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# Insights from teacher leavers: push and pull in career development

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the career pathways of US teacher leavers, individuals who have voluntarily left classroom teaching prior to retirement. Based on the perspective that teachers construct their own career pathways through an ongoing negotiation among intrinsic and extrinsic factors, this research captures the experiences of 24 teacher leavers from geographically diverse regions of the United States. Using life history interviews, this study inquires into individuals' experiences before, during, and after classroom teaching. Unexpectedly, only one of the 24 individuals initially intended to enter teaching. Data also indicate that teachers' career pathways were shaped by dynamics pushing and pulling their careers into and out of the classroom. These life history interviews suggest that teachers were pushed and pulled *into* teaching, pushed and pulled *out of* teaching, and pushed and pulled *around* their passions. The trajectories of these teacher leavers, who have now moved into fields as diverse as non-classroom education, medicine, government, and caregiving, suggest important theoretical and practical implications for understanding and shaping teachers' careers in today's workforce.

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Career development; teacher attrition; life histories; profession building; teaching status

## Introduction

In many countries around the world, high rates of teacher attrition pose a pressing problem, resulting in decreased achievement for students, high financial costs for schools, and de-professionalization for teachers (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012; NCTAF, 2007). In the US, estimates vary but analyses of the national Schools and Staffing Survey show that between 17 and 46% of new teachers leave the classroom within their first five years (Gray & Taie, 2015; Ingersoll, 2003). Not only are these rates far higher than equivalent professions such as nursing (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012), they also negatively impact students, schools, and teachers. Teacher expertise increases over time, thus teacher attrition that results in a less-experienced workforce is harmful to student achievement and may have a disruptive effect school-wide (Henry, Fortner, & Bastian, 2012; Papay & Kraft, 2015; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). Recent calculations have also estimated the cost of teacher turnover to be \$7.34 billion in the US nationally (NCTAF, 2007). Further, some have argued that high rates of teacher attrition are undermining years of

professionalization, changing the image of teaching away from ‘highly complex work, requiring specialized knowledge and skills’ (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012, p. 19) and toward a more technical model.

A wealth of research has attended to the dynamics of teacher attrition in the US and worldwide (e.g. Macdonald, 1999; Quartz et al., 2008; Rinke, 2008, 2009, 2014; Smethem, 2007). However, teachers who have voluntarily left classroom teaching prior to retirement (hereafter termed ‘teacher leavers’) are a notoriously difficult group to identify and study. As many teacher leavers are no longer associated with schools or school districts, they frequently disappear from the research literature after they leave the formal institutions of education. Analyses that do exist indicate that teachers typically leave for either personal or contextual reasons (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014; Patterson, Roehrig, & Luft, 2003), although some leave because they feel they can no longer uphold their principles within the school setting (Santoro, 2011). One study, which included teacher leavers as well as retirees, indicates that former teachers are more satisfied with their salary, work/life balance, professional prestige, and ability to make a difference outside of the classroom (Goldring et al., 2014). We also have seen that some teacher leavers struggle to transition into new careers (Rinke, 2013) and that 5.8% of teacher leavers remain unemployed (Goldring et al., 2014).

This study aims to expand the knowledge base about this important but understudied group: teacher leavers who voluntarily left classroom teaching prior to retirement. This investigation into the life experiences of former teachers attends to the full professional life cycle of educators, expanding upon existing work that captures the life cycle of teachers within a school setting (e.g. Day & Gu, 2010; Huberman, 1989) and highlighting program and school features that support teacher development for today’s workforce. In recruiting teacher leavers, we selected a national sample from a variety of school districts and a range of experience levels. We also selected subject-area groups because of the discipline-specific experiences of educators (Hancock & Scherff, 2010; Helms, 1998).

Working closely with this group of teacher leavers, we asked the overarching research question, ‘How do teacher leavers, working across a variety of school contexts, experience their careers over time?’ More specifically, we used a life history methodology to investigate the questions:

- (a) What brought these teacher leavers into the field of education?
- (b) How did these teacher leavers experience the teaching profession in schools?
- (c) What factors motivated teacher leavers to leave classroom teaching?
- (d) What characterizes teacher leavers’ career pathways after classroom teaching?

Through this investigation, we aimed to better understand the dynamics of their full career pathways, both within and outside of schools, as well as identify emergent patterns among their experiences that shed light upon our current understandings of teacher career development.

