The Dissipating Energy: When Teaching Priorities Are Repositioned

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Author Biography

Lauren May is a third-year doctoral candidate in Virginia Tech's Curriculum and Instruction program. Her research interests include teacher identity, teacher attrition, reflective inquiry, and pre-service teacher preparation. She has experience teaching secondary English and Language Arts, and she is currently conducting her dissertation study which examines how novice teachers can be better supported through the challenges that are often within the first years of teaching.

Abstract

The issue of teacher attrition has strengthened over the course of the decade, especially with the influence of a global pandemic (Zamarro et al., 2021). Ingersoll et al. (2018) found that 44% of teachers leave the field of education within the first five years of their careers. More recently, Zamarro et al. (2021) described a 6% increase in teachers expressing the desire to leave their teaching careers within the next five years. A wide range of demands have contributed to teacher attrition across the years, and it can be problematic when teaching philosophies are pushed aside as teachers attempt to navigate the demands of teaching. This paper considers how some may find the enthusiasm involved with a new career dissipating as the challenges of teaching become clearer.

Introduction

The issue of teacher attrition has strengthened over the course of the decade, especially with the influence of a global pandemic (Zamarro et al., 2021). Ingersoll et al. (2018) found that 44% of teachers leave the field of education within the first five years of their careers. More recently, Zamarro et al. (2021) described a 6% increase in teachers expressing the desire to leave their teaching careers within the next five years. A wide range of demands have contributed to teacher attrition across the years which can be problematic when teaching philosophies are pushed aside as in attempts to navigate the demands of teaching. This paper considers how some novice teachers may find the energy involved with a new career dissipating as the challenges of teaching become more prevalent. My experiences as an early career English teacher provide additional support regarding the importance of awareness as aspects of teacher burnout may subtly influence increasing rates of teacher attrition.

Reflecting on my first three years of teaching secondary English combined with the first three years as a teaching assistant in graduate English methods courses, I have gained more experiences and generated understandings regarding the motivations of a student teacher and a novice teacher. I draw from Hubert Hermans' (2010) dialogical self theory which focuses on identity shifts occurring within our dialogical selves. This in-depth understanding provides a way to view how the novice teacher may unknowingly begin to veer away from personal teaching philosophies in navigating the demands of a full-time teacher. When the teacher's enthusiasm begins to dissipate or become overwhelmed, it could be difficult for a teacher to maintain their passion, beliefs, priorities, and teaching philosophies in the classroom.

Dialogical Self Theory

Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) articulate that "dialogical relationships are required not only between individuals, groups and cultures, but also within the self of one and the same individual" (p. 1). We are each influenced by our various lived experiences and cultural contexts; therefore, we each have a variety of positions, or I-positions, that show the unity of the self: "by attributing an 'I,' 'me,' or 'mine' imprint to different and even contradictory positions in the self" (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 9). These I-positions are constantly adapted, developed, or restrained as we encounter different environments and contexts. My *I-as* teacher position, for example, is subtle if I am in a gathering of friends; however, that position will be prominent if I am in a classroom or speaking with other teachers. Hermans (1996) describes how "the *I* has the possibility to move, as in a space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation

and time" (p. 33). Considering novice teachers, the *I* may reposition as one works to balance content knowledge and personal teaching philosophies with the logistics and realities of full-time teaching.

The Transition

As I work with teacher candidates (TCs) in an English Education program at a research university, their passion for teaching is evident. The TCs each have their own teaching philosophies and priorities they desire to express in their classrooms. Many of these philosophies include ensuring that equity, justice, and antiracist pedagogies are prevalent throughout their classrooms. The crafting of teaching philosophies can inform teacher development and is a reflective tool in the process of self-development (Beatty et al., 2009). During this experience, the TC focuses on specific aspects such as lesson planning, classroom management, and assessment to improve and satisfy education programs, teaching certificate, or district requirements. These aspects can help the TC practice what kind of teacher they will be to their future students. The TC's cooperating teacher, on the other hand, is there to handle the logistical demands of teaching such as observations, meetings, required forms, and parent contact. While the TC may be involved in some of these experiences, the full weight of these administrative pressures is not on them during this experience. Without the additional weight, TCs can focus on implementing their teaching philosophies; they are prompted to lesson plan in ways allowing for their philosophies to be shown in their classrooms. Based on personal experiences, student teaching is an exciting time when the possibilities are endless and one can foresee a bright and successful future. Sometimes, though, the transition from TC to full-time teacher can be overwhelming. While navigating the demands of teaching, it can be easy to become overwhelmed and forget personal teaching philosophies, as I did within my first year.

