, you are really a wise man.”

--Euripides

Background of Study

Chapter one provides some background on how this study topic was chosen. I introduce my experience in the education field as a student and teacher. My experiences, coupled with those described by the other teacher-participants, elucidates a recurrent theme that inspired my topic of balance. I present the concept of balance in this chapter and conclude with the purpose and guiding research question for the study: *In what areas do the new secondary English Language Arts teachers in my study seek balance?* A sub-question is: *How do these teachers find balance in their early careers?* These questions are intentionally broad as balance in this study relates particularly to the teachers' lives within the classroom, but also beyond into the school and their outside lives.

Teaching as a balancing act.

When I was a child, I thought everything teachers did in the classroom was pure magic. I was one of those children who loved school and would have attended seven days a week if it had been an option. I could relate to my early teachers and I admired them, viewing them as role models. I often remember

feeling that my teachers liked me and were speaking directly to me when they addressed the class. My first scholastic memories were formed in a culturally diverse setting, and I didn't understand why some students were disruptive or didn't do well. The teachers' goals and methods made sense to me, and I was only vaguely aware of the fact that others didn't feel the same way. Like many others for whom school is a pleasure, I decided early that I wanted to teach, and since I had only experienced elementary school up to that point, I settled on becoming an elementary school teacher. According to Clement (2002), "Many elementary teachers are women who grew up 'playing school,'" as I did. I was also an oldest child and enjoyed taking care of (and bossing around) my younger siblings and cousins. I liked caring for younger children, and from my earliest memories, I envisioned a grown-up life as a teacher with lots of children of my own.

Later, my high school teachers helped me navigate the college-entry process, where I took my first steps toward becoming a teacher and a lifelong learner. This era was also when I began to contemplate teaching secondary school, mostly because of my love of literature and foreign languages. I had maintained a love of learning and a respect for teachers to that point, and was largely unaware of the challenges faced by my teachers. During these years, I attended a school with little diversity and took classes with mostly other academically-motivated students. Physically and metaphorically, I was at the front of the class. I never looked back to see the bored, distracted, disengaged students struggling at the back of the room.

Now, after having passed through a College of Education, experienced teaching, and through discussions with and observations of other teachers, I see the hurdles teachers face. I see that they, or *we*, must align our curriculum with standards passed down from national legislation to state departments to districts to school administrators; I see that we must plan fool-proof lessons to capture the attention of diverse and disengaged—often for good reason—students who face pressures of their own; I see that we must collaborate with peers, even when time is scarce; and I finally see that the act of teaching is less an act of magic and more an almost-incredible balancing act. I envision a waiter on one foot, stacks of plates on his hands and head.

After interviewing new teachers about their transitions into the teaching career, I thought about the threads that ran throughout our conversations. Eventually, a word came to mind: balance.¹ The quest for harmony of opposing, at least seemingly, forces resonated with me. Parker Palmer (2007) affirms this balancing act, writing:

My two-year journey with public school teachers persuaded me beyond doubt that they and their kin are among the true culture heroes of our time. Daily they must deal with children who have been damaged by social pathologies that no one else has the will to cure. Daily they are berated by politicians, the public, and the press for their alleged inadequacies and

¹ According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1971), balance can be equated with equilibrium, and is “a condition in which two (or more) opposing forces balance each other,” or the “general harmony between the parts of anything, springing from the observance of just proportion and relation.” The figurative meaning is a “metaphorical balance of justice, reason, opinion, by which actions and principles are weighed or estimated.”

failures. And daily they return to their classrooms, opening their hearts and minds in hopes of helping children do the same. (p. xii)

Even before I stepped foot into a classroom to teach on my own, I caught inklings of these demands that teachers face. Several people, both explicitly and implicitly, discouraged me from following the path I had chosen. One professor in particular said something along the lines of, “You’re smart, you should do something better than become a teacher.” Since this time, I have read accounts of other teachers who heard similar feedback. Welborn (2005) struggled with the choice to become a teacher, and when I read her words they powerfully resonated with me: “perhaps they think I’m too ‘smart’ to stay in teaching (someone actually did say that to me once)” (p. 19). Welborn (2005) speaks to me through the space and time that separates us when she tells of her similar attraction to and repelling of the field of Education.

When I received my professor’s comment, I was young and had no reply; I was woefully unaware that others had experienced anything like it. At this point, the balancing of my desire to teach with all of the reasons I saw to run from teaching began. I had come to college as an Education major, but by the end of the first year, that status had changed. Paradoxically, my strong desire to teach was intermittently counteracted by a strong fear, which I masked with logical justifications. Paradox² is another strand that ran throughout not only my

² According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1971), paradox is “a statement or proposition which on the face of it seems self-contradictory, absurd, or at variance with common sense, though, on investigation or when explained, it may prove to be well-founded” (p. 2073).

memories of entering the Education field, but also was present in the discussions of other new teachers. Palmer (2007) claims:

“Paradoxical thinking requires that we embrace a view of the world in which opposites are joined, so that we can see the world clearly and see it whole. Such a view is characterized by neither flinty-eyed realism nor dewy-eyed romanticism but rather by a creative synthesis of the two.” (p. 69)

Sometimes difficulties in finding balance can be the result of a failure to recognize that we are balancing two sides of the same coin.

I wanted a black and white definitive answer regarding my future career. Unbeknownst to me, in the year I graduated from high school Parker Palmer also had published a book that might have given me valuable insight, if I had been ready to receive it. Palmer (1999) discusses the origin of the word “vocation,” which has its root in the Latin word for “voice” (p. 4). At this time my struggle to find my voice and my vocation were both at the forefront of my mind, but they seemed unrelated and often opposing. Now I have come to believe that, as Palmer claims, they are one in the same. After several years of wandering and searching, I made my way back to the Education field in 2007 when I began taking courses to become a certified teacher.

For me, finding the path to teaching was difficult and the adjustment to the career has been fulfilling, though exhausting. I know I have chosen to walk a road that has no end, in which I never know what is up ahead—that knowledge is both

terrifying and exhilarating. Through this study, I have a rare privilege of taking a closer look at the journeys of a few other teachers. My goal is examine and relay how five other teachers and I strive to keep our balance along the way.

Need for the Study

Anyone beginning a job in a new field has a difficult task ahead of them.

Ingersoll (2012) says:

All organizations and occupations, of course, experience some loss of new entrants — either voluntarily because newcomers decide to not remain or involuntarily because employers deem them unsuitable. Moreover, some degree of employee turnover, job, and career change is normal, inevitable, and beneficial. (p. 49)

While this turnover may be inevitable and even advantageous, new teachers face unique challenges that might increase the difficulty of the adjustment to the career, thereby increasing turnover rates. They are sometimes hired days before the students return to class, leaving little room for thorough training. Furthermore, even teachers who have some experience face unexpected challenges with each new set of students, school policy change, and alteration of curriculum. Because of this, teachers must learn flexibility to enable them to react quickly and regain balance. Ingersoll studies teacher retention and has found that among other professions, teaching has “a relatively high turnover” (p. 49). This fact is not surprising if we consider Nieto’s (2005) claim that teachers “are overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated, and they rarely experience the support and

public acclaim of other professionals” (p. 10).

Nieto believes that pre-service and practicing teachers need a chance to look at their work in a “critical and comprehensive way” (p. 10). Opportunities for new teachers to reflect on and discuss their efforts to find overcome challenges and to realize they are not alone in their struggles might ease the transition into the teaching career. Additionally, research that examines the big picture of some of new teachers’ most pressing concerns contributes to this “critical and comprehensive” understanding. I have emerged from a College of Education where critical consciousness and reflection are deeply rooted. As an English educator, I have been shaped by Friere’s (1987) concept of “conscientization,” of raising people’s critical consciousness through literacy and leading them to critical reflection (p. 121).

Looking deeply at teachers’ purpose has become part of me, for I believe that public education must serve to embolden pupils to become reflective, critically conscious citizens who are willing to act in order to better our world. Teacher education, in turn, must do the same for its pupils, continually. Teachers must learn to think critically about the world around them and their part in it, in order to educate students to be members of a just society. This study is an opportunity for me to look at my work and the work of other teachers; furthermore, it allows the teachers I interviewed to reflect on their work.

I began this study with a desire to give my teacher-participants, those beginning to perform the delicate balancing act of teaching, a voice, and then to

share their wisdom and struggles with other new teachers. I particularly wanted to hear from new teachers, which I define as within their first five years of teaching, because, after all, they are still negotiating unfamiliar terrain. This idea was not new. I had read similar accounts of new, or early, teachers, such as *Tensions and Triumphs*, which is authored by six teachers within their first six years and a teacher-researcher. Of interest to me, however, is that all of my participants have been through similar teacher preparation processes. While I did not necessarily want to ask them specific questions about their pre-service courses and field experiences, I hypothesized that some of their shared experiences might affect their early responses to teaching situation they would encounter.

Through informal observations, these early years seemed to be a time when teachers flourished, languished, or fled. My serious "wonderings" (Hubbard & Power, 2003, p. xiv) about the transition from student to teacher first began when I started teaching an upper-division course in the College of Education and observing student teachers during their internship semester. I was able to listen to the concerns of pre-service teachers as they stepped into their teacher roles for the first time. Even when the "baptism by fire" (a phrase used by one of the teachers I interviewed to describe the transition to teaching on her own) created by those first days confirmed that teaching was the right choice, the teachers I knew had exhausting work to do in order to feel they were successful in their careers. In fact, I knew few experienced teachers who would claim success, even if others viewed them as successful.

Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study, originally, was to interview five new secondary English/Language Arts teachers at different points within their first years in order to learn something of their journeys in order that I might learn something and the information might be shared with others in the similar situations as new teachers. My feelings matched Nieto's (2005) sentiment:

While administrators, policymakers, businesspeople, and politicians have all had their say about teacher quality, teacher recruitment, and teacher resilience, the voices of teachers themselves have been largely missing in these discussions. Yet who better to tell us about the lives of teachers?" (p. ix)

I wondered why the participants had originally wanted to teach, who had encouraged and discouraged them along their paths, where they were now, if teaching matched their expectations, what challenges and victories they had encountered, and anything else they felt was important to share. Basically, I wanted to use some of the time I would inevitably spend conducting a study to sit with other new teachers over a cup of coffee, often after a long day for these teachers, and do something rare for these teachers--I wanted to *listen*. What I found is that they had much to say. Worthwhile themes naturally and consistently emerged.

Between the time I started the interviews and the day I started writing,

somewhere in the messy transcription and coding process, my circumstances shifted. I found myself back in a secondary English classroom full-time, struggling not only to complete the study, but to divorce myself from the data I had collected. At that point, and at the recommendation of the professor advising me, I decided that I would become a part of the study as well, adding my voice to those of other new teachers. While I had taught before, I was still within that five-year period and still considered myself a new teacher. I had taught in a high school before and was now entering a middle school where I would teach sixth through eighth grades.

What began as a broad and fuzzy purpose for the study came into focus after I examined the interview data and thought about my own teaching experiences. Initially, I saw recurring themes on the good, bad, and ugly concerning relationships with students, standardized testing pressures, and collaboration with peers, but my challenge was to unite all of these thoughts in a coherent way. One day when I was driving down the road thinking of everything but this study, a word came to me: balance. My epiphany in that moment was that all of my interviews had centered on *balance*. While I didn't realize it at the time, Palmer's (2007) discussions of balancing paradoxical parts probably influenced me; I had been deeply touched by his book when I read it in graduate school during my first year teaching high school. Issues discussed by teachers in my interviews, such as personal connections with students that both aid and hinder the learning process, were often paradoxical and resistant to quick fixes that might be provided by a

teacher's handbook containing the rules.

The teachers I interviewed discussed struggles in seeking balance regarding the fine line between teacher and friend in student relationships. The quest for balance extended to the balancing of lesson plans with the need for flexibility, relevancy, and the demands of standardized tests. Balancing the teaching life with home and family life also emerged as an issue for new teachers. Much of what I discovered through the interviews could be described as a desire for balance. Furthermore, my own life as a new teacher had come to feel like a supreme balancing act. My position to the study is biased, but my ability to relate to the teachers I had interviewed is also a strength because I understand the context of the secondary English Language Arts classroom.

I undertook this study with the broad research question: How do new teachers transition into the teacher role? Following my epiphany, balance began to weigh on my mind. It became the lens through which I saw my failures and successes as well as the experiences described by my participants. Accordingly, I adopted the following emergent research question to guide my study: *In what areas do the new secondary English Language Arts teachers in my study seek balance?* A sub-question is: *How do these teachers find balance in their early careers?* The discussion of the transition into teaching became the phenomenon I used to answer these questions.

Outline of Following Chapters

In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology I have settled upon and

introduce my participants. In the subsequent chapters, I discuss other paradoxes and issues of balance for new teachers. In chapter three, I introduce an important issue of classroom balance brought to light by the participants: balancing student relationships. In chapter four, I discuss how the teacher-participants balance relationships with students and classroom management; in chapter five, I discuss what we teach and what students want to know; and in chapter six, I discuss ways in which these teachers balance the needs of all students. Following the discussion of balance within the classroom, I discuss balance as it pertains to teachers' lives outside of the classroom, such as the life/work balance, in chapter seven. Conclusions from this study are offered in chapter eight. A review of relevant literature will be included throughout the study.

Chapter Two: Methodology

“Implicit in this exploration of how we know is an image of truth that can now be made explicit: truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.”

--Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*

This chapter describes the methodology I use to explore the research questions that emerged:

1. *In what areas do the new secondary English Language Arts teachers in my study seek balance?*
2. *How do these teachers find balance in their early careers?*

First, I provide information on qualitative case study methodology and explain how I settled upon it for my study. Next, I offer a rationale for weaving in personal narrative. After discussing relevant information on case study and personal narrative methodologies, I explain how I chose my participants and how interviews were conducted, recorded, and analyzed. In order to allow my readers to envision the participants and the situation in which they are situated, I include a description of each of them and some information on their current positions and school settings.

Case Study

An important aspect of this study is that epistemologically it is qualitative and interpretivistic. The interviews are interpreted by me as the researcher, and

therefore represent my interpretation of their meaning, though, following Geertz, I strive to provide the participants' points of view as accurately as possible (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). The aim of the study is less about objective truth seeking, and more about conveying dialogue I shared with the teachers in the appropriate context.