## Literature review and theoretical framework

Career development is situated within a larger cultural and structural context; the same can be applied to teachers (Roberts, Clark, & Wallace, 1994). Extant research suggests that teachers’ careers in the US and around the world are currently shaped by intrinsic as well as extrinsic

factors, which influence teachers' decisions to stay or leave the profession. Teachers respond to these personal as well as societal influences by longitudinally constructing their careers.

### ***Teachers' careers as shaped by intrinsic and extrinsic factors***

Prior research has demonstrated that teachers' careers, and retention and attrition decisions in particular, can be influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Lortie's (1975) research showed us four decades ago that teachers prioritize psychic rewards. In the years since, more recent research has added support to the understanding that intrinsic factors influence teachers' decisions to stay or leave classroom teaching. Scott, Stone, and Dinham's (2001) analysis of over 3000 survey results from four countries showed that the ability to make a difference for students rated highly in teachers' career satisfaction. In her UK study of long-serving teachers in high-poverty schools, McIntyre (2010) found that an emotional connection to their workplace was central to their longevity. Likewise, Nieto's (2001, 2003) work with US teachers found that personal biographies, connections to students, and intellectual work sustained them in the profession over time. However, mission can also precipitate teachers to leave classroom teaching; Santoro (2011) identified a group of principled leavers who chose to leave teaching because the practices of schooling contradicted their core ethical beliefs. Rinke's (2013) study of teacher attrition also demonstrated the role of physical and emotional exhaustion in the decision to leave the classroom.

Alongside the research on intrinsic motivators stands a body of literature on the role of extrinsic factors on teacher attrition. Dinham and Scott (1998, 2000), in their international Teacher 2000 Project, identified school-based factors such as leadership and climate as well as societal factors of status and educational change as central to teacher satisfaction. Salary is also influential; Imazeki (2002) found that increases in overall salaries and maximum district salaries reduced teacher attrition from one US state and Gray and Taie (2015) found that in the US nationally, teachers with higher starting salaries were less likely to leave the profession. Working conditions also matter, with physical facilities (Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2005), school leadership (Ladd, 2011), workload and student behavior (Barmby, 2006), support and collaboration (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012), and autonomy and decision-making (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011) all predictive of teachers' planned or actual attrition decisions.

### ***Teachers' careers as constructed process***

In this study, we built upon a theoretical framework capturing multiple factors as part of the complex life experiences and career development processes of teacher leavers. This approach is grounded in a social constructionism and life-design framework that, 'envision[s] "life trajectories" in which individuals progressively design and build their own lives, including their work careers' (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 241). This approach reveals our underlying assumption that teacher attrition is not a simple or hasty act based on singular factors, but instead constitutes a long-term, constructed, identity development process (Savickas, 2012). Flores and Day (2006) note that teachers' personal and professional histories mediate their professional identities, with Clandinin et al. (2015) building upon that notion to connect the 'identity making process' (p. 3) to teachers' career trajectories.

We grounded this study on an understanding that teacher career development is an ongoing negotiation between life experiences and workplace contexts, with an eye to

establishing a sense of success within the profession (Rinke, 2014). We also recognized that, as part of this negotiation, teachers establish narrative coherence within their career trajectories (Schaefer, Downey, & Clandinin, 2013). In this study, we built upon this framework by capturing teachers' career pathways in their own voices and valuing not only their jobs but also their lives as part of a career unfolding (Tiedeman & Miller-Tiedeman, 1985). We saw teachers not as passive players subjected to external influences, but as active agents who construct their own coherent understandings of their personal and professional experiences and use those understandings to mediate career decisions.

In this study, we also complicated teacher attrition such that it is not the either/or proposition of staying or leaving. Instead, we understood teacher career development as having three primary trajectories: remaining a classroom teacher, shifting into an education-related field, and leaving education altogether (Ingersoll & Perda, 2011). A growing accumulation of research suggests that a substantial number of teachers leave classroom teaching but remain connected to the field of education in both personal and professional ways (e.g. Donaldson et al., 2008; Margolis, 2008; Quartz et al., 2008). Our research conceptualized teacher leavers as individuals who have both shifted out of classroom teaching as well as left the field of education altogether.

The influence of intrinsic and extrinsic factors on teacher attrition, coupled with a life-designing framework, led us to explore the life histories of teacher leavers in today's workforce and add their voices to the literature on teacher career development.