Upon entering a full-time teaching position, it is easy to notice how novice teachers can become swallowed in the demands of full-time teaching. Within my own experiences, there was a shift within my dialogical self as I began to dedicate more time to ensuring the challenges were handled rather than spending more time focusing on students, lesson plans, and context. Lesson plans were an easy task to push aside as it became easier to spend my time navigating the demands of meetings, parent contact, and the various required forms while simply copying experienced teachers' lesson plans, pulling from personal education experiences, or seeking assistance from the internet. These simple, quick solutions seemed more valuable than the time required to implement my teaching philosophy into the lesson plans. I thought using lesson plans from experienced teachers would make everything go well. Within my first year of teaching, there was a slow dramatic shift away from my teaching philosophy and priorities. When I began the school

year fresh out of my teacher preparation program, my position of *I-as* new teacher was ready to engage students with the content based on their background and context. I knew it would take a significant amount of time, but I wanted my classroom to be a positive environment where students could see themselves in the literature and freely write about their lived experiences. This position of *I-as* new teacher was eager and ready to face any challenge. However, rather than allowing individual voices to engage in and contribute to the classroom, the demands of teaching eventually became my daunting priority. A position of *I-as* survivor began to move into a more prominent position prompting me to check boxes off my to-do list without using up too much of my precious limited time. As I progressed through my first year of teaching, I found myself feeling an increase in stress and anxiety that, left unchecked, may have eventually resulted in burnout.

Navigating Burnout

Maslach et al. (2001) define teacher burnout as a composition of three constructs: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lack of personal accomplishment. Within education, emotional exhaustion can relate to the inability to navigate mental health; depersonalization can relate to teachers' perceptions of students; and lack of personal accomplishment can relate to self-evaluation. Building on each other, these three constructs can encourage teacher burnout, resulting in a withdrawal from the field. Burnout can become a concern when the energy and optimism of a novice teacher begin to wane. As characteristics of burnout become prevalent within a new teacher, priorities can begin to shift within the dialogical self. Positions of *I-as* new, excited, or eager teacher may shift into more reluctant positions of *I-as* nervous, imposter, or just surviving teacher. Being emotionally exhausted, depersonalizing students, and having a lack of personal accomplishment all have the potential to cause these shifts within the self. In this way, burnout aligns with teacher attrition since almost half of teachers leave their positions within the first five years (Ingersoll et al., 2018).

According to the literature, balancing mental and emotional health is one of the best ways to navigate teacher burnout. Numerous articles (Dirghangi, 2019; Drolette, 2020; Kuok & Lam, 2018; Oliveira et al., 2021; Sproles, 2018) focus on the similar concepts of self-care, social-emotional relief, or emotional balance to encourage teachers and assist with global teacher attritions rates. Surprisingly, Oliveira et al. (2021) describe how burnout interventions that centered on improving "classroom management, classroom interactions, and sensitivity to students' needs had no significant impact on teachers' burnout levels" (p. 1800). However, focusing on the sense of personal accomplishment, or confidence, can protect against burnout (Oliveira et al., 2021) and assist with mental health and emotional relief within some individuals. In consideration of my former position of

I-as new teacher, I remember struggling with the bridging of knowledge content and application. While I felt confident with English content knowledge, I did not always feel confident with my ability to implement that knowledge and those skills within the classroom. My sense of personal accomplishment weakened as I realized that the lessons plans I was implementing were not working as well as I had hoped. This idea is interesting to explore due to the focus that many individuals place on specific strategies, book knowledge, and a teacher's bag of tricks. In this way, while an individual's position of *I-as* knowledgeable can be strong, the position *I-as* confident can remain inferior when considering knowledge application. Therefore, considering ways in which to gain confidence and a sense of personal accomplishment in the field could assist in repressing feelings associated with teacher burnout.