The methodology for this research began as qualitative case study, and while I have come to include some aspects of personal narrative, case study is still the overriding methodology. While researchers conceptualize case study research differently, the methodology resonated with me even when the description varied. For example, Yin (2014) asserts that the choice to settle upon a case study methodology begins with an examination of your research question, claiming, "The more that your questions seek to explain some present circumstance (e.g. "how" or "why" some social phenomenon works), the more that case study research will be relevant" (p. 4). My "how" question fits this description nicely, and while Stake (1995) focuses on the use of case study to study the particular (as opposed to the general), both "argue that case studies can be used for theoretical elaboration" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 23). Schwandt (2001) also discusses the postmodern attitude that rejects large-scale truths. This view resonates with me, making a qualitative case study appropriate in that my work doesn't strive to find answers, but to raise questions and give individual accounts that cannot be generalized.

In continuing to explore my methodological choice for this study, I came to

rely most heavily on Merriam's (1998) descriptions of case study application in the field of Education. Merriam (1998) emphasizes the importance of "fenc[ing] in" what will be studied, so I defined my case as this group of participants who were all English/Language Arts teachers, within their first five years of teaching, who had received pre-service education from the same college. In my understanding of her parameters, case study is only applicable when the data collection is somewhat finite. This point leads me to emphasize that my research study does not deal with a case including all new teachers, but only those who have recently taken classes within this particular College of Education, and only those chosen to be part of my participant group. I set out to recruit four to five participants, all of whom would fit the criteria of being secondary English/Language Arts teachers and all of whom would have taken courses in the same College of Education where I had taken courses and later taught.

Merriam (1998) further asserts "qualitative case studies can be characterized as being particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic" (p. 29). With regard to the particularistic nature of case study, Merriam (1998) highlights that "[t]he case itself is important for what it reveals about the phenomenon and for what it might represent" (p. 29). This study is not generalizable, as I discuss later, but it can raise awareness of issues that can be further studied within the field. My study is descriptive, by Merriam's (1998) standards, in that I use literary elements, such as narrative, and extensive quotations to relay information and provide context. Additionally, this study is descriptive in that it "illustrates the complexities of a

situation," namely the complexities involved in finding adequate balance to become successful as a new teacher (Merriam, 1998, p. 30). Furthermore, this study is heuristic in that it seeks to "confirm the reader's experience" and sometimes to "confirm what is known" about a more general case (Merriam, 1998, p. 30). For example, other new teachers may find some of their own knowledge and experiences confirmed as they read the words of new teachers who participated in the study.

Personal Narrative

While strong elements of case study are present and it remains the prevalent methodology, I chose to weave in some personal narrative as well. Narrative, Schwandt (2001) explains, might include "a personal experience story relates the teller to some significant episode, event, or personal experience . . ." (p. 168). My rationale for the addition of personal narrative is that I, too, became a new secondary English/Language Arts teacher who had taken courses in the same college, so I fit the bill as a participant. Furthermore, I believed my commentaries, where they were relevant to the themes that had emerged, would be worthwhile for a reader seeking multiple perspectives, so I chose to relay them via narration.

One of the challenges to narrative research is that the researcher "needs to collect extensive information about the participant, and needs to have a clear understanding of the context of the individual's life" (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). While I don't have adequate data and perspective on my other participants' lives to successfully use a narrative approach throughout, I do have "extensive

information" and "a clear understanding of the context" of my own life, to a reasonable extent. A concern arose, however, in that when an inquirer is "part of the setting, context, and social phenomenon he or she seeks to understand," as I am, reflexivity must be considered in order to maintain the validity of the participants' data (Schwandt, 2001). For this reason, I strive to disclose biases that may color my interpretations of the interviewee's accounts. Some of the data I chose to emphasize may have been included because it was related to a personally important issue I have faced as a teacher. Still, my position to the study offers a "rich resource base," because as a teacher-researcher, I have a "depth of awareness" to my data (Hubbard and Power, 2003, p. xiv). I know the college out of which the participants came, and have experienced many of the same classes they took. Furthermore, I have an understanding of the context in which the participants teach because I have been in several schools in the area due to my work with student teachers during their internships.

Participant selection and data collection

The names of potential participants came from the College of Education previously mentioned. I then sent an email to those who might qualify asking if they would be willing to participate in the study. Participants needed to fulfill all of the requirements listed above and be available for up to two one-hour interviews. While I had hoped for a mixture of males and females, I ended up with five female participants as the first to fit the criteria and schedule interviews. This fact is not surprising given the numbers of males and females in the English

Education department. Of the three course sections I taught in the department as a graduate student, slightly over ninety percent of my students were female.

Once I had my participants lined up, I met with each of them individually at coffee shops that were convenient to their location, with the exception of one participant who was living several states away and generously gave up part of a trip back to Oklahoma to meet with me. I obtained permission to audio-record the semi-structured interviews. I began with a list of open-ended questions³, but explained to the interviewees that they had control to say as much or as little as they liked about a given topic, and to change the topic. The order in which I asked the question depended upon the flow of each interview.

I asked the teachers to refrain from using names during the interviews, but also informed each participant, before the interviews, that their names, as well as the names of their institutions and any students or co-workers, would be changed during the transcription process. I labeled all transcripts with the participants' pseudonyms in order to de-identify their responses. Upon completion of all five interviews, I transcribed and coded them for themes. As I made notes on each participant, I grouped the themes in an effort to develop coherency.

At this point that I came to the realization that all of the participants addressed issues of balance both in their teaching lives and beyond. Of the five participants, two were in their first year, one was in her second year, and two were in their fifth year of teaching. This range from very little experience to the outer

³ Found in Appendix A

edge of what I termed "new" teachers gave a nice snapshot of some of the changes a new teacher might experience during this period.

Qualitative research such as this study is valuable not for the ability to make an "encompassing statement or proposition made by drawing an inference from observation of the particular" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 224). The participants I interviewed were all unique, and other teachers reading this work will not be able to relate to all of their views and experiences. Still, when I examined my data, I saw it as an authentic way to relate to and begin to think about my own experiences, if nothing more. The honest specifics put forth by the teachers I worked with illuminate possible strategies for and barriers to finding balance that others can read to "theoretically elaborate" on generalities, or perhaps begin to reflect on their own teaching lives (Schwandt, 2001, p. 23). Essentially, while none of my study results are generalizable, other new teachers might gain insight and perspective by reading of the early difficulties and successes of others.

Participants.

Caroline: Caroline is a first-year teacher in her early twenties, two months into her first job. At the time of her interview, she excitedly relayed: "Getting my third teacher paycheck on Friday!" She teaches ninth through twelfth grade remedial English classes, working with "all different kinds of kids" in a suburban high school. She has remained at the school where she did her student-teaching internship.

I met Caroline two years ago during her junior year of college when she

took a course on teaching grammar and composition that I taught as a graduate student. She sat on the front row from the first day and was very outspoken. Her keen observations and witty remarks become one of those steady interruptions teachers sometimes squelch for the sake of time but often appreciate.

The students in Caroline's classes are placed there because they either had failed a previous semester or an End of Instruction (EOI) exam. Her class is a graduation requirement for these students. According to Caroline, most of the seniors she sees are English Language Learner (ELL) students or have just exited that program and still struggle with the language. On the other hand, she describes her freshman students as "highly unmotivated students" who are "actually all really smart." Because of this, she claims that part of her "job has more become a motivational speaker."

When I asked Caroline when and how she first decided to become a teacher, she energetically responded: "I actually declared that I wanted to be a teacher in second grade, but knew it from the beginning." Unlike my story, however, she didn't begin school as a well-behaved student who tried to please teachers. Instead, she describes herself as a "super rowdy, rambunctious child," citing behaviors like "cutting girls' hair in class, squirting glue everywhere, stealing stuff . . . and flushing stuff down the toilet." Her first memory of wanting to teach is vivid:

. . . I remember my kindergarten teacher, Ms. L. She was in an all-white skirt suit with pantyhose and white shoes, and kindergarten desks, or tables,

are really, really short, so when I say she got up on the table with both feet stomping, her face so red, she was yelling, she was so . . . I had covered one of the tables in glue and stuck papers on it, and she was so mad. And I just remember thinking, this would be fun, to be a teacher.

Briefly after this incident, Caroline decided to become a good student. From then on, she told her parents she wanted to teach. "And then, though," she says, "my parents tried to convince me that I was smart and I should do something that paid more, because I would never have--my mom says I have lavish taste and that my income will never take care of me."

Throughout high school, Caroline continued to enjoy school. She said, "I liked going to school. I did well at school. I never . . . it was never a struggle for me, so it was a safe, fun place." Caroline concluded that after college she wanted to "go back and do that [teach] forever." She describes the idea of leaving the classroom as "heartbreaking."

Diana: I initially met Diana, like Caroline, when she enrolled in the class I taught during her junior year. I remember her as a quiet student, but I certainly would not have described her as shy. Instead, I interpreted her silence as a chance to take in her surroundings. I also got the feeling she didn't always agree with what her classmates had to say, and at times she validated this by speaking up and effectively arguing against an idea that had been proffered.

Diana is also in her early twenties, in her first year of teaching in a suburban school. She, however, teaches freshmen all day. Her day is made up of three

periods of pre-AP English classes and two sections of "regular" on-track classes, which she describes as "a little bit of a different dynamic throughout the day."

Unlike Caroline, Diana has switched schools since her student teaching internship. Her experience during her internship semester led her to seek employment elsewhere. She says:

The school I student taught at is from a very high socioeconomic grouping, and there is a culture of entitlement, both in the student body and the staff.

Um, the staff was very clique-y and proud in the worst way, of they are teachers supreme and you can't mess with anything they're doing. And there is zero collaboration in that school.

She started teaching mid-year at her current school for a teacher who was taking maternity leave and is much happier. According to Diana, she is now in a "collaboration-based school" where "everybody comes and checks on [her] and gives [her] ideas for lessons." Furthermore, she claims that "every principal in the building was a teacher first, which was not the case at the school I taught at."

Although she doesn't see the principals as intimidating to the staff, she calls them "very involved" and describes them as "very present."

In further contrast to Caroline, Diana did not always want to teach, nor did she always enjoy her classes and teachers. In fact, in reference to high school she says:

I only had one, really just one English teacher in high school that actually helped me and worked with me, and all my other were not particularly

good. So it was a slightly vindictive reason [for choosing to teach English] almost, of, by god there's a good way to do this and I'm gonna figure out how because mine sucked.

She began as a pre-veterinary/zoology major, but says "most of the jobs" during college "all dealt with teaching people." Eventually, she realized that teaching makes her "really happy," so she enrolled in an Education course and loved it, saying it was like "Christmas every day." Now that she is in the classroom, she said: "I'm not teaching to get to something better. I'm teaching because that's exactly what I want to be doing."

Amber: Amber represents the final participant I met as a student in teaching grammar and composition class. As a junior, Amber was a quiet but eager and bright student. Even in a class with twenty-five other students, I could see that she was committed to the teaching profession and had a caring demeanor. Because she was quiet, I became acquainted with her primarily through her writing.

Now she is in her mid-twenties and has been teaching for nearly two full years. She is one of four ninth-grade English teachers at her urban school. In describing the school, she said, "the neighborhood that we're in is really the crossroad of several gang wars, so there's not a lot of community support towards the school, and the kids come in thinking it's a bad school." This is her first year at her current school, and, like Diana, she is much happier in her current situation than she was in her former teaching job, even though it's a difficult place to teach. She describes the school as having a "group atmosphere" and she said the

following about her students:

We work with inner city kids and they are just fantastic, wonderful kids.

They blow me away every day. I love my kids. I could talk about them forever . . . the job is really fun.

Currently, Amber teaches five sections of English I, but in her last job she taught seventh, ninth, and twelfth grade in a school where she felt an "ever-present threat of being fired" due to the approach the administration took with teachers.

Amber has good memories of her own school days and of her teachers.

When I asked Amber when and why she first wanted to become a teacher, she said:

. . . well, I actually all through school wanted to go into law, and my algebra, well she was my math teacher all through high school cause I went to a really small school . . . she always knew that I'd be a teacher. She always said I'd be a teacher, and I got to OU and was like, well, you know, I'm just gonna take some literature classes to start out, and I was like, well I really love this and I can make other people love this, too, and I could do a lot more good in this world teaching than I could being a lawyer, because I could help a lot more people. So, it just kind of happened, and I just kind of ran with it.

According to Clement (2002), "Many people choose teaching because they want to make a difference in the world," and Amber became one of those people (p. 8).

While she was happy with her new path, her mother was "extremely upset,"

because, like Caroline's parents, she worried about "the money issue." At this point, though, Amber says her mother "can't really argue anymore" because she sees how happy she is in the teaching field.

Erica: Erica is in her late twenties and has been teaching in the same school for almost five years. She has a master's degree in Education, and her mother was a teacher before her. I came to know her through a class we took together four years ago, but until the interview we had not kept in touch. Currently, she teaches seventh grade at a suburban junior high. Initially, she taught only reading, but the reading and English departments have since combined, so she now teaches both, which means she has the same students for two class periods every day. She also teaches Pre-AP classes, and those students combine reading and English into one period per day.

Erica describes the culture of her school as collaborative, which she says helps with the three separate plans she makes for each day. She and her co-workers began splitting up the planning responsibilities two years ago--they were the pilot program in their city--and have continued to share the workload.

I asked her if she remembered when she first wanted to teach, and she recalled memories similar to my own:

. . . when I was little, I wanted to be a teacher. My mom was a teacher, and so when I was little, we would play school. My siblings would be the student and I would never let them be the teacher . . . I would have worksheets, and they would get them . . . and people think that's weird, but I

just think it's normal--I didn't know that not everybody did that until recently.

Like me, Erica is also the eldest child in her family and she likes "being in charge of people" and having control, just as she did when she played school as a child.

As she grew older, Erica decided she wanted to "be a lawyer and help kids." She says that changed in her sophomore year in college when she, like Amber, switched from Law to Education. Her reasoning also matched Amber's; Erica said she thought, "I can make a lot more of a difference in that [teaching] than I could if I was a lawyer--with kids." Like both Amber and Caroline, Erica had a parent who was wary of this new path. "My dad was upset that I was going to be poor forever," she said. Her mother, the teacher, on the other hand, was "so excited."