## Methodology

In this study, we sought to understand how a group of teacher leavers experienced their careers before, during, and after classroom teaching. As former classroom teachers ourselves who transitioned into teacher education faculty members, this inquiry emerged from our own personal experiences as well as prior research into the longitudinal career trajectories of educators. We both entered classroom teaching through traditional preparation routes in the late 1990s, a time of renewed national interest in the field of education, a larger societal force that likely influenced our career construction. While we encountered both frustrations and rewards working at multiple school sites, we both left classroom teaching for doctoral programs out of a desire for increased influence, intellectual stimulation, and flexibility. We attempt to integrate elements of autoethnography into this work as a recognition of the inherent personal and cultural influences in narrative (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

We utilized life history interviews (Atkinson, 1998) to inquire about teacher leavers' prior schooling, entry into teaching, classroom experiences, transition from teaching, and current career paths. We selected the life history method because of its emphasis on integrating the personal with the professional in constructing coherent narratives across the lifespan of teacher leavers (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Atkinson (1998) notes that life history interviews inform, 'how ... individuals have found their centers through their chosen profession ... [and] illustrate the primacy ... of the quest for life's meaning' (pp. 16, 17). We conducted life history interviews in the interpretivist tradition, soliciting and privileging the meaning teacher leavers constructed of their own lives and experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). We also continually aimed to build rapport with our participants during the interviews by sharing our own related life experiences and generating a form of reciprocity that Zigo (2001) refers to as collaboration in labor. Recognizing that this reciprocity is inherently limited (Rinke &

Mawhinney, 2012), we nonetheless endeavored to provide emotional support for those teachers still struggling with the emotional challenges of the career construction process.

### **Data sources**

Twenty-four teacher leavers were selected from multiple geographic regions of the US, including East, South, Midwest, and West. Selective purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) was used to identify teacher leavers who voluntarily left the profession between the years 2004 and 2014, a range reflective of current societal dynamics. In an effort to focus on one hard-to-staff group, we targeted former teachers of science. Research indicates that science teachers are more likely to leave than other teachers because of their higher status (Hoyle, 2001), higher dissatisfaction (Ingersoll, 2003), and higher opportunity cost for teaching (Murnane & Olsen, 1990). In our selection process, we also included special educators of science as well as a set of former teachers of English, intended to serve as a control for the dynamics of subject area in science. As teacher leavers were no longer associated with formal educational institutions, participation was solicited via a variety of electronic and social network platforms, including email, listservs, Facebook, and LinkedIn; snowball sampling was also used.

In addition to aiming for a geographically diverse representation of participants, we also selected for a range of characteristics, including gender, race and ethnicity, years of classroom experience, teacher preparation route, school context, and current professional field. Summarized in Table 1, our participants generally reflected the predominantly White and female US teaching force (Papay, 2007). Our participants were 84% female and 16% male, 70.8% White, 12.5% Black, and 12.5% of multiple backgrounds. Among these teacher leavers, 58.3% pursued traditional, university-based teacher preparation, whereas 41.6% pursued alternative certification routes. They ranged from 2 to 23 years of classroom teaching, with an average of 7.1 years, working across urban, suburban, and rural schools. Currently, 54.2% remain in non-teaching roles in the field of education, whereas 45.8% are engaged in fields as diverse as medicine, science, religion, government, and family caregiving.

Because of the geographic diversity, we conducted either in-person, phone, or Skype life history interviews with each participant. Interviews, which lasted approximately 75–90 min each, were audiotaped, transcribed, and member checked by each participant. We developed a common interview protocol with questions focused on life experiences before, during, and after teaching, including projecting future career directions. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner that was responsive to the priorities of the participants themselves (Merriam, 1998), allowing the teacher leavers to put forward and elaborate upon the experiences they perceived to be most salient in their personal and professional lives. In the interviews, we also strived for an empathetic and relational dynamic as the interviews frequently became emotional for participants (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

### **Data analysis**

We conducted a series of within- and cross-participant analyses both during and following the interview process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Specifically, we constructed a coding scheme with a total of 28 codes, including concrete demographic information such as geographic region, educational background, and years taught as well as more conceptual