In my position of *I-as* new teacher, I sought specific strategies to assist with my classroom management skills; I could not understand why my classroom was chaotic. My sense of accomplishment was weak since I thought I was doing everything right. I used lessons plans from experienced teachers and followed them step-by-step to manage students and activities in my classroom. However, my first year of teaching still brought in all the burnout characteristics surrounding emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment. I was emotionally exhausted from feeling the need to battle my classes for control and management every day. I began to have feelings of doubt surrounding my ability to be an English teacher. I was using the same books and lesson plans as the other teachers on my grade level, but my students were not thriving in the same ways as others. At the same time, I was depersonalizing my students by not truly perceiving them as individuals. While I spoke with them individually and read their writings based on their lived experiences, I was not creating lessons that met those individual needs. I did not have the same students as my neighboring teacher, so my lesson plans should not have looked the same as hers. Lastly, my emotional exhaustion and depersonalization contributed to feeling a lack of personal accomplishment and confidence. My students were not thriving as well as I had expected, and I felt depleted of resources and ideas. Trudging along that path with the dominant position of *I-as* survivor could not last long. I had seemingly lost my enthusiasm for the teaching profession.

It was not until my second year of teaching that I began to realize that using someone else's lesson plans and relying on those plans to engage various groups of students was not going to work well. I noticed this as I began implementing the same plans from my first year of teaching into my second year. Various activities and aspects of classroom control that had worked well for me in the previous year were no longer beneficial. While I knew book knowledge regarding the importance of individual student context and considering their personal lives and interests, the act of bridging that knowledge with my teaching practice was more difficult for me

to implement. It took time, but positions within my dialogical self began to shift. I noticed how students in different classes would actively discuss different themes within *The Outsiders*; those discussions were influenced by the individual students' lived experiences and cultural contexts more so than my guiding discussion questions. I also realized that phone calls home to parents or guardians only assisted me with the management of some students. As I finally took notice of these and other differences that had always been prevalent, I began shifting towards my original teaching priorities focusing on specific students and their contexts. I would either adapt the lesson plans given to me by others or formulate my own, focusing each plan on the specific class and group of students. With this rejuvenating repositioning of my former teaching priorities, the classroom management and pedagogical implementations seemed simple and less intrusive on the students. During this timeframe, my position of *I-as* confident teacher became more dominant as I considered individual students while implementing management and instruction. Consequently, my *I-as* survivor position began to move into the background. Building my confidence helped me focus more on my students' contexts and more thoroughly consider pedagogical decisions. I felt better about my ability to succeed and my ability to help students succeed. Taking the time to reflect and understand the importance of context helped me notice a repositioning within my dialogical self and begin to create individualized plans, assignments, and assessments for the betterment of my students.

Implications

As a secondary English teacher and graduate assistant, I have noticed that the most challenging aspect of making a change is understanding that a change needs to happen. Therefore, the purpose of this short article is to bring awareness to the importance of context when creating content for students. Teacher attrition numbers are currently an issue within our society, but they could potentially decrease with the spreading of more knowledge and awareness regarding the prevention of teacher burnout. I wish I had been able to prevent symptoms of burnout in my first full-time teaching position before they influenced my teaching priorities and philosophy. My *I-as* survivor position seemingly attempted to balance my mental health by replacing the importance of context with other demands of teaching. Not generating content based on my specific students and classrooms negatively affected my emotional balance, tendencies to depersonalize, and sense of personal accomplishment. Reflecting has shown me the importance of building a bridge between theory from teacher preparation programs and the actual teaching practice as soon as possible. I was able to construct a bridge within my second year of teaching; since then, I have been able to reflect and grow from those experiences. Building confidence over time has contributed to my experiences as

an English educator. I hope that readers of this short article become more aware of the natural tendencies to overlook context and find the ability to revert to their original passions of teaching.

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