Rebecca: Rebecca teaches ninth grade at a magnet school in a "very, very large district." She is in her late twenties, and this is her fifth year teaching. I met Rebecca when we took a class together five years ago, just before she began teaching. The class was through the College of Education and was taught by one of our professors, but took place in Santa Fe, NM. Because we spent much of our class days together, I got to know Rebecca better than I might have if we had been in a regular class. I remember being inspired by her ideas and influenced by the creativity she infused into her work. Rebecca was the last to be interviewed because she now lives several states away, but, fortunately, she agreed to be interviewed while visiting her sister.

The school where Rebecca currently teaches has a "diverse student

population" of about 2,700. When describing her school, she says:

Our school culture's really interesting. Since we are a magnet school, I have kids that I know live in the wealthiest of neighborhoods and I have kids that oftentimes don't know where their next meal is coming from . . . um, culturally we're also a really diverse school. We have a large Caucasian population, but we also have a large Asian and Latino and Black population.

She teaches two sections of AP Language and Composition and one section of Academic English III, which is "just kind of the run-of-the-mill, everyday American Literature class." All of her students are juniors, and she has them for ninety minutes at a time, every day, due to block scheduling.

Unlike the first school where Rebecca taught, her current school doesn't keep subject areas together, so she is in the hallway with "Special Ed., with History classes, with one other English teach," so, she says, "seeing the other English teachers regularly . . . I mean, we have our department meetings once a month." Although she doesn't see most of the other English teachers often, she and the other ninth grade teachers plan together and meet weekly.

Rebecca's school has "a high teacher turnover rate," which she attributes, in part, to the difficulty of the job, saying, “. . . it's a really dynamic place, but if you're not prepared for that, it can be a very difficult place to be." She also discussed a "very, very thorough and involved" teacher evaluation tool that was adopted by the state of North Carolina where she teaches.

When Rebecca was a child, she loved to read and write. The content of the

English classroom was always a passion for her. Furthermore, she loved school and has very positive memories of her teachers and their impact on her. However, she didn't consider becoming a teacher until after her first semester of college. She started out as a Political Science major and quickly realized she was in the wrong place, which led to an "existential crisis moment." Fortunately, Rebecca's mother suggested that she would make a great English teacher. She describes her response:

And so I applied for the College of Education and I loved my classes. Um, and when we started doing our first classroom observations, the school environment and being around the students and everything, I love it. Like, I could not wait to go into my field placement because I just wanted to be in it and I wanted to be all about it. And seeing the school as a living thing that's always changing and is alive was really evident to me from the beginning, so I loved it and decided to do it, and never looked back.

After completing a bachelor's degree, Rebecca earned a master's in Education as well.

Of the five teacher-participants, all are secondary English/Language Arts teachers in public schools. Two are in suburban schools in their first year of teaching on their own, post student teaching. One is completing her second year in an urban school. The final two participants are completing their fifth year, one in a public junior high and the other as a high school teacher in a magnet school.

Chapter Three: Balancing Student Relationships and Academics

“[O]ur intense fear of connectedness, and the challenges it brings, is pursued by an equally intense desire for connectedness, and the comfort it offers.”

*--Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach**

Paradox: Relationships with students bring both opportunities for deeper learning and challenges to the learning process.

I begin this chapter by reviewing my own relevant experiences with student relationships when I first began teaching. I then discuss some of the various complexities at play as these new teachers attempt to reach equilibrium in relationships with students, such as the proximity of the teacher’s age to her students and the balance required in maintaining high standards while taking time to relate to students about their interests. The topic of teacher dispositions is raised briefly, and I end with my current struggles with balancing my relationships with students and academics.

When I recall my first teaching job, which was at a private, independent k-12 school, I remember my interview. The interview had several parts, one of which was to teach a middle school class in front of several teachers and administrators. I knew I wasn’t going to have much time to create relationships with students within the forty-five minutes I taught, but I already knew how important that aspect was to me, so I made an effort to connect with as many students as possible during that class period. Apparently, the effort was

worthwhile; in my interview with the headmaster later that day, he said something like, “What you know about your subject matters less than who you are as a person.” He said students had responded well to me, and, because of that, they would want to learn from me, and not only learn the course objectives, but learn how to live. Rita Pierson, who gave a TED talk entitled “Every kid needs a champion” similarly said, “Kids don’t learn from people they don’t like” (Pierson, 2013).

When I began that first job, I came in mid-year. I immediately ascertained that the teacher whose place I had taken was very strict and somewhat erratic, and while the students were almost unanimously pleased to be getting a new teacher, they were also apprehensive about my arrival. Because it was my first teaching job, and I have a friendly personality and tend to like everyone I encounter, I was anxious to allay their fears. For the most part, students were grateful and behaved well—at first. Before long, though, some students had begun to take advantage of the freedoms I had given them. I had somewhat of a crisis trying to figure out how to be myself and have fun with the students while ensuring they didn’t cross too many boundaries. I also found it difficult to maintain high academic standards because I didn’t always have control of the class. Distractions and interruptions became frequent because students knew I wouldn’t be too strict in correcting them; students let grades slip and then begged and made excuses in order to earn back grade points they had lost. I knew I had to change something, but I didn’t want to lose the authentic learning that really was taking place, even if it

sometimes looked unorthodox, nor did I want to lose the relationships I had formed with students. I saw right away that some of the off-topic questions students asked led to meaningful conversations, and I often felt torn; had I failed because I hadn't kept students on track and we were behind on curricular goals or was the life lesson more important? Sometimes I wasn't sure.

Some of my initial struggles arose from teaching Spanish, which was not my strength when it came to content knowledge. The fear that I was not properly qualified to teach my subject because I was not a native speaker led me to paradoxical action as well—I wanted to hide behind my podium and distance myself in order to avoid and evade difficult questions I might not be able to answer, but I also wanted students to like me so they would be forgiving when I was caught without a correct or certain response.

Content knowledge without a connection to students is of little benefit. Palmer (2007) calls community--or “connectedness”-- “the principle behind good teaching” (p. 115). Teachers and students alike crave the connectedness Palmer describes. Each teacher creates community her own unique way, and for me it is about being honest about who I am and what I know—or don't know. Being my authentic self and allowing students to ask questions of genuine interest is essential, so I learned to let students question me and to express uncertainty when I was unsure of the answer. I learned that year that students respond well to seeing their teachers as human beings who are not somehow supernaturally equipped with all of the answers. They saw me struggle and were often more willing to

learn with me than from me.

The connection to students presented in interviews and found in my reflections often mirrored the fears and comforts Palmer (2007) discusses. The emphasis on forging positive relationships with students was evident in every interview I conducted, even though none of my questions were specific to the topic. Furthermore, student relationships are of utmost importance to me in my career. Striking the delicate balance between teacher as authority figure and teacher as co-learner and friend was reiterated as a concern, in part due to the effect this relationship has on classroom management and student engagement. In this chapter, the focus is on the balancing of relationships with students and academic goals we, as teachers, have for our students.

In my conversations with other new teachers, I found comfort in the fact that I was not alone in this struggle. Some of the issues raised in regard to balancing teacher roles with students seem paradoxical at first glance. For example, Palmer (2007) claims that “our intense fear of connectedness, and the challenges it brings, is pursued by an equally intense desire for connectedness, and the comfort it offers” (p. 60).

A narrow age gap between teacher and student can paradoxically help and hinder a teacher’s attempts to form meaningful and authentic relationships while maintaining high academic standards. For example, Caroline attributes her youthful age to some of the difficulty she encounters when forming relationships with her students, but she also appreciates that she is not so far-removed from

their lifestyles as to encounter difficulty in relating to them. She said:

I'm so young . . . I remember when I was teaching seniors . . . and it was like I was twenty-two in the classroom and I had some eighteen year-olds; that's a four year difference. That's not a lot . . . they still wanna know everything about you. They wanna be your friend. Um, and it's, to draw the line where you want them to know you're still a person, but at the same time, like, they don't need to know who I went on a date with this weekend.

Because Caroline is young, students can relate to experiences she is having, like dating. Diana also mentioned that she looks young, which raised my awareness that this concern may be common for young, new faculty. In his book of case studies on teachers, Hayes (2000) devotes one section to this issue, saying:

First year high school teachers are sometimes only four or five years older than some of their students. In such a situation, maintaining a proper teacher-student relationship can be a challenge. The students and teacher may have many common interests and occasionally may meet in social situations. Socializing with students outside the classroom, however innocent it might seem, can create unusual and sensitive situations for a young teacher. (p. 5)

During their internships, teachers like Caroline are still students themselves, and there may be no great chasm between their daily lives and the students'.

Additionally, Caroline is still in the age group most likely to utilize the social media sites her students frequent. When discussing her students from the

previous semester when she student taught at the same school, she adds that she allowed some of the students to follow her on Twitter and Instagram (a social networking platform and a photo sharing application, respectively) after she left the school. Shortly thereafter, she was hired by the same school with those students. She explained how the information sharing that occurs on social media can lead to blurred lines within the school:

. . . so the line with them has been kind of, they can be free to talk to me about whatever in the hallways when they see me, because I'm not their teacher anymore, but yet I'm still a teacher in the building, so I think that's hard. It's hard for them. It's hard to me too because I'm not their teacher, but at the same time, I am a teacher, in the building, and you're still students.

Still, Caroline doesn't want to give up the close relationships she has with students, and she doesn't exactly see it as a hindrance to academic achievement, either. Instead, getting to know her students gives her something to talk to them about, and, she explained:

when you have something to talk to them about, they will talk to you about anything, and they will start doing stuff for you--like homework stuff--and actually doing their reading assignments . . . if you can open the relationship door and keep it going . . . if you can keep them in the classroom and interested, I think that's success. I don't think that's lowering the standard, because I think that's real.

Caroline talked out these feelings in a very candid way in the interview.

When I asked her about formative mentors, she returned to the topic of student relationships by giving an example of a teacher who builds successful relationships with students. She described her mentor teacher during the student teaching internship as someone who "holds a high standard." While she worries about classroom management, she said that in her mentor teacher's class, "Kids don't get away with stuff and they know it." However, she also asserts that "she's [the mentor teacher] found a way to connect with them because she's learned who they are." One way she accomplishes this understanding of her students is through academic assignments--their first writing assignment of the year, a two page personal career essay. Caroline explained that the content of this essay gives their teacher fodder for individualized discussion, which is the first step to engaging students.

Rebecca echoed Caroline's emphasis on student relationships. She asserted that a great rapport with students is necessary for successful teaching, but explained:

. . . by that I don't necessarily mean the students' best friend, um, but that that respect is still there, but that the teacher can then enter into that learning process side-by-side with the student, not, you know, separated by a podium or kind of away from them, but can walk alongside the students through their learning process.

Like Caroline, she described a mentor teacher who had a great balance of "really challenging all of the kids" and "caring about all of the kids," saying, they all,

even the roughest kids, loved her and responded positively to her. And these were kids that I know struggled with other teachers . . . but she was just able to build that rapport that was so phenomenal . . . And I think that of all the countless things I learned from her, I think what I learned most was that even though she was the teacher, they were the students, she was the instructor, you know, there were years and years of age gap between them, but they were still human and she was still human, and that that human connection is what makes us all the same.

When I asked Rebecca for examples of how this mentor accomplished this elusive balance of high academic standards and connected lives, she added that students observe that the teacher both "asks me about my life outside of school" and has "really productive classes." According to Wasicsko (2007), my participants' descriptions of their formative mentor teachers are not uncommon; he says:

When describing their best teachers, people frequently struggle with words to express the deeply meaningful and personal relationship that existed and the life-altering impact it had. Asking thousands of students, friends, and acquaintances about their most effective teachers led to the conclusion that *it is not so much what the teacher knows or does rather it is who the person is that makes all the difference.* (p. 54)

The tricky element when applying this knowledge to new teachers is that altering *who one is*, if she wants to improve as a teacher, is much more difficult than learning a new teaching method. Measuring the impact a teacher is having is

messier if we must consider the whole teacher. Still, if what makes a positive difference for students and leads to lifelong learning has to do with a teacher's "disposition," this piece cannot be omitted (Freeman, 2007, p. 5). Hare (2007), who has worked in teacher education for more than thirty years, discusses using the term "dispositions" in the field in place of attitudes. The difference, essentially, is that when "we teach who we are" (Palmer, p. 1), we are not only teaching from the "external forces" that tell us who we should be, but also from deeper dispositions (Hare, 2007, p. 143). Consequently, according to Hare (2007), "An important part of teacher preparation is adequate time and safe space and skilled guidance to enable the individual to discern which of those dispositions that are integral to selfhood also serve the Self that teaches" (p. 143). Perhaps this time, space, and guidance is key for new teachers, as well as pre-service teachers.

Rebecca, Caroline, and Amber all had the advantage of watching teachers who seemed to teach from within, and those experiences profoundly impacted them. They saw teachers who balanced caring and connection with demanding academics, and they discussed the experience at length. Rebecca made a statement on the impact her mentor had during a formative time by saying, "that both could happen in the classroom: that you could have a rigorous and challenging time of working with them but then also just really personal human connections, was really important." Clearly, ample exposure to positive mentors is an invaluable component of teacher education programs.

According to Tschannen-Moran and MacFarlane (2011), two of the four sources from which we obtain self-efficacy beliefs are vicarious experiences and social persuasion. Vicarious experiences can occur in the form of observing teachers who the students admire and respect, as is often the case when pre-service teachers have the opportunity to watch teachers at work. Supportive feedback from cooperating teachers and faculty members constitute social persuasion, which boosts new teachers' beliefs that they can succeed in their efforts with students, such as in their efforts to emulate effective teachers who have illustrated connectedness with students while challenging them academically.

Amber's positive experience was with one of her high school teachers, who she describes as a formative mentor, who "treated us with a lot of dignity." Erica, who like Rebecca is completing her fifth year as a teacher, also brought forth the importance of being able to forge relationships without becoming a friend and without sacrificing high academic standards. Erica said successful teachers must:

. . . build a good rapport, that's, that's like respectful, that can straddle that fine line between teacher and then, like, you know, their friend--like you don't want to be the teacher everyone likes cause you're their friend and they do nothing in your class . . . you have to be tough at the same time as you have to be caring.

In both Rebecca and Erica's discussions, being seen as a friend to the students, which they avoided, seemed to equate to giving the students too much personal

information and using excessive class time to focus on personal issues outside the range of class learning content.