**Table 1.** Participant overview.

Participant	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Teacher preparation	Years taught	US region(s)	Subject taught	Current field
Abigail	F	Black	Masters	2	Multiple	English/SE*	Higher Ed
Amber	F	White	Masters	14	West	English	Higher Ed
Andrew	M	White	Alternative	10	East/South	Science	Ed Admin
Anita	F	White	Undergrad	17	Multiple	Science/SE	Community
Ayana	F	Black	Alternative	3	South	Science	Community
Beatrice	F	White/Asian	Masters	2	East	Science	Higher Ed
Caitlyn	F	White	Alternative	2	West	Special Ed	Government
Catherine	F	White	Alternative	4	East/South	Science	Medicine
Erika	F	White	Masters	3	East	English	Higher Ed
Jennifer	F	Black	Alternative	14	East	Science	Higher Ed
Jeremy	M	White	Masters	5	Midwest	Science	Education
Jordan	F	White	Alternative	9	East	Science	Technology
Kelsey	F	White	Masters	5	East/South	Science	Caregiver
Lily	F	White	Alternative	6	East	Eng/Sci/SE	Higher Ed
Liana	F	White	Masters	5	East	Science	Policy
Lora	F	Black/Asian	Alternative	6	East/West	English	Higher Ed
Mason	M	White	Undergrad	15	Midwest	Science	Pastor
Miles	M	White	Masters	23	East	Science	Community
Monica	F	White	Undergrad	6	East	Science	Medicine
Nina	F	White/Asian	Alternative	4	East/South	Science	Medicine
Patricia	F	White	Alternative	2	East/West	Science	Science
Sasha	F	Arab	Undergrad	3	East	English	Higher Ed
Sidney	F	White	Masters	6	East	English	Higher Ed
Susan	F	White	Alternative	6	East	English	Non-profit

\*SE refers to special education.

categories such as major rewards and frustrations of teaching and reactions to new occupation. The codes were primarily developed out of the chronological, life history approach to categorize various stages and experiences as they unfolded over time. However, emergent codes were also added based on participants' responses and included prior careers, consideration of returning to classroom teaching, and emotionality. Following coding, we developed a series of matrices to identify patterns and themes across participants. These matrices again used a chronological approach to career development that allowed us to recognize themes in teacher leavers' reasoning for entering teaching, leaving teaching, and transitioning into new careers. Throughout the data analysis process, we attended carefully to the interaction between personal and professional factors, as suggested by our theoretical framework, as well as teacher leavers' active construction of their career trajectories.

## Findings

The life history experiences of these 24 US teacher leavers reveal an important theme in understanding teachers' career pathways: *push and pull*. Much previous research has looked only at one of these aspects at a time, that is, factors that pull teachers to the classroom (e.g. Nieto, 2003; O'Brien & Schillaci, 2002) or factors that push teachers out of the classroom (e.g. Gray & Taie, 2015; Ladd, 2011). In either case, the lens traditionally has focused on features of education that influence teachers' decisions. Our data suggest that these teacher leavers instead negotiated a simultaneous push and pull in which they balanced features of teaching with features of other positions and fields. This simultaneous push and pull dynamic appeared repeatedly in the teacher leavers' narratives. This essential reframing of how teachers negotiate their career pathways highlights the importance of looking not only at features of



**Table 2.** Participant career overview.

Participant	Original career direction	Pathway into teaching (personal)	Pathway into teaching (professional)	Pathway out of teaching (personal)	Pathway out of teaching (professional)
Abigail	Law	Personality fit	Recognized career	Disillusion	Flexibility/support
Amber	English	Informal teaching	Make a difference	Continue learning	Broaden influence
Andrew	Foreign policy	Dissatisfaction	Make a difference	Salary	Financial security
Anita	Translation	Felt right	Recognized career	Continue learning	Broaden influence
Ayana	Theater	Informal teaching	Influence students	Exhaustion	Arts
Beatrice	Science	Less solitary	Influence students	Exhaustion	Higher education
Catherine	Medicine	Informal teaching	Make a difference	Disillusion	Medicine
Erika	English	Less solitary	Social justice	Stress	Flexibility/support
Jennifer	Science	Informal teaching	More enjoyable	Disillusion	Broaden influence
Jeremy	Medicine	Informal teaching	Make a difference	Disillusion	Follow principles
Jordan	Medicine	Unclear career direction	Influence students	Workload/salary	Solitary career
Kaitlyn	Community work	Experience	Make a difference	Stress	Community work
Kelsey	Anthropology	Informal teaching	Recognized career	Disillusion	Family needs
Lily	Educational policy	Experience	Temporary	Workload	Policy
Liana	Science	Informal teaching	Shorter preparation	Workload/disillusion	Broaden influence
Lora	Unclear	Unsure career direction	Social justice	Feels right	Improve the system
Mason	Physical therapy	Coaching	Influence students	Religious beliefs	Pastoral work
Miles	Medicine	Felt right	Gain educational skills	Contract issues	Broaden influence
Monica	Medicine	Pay off debt	Influence students	Exhaustion/salary	Medicine
Nina	Medicine	Informal teaching	Delay graduate school	Disillusion	Medicine
Patricia	Science policy	Informal teaching	Inform citizens	Stress	Flexibility/support
Sasha	Education	More rigorous coursework	Influence students	Stress	Improve the system
Sidney	Law	Informal teaching	More enjoyable	Disillusion	Follow principles
Susan	Community work	Experience/personality	Make a difference	Contract Issues	Community work