Part of the difficulty in achieving this balance is knowing when authentic, real-time opportunities for learning are arising in the classroom, and when students are finding ways to disrupt the learning process. Later in the interview, Erica admits that the lessons she deems most valuable to students are “not always” planned. Teachers frequently must make quick decisions. In fact, in a recent professional development seminar I heard that teachers make a myriad of decisions every teaching day. I tracked that number down to Clark (1988), who says, “Research on interactive decision making indicates that teachers encounter decision situations at two minute intervals while teaching—literally hundreds of decision points per day (p. 9). Some of these decisions are about what paths of conversation to follow and how far to go on a topic in order to show students we care about their interests and their lives; on the other hand, teachers are aware of the burden of leading students through an enormous amount of curricular content. According to Kendall (2011), the Common Core State Standards, which are designed to drive instructional content, leave fifteen percent of classroom time available for teachers to use as they see fit. Whether or not this time breakdown is realistic or not remains to be seen in most states, but certainly classroom differences will impact the time a teacher has outside of the prescribed curricular content.

Although all of the teacher-participants in this study spent time on

discussions of student relationships, none of them were asked explicitly about the issue. The comments arose from questions such as: 1) What makes a successful teacher? 2) What is your favorite part of teaching?; and 3) What do you struggle with as a teacher? Furthermore, while all of the teachers discussed the importance of student relationships, one participant, Diana, said little on the topic. Near the end of the interview, she put forth the idea that “a lot of it [successful teaching] is also building that relationship with the students and getting them to trust you.” She admitted that a struggle for her was that she doesn’t like all of her students, which she said surprised her.

Amber, on the other hand, reiterated the love she has for her students throughout the interview. Her concerns with student relationships had more to do with classroom management, which leads to another balancing act teachers perform: balancing student relationships with discipline. Amber explained, “I was really concerned about becoming more strict because I thought I would lose a lot of that, kind of, warmth and gentleness that I had the first year [of teaching].”

I am in a public school setting now where I face new challenges regarding student relationships. I now teach middle school instead of high school students, and the difference in our ages at this point alleviates problems like the ones Caroline and Diana mentioned. However, I work with small groups of struggling readers, and a great paradox for me is that the close relationship I have with my students is a help and a hindrance. On the one hand, because my students feel comfortable with me, we can sometimes achieve more together than they might in

a larger class where they become disengaged or have the ability to hide. On the other hand, when the traditional class structure is not in place, they can be less focused and more inclined to want to discuss topics outside of the learning content, such as personal issues. I am still learning to balance my classroom time. As will be clear in chapter four, the issues of balancing are compounded when classroom management comes into play.

Chapter Four: Balancing Student Relationships and Classroom Management

“Teaching is about the interactions of child with task, of teacher with child, and child with child, and how interactions need to be different with different children.”

--Marie M. Clay (2003)

Paradox: Close relationships with students can both bring forth and squelch discipline problems.

In this chapter, I discuss some ways in which the teachers I interviewed and I balance student relationships and classroom management. Balancing a caring attitude and discipline was a concern for some new teachers, as was maintaining a good rapport with students. Some specific disciplinary encounters the teachers have faced are detailed, as well as the teachers’ responses. I then include commentary on self-reflection as a tool one teacher used in order to find her own unique path to a classroom management style that matched her demeanor and context. Following this, I describe my current issues of balancing student relationships while ameliorating unwanted behaviors.

The teaching profession affords us with a rare and wondrous gift: the ability to start anew each year with a new group of students, new plans, and renewed hope. I spent many hours during the summer between my first and second years contemplating and scheming better ways to teach and manage the class. I shared Amber’s concern about balancing “warmth and gentleness” with discipline. Still, I

had such a “fear of losing” identity as a teacher that I began the year by distancing myself from the students. Palmer (2007) sums up nicely what I see in retrospect: “To avoid a live encounter with students, teacher can hide behind their podiums, their credential, their power” (p. 38). My classroom management appeared to have improved for the first couple of weeks, but much of the joy of teaching was absent for me. Students weren’t open with me and I didn’t waste valuable class time asking them about themselves or their lives, so I had trouble creating lessons that engaged them because I didn’t know what they cared about. Furthermore, the classroom management issues still bubbled up.

I made a somewhat-conscious decision to stop hiding behind the podium. Students relaxed, and the environment became more chaotic but more alive with engagement. Still, I worried that students were too noisy or moving around too much. I never found easy answers in that job, but I did have a friend ask me a profound question that semester: Are you bothered by the class atmosphere and energy or are you fearful that administrators and other teachers wouldn’t understand or approve? If it’s the latter, he said, you might just want to close your door. As I continue to make appropriate decisions in the classroom, Palmer’s (2007) words resonate powerfully with me: “there is no formula to tell me whether this is a moment for freedom or discipline or some alchemy of both” (p. 87).

As a new teacher, Caroline also faces the balancing act of managing the class while becoming acquainted and forming relationships with struggling

students so she can capture their interest and keep them in school where they have a chance to achieve academic success. A barrier to meeting the academic goals is disruptive student behavior. During the interview, Caroline explained an incident to me that illustrated the kind of classroom management issues she faces. One student was on his cell phone, which is restricted, so she tried to take the phone, according to school policy. Here is the resulting conversation, as Caroline explained it:

I had a kid tell me to, I'll just say it, he told me to 'fuck off.' That was nice. On my second day. Um, and then he said, 'Well, what are you gonna do?' and I said . . . he said, 'Aren't you gonna send me to the office?' and I said, 'No, because you wanna leave. So actually you're gonna stay here, and I'm gonna take your phone.' And he said, 'No, you have to send me to the office,' and I said, 'No, I don't have to send you to the office. It's up to me what I do. I get to decide your punishment. And you clearly don't want to be in here, so I think it's more of a punishment to make you stay.' And then he said, 'Well, what if I just go to the office? What are you gonna do?' I said, 'I will buzz the office and tell the principal you are on your way and will see him shortly.' And he said, 'Alright then,' and he grabbed his bag and he headed to the door and he looked at me, and he said, 'I'm going,' and I said, 'Okay,' and he goes, 'Forget it!' and he threw down his backpack and sat in his chair and did his work. I considered it a victory.

Caroline considered her response to the disrespectful student with a phone to be a

victory, but some strictly rule-oriented administrators might disagree. Teachers must balance what they feel is the right course of action with a student versus the written rules regarding a particular situation. Caroline praised her administrators for being very present and available while, at the same time, trusting teachers with autonomy. This freedom is important for teachers like Caroline because just as “no one method” works for all students regarding academics, no one method will successfully manage student behaviors (LaCoe, 2008).

Caroline complained of one period in particular with behavior problems where classroom management is difficult. She laughed as she recalled a day when one student was "juggling three basketballs in class," comparing the classroom to a circus. She said these students have a "big lack of respect for authority" and added that "they don't sit in their desks, they sit on their desks." Still, the patience Caroline has for chaos was evident throughout the interview.

Rebecca, on the other hand, struggled mightily with the classroom management issues she faced during her first year. She described herself as “non-confrontational by nature,” and she described her first year as being unusually difficult. The “violent kids . . . blatant acts of racism . . . [and] defacing of student projects” she faced that year would have been trying to any teacher, but she additionally had to find a way to respond when she “had a kid bring his pit bull to class,” and had to learn how to grieve with the students when they lost one of their classmates. Rebecca now believes that some of the behavior problems that arose sprung from the students’ desire to test a new teacher. She said:

And then at the end of the year, some kids said, are you gonna quit? Are you gonna come back next year? And in that moment, I realized maybe they were trying to test me. They knew I was a first year. And I said, I'm absolutely coming back next year.

Rebecca chose not to let her fear and struggles get the best of her, but stayed to teach in that school for another year before moving to another state. Now, she says, she is "always learning how to handle different discipline situations."

Erica's first year was nothing like Rebecca's. In her interview, she said, "I never really had a big issue, because I build--I try to build rapport with the students so they're usually really good in my class and really bad in everyone else's." She admits that she is inconsistent with discipline, but says:

I've gotten better at, you know, giving them discipline when they need it. It's just something that I've had to learn, because at the beginning I never wanted to get them in trouble . . . I think my follow through has gotten a little better. Still working on it. It's still a work in progress.

Interestingly, Erica discusses student relationships, classroom management, and meeting learning goals in a unique way. Whereas most of the focus throughout the interviews dealt with students becoming distracting or behaving badly, which led to an inability to accomplish learning goals, Erica admits that she would enjoy the personalities of her students and the relationships she had with them so much as a new teacher that she herself would get distracted and off-topic. Now, she says, "if somebody says something funny in class, I'm not distracted now. I don't joke

with them, you know, it doesn't distract me. I just keep going. So that's gotten easier."

Diana sees classroom management as a key part of balancing high academic expectations while being practical about what she can expect her students to do.

She said:

If you have those high behavior expectations, then having high academic expectations is easier because you're not standing at the front of the room with a lion taming whip and chair, um, so you can focus a little more on teaching hard material.

In a later discussion of Education classes, Caroline mentioned she took a course on classroom management as a sophomore in college, but that she didn't remember what she had learned well enough by the time she was teaching, when she really needed the knowledge. Erica had only positive commentary on her time in the College of Education, but also discussed the advantage to taking Education classes after she had already begun teaching. I have heard the phrase "just in time" learning versus "just in case" learning. Caroline and Erica may have been more motivated to learn the content in their Education classes when it became relevant to their daily experiences.

Amber, who is in an urban school setting, described difficulties with classroom management during her first year as a teacher. She said, "My classroom management has improved" from the first year, adding "I think that last year I was a little bit too nice and I was kind of taken advantage of a little bit and

so this year I've learned to be stricter." Brown (2002), who writes specifically about teachers in urban schools, says, "Novice teachers expect a return of kindness and cooperation from their students for their caring behavior," which Amber learned is unrealistic (p. 82). When I asked her follow-up questions about becoming stricter, she admitted:

It wasn't really--it was being more consistent, I think. Because the rules didn't really change, but the level to which I enforced them changed . . . I could never be a disciplinarian, that could never be me, it's not my personality. I'm very easy-going, very jovial.

Because Amber had taken Education classes where she read books like *The Courage to Teach*, she recognized that the only way a discipline plan would work in her classroom was if it meshed with her authentic self.

In order to create a plan for the following school year, Amber used the summer to do a lot of self-reflection to pinpoint ways to more effectively manage the classroom. Self-reflection through writing, both in the form of journaling and narrative, are common practices in the teacher-education program at the university of which we were all a part. This "mode of teacher education that is practical in a non-technical sense" rests on a belief that "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" (Conle, 2006, vii). Amber hadn't planned to teach in an urban school, but when she found herself in one, she had tools like self-reflection to lean on to allow her to come to conclusions that fit her new

setting and her demeanor. This skill is important because teachers often find themselves in unexpected teaching situations.

While pre-service teachers crave practical teaching techniques, the advantage to a more self-reflective approach is that teachers like Amber, who find themselves in different teaching contexts than they imagined, have the tools to continually re-imagine and find answers within themselves. As Palmer (2007) says, “When teaching is reduced to technique, we shrink teachers as well as their craft—and people do not willingly return to a conversation that diminishes them” (p. 149). Teachers need room to find creative and personal answers to their unique classroom struggles.

Amber was able to successfully reflect on her new role with inner-city kids and envision the kind of classroom atmosphere that fit her disposition and goals. She said, "I narrowed it down to three rules and posted them in plain view of the kids. That's: Respect yourself, Respect each other, and Respect your education and the educational process." Furthermore, she devoted several days at the beginning of the year to explicit discussions on expected behaviors and role-playing classroom situations that might arise. In addressing her previously stated fear that she might lose her relationships with students if she became stricter or more distant, she said, “but I've found a way to balance that [warmth and gentleness with discipline], so the kids still relate to me but they don't act up. So now we're able to devote more time to, you know, actually learning."

Days still pass when I feel I have devoted more time to classroom

management than I have spent teaching. When I think about my classroom management now, a student who I will call Juan comes to mind right away. Teachers around school know him because he tends to be a troublemaker. I like Juan, and he likes me—some days. Some days he does his work in my class, and I believe part of the reason for that is that he feels some kind of connection to me and knows I care about him. On the other hand, some days he disrupts, threatens, and whines in an attempt to take over the class. He is very clever, and sometimes I think my efforts to control him are overtaken by his even more subtle efforts of manipulation.

I recently had a meeting with some of Juan's other teachers and he was the main topic of discussion. The emphasis was on adhering strictly to the school discipline rules when dealing with him. After a particularly rough day in class with him that day, I was on board with the plan—we would jointly continue to punish him until something changed or he was suspended. Then one teacher in the group spoke up and explained that she didn't have trouble with him because she praises him. She said that although he pretends to dislike positive attention, she believes he responds to it by changing bad behaviors. At that moment, I was very torn. Had I not shown him I cared enough? Was this other teacher fooling herself and being taken advantage of by Juan? However simple issues like this one might seem to an outsider, lines become blurred when you come to know and care about a student.

Recently Juan crossed the line of appropriate behavior yet again in my class.

I was particularly unwilling to negotiate on his punishment because he had blatantly disrespected a student who I see struggles relating to peers. In the end, however, I gave him one shot to get out of his after school detention. My reasoning was that the detentions had never improved his behavior in the past, so I didn't have much to lose. A little background: Juan hates to read. In order to get out of his punishment, I told him he could read a story about a misunderstanding between two people⁴ and then write me a paper on how he could have handled his situation with the other student differently. Because he resists writing even more than reading, I was prepared to re-instate the detention the following day. Instead, to my surprise, he had read the story and written a thoughtful response. To add to my shock, he said he liked the story so much that he wanted to read it aloud to the class. I took advantage of his enthusiasm and made copies so the other students could read along. Later that day, Juan offered to help me clean up my classroom. While my alternate "punishment" could just as easily have gone awry, it worked that day and I was happy to have chosen a path that showed him I cared and possibly taught him something. If nothing else, I got him to read!

Many of my struggling readers also have emotional, learning, and behavioral differences. I recall a day when I was nearly at my wit's end with a small class of seven students. One student in this particular group had told me on the first day of the year, "We're the dumb kids and we're always in trouble. We made our last teacher quit 'cause we drove him so crazy." Of course this wasn't

⁴ Found in Appendix B

true, but many of them had taken on that identity for so long, it seemed to fit. On this day, I was feeling the pressure of their failing grades in other classes and the urgency of preparing them for benchmark testing. They, on the other hand, were joking and arguing with each other, sneaking around to eat (which was a privilege they had revoked when they started food fights and left messes), stealing each other's things, and generally being disruptive. I showed them some weakness that day. I said, "I care about all of you guys, but I can't teach you anything when I have to deal with your bad behavior every thirty seconds!" A student piped up with, "You'll give up and stop trying soon, like all of our past teachers," but she looked sad instead of victorious. Like Rebecca, I feel that I am being tested. Students want me to prove how much I care and how far I will go to help them. It is exhausting work, and I can't imagine that I will ever have all of the answers. Still, Palmer (2007) comforts me across time and space by reminding me to love the questions.

Chapter Five: Balancing Instructional Aims with Student Interest and Outside Pressures

*“We are like plants, full of tropisms that draw us toward certain experiences and
repel us from others.”*

--Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*

Paradox: Teachers are close enough to their students to know what they are interested in and motivated to learn, but they are often not involved in or trusted with curricular decisions.

This chapter discusses the myriad of factors facing teachers as they make decisions about what knowledge to emphasize in the classroom and how to best teach in order to motivate students. The importance of flexibility is a key concern for these teachers, as is the autonomy to take time for essential but unplanned learning opportunities. A discussion of making learning relevant to students' lives is included, along with how this effort can be accomplished while preparing students for standardized tests.

Like many new teachers, I was quite idealistic when I began my career. I had learned great ways to get students to think critically and to engage them through multi-media and multisensory lessons. I had planned in-depth units during my Education classes. In my mind, I would exclusively use maieutic methods to bring students to meaningful light bulb moments. Probably it will come as no surprise to learn that my teaching reality didn't exactly match the

classroom picture I had created.

My first full-time teaching job didn't require much differentiation. I had bright students with almost unanimous parent support at home. Yet, the students were still resistant to much of what I tried to teach. I remember hearing, "Why do we have to learn this?" and "Is this for a grade?" at the beginning of every unit or activity. In a flash, my own teachers' responses would flood my mind, and I was ready with glib statements like, "You have to learn this because it's important. Get to work. Yes, it's for a grade." All of this I said in an exasperated tone. Students would work begrudgingly, because they cared quite a lot about their grades, but the joy I had experienced in planning for the lesson would be deflated.

Eventually, I realized that some students sincerely wanted to know why we were learning something; they weren't all trying to get out of the work. I made more of an effort to explain the importance of the content material. Sometimes it made a difference in students' attitudes, and sometimes it didn't. Sometimes students were sincerely bored and it was my fault. I put more effort into making activities fun for students and not relying on the misguided belief that all students would want to learn for the sake of learning or that all students would share my interests. As I become better acquainted with my students and was able to personalize lessons more, the atmosphere in the classroom improved. I began to write stories about my students or that involved them as characters, which they almost unanimously loved. I learned—and am still learning--the importance of connecting everything to their lives and making it relevant.

Because of my experience as a first-year teacher, I struggled to hide my surprise when one participant I interviewed after another, all of them except one, said they found teaching to be much as they imagined it. Interview after interview, teachers answered my question: “Is teaching as you imagined it would be?” with a nonchalant “Yeah, pretty much.” I had to hold back my incredulity. During my final interview, with Rebecca, on the other hand, she said:

No! It’s not. It absolutely was not. And, I am a perpetual and eternal optimist. I am always just like, yes, this is going to be great and wonderful and I’m going to make all of these wonderful plans, and they are going to respond, and this is really going to click for the students, and it’s gonna be, like, the best educational experience ever! And then I had my first year of teaching and it was terrible.

Some of the reasons why teaching didn’t match Rebecca’s (or my) expectations were that our plans didn’t work out as we had, well, *planned*, and students were often disinterested in what we imagined to be fascinating lessons. Furthermore, I came to realize that even when students were interested, I didn’t have time to focus on many lessons I found worthwhile because they didn’t comply with testing standards and skills. Another balancing act was in order.

The teachers I interviewed and I use lesson planning and some of the tools we acquired from the College of Education to help us create authenticity and connections for students. We balance these efforts with the demands of standardized testing. Much of the classroom content is planned through

collaboration, which was viewed as beneficial in most interviews, as was the transition to the Common Core State Standards. However, even though all of the teacher-participants found group planning to be very valuable, they also maintained the desire for some freedom, not only in implementation, but in what skills and knowledge they chose to emphasize in the classroom. This validates studies by Rex and Nelson (2004), which claim that teachers went underground when making truly important decisions about either what to emphasize in teaching or assessment. This autonomy was clearly important to each of the participants.

Autonomy and self-efficacy are important aspects of a teacher's career. Without a sense of self-efficacy, which Bandura (1977) first defined as "an assessment of one's capabilities to attain a desired level of performance in a given endeavor," teachers would lack the motivation to spend precious time planning lessons and responding to students. In the decades since Bandura introduced the concept of self-efficacy, a multitude of educational studies have been performed to learn more from teachers. Self-efficacy is exceedingly important because it is related to teachers' motivation because it correlates to whether or not teachers believe the effort they exude on tasks bring desired results (Tschannen-Moran & MacFarlane, 2011).

Most teachers I know spend a great deal of time planning for their classes, and a sense of self-efficacy helps spur teachers to put forth this effort. When I plan, I am mindful of balancing district curriculum with what I believe is most

important for the students to know. Although I plan my lessons carefully, I am flexible, as well, because I want to ensure my students are absorbing the information I attempt to disseminate. Rebecca said one of the first rules she learned about planning was, “Be flexible, be flexible, be flexible.” Beyond the written plans, teachers often take into account learning opportunities that arise when a noteworthy event occurs somewhere in the world, life lessons, and topics in which students show interest. When I asked Erica if her most successful lessons are planned, she said:

No! Not always. Sometimes they are, like through literature that we read. But sometimes it’s just teaching them a lesson from something that has happened in the world or whatever. We do donations to the city rescue mission, so teaching them about giving back, and that sort of thing. So I think, to me, those are more important than if they know what a simile is . . . I want them to be better people when they leave.

When I asked Erica what the most important thing she teaches her students is, she replied, “I think the most important thing that I teach them is just, like, life lessons. Social, and introducing them to different cultures and different ideas. I think that’s the most important part.” Rebecca admitted that her emphasis has shifted with regard to what she deems the most valuable lessons, saying:

I really had to shift from that because my first couple of years I desperately just wanted to improve their grammar and to make them good writers and, you know, and that they could go any gathering and be able to talk about

literature halfway intelligibly, but that's not what's important, and that's not what was important when I was a student. And I kind of had to really think back to that, that that wasn't what shaped me and what was so impactful for me in those settings. I don't want them to just come in, and, if they leave my room and know what a metaphor is, know what a simile is, know what parallelism is, great, wonderful, but if I send them out and they can't think for themselves, and can't push themselves and challenge themselves to think of things in a new way, and a unique way, um, then I probably would consider myself a failure. I always try to push them to, to, one believe in themselves and believe in their own intellectual abilities so that that hopefully leads to them feeling confident enough to think critically and to challenge themselves.

These teachers are aware of the great need to educate the whole child, and to prepare her for the world she will be faced with. John Dewey was mentioned explicitly in two interviews (Diana and Amber), but his educational theories permeated the conversations I had with the teachers. For example, Dimitriadis and Kamberelis (2006) say, “For Dewey, the purpose of education is the intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development of the individual within a democratic society” (p. 9).

Amber recognized that a student’s lived experiences significantly impact his educational pursuits and interests. She said the prescribed content for her course is not always a priority for her inner-city students. She discussed relevance to the

students' lives by describing the following situation:

The unique challenge faced by inner city kids is that, you know, at times going home and reading Act III of Romeo and Juliet isn't necessarily as important as making sure that brother and sister are washed and put to bed because mom is working her second job.

Even though Amber grew up in a small school with what she described as fantastic teachers, she still admitted:

. . . one of my big things when I was in school was that if I couldn't see the actual real world value for it I was less inclined to give it my full attention or my full effort so that's probably my biggest thing that I try to bring into my classroom is that explanation of why do I need to know this? Why do you need to care about this?

Amber and Rebecca both described using tools they had learned through the College of Education to make content more relevant and relatable to students. For example, they both use Young Adult Literature to connect students to other required stories and articles. This pairing was a part of the curriculum from the College of Education that they found relevant to their teaching; therefore, it has remained with them. Rebecca has "also seen that [YAL] as a tool to work with reluctant readers." Furthermore, Amber discussed teaching grammar through reading in order to make it more relevant to students. This strategy was part of the course she took on teaching grammar and composition. The participants in this study, like their students, expressed a desire to learn relevant and engaging

material in Education classes. Amber complained about the College of Education in general, saying: “They don’t teach you much of the practical stuff in many of your classes in college,” and Diana liked her English-Education-specific courses, Teaching Grammar and Composition and the Capstone, best because, according to her: “I felt like I was gaining practical knowledge that I could actually use, whereas most of the Education classes, it’s not that they don’t focus on things you can use in the classroom, but it’s not subject-specific.”

Erica echoed this sentiment but felt it would be impossible for a college of Education to teach all of the day-to-day procedures a teacher must know, especially since they are often district, and even school, specific. She did, however, lament the loss of “the mentor program that the state cut,” which she felt provided a lot of the relevant information new teachers need:

I mean that was, I think I was the last year that they did that and so that was helpful, um, for me, because I would be like, ‘Okay, how are you doing this?’ And I think that, you know, I didn’t really struggle my first year teaching, and I think for people who really do, I think that that’s just—I mean, it’s kind of why they’re just not going to teach anymore because they never learned. They never had somebody to help them.

Erica brought to light an important topic. While her first thought was that the College of Education should better prepare students for their future day-to-day work, she admitted that she wasn’t sure how any college could possibly cover the practical aspects of each potential school. Ingersoll (2012), who researches

teacher induction and retention, summarizes: “The more comprehensive the induction program, the better the retention” when it comes to teachers (p. 50). He goes on to say, “while most beginning teachers now participate in some kind of formal induction program, the kinds of support that schools provide to them vary” (Ingersoll, 2012, p. 50).

Overall, Erica praised the College of Education, saying:

I have a lot of good memories of great teachers and great friends who are still friends, just good camaraderie. And then my master’s classes, I think were—as far as teaching—were way more, um, beneficial and challenged me a lot more to become a better teacher. I think that those were a little bit different because I was teaching at the same time.

Pedagogical concerns become more pertinent when a teacher is already spending time in the classroom. Colleges of Education aim to make the theoretical more practical for students by giving them early classroom observations, field experiences, and student-teaching opportunities.

Rebecca described using techniques she learned in a Paint/Write class she took in the College of Education to help students become engaged with what they are reading. This class, which is very popular among graduates of our college, illustrates how words and images are connected and draws participants in. According to Walsh-Piper (2002), “Artists and writers are kindred spirits and will often work in both genres, using one medium to stimulate work in their primary mode” (p. xxv). The Paint/Write course operates under the premise that this

visual/verbal connection can engage students, foster writing skills, and allow students to achieve a deeper understanding of texts and a greater awareness of the world. Additionally, classroom collaboration, the embracing of process of product, and community cohesiveness are goals for the paint/write process.

After taking the class once, I chose to return for the experience of using painting as a prompt for ekphrastic writing, and vice versa, every summer throughout my graduate coursework. When I tried some of the painting techniques with my students, they were captivated as well. Perhaps with the influx of technology that allows for a pairing of images and words, students favor the visual more than ever before. Shortly after my paint/write experiences, I learned of the work of another teacher from our College who had taken the class and successfully incorporated the process into her work with high school students. Courtney-Smith (2005) published a study in the *English Journal* detailing her method of responding to the *Siddhartha*. She added to the list of student benefits a nurturing of student voice and an enhanced creative writing ability.

When I asked Rebecca what Education classes stood out in her memory, for good or for bad, she first mentioned her paint/write class:

. . . that was the first time that I was really challenged to think of language not just being words, but that there were other ways to express ideas about literature, and poetry, and text, beyond just writing about it. Um, that we could respond by painting, or through art, anyway, and that really just challenged me and terrified me, but really excited me in a lot of new ways,

and so I will forever be appreciative of that . . . as much as it freaked me out the first time I heard about the paint-write concept, it freaks the kids out. Really badly. They're like, I'm in an English class and we're gonna paint? And I'm like, yes, and you know, since it's washable paints, they're like, oh my gosh, I got some on the desk! And it's like, it's okay, this is a messy process. And so it gets them thinking outside of what they believe English class is. And it's been really great because it's been a great way for them to think about symbols and imagery, um, and it's been a great tool in teaching those things because, you know, we say, oh yes, the verbal description of this, and everything, but actually, it's been really great.

Heffernan (1991) says: "To compare the graphic representation and the verbal self-representation is to see that each corroborates the other" (p. 311). Rebecca's experiences with students validate this perspective. She also describes how paint/write concepts have been advantageous as her state implements the Common Core because texts are read multiple times. During their first reading of Jonathan Edward's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Rebecca reads aloud and has the students paint the images that come to mind as they listen. She says, "they always come up with really, really creative things," and that "it gets them thinking critically without them knowing it. It's very sneaky." The classes the teacher-participants remembered all had some element they could apply to their own teaching. Students, likewise, remember what is relevant to their lives.

Teachers must find ways to make testable knowledge relevant to students'

lives in order to engage them. This balance can be tough for teachers who don't value the tests. For example, Amber said:

I'm not really a big—I don't really put much stock into standardized tests. I know we're supposed to, I know that's like our bible, standardized tests. But they don't mean very much. You know, especially with my—I don't, it always sounds like I'm making excuses, but my inner city kids don't know what—I mean, if there's a question about a farm, they don't know what that stuff is. So they get lost in the wording. So they try really hard, but they don't always get it. But as long as they leave my class knowing that they're smart and knowing that they have the tools to continue showing that, that's all I want.

This resistance to the test culture in Amber's mind adds complexity to her search for balancing learning goals. She showed frustration with having to cut part of a unit she predicted her students would find interesting due to “a bunch of testing . . . that was unexpected.” Palmer (2007) cautions placing too much emphasis on standardized tests as well, expressing a fear that “our society's growing obsession with educational externals—including relentless and mindless standardized testing,” will impact the “authentic teaching, learning, and living” that takes place in a classroom community (p. ix). Furthermore, Hedrick (2007) examines what he calls “the iatrogenic practice of testing in the schools,” further describing such tests as “practices based on good intentions that produce negative, unintended consequences” (p. 64). Eisner (2008) expresses a similar concern, saying that one

of the assumptions of standardized testing to be questioned is that the “real outcomes of schooling can be measured by tests employed within the school (p. 13).