education that push and pull teachers' careers, but also the overarching societal context in which education operates, including the direct competition for human capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

### ***Push and pull in choosing teaching***

In looking across the career pathways of these teacher leavers (see Table 2), one of the most striking patterns that emerges is how few initially intended to become teachers. Rather, 95.8% of the teacher leavers entered college without plans to pursue a career in education. Even those teacher leavers who completed undergraduate teacher certification programs had other plans in mind: Monica completed a teacher certification along with a pre-medical program, Anita thought she was going to be a translator before going into bilingual education, Sasha mentioned taking education courses because she thought they would be 'easy passes', and Mason transferred mid-way from physical therapy to teaching.

Another feature of these teacher leavers' initial plans is that most aspired toward a high-status, traditional profession such as medicine, law, or academia. In fact, the majority of the teacher leavers had clear graduate school plans, with seven participants aspiring to, applying, and at times even beginning doctoral programs, six heading toward medical school, two considering law school, and three interested in government or community-based



work. While some of this dynamic may stem simply from the high visibility of these traditional professions, it is at least worthwhile considering that the high status and prestige of these fields attracted them to the fields as well (Hoyle, 2001). In this way, teaching emerged as a 'second choice' for many of these teacher leavers.

The majority of participants explained they were drawn to teaching at some later point in their career development because of the opportunity to make a difference or influence students, with 15 out of the 24 mentioning these goals, a common theme in the motivation for teaching literature (e.g. Watt et al., 2012). For Patricia, who held a strong interest in science policy, teaching offered the opportunity to shape the views of the next generation. She explained, 'You're educating future citizens to think critically about issues like climate change, pollution or environmental justice.' Mason, who taught chemistry and coached football, noted, 'I went into education to help kids lead healthy, positive, productive lives.' And Lora says she was greatly influenced by the 'image of black and brown kids not having access to a college education.'

Additionally, 10 of the 24 cited previous informal teaching experiences such as tutoring, serving as a teaching assistant, or facilitating summer programs as inspiring their interest in working with young people, another common refrain in motivating teaching careers (e.g. Schutz, Crowder, & White, 2001). For instance, Jennifer had partially completed a doctorate in chemistry when she was given her first job as a teaching assistant and became drawn to teaching. She explained, 'I taught freshman chemistry and that's when I fell in love with teaching. I was like, this is so much better than working in a lab.' Likewise, Amber said she had 'absolutely no interest in getting certified to teach.' However, after working at a summer program for at-risk youth, she, 'just fell in love with the experience of it' and decided to earn a masters in teaching.

Along with the prominent themes of making a difference and informal teaching experiences, an additional pattern also emerged for a substantial minority, nine of the 24 participants. These individuals were not only pulled to teaching but also pushed away from their first-choice careers. They became dissatisfied or anxious about their choices for one reason or another and began to consider other options, including teaching. For instance, while working on her senior honors thesis Erika noted:

Originally I was thinking I would get a Ph.D. and I decided against that. My thesis advisor just didn't make it seem appealing. She was like, it's going to be a lot of alone time. And I thought, maybe I'll do something else, maybe I'd like to be a teacher.

Liana was also considering a doctorate but was concerned about the extensive training required in the sciences, explaining:

It was a little bit that I was done with school but mostly I felt the prospect for getting a professorship was so low that I just didn't feel like putting myself through that and then not having a permanent job until I was 40.