A first attempt to standardize nationwide curriculum is underway in the form of the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), which grows from an ongoing discontent that permeates the rhetoric of public education since the 1983 study *A Nation at Risk*. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) blamed educational deficiencies on poor curriculum, lack of assessment, and inept teachers, setting in motion reforms such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001. Additionally, the Commission essentially defined “high stakes testing” when it strongly suggested implementing a strict grading system and rigorous examinations to prove students’ mastery of subjects before receiving a diploma.

Unfortunately, NCLB failed to significantly impact the achievement gap (Strauss, 2012), newly outlined proficiencies were not met in many schools (Anderson, 2011), and the definition of a highly-qualified teacher remained debatable and difficult to assess, varying from one state to another. Critics believed NCLB motivated teachers to teach to the test rather than to facilitate in students a desire for knowledge. The standardized tests were criticized for failing to measure critical and creative thinking and expression.

Kendall (2011), Senior Director in Research at Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, believes that the CCSSI is a solution to many of the

problems faced by previous attempts at educational reform. Although the CCSS was born from the tradition of testing and accountability we saw with NCLB, Kendall (2011) argues that many of the previous drawbacks have been addressed. For example, tests will purportedly contain more high-level, critical thinking elements. Still, critics voice concerns about the lack of significant impact from the teachers who know students best. Ravitch (2011) concludes that “most of the reform strategies that school districts, state officials, the Congress, and federal officials are pursuing, that mega-rich foundations are supporting, and that editorial boards are applauding are mistaken (p. 12). For new teachers caught in the middle, there are not clear answers, only attempts to temper the effects of reform on powerless students.

Common Core is a driving force in English/Language Arts classes this year, so I asked Amber about her feelings—positive or negative—on teaching those standards. She replied, “I think we’re moving in a good direction with the Core,” because she appreciates the idea that students can show what they know in writing as opposed to answering only multiple choice questions that only illuminate what students don’t know.

A significant change for English/Language Arts teacher with the advent of the Common Core is an emphasis on non-fiction texts (Kendall, 2001). When I asked Amber about this change, she said, “I’m going to make time for it [fictional literature]. Because I love it. It’s the spice of life.” If the standards are implemented as they were written, much of the time spent on non-fiction texts

will come from the inclusion of other disciplines in the study of literacy, such as science and math.

One way that Caroline balances tested knowledge and skills with lessons that are relevant to students is through vocabulary. Like Amber, Caroline has qualms with standardized tests, saying:

Well, I understand multiple choice, but to me it's, a multiple choice test tells me what don't you know, not what do you know. And I'm more interested in knowing what the kids know and where we can go from there. As opposed to what the kids don't know and what I have to throw at them, over and over and over again.

Nevertheless, she wants her students to succeed. Furthermore, part of the evaluation she receives from administrators depends upon her ability to help students raise their test scores whether or not she agrees with the format of the test. Therefore, she spends time every week teaching the vocabulary students should know in order to improve on these exams. She balances this effort by also teaching the students words from the urban dictionary words. Urban dictionary is “A veritable cornucopia of streetwise lingo, posted and defined by its readers,” and it is popular with adolescents. Not only does Caroline’s use of the urban dictionary make learning vocabulary more relevant to their real lives and keep them engaged, she explained that it has the added advantage of allowing the students to be the experts occasionally, such as when they know the definitions better than she does.

Because Caroline has a number of unmotivated students, she also spends time explaining to them why what they're learning matters. Like Amber, she sees the importance in making this connection for students. One way she attempts to relate to the students is by connecting her lessons to their lives after high school. She described one student, Cade, who had no plans of going to college and instead planned to be a race car driver. Her response to this student was that even Jeff Gordon "has to be able to read his car manual." As is often the case, this student had an argument; only the crew does that, said Cade. Caroline continued to try to capture Cade's attention by pulling "an excerpt from *The Art of Racing in the Rain* about how important it is to know how the car works and to experience it, and how it's more than just pushing on the gas and turning the wheel slightly."

Caroline's efforts to connect her students to the content inspired me and became the title of my work. When relaying what she has taught the day of the interview, she said, "I'm real excited because I'm teaching *The Great Gatsby* right now, and they're not so much loving it. They did love it the day we did the Charleston, um, but we can't dance every day." Dedicated teachers will dance, paint, and scheme to find ways to get kids engaged, and to show them the relevancy of their lessons.

Diana illustrated this by saying, "depending on the class, what I'm gonna do changes completely because of what they're interested in. I still try to communicate the material that I have to communicate, but I also try to base it on

something that they've shown me that they're interested in, because then they tend to absorb it a little bit better.” When I asked her for more concrete examples of how she does this, she responded:

I teach more, like, I teach the individual material and the content material, but I focus more on bigger picture themes that are relatable to their world around them. So, teaching them through whatever piece of literature I picked or whatever writing assignment I've picked to kind of navigate the themes that they're going to encounter in their world.

Diana provided an example using their reading of *Romeo and Juliet*: “we talked a lot about the impetuous decisions that Romeo and Juliet make and how it ends up affecting, ultimately, their entire life—a whole three days later.” In my experience, impetuous decisions are very relevant to the life of an adolescent, and by framing the literature in this way, Diana has an opportunity to teach importance lessons on life and character as she guides students through the text.

Rebecca articulated her struggle with balancing plans and flexibility by saying: “I had envisioned that, I’ve got a plan, we’re gonna go with the plan, the plan’s gonna work, and life’s gonna be beautiful—and it is ugly, messy, hard work. But it’s wonderful.”

From my interviews and my own experiences, I take away the message that in order to see their work as “wonderful,” teachers need to know their students, both what they care about and what motivates them to learn. They need the time and autonomy to plan as well as to deviate from plans when authentic

learning opportunities arise. Finally, they need a sense of self-efficacy that their work will positively impact the whole child, not just the intellectual piece.

Chapter Six: Balancing the Needs of All Students

“I don’t think I knew how tiring it would be, how invested I would get in the students, and how heartbreaking sometimes it can be. I don’t think I realized.”

–Erica

“Every student comes in with life experience, and what a messy thing to bring thirty or so kids into an enclosed spaced to then try to teach them.”

--Rebecca

Paradox: The more we strive to get all students on the same level, the greater the need for differentiation for individuals.

In this chapter, I discuss some of the various types of students the interviewees encounter in their classrooms and how they balance each of their diverse needs. Two categories of diversity are discussed: surface level and deep level differences. While surface level differences like race or physical disabilities are readily apparent, deep level differences include attitudes and values and may take teachers longer to pinpoint. Some of the varied instructional needs in these teachers’ classes arise because their students are from disparate socioeconomic statuses, have learning and behavior differences, are English Language Learners, are autistic, are from different home backgrounds and cultures, and have different attitudes, values, and beliefs about education.

According to Carl Jung (1933), “The shoe that fits one person pinches another; there is no recipe for living that suits all cases” (p. 69) However, it is the

task of public educators to find enough of a balance, perhaps enough common ground, to enable all students to feel comfortable and to learn. This mission is particularly challenging in such a large system as public education, for as Jung also claims, “The bigger the crowd, the more negligible the individual” (p. 14). I see a paradox in Education as we strive to standardize while simultaneously individualizing for each unique student’s needs. I feel unsure of how to respond to these dueling pressures, and I am not alone.

My recent move from a homogenous private school to a public school highlighted the concept of diversity. My job now centers on differentiation, because I work exclusively with struggling students who have learning differences or special needs that must be met. However, I have come to appreciate is the level of differentiation all public school teachers must implement in order to balance the needs of diverse student bodies. In my current position, I have some freedom to meet students where they are in order to build foundational reading skills. While I consider this a luxury, I know that in reality, I am preparing them for the same standardized reading test that every other student in the school, and the state, will take. While my school context is now more diverse, I contend with more standardized tests. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) begin their rationale for a Differentiated Instruction (DI) model by claiming, “Beset by lists of content standards and the accompanying “high-stakes” accountability tests, many educators sense that both teaching and learning have been redirected in ways that are potentially impoverishing for those who teach and those who learn” (p. 1).

The progress each of my students makes might be meaningful, but it will rarely be enough for them to succeed at the high-stakes tests. I have learned that differentiation is challenging for me with very small classes, in part due to the behavior issues, but most public school teachers are expected to meet each student's needs while managing classes of somewhere on the order of thirty students. Like the teachers in Nieto's (2005) study, my participants "teach students of diverse ethnic, racial, linguistic, and social class backgrounds" (p. ix). Clement (2002) says:

The students in our classes are from a myriad of economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, as well as from homes where English is not the family's first language. The first goal of a new teacher must be acceptance of all students who enter the door to the classroom. It is especially important that new teachers gain experiences working with diverse students before accepting their first teaching assignment. (p. 38)

If I had a snapshot of all my students from a given semester, I could point out the diversity that exists. There would likely be a mix of gifted students, special education students, Native American students, Hispanic students, African-American students, autistic students, rich students, poor students, and the list goes on. Some of the differences that exist within our classrooms are visible or readily apparent, these would account for the surface level diversity, such as race or physical disabilities. Other differences are not so easy to pinpoint; these are examples of deep-level diversity, such as attitudes and values (Phillips & Loyd,

2006). These two theoretical categories of diversity are common within the literature of Organizational Psychology and the practical implications of surface and deep level diversity within groups are discussed in the field of business, but should also be acknowledged in our schools.

Brause and Mayher (2003) discuss extensive diversity, of all types, in our schools, and conclude by saying:

. . . [W]e cannot continue to let the growing number of so-called minority children in our school serve as the perennial reason to excuse our failures. Their numbers will continue to grow. Our challenge is to use this opportunity to rebuild our schools so that they actually help all children have equal access to the American Dream—to make the American ideal that education should serve to provide equality of access to the good life a reality for our students, not an illusion.

Fortunately, the College of Education from which my teacher-participants and I come acknowledges student diversity and the need for multicultural education, but multiculturalism is only part of the picture. Student differences range from surface-level to deep-level, and can be difficult to recognize, much less to modify for. Public education is of the utmost importance, and all students need equal access to a good education, but providing it can be a challenge for even the most well-meaning educators. In my experience, balancing the time spent with those students with many needs (academic, emotional, physical) and the time spent with the rest of the class can be part of the difficulty. Furthermore,

even if deep-level diversity is relatively absent, each student still possesses different interests and motivations (Tomlinson and McTighe, 2006).

When I look at the data from my participants, it isn't surprising to see that the teacher in a magnet school, Rebecca, had much to say on the topic of diversity, as did Caroline, who works in a higher socioeconomic suburban school, but teaches exclusively struggling students. Amber, who is now at an urban school, shared stories of at-risk students in her classes as well.

Rebecca introduced the topic of student diversity by discussing her students' varied socioeconomic statuses. The following response came at the beginning of the interview when I asked her to explain her teaching situation:

Since we are a magnet school, I have kids that I know live in the wealthiest of neighborhoods and I have kids that oftentimes don't know where their next meal is coming from, and they have to kind of, they have to learn to co-exist, um, with each other, and make that okay.

Caroline had similar stories to tell, saying: "I have kids that have been living out of cars, I have kids that live in three-story houses and maids come in and clean their house once a week. So, um, in that respect, I have kids from all over the place. One issue this socioeconomic status chasm raised for Caroline was the difficulty in balancing how much she should help the students. For example, she said:

. . . knowing how to draw the line between what's parenting and what's my job. And what happens if they don't have parents? Then it's kind of my

job. And that was hard. Like whenever a kid comes up to me and says, 'Sorry I'm late, I was sleeping in my mom's car for the last two nights. I think I cried every day during my student teaching, and not because I didn't like teaching, but because every day I had another sad story. Because, I mean, I heard some people say they cried every day because they were stressed or hating teaching, but I was crying because, like, this kid doesn't have food, or a place to sleep, or they've worn the same pair of pants to school for the last two weeks. And just that stuff breaks your heart and it's out of your control. Also being a teacher, and also being me, I'm a control freak, so if there's a problem that I can't fix, that's frustrating. Which is why the kids that are highly unmotivated that I try to help, that's why it's frustrating, because there's some point where I just have to let go.

Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) also address the need for differentiation when some students lack parental support. For example, giving homework with the assumption that all students will have help or materials can be detrimental. Aside from issues of socioeconomic status, Rebecca and Caroline also brought up the balance necessary when a teacher has culturally and linguistically diverse students. Caroline said:

I can't think of a race that I don't have in class, like the major, you know, I have all the minorities, and especially, actually, in my remediation classes, and I guess research kind of backs this up, that I have mostly African American males in my literacy foundations class. Or, um, not ELL

students, but ELL students that have either been exited from the program or they do still speak another language at home.

A student's home language and culture also create the need for differentiation, even if the student is labeled as proficient in English. Rebecca described the cultural diversity present at her magnet school:

Um, culturally we're also a really diverse school. We have a large Caucasian population, but we also have a large Asian and Latino, and Black, population. And, I know that in the data that we have--our school is really big on data crunching right now, yeah, we're in a big data push--and I know that consistently our most underperforming demographic has been our Black males. But we also kind of have a culture right now where we have very, very aggressive Black females. Um, we had a brawl break out after school a couple of weeks ago and we had five police cars at school. But what's weird is that it's a nice building, it's a great school. And so we kind of have that tension that pops up every now and then.

Rebecca continued her description of the school by discussing other types of diversity, such as students with autism, students on Individualized Education Programs (IEP's), and emotionally-disturbed students:

I know my big challenge this year has been differentiation, and figuring out how to work with students who, um, who have autism. I have my first round of autism students this year, and so learning how to work with them. Really learning how to work with any situation, um, my fourth block class

is a big, big, big, they're probably my biggest challenge right now, um, there are 24 kids in that class. Eight of them are on IEP's, one of them is classified emotionally disturbed, um, I have three students not on IEP's that are on behavioral prevention plans, um, I have two Chinese foreign exchange students in that class, and two students who are ESL students in that class, and so it is just, I mean, it is a constant battle and struggle. One, to get them focused; Two, to even get them aware of how different they are from each other. They just come in and kind of ignore each other. But then also how to handle all of those different instructional needs. Um, I have a handful of kids that are proficient at reading on level, most kids are not in that class. I have some kids that are okay writers and a lot of them that really are terrible writers, um, and, so the challenge then is how do they coexist in this room every day and how do I give each student the best learning experience that I can while giving them the attention that I think they need, and to monitor them, and to monitor their growth--it's a challenge.

Diana included what she called an “observation of what not to do” during her time as a student observer at a rural school. She said:

. . . on that entire campus, because it was a small enough town that they had elementary, middle and high school all together and on that entire campus there was one child on an IEP, and she was in that class, and she was, she . . . Asperger's and high-functioning autism, and that teacher literally would do

absolutely nothing to help that student, that was outside of what she already had planned, so she just, the lack of tolerance from that teacher was astounding.

Diana's criticism is certainly valid, but we cannot judge why the teacher didn't do more to help her student. Teachers need ongoing professional development to learn how to handle situations that are new for them in order to best serve each individual. Beyond individual-level diversity, Rebecca mentioned the difference in each class she encounters throughout the day. She said:

A school is a living thing, kind of an organism, and things are always shifting and changing, and certainly curriculum models and things are always changing. Um, but I always want to, you know, cater to what my students are like. I sometimes joke that I have multiple personality disorder because I feel like you kind of have to shift your personality with each new class. My first block is totally different than my fourth block. And my fourth block is totally different from my second block class. And you kind of just have to approach, even though you may do the same material with them, you have to approach it in an entirely different way with each class.

She continued, "My husband often teases me, but you already wrote a lesson for that, or, you already created a worksheet for that or an activity for that. And I'm like, I know, I know, but these kids are different than the kids that I created that, you know, thing, for." Caroline would agree; she said, "it's just a different dynamic in every room based on your kids."

The level of care and dedication that Rebecca, Caroline, Amber, Diana, and Erica showed for students was astounding and inspirational, but I could sense the immense burden each of them felt when recalling the needs of students. They each shared stories of students facing difficulties, and conveyed a sense of powerlessness to help. Amber described her work with a “gang leader,” who has in many ways responded positively to Amber’s efforts. Erica recalled the heartbreak she encountered with an at-risk student during her internship. She told this story:

During student teaching I was using one of the girls for my paper that I was writing, and I was trying to mentor her, and blah, blah, blah, and I thought we had made a breakthrough and she was an at-risk student, but she ended up selling drugs at school and getting expelled. So then I was like, I didn’t do anything. I just kind of felt like I didn’t do anything. But then she found me on Facebook like two years ago and told me what I difference I made. So, I don’t know . . . when a student writes about something and I have to call DHS. That’s really heartbreaking. Or not even something that bad. Something as simple as a dad coming and saying, ‘You know, he doesn’t have a mom and I just don’t have time for him,’ and it’s just the stuff that my kids have to go through. It’s just hard for me to take sometimes. And I’m like, your kid is the coolest kid ever—how do you not have time for him?

For Amber, in her urban school setting, significant changes to the

educational system seem to be in order to give her students a chance to succeed.

She said we need:

. . . more of an emphasis on practical skills and more of a celebration of what they do know, because even if I get kids that aren't particularly book smart, they're really street smart. They have common sense in spades and are practical and logical and they can break down, you know, a problem, and we don't celebrate that. Because they can't memorize these stupid terms that they're never gonna use again, we tell them they're stupid. And that's not fair. They're not. They're very smart, they just don't fit our very narrow definition of what smart is and that makes them give up.

Later in the interview, when I asked Amber about her biggest challenge as a teacher, she replied that balancing her confidence in the students with a genuine need to slow down is one of her challenges, saying:

Recognizing when they need help, because I have such a, I mean, I really do believe in them and I believe that anything they want to accomplish they can, so sometimes it's more difficult for me to stop and say they actually don't understand this. I need to go more in-depth with this. Because I'm just so confident in their abilities that sometimes I'm over-confident that they can do it, and I think that's a big challenge for me, just stepping back and realizing when they don't get it, when it is actually that they don't get it, it's not just a lack of effort. And that sounds awful.

While teaching was much as Amber had envisioned, one aspect was different.

Like me, Amber was unaware of some of the students in our classes who didn't want to be at school. She said:

I kind of went into it [teaching] thinking I could do these grandiose units where I put a lot of stuff in and I wish that I had known that it takes a lot more time to get through something than I would have anticipated. Uh, I wish that I had known that not all kids were gonna be like me and just come in wanting to please the teacher, that I was going to have a little more opposition than I thought that I would, so that I could have prepared for that. Because I went in with the assumption that they were all excited to be there and they all want to learn, and that was false.

Diana echoed a similar sentiment when discussing the balance of lesson plans and flexibility in the classroom. She described:

I can't really go as fast as I would generally like to, um, I have to slow down, I have to break down a lot more, and I can't take for granted that they're going to know something because technically they were supposed to learn it the year before. Um, so, just remembering to slow way down and it's, I've found that it's better to start too simple and have all the kids go, "We already know this," than to just get the blank face of doom from all of your students.

On the other hand, Diana is aware that in order to meet the needs of *all* students, she must be mindful of the academically gifted students who may feel frustrated with school. She said of her own experience: "I would get A's on my papers, but I

would get no feedback on how I could improve . . . Just because I could produce an A, if I didn't learn anything while I was producing that A, then it wasn't good enough."

Rebecca wrapped up her discussion on the diversity of students at her magnet school with a touching reminder:

. . . every student comes in with life experience, and what a messy thing to bring thirty or so kids into an enclosed space to then try to teach them. I think about my fourth block this semester, and I'm like, how can I expect them to appreciate the complexities of *The Crucible* when several of them don't know where their next meal is coming from. You know, when I have a couple of kids in that class living with foster parents, that have been shuffled around, so how do I expect, I mean how can I expect them, as a human being, to engage the text in this way. And so kind of learning how to, and my definition of education evolving. And especially English Education, for me, because every subject is different, but English Education isn't just, can you remember anything about this author's life that influenced their writing? And all of these things, but knowing that our stories, and our histories, are recorded in our literature, and that it's important that we keep telling that story. Um, and that they can be a part of that story.

Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) offer the wisdom that our students remind us that even "the best-laid plans of the best teachers are just that—plans, subject to

change” (p. 13). Still, in spite of the myriad challenges created by her student’s diversity, Rebecca maintains that she is in the teaching profession for the “long haul.” She even muses on the fact that my questioning her intention to stay in the field is common when she tells people she’s a teacher.

Welborn (2005), who like Rebecca found her way somewhat accidentally into the profession, also discusses this line of questioning. She says, “On many occasions people have asked me, ‘Are you still a teacher?’ When I hear this, it makes me think that people must think that, since I’ve been teaching for years, I must have it down pat and I’m ready to move on” (p. 19). After hearing of the individual and class-level diversity in Rebecca’s classes, imagining that she would even master teaching is impossible. Furthermore, Rebecca pointed out in the interview that there is “a big difference between teaching for thirty years and teaching one year thirty times.” Like the other teacher-participants, Rebecca differentiates for and adapts to each new class, and indeed to every individual. I believe part of the reason for this massive effort is that she believes as Welborn does: “I may be naïve, but I believe that what I do day in and day out *does* make a difference. Teachers *do* change lives forever” (Nieto, 2005, p. 205). Striving to meet the educational and sometimes emotional needs of all of our students is a daunting task, but it can be undertaken with pleasure when teachers feel they are making a positive difference in some students’ lives.

Chapter Seven: Balancing life and work

“The challenge of work-life balance is without question one of the most significant struggles faced by modern man.”

--Stephen Covey

Paradox: The teachers who want to commit themselves completely to their students without adequately balancing rest, family, friends, and play may be the teachers who eventually don't want to commit any of their time to students.

In this chapter I discuss a somewhat overlooked aspect of professional teacher preparation and entry: the life/work balance. Businesses often are attentive to a healthy life/work balance because they know it leads to more satisfied employees who will remain with the company. Teachers, on the other hand, are sometimes expected to spend more hours working because they are committed and care about their students' success.

While there is much research on the life/work balance within the business field, the topic was not raised much in my discussions with these five teachers. With Caroline, Diana, and Amber, the three newest teachers, there seemed to be an assumption that most of their time would be spent on their new professions, so I think they were prepared for that adjustment and didn't expect to have much time for other activities. When I asked Caroline if teaching was as she had imagined it would be, she said:

Yes, it really is. I knew it was a lot of work. I knew it was a lot of out-of-

school time, and I knew it was a lot of personal investment. And I think that's because I knew a lot of teachers who were personally invested and spent a lot of time and I knew there was no way they did that in their forty-five minute planning period. Um, what people would tell me over and over again was, like, you don't realize how tiring it is, so in the back of my head I thought, I'm going to be exhausted. But I thought that would come during the day, but, like, no. If I got to be up and teach, I had energy all day, but then as soon as the classroom got quiet, it was like, I don't know if I can drive home without falling asleep. And I live down the street. I probably took an hour long nap every day after student teaching.

Erica, who has now taught for almost five years, thinks back to her time as a brand new teacher and says:

I think for the first few years, um, teaching was like my life. Like I would bring it home and I would work till like midnight. I don't do that anymore. I try to leave it at work and not do a lot at home. Um, which, I try to have a healthy balance. Because you can just work yourself to death and I think that that's part of the problem that I'm so burned out, feeling burnout, or, you know, right now, is that I worked so hard the first few years. If I was just doing this the whole time—and everyone told me when I was a first year teacher, 'Don't do that. Don't stay at work till five, seven o'clock at night and work. You're gonna work yourself to death.' I didn't listen. But I should have. Um, so I think that healthy balance of family and work, that's

changed a lot. A lot. Because I used to be a workaholic. I would, like, fall asleep with the computer in my lap. And now I feel like I get more graded, I'm not as behind, and I'm doing—I'm taking less stuff home. I don't know how that works. Maybe it's just easier for me, but, yeah. I just think that in general it's easier, and, um, it gets better. Like, for your first three years—after that, it's pretty easy.

While pre-service teachers may be prepared by professors and colleagues for the exhaustion and complete commitment required as a teacher, they may not be aware that neglecting to balance life and work can lead to burnout later. Erica attributed “part of the problem” that she’s “so burned out” is that she over-worked during her first few years. While she didn't mind the extra work at the time, she now considers leaving the profession, partially due to feeling burned out.

Rebecca, the other fifth year teacher, didn't mention difficulty in life/work balance, but she discussed difficulty finding time to learn and grow outside of school so she can be a better teacher. She did, however, mention her husband teasing her about the vast amount of time she spends making, and re-making, lessons so they will best suit her current students.

When projecting into her teaching future, Caroline said she always wants to teach, even when she has children. She acknowledges that this balance will be difficult but says, “it's nice to have a balance” of life and work. Caroline also fears the educational changes she would miss if she took time out of the profession. She admits, though: “sometimes I'm stressed out when I go home and

I just have a bulldog to take care of.”

Teaching is more than a job to the participants I interviewed in this study. Caroline calls it a “calling,” and her commitment to the profession was echoed throughout each of the interviews. Because of this, these teachers are willing to spend extra time pursuing their passion for good teaching. While the newest teachers I interviewed didn’t explicitly discuss the difficulties of balancing life and work, I conclude that part of the explanation for this lies in the fact that their rhetoric throughout the interviews seemed to acknowledge an awareness that the early years of teaching would be all-consuming. Caroline’s comment that her teachers in the College of Education had warned her about how exhausted she would be illustrates that she entered the profession with an assumption that she wouldn’t have much free time, and this assumption seemed to be shared by all of my participants. In my experience, the teachers who have been most challenged by the life/work balance were those who either came into the profession after first having families, or who were not traditionally certified as teachers and therefore didn’t necessarily take Education classes. Preparation for the challenges is important, but, as Erica points out, it is also important to make an effort to balance life and work from the first year so burnout doesn’t occur prematurely.

Chapter Eight: Discussion, Implications, and Suggestions for Further Study

“ . . . one of the true paradoxes of teaching: the same person who teaches brilliantly one day can be an utter flop the next!”

--Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*

In this chapter, I conclude with a discussion of some of the most salient findings I brought forth from my study. I provide some of the implications for pre-service teachers, practicing teachers, and teachers in Colleges of Education. I end with suggestions for further research and a final reflection on my work.

I began this study with only a broad focus and open-ended questions. My own experiences as a student of Education and a teacher, coupled with my work with pre-service teachers, propelled me to investigate their transitions from student to teacher. After I determined a direction, however imprecise, I settled upon a case study methodology, using interviews to glean information from five teachers, all of whom had taken classes in the same College of Education from which I graduated. The participants had freedom to discuss anything about their journey into teaching that they deemed important. We discussed their motivations for choosing the profession, as well as their struggles and triumphs along the way.

After transcribing the data from each interview, I noted that all of the teachers faced situations in which there were no easy answers. For instance, the teaching method that worked beautifully in one class might fall flat in the next period. Alternatively, the kind of relationship a teacher fosters with one student

might not suit another student. These complexities led me to see much of the teachers' comments as a struggle to find balance. As balance became my lens, I began to realize that easy answers were eluded due to the paradoxical quality of some of their issues. When I teach my middle school students the literary term "paradox," we define it as a statement that appears illogical or impossible, but turns out to have a coherent meaning and hold an unseen truth. Palmer (2007) refers to paradox, or embracing "*both-and*" thinking, as a way to find truth (p. 65). Forgoing binary thinking in order to arrive at profound truth is not a quick, simple fix when we have difficulties as teachers. I remembered the sighs I would hear from one student in particular when she would ask a question about teaching during an Education class I taught. Because I am not an authority on the subject and every situation is different, I would often defer to the class and open up discussion. She was dissatisfied because she wanted a concise and definitive answer.

As I visited schools to observe teachers in their final student teaching internship, I noticed that some of the teachers I considered to be the best⁵ were convinced of their shortcomings. I appreciated these teachers' commitment and care to the profession as well as their humility and willingness to grow, but I worried that their fear could lead them to break away from their fragile new roles. Through Palmer (2007), I had learned that when we are exposed to new positions or contexts, we have a tendency to react out of fear, which leads to a fight or

⁵ I use the term "best" to refer to a good content knowledge, superior rapport with students, and engaging lessons.

flight response. I wanted to give these reflective teachers, who were most valuable to the field, advice to help them feel successful without encouraging them to become complacent.