Others simply found they did not enjoy their original career choices as much as they expected. Sidney explained, 'I started working at a law firm and that killed the dream' and Jordan noted, 'I started volunteering at a hospital and I found out that I'm a little bit more squeamish than I realized, and I just started having all sorts of doubts associated with the whole medical school thing.' These participants expressed a pull toward teaching as well as a push away from their original career paths.

### ***Push and pull in leaving teaching***

While the life histories of these teacher leavers suggest a simultaneous push and pull in the selection of a teaching career, they also indicate a push and pull in their decisions to leave classroom teaching. Here again, teacher leavers did not offer one reason for leaving classroom teaching, but instead cited a variety of factors both pushing them out of teaching and pulling them toward other careers. As might be expected, almost all of the teacher leavers noted some level of dissatisfaction with their workplace context that pushed them out of teaching (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Ladd, 2011). Sixteen of the 24 teacher leavers mentioned disillusionment, exhaustion, stress, or excessive workload within their school context.

Lora explained that as a teacher, she felt complicit in a system that was harming children, explaining, 'I felt like I was in an oppressive environment and I was enabling this machine that I wanted to destroy. I didn't feel like I could kill it from within, I had to kill it from outside.' She later returned to graduate school in education to work toward social justice goals. Erika expressed a similar sentiment, 'I felt really traumatized by the experience. It was a very chaotic place, it was violent in some cases, and I felt like it was really like an abusive, toxic work environment.' Jeremy also cited conflicts with colleagues who held more traditional philosophies of science teaching, noting, 'I was getting pretty tired of having to fight constant battles just to maintain effective teaching.' Another common refrain was ineffective administrators, mentioned by 16 of the 24 teacher leavers, who believed their principals to be 'vindictive' and 'vengeful' while they tried to 'pit staff against each other.'

Other teachers mentioned themes of exhaustion and overwork. Kaitlin felt her own brief teacher preparation did a disservice to herself and her students, noting, 'I continued to really struggle to balance everything, to feel successful, to ensure that each student was challenged, to manage behavior. I didn't think [I was] benefiting the students to the degree [I] could.' Kaitlin now works for city hall. Jordan, in her eighth year of teaching also continued to feel overworked, noting, 'I just felt like I was kind of drowning. I started to become disenchanted with everything – the system is so broken, and I'm overworked, and I'm underpaid.' She later made a switch into computer science. And Lily simply noted, 'This isn't fair. I shouldn't be doing all of this work. This isn't one person's job. This is three persons' job.'

In addition to school-level frustrations, five of the 24 teacher leavers discussed contract or salary concerns that accelerated their departure from the classroom. Liana, who holds a physics degree, was placed in a second grade science classroom. According to Liana, when her principal assigned her to, 'second grade, I said, okay, goodbye. Because she knew I didn't want second grade.' Likewise, after over 20 years in the classroom, Miles started a new district program, but his position was cut after only one year. After that experience, Miles explained, 'I was so angry and so sad. I started to think that this was not a place for me.' Susan's departure from teaching was also accelerated by anticipated district lay-offs. She noted, 'I got out one year ahead. There is about to be this wave of unemployed teachers. How am I going to differentiate myself from any of the rest of them? Most of them are young, over-educated White women.'

Salary also came up as influential for several teachers. Monica noted, 'I work 100 h a week, I repeat myself every day, and I can't afford to go on vacation. I'm turning 30 and I don't feel fulfilled.' She is now in the process of applying to become a Physician's Assistant. Kaitlin raised concerns about her ability to buy a house on a teacher's salary, noting, 'I was so stressed out,

I was like how could I ever like buy a house in [this area] and continue at this job.' And Andrew pursued school administration simply because it paid more to support his growing family.

In all, there were only four of the 24 teachers who did not raise the issue of working conditions as part of their decisions to leave teaching. Only one teacher, Mason, who is now a pastor, explicitly mentioned that he was not dissatisfied with the field of education, noting, 'None of the switches were because of ill-will. Yes there are concerns about the direction of education today, but those concerns never pushed me out.' However, alongside these issues of working conditions pushing teachers out of the classroom, there was again a substantial minority of teachers who were also pulled toward other fields. Nine of the 24 teacher leavers explained that they were also pulled toward the salary, contribution, intellectual stimulation, or fit of other careers.

Susan, although her departure was accelerated by a coming wave of teacher lay-offs, had already been making plans for some time to transition to the non-profit sector. She noted that her long-term goal was to serve a community in need and she saw teaching as only one of many possible avenues for doing so, explaining:

My whole attitude is, what do I see that a community is looking for and can I plug in? Educational inequity seemed like an easy and a meaningful entry point. But there's also other social problems that are fascinating and really urgently need work.

While teaching, Susan volunteered for a full year at an organization fighting homelessness, noting that she was, 'networking and positioning myself so that I could have a job.'

Catherine offers another example of pull. She pursued pre-medical requirements during college and became interested in teaching after spending a summer in Africa writing curriculum for HIV/AIDS education. While Catherine dealt with frustrations with her school administration, she also was pulled back to her interest in medicine, noting, 'I have this passion to care for the underserved. It may not be in the classroom, though.' Here again, teacher leavers were both pushed from the classroom while also pulled toward other professional avenues.

### ***Push and pull around teachers' passions***

A third theme of push and pull around teachers' passions emerged from the life histories of these 24 teacher leavers. On this theme of connectedness over time, Olsen (2008) writes, 'I am guided by a view of teacher development as a continuum rather than discrete, linear parts' (p. 23). We similarly found that teacher leavers expressed passions that served as guides throughout their professional careers, pushing and pulling them into and out of classroom teaching at various points in time. These passions emerged as underlying currents that weaved throughout their professional pathways in various ways and many felt that, by leaving classroom teaching, they were actually continuing along the same course. In this section, we highlight the experiences of two teacher leavers who reflected upon the ways in which their career trajectories were pushed and pulled by guiding passions.

Kelsey began her life history by noting that, as a child, she loved dolphins and wanted to be a marine biologist. Throughout her childhood she was drawn to living things, noting, 'I loved animals. That was just kind of my thing. I loved being around animals. I loved hanging out with animals.' In college she discovered the field of primatology, spent a summer doing primate research in Mexico, and intended to earn a doctorate in the field. During her senior year, however, she began to have doubts about her ability to live overseas conducting

research for long periods of time. Instead of graduate school, Kelsey decided to move with her future husband and work as a zookeeper at the local zoo, where she continued her interaction with animals. From this experience, she became inspired to share her love of science with others, noting, 'My love of science was just bursting. I want to teach and give other people this love of science. It was just coming out of me in every way at that point.' Recognizing that zookeeping jobs were limited and poorly paid, Kelsey decided to apply for a masters in science education, which she saw as more of a 'defined career.'

Upon certification, Kelsey taught science for four years in the Midwest US. While she expressed frustration with traditional colleagues, inconsistent administrators, and overzealous reform efforts, she generally enjoyed her time as a classroom teacher, particularly her relationships with the students. At the end of her fourth year, when Kelsey had two young children and her mother-in-law began having health problems, she and her husband made the decision to move back to his hometown to take over the family farm. Kelsey now stays home with her two children and raises 300 chickens as part of an egg business. Of this change in her career path, Kelsey notes, 'I ended up coming back to taking care of animals.'

Ayana is another teacher leaver who began her life history with a passion for the arts. As a student, Ayana attended several high schools, switching so that she could participate more actively in the theater program. After studying theater in college and captaining the swim team, she was headed toward a performance career when she decided that she wanted to apply the arts toward a larger purpose. She explained, 'I'm passionate about the arts, but there needs to be another connection for me. What is the purpose of doing this? I always wanted to work with at-risk populations within the context of art.' Ayana took a job as a counselor at a 'last chance' wilderness program for youth in trouble with the law. She explained, 'I saw the connection. I could see the through line through everything that I've done.'

After two years at the wilderness program, Ayana began to wonder if, as a classroom teacher, she could prevent some of the problems youth faced with juvenile delinquency. She noted, 'If I become a teacher then I could stop people from getting in the system before they start.' She applied to an alternative certification program and was placed in a biology classroom because of her experiences in nature. Ayana taught for three years in a rural area of the southern US, where she explained, 'I love teaching' but found the time commitment overwhelming, commenting, 'If you're doing everything that you need to do as a teacher you will never do anything else. You just cannot physically do it all.'

Ayana ultimately decided instead to take a position as an after-school program director in a college preparatory leadership program:

I decided to come here because I wanted to get back into the arts. I wanted to get back to that part of my life and share that with kids, because that's what I've always wanted to do. I believe in the power of the arts to help kids really become better thinkers.