I remembered Palmer's (2007) line about the Hasidic tale: "We need a coat with two pockets. In one pocket, there is dust, and in the other pocket there is gold. We need a coat with two pockets to remind us who we are" (p. 113). Teachers must be humble while also recognizing their worth and remembering that theirs is important work, meaningful beyond measure. Through my role as an observer and a supervisor, I tried to balance the feedback I gave these teachers in order to reassure them while encouraging them to keep improving. I also pondered Palmer's (2007) statements about the paradoxical nature of fear in the classroom; he says, "My fear that I am teaching poorly may be not a sign of failure but evidence that I care about my craft" (p. 39). On the other hand, fear can lead us to disconnect from our students, which preempts the relationships that make learning and teaching worthwhile, both for students and teachers. I came to view embracing paradox as a key to finding balance.

Shortly after deciding that I would rest my data on a frame of balance, I remembered a quotation from my interview with Caroline. As she discussed her efforts to make instruction relevant and engaging to students, she described using the Charleston dance as a way to begin a unit on *The Great Gatsby*. While the students loved this activity, they were less enthusiastic about reading the book the following day. Caroline's frustrated response, "We can't dance every day!"

summed up one piece of the balance issue. The paradox is that we must make learning fun, but always doing what students consider fun would be counterproductive. I asked Caroline if I could lift her quotation for my title and she was happy to oblige.

In chapter three, the first theme I discussed involves balancing relationships with students and academics. The goal is to balance high academic expectations with good rapport with students. For new teachers, who are often young, this can be challenging because students want to spend class time discussing their own or the teacher's personal life instead of learning the class content. According to my participants and my experiences, teachers can begin to reach a good balance in this area by watching professionals who take time to show students they care about their lives outside of the classroom while still holding high academic standards. There is no one way to do this, but watching other professionals can illuminate possibilities.

Caroline, Rebecca, and Amber all discussed positive mentors who were successful in finding the balance between academics and student relationships. For them, seeing that neither had to be sacrificed for the sake of the other spurred them to attempt to find this balance in their classrooms, as well. Furthermore, time in the classroom is important. While Rebecca, Amber, and Erica all emphasized the importance of a good rapport with students, they each described a transition from wanting to be seen as the students' friend to more of a focus on academic goals. Erica said her students still make her laugh, but now she is able

to recover more quickly and stay on track with lessons,

The second issue the teachers I interviewed must balance is relationships with students and classroom management, discussed in chapter four. The goal is for teachers to show students they care about them while maintaining appropriate discipline to ensure a safe and effective learning environment for all students. Because every classroom is different, teachers need the tools to figure out this balance for their individual identities and their own unique situations when they begin teaching. Teachers must know how to find resources, such as books, articles, and mentors, who can help throughout the transition into teaching. They need to see that other teachers struggle with classroom management, too, so they don't feel so isolated. Furthermore, teachers should have opportunities to self-reflect in order to pinpoint problematic issues of balance with regard to student relationships and classroom management.

Caroline and Amber both discussed the importance of administrators who will give teachers freedom to make disciplinary decisions and will also back up those decisions. Diana believes engaging academic lessons are the key to promoting good behavior in students. From Rebecca, we can see an example of a teacher who faced a very difficult first year with a myriad of bad behaviors from her students, but who made the choice to continue teaching, and to use self-reflection and flexibility to continually re-invent her management style with each new class.

The third balancing act for my participants comes from chapter five and

centers on what teachers want to teach, what they are required to teach, and what students want to learn. A complicating factor arises when teachers don't have the time or autonomy to teach what they deem most important. Further, students have varied interests and often miss the relevancy of the content we must pass along to them. Together, these factors can lead to a feeling of failure or inadequacy in new teachers. Teachers need to know that even good teachers have bad lessons, and that flexibility is vital to the teaching art. They also need a positive sense of self-efficacy in order to continue putting forth the time and effort to plan lessons.

Although the participants in this study had mixed feelings about common standards and assessments, they found some modicum of balance by choosing the ways in which they prepare students for standardized tests and by making time to teach the lessons they deem most important. For Rebecca and Erica, both in their fifth year teaching, that means they take time to teach life lessons when opportunities arise. For Amber, this means taking time for the literature she loves. Issues of balancing our instructional aims with the interests of students can sometimes be remedied by working students' interests into lessons we teach. Rebecca uses Paint/Write to capture students' attention. Amber and Rebecca both use Young Adult Literature pairings to hook students into other fictional and non-fictional texts. Additionally, Erica points out the importance of camaraderie with other teachers who are facing the same instructional pressures from both the top down and the bottom up. Other teachers and teacher educators can remind us of the reality that not all lessons go as planned, not all students will be interested

despite our best efforts, and that teachers must sometimes teach what others have decided is important for students to know.

Balancing the needs of all students was the fourth piece I discussed, in chapter six, and it encompassed several types of student needs, including deep level and surface level. My participants rendered heartbreaking accounts of students they had encountered whose needs caused the teachers emotional distress they struggled to manage long after the student had walked outside their classroom doors. The goal is to care and do what we can to help every student, while also being able to let go enough to move on and work with the next set of students. Because some of the new teachers I interviewed were surprised by the diversity and needs of students, even within high socioeconomic status suburban schools, it is important for teachers to realistically prepare for the classes they will face by reading educational research on public schools in the U.S. today. For instance, Brause and Mayher's (2003) "Who really goes to school? Teaching and learning for the students we really have" was eye-opening to me before I began teaching.

Still, reading about the vast and varied needs of students does not compare to the reality of facing them. The paradox is that we need teachers who care deeply about students, but caring teachers can easily become overwhelmed by all of the deep academic, emotional, and physical needs of students. While there is no easy answer to any of the issues of balance I encountered in this study, this matter is perhaps the most difficult for me personally. I attempt to set aside times when I

am not thinking about my students. Erica tries to do small things to show students she cares about them when she knows they are facing difficulties. Rebecca strives to meet students' academic needs through extensive classroom differentiation. Diana reminds us to heed the sometimes overlooked needs of successful students, as well. As was the case with the student Erica struggled to help, we often don't see the good we may have done for a student in need for many years; this fact can be both comforting and frustrating.

The fifth and final type of balance I saw in the interview transcripts was the life/work balance, which I discussed in chapter seven. The goal with life/work balance is to inspire new teachers to be committed to the profession and students at a high level, while allowing for enough time and distance to prevent burnout. Teachers should be prepared for the time-intensive nature of the profession, but should also be reminded to take time away from work as well. Caroline was able to ease her transition into the profession by taking daily naps for the first semester she taught. Rebecca mentioned the difficulty finding time for her own reading and personal growth due to the time she spends preparing for her classes. She finds some level of balance by ensuring that much of the work she does to prepare is enjoyable. For instance, she uses lesson planning as a creative outlet. Erica also said she appreciated that teaching allows her to be creative, but after nearly five years as a very committed teacher, she is considering a break from the profession. She attributes her burnout to a lack of balance during her first few years teaching, in which she said she would take work home every evening.

Further Study Suggestions

After completing this study, I see several opportunities for further, related research projects. For example, a broader study with more participants would be worthwhile. In addition to collecting more data, this accumulation would evoke more themes that might be important for teacher preparation programs and professional development providers to heed. Furthermore, since this study focused exclusively on new teachers who had taken classes in the same College of Education, it would be beneficial to compare their responses to students from another/other program(s) in order to discover to what degree the courses students take influence their interpretation of their transition into teaching. Alternatively, an in-depth study in which the effects of specific Education courses are studied could be beneficial in order to ascertain the application of the theoretical knowledge to the practice of teaching.

Because not all teachers have taken classes in a College of Education, another potential study could compare traditionally-trained teachers with alternatively-certified teachers. Additionally, a study comparing the transition of teachers into both public and private school settings would be of interest. Finally, a study could be undertaken in which experienced teachers are questioned about some of the areas of balance that emerged from these new teacher participants. Observations and interviews with more experienced teachers might provide some strategies for achieving balance in student relationships, student needs, instructional decisions, and life/work. Certainly, the participants I interviewed in

this study benefitted from observing and conversing with mentors who they deemed successful. This type of study would be beneficial because, as Palmer (2007) claims, “There are no formulas for good teaching, and the advice of experts has but marginal utility. If we want to grow in our practice, we have two primary places to go: to the inner ground from which good teaching comes and to the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft” (p. 146).

Each of the studies I want to pursue in the future center on the voices of teachers; I believe that reflecting on our craft and sharing our deepest insights with others in the field will pave the path to authentic and positive growth. Ingersoll’s (2006) study concludes that the teaching profession experiences “a relatively high turnover” when compared to other careers. I believe balance is important to retaining teachers in two key ways: teachers must feel balanced comfortable enough and somewhat successful, yet they must not feel stuck, neither in a stagnate equilibrium created by fear to move nor by pressure to hold an awkwardly balanced pose imposed by others. Like a dancer, teachers must continually rebalance themselves. The dancer finds joy when she is stretched to her ever-changing potential and has the strength and flexibility to adjust and adapt to new positions. When one movement flows beautifully into the next, the dance is enjoyable for all who see it, and the tedious practice becomes worthwhile. When teachers have a positive sense of self-efficacy and the circumstances to find the balance unique to their dispositions, a dance is created that benefits dancer and

viewer alike. Paradoxically, it is a dance that is both magically effortless and
impossibly difficult.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your current teaching position.
 - a. What grade/subject do you teach?
2. How long have you been teaching?
3. Describe your school culture.
4. Describe yourself as a teacher/Give a metaphor for yourself as a teacher.
5. What do you believe to be the most important lesson you teach your students?
 - a. Why?
6. Do you consider yourself a successful teacher?
 - a. What defines success in teaching?
7. What is your favorite part of teaching?
8. What is your biggest challenge as a teacher?
9. When and why did you first want to be a teacher?
10. Do any of your Education classes stand out in your memory (for good or bad)?
 - a. Have you used what you learned?
 - i. If so, in what ways?
 - b. What do you wish you had learned that you didn't?
11. Describe your field experiences.
12. Describe formative teachers or mentors who have impacted your teaching.
13. Do you imagine yourself teaching five years from now?

a. Why or why not?

14. Do you imagine yourself teaching ten years from now?

a. Why or why not?

Appendix B: “Cookies” Story

A young lady was waiting for her flight in the boarding room of a big airport. As she would need to wait many hours, she decided to buy a book to spend her time. She also bought a packet of cookies. She then sat down in an armchair, in the VIP room of the airport, to rest and read in peace. Beside the armchair where the packet of cookies lay, a man sat down in the next seat, opened his magazine and started reading. When she took out the first cookie, the man took one also. She felt irritated but said nothing. She just thought, "What a nerve! If I was in the mood I would punch him for daring!" For each cookie she took, the man took one too. This was infuriating her but she didn't want to cause a scene. When only one cookie remained, she thought, "Ah.....what will this abusive man do now?" Then, the man, taking the last cookie, divided it into half, giving her one half. Ah! That was too much! She was much too angry now! In a huff, she took her book, her things and stormed to the boarding place.

When she sat down in her seat, inside the plane, she looked into her purse to take her eyeglasses, and, to her surprise, her packet of cookies was there, untouched, unopened! She felt so ashamed!! She realised that she was wrong she had forgotten that her cookies were kept in her purse. The man had divided his cookies with her, without feeling angered or bitter. While she had been very angry, thinking that she was dividing her cookies with him. And now there was no chance to explain herself...nor to apologize. (Brunvand, 1984)

Appendix C: IRB Recruitment

Greetings on behalf of the University of Oklahoma,

IRB#: 701-A-1

My name is Anastasia Wickham and I am a graduate student of Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum (ILAC) at the University of the Oklahoma. I am requesting that you volunteer to participate in a research study titled, “**Finding their voices: Transitioning from student to teacher.**” You were selected as a possible participant because **you are a current or former member of the OU department of ILAC and currently teach secondary English.**

This research will be a case study. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. A follow-up interview of approximately 30 minutes may be requested after the initial interview.

All information obtained will be confidential and there is no direct benefit to you for participating.

Thank you for your help,

A. Wickham

Anastasia Wickham, Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum

University of Oklahoma

staciwickham@ou.edu

The OU IRB has approved the content of this message but not the method of distribution. The OU IRB has no authority to approve distribution by mass email.

The University of Oklahoma is an equal opportunity institution.

Appendix D: IRB Informed Consent

**University of Oklahoma
Institutional Review Board
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research
Study**

Project Title: New Teachers Finding Balance

Principal Investigator: Anastasia Wickham, M.Ed.

Department: Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum

You are being asked to volunteer for this research study. This study is being conducted at The University of Oklahoma. You were selected as a possible participant because you completed a degree in English Education at the University of Oklahoma and currently teach secondary English.

Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

Purpose of the Research Study

The purpose of this study is:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the transition from student to teacher for new secondary English/Language Arts teachers.

Number of Participants

About 5 people will take part in this study.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

Respond to interview questions and keep a teacher journal about your teaching beliefs and practices. Those interactions will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

Length of Participation

The study will last one semester and will include at least one interview. Your participation in the interview should take about 60 minutes. A follow-up interview of approximately 30 minutes may be required.

This study has the following risks:

There is no perceptible employment risk if your employer or peers were to learn of your answers; regardless, your identity will never be associated with your comments and all results will be de-identified and presented in aggregate.

Benefits of being in the study are

None

Confidentiality

In published reports, there will be no information included that will make it possible to identify you without your permission. Research records will be stored securely and only approved researchers will have access to the records.

The OU Institutional Review Board may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis.

Compensation

You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you withdraw or decline participation, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the study. If you decide to participate, you may decline to answer any question and may choose to withdraw at any time.

Audio Recording of Study Activities

To assist with accurate recording of participant responses, interviews may be recorded on an audio recording device. You have the right to refuse to

allow such recording without penalty. Please select one of the following options.

I consent to audio recording. Yes No.

Contacts and Questions

If you have concerns or complaints about the research, the researcher(s) conducting this study can be contacted at

Anastasia R. Wickham, M.Ed.

Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum

114 Ellsworth Collings Hall

Norman, Oklahoma, 73019

staciwickham@ou.edu

405-255-0222

Contact the researcher(s) if you have questions or if you have experienced a research-related injury.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than individuals on the research team or if you cannot reach the research team, you may contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

***You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.
If you are not given a copy of this consent form, please request one.***

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received satisfactory answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature

Date