The program combines academics with health, arts, camping, travel, and community involvement. Ayana explained, 'It kind of wrapped all of the things that are important to me in one program. And that felt like the through line of my life. All of it makes sense and preps me for what I do now.'

Kelsey and Ayana exemplify the ways in which teachers' careers are pushed and pulled around their underlying passions. Kelsey maintained a passion for animals throughout various phases of her career. While teaching biology was one way to carry out that passion, she was ultimately pulled toward other venues for pursuing her love of animals. Likewise, Ayana

discussed a ‘through line’ in her life, referring to a sustained passion for the arts. Ayana carried out this passion in various professional roles, including but not limited to classroom teaching. Kelsey, Ayana, and other teacher leavers viewed the classroom as only one of many possible sites for pursuing their underlying passions.

## **Discussion and implications**

In this study, we applied a life-designing theoretical perspective to the experiences of teacher leavers across the US. Connecting personal, professional, and societal factors, we found that teachers engaged in a complex negotiation of pushes and pulls in the longitudinal construction of their lives and careers. These findings reinforce the Savickas (2012) and Savickas et al. (2009) perspective that teachers actively construct their own life trajectories, not in response to singular factors but through a complex designing process that integrates pushes and pulls from within as well as outside of education. These teacher leavers’ authored career stories provide implications for teacher education programs and school administrators for improving the recruitment, retention, and profession building of classroom teachers.

### ***Recruitment***

Our data show that only one of the 24 teacher leavers started out interested in the field of education, and she was attracted to teaching because it appeared to be an ‘easy pass.’ While a larger study would be needed to verify this finding in the teacher population, it suggests a possible connection between individuals choosing teaching as a ‘second choice’ career and their later attrition from the classroom. More immediately, it suggests the vital importance of actively pulling teachers to the classroom from other careers. This finding underscores the fundamental necessity of increasing the attractiveness of a teaching career, to even more powerfully pull individuals toward teaching and to keep them there. Specifically, opportunities should be put in place to allow individuals to experience the intrinsic rewards of teaching. Teacher education programs can work in concert with after-school programs, summer camps, and other informal educational organizations to provide early teaching experiences for undergraduate students. Some teacher education programs have already introduced such early teaching experiences for liberal arts undergraduates and found them to be effective for recruitment into high-need fields (The UTeach Institute, 2013). Some schools begin even before entry to higher education, reaching out to current high school students through Grow Your Own Programs and Future Teachers Clubs to create positive experiences and generate interest in the profession (Hill & Gillette, 2005; Madda & Schultz, 2009). Informal experiences with teaching such as these may create a larger pool of prospective teachers and allow programs to become even more selective in their recruitment process.

### ***Retention***

Our findings also indicate that workplace factors pushed teachers from the classroom. Disillusionment, exhaustion, stress, and excessive workload were cited by two-thirds of these teacher leavers as influential in their career attrition decisions, consistent with substantial evidence that teacher workload has intensified in recent years (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2007).

Salary was also mentioned by 20% of participants, particularly with respect to teachers' long-term earning potential (Imazeki, 2002). As individuals negotiate their teaching careers within a complex network of factors, certainly improving the working conditions in schools could pull them more forcefully toward the teaching profession for the benefit of schools, students, and the teachers themselves (NCTAF, 2007).

Day and Gu (2014) offer a framework of resilience as one approach for thriving within today's challenging workplace contexts. Seeing resilience as not a fixed attribute of an individual, Day and Gu instead conceptualize it as a set of conditions in which teachers can sustain commitment and effectiveness over the course of their professional lives, despite challenges that may emerge. They suggest that resilience can be fostered within supportive school contexts with effective school leaders and that resilience depends upon a strong sense of identity and commitment to the moral purposes of the profession. Day and Gu's (2014) framework suggests that school administrators can foster long-term success by constructing workplace contexts that are supportive of and striving toward teacher resilience.

Teacher leavers' concerns about their long-term financial abilities must also be addressed. Competitive salaries and financial subsidies are commonplace within the strongest educational systems (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012) and should be comprehensive across the US as well. Career ladder approaches also show promise, when coupling increases in salary with higher levels of responsibility. For instance, mentor teacher programs that emphasize shared expertise and continual professional growth have been shown to improve retention (Donaldson, 2005). Recommendations for school administrators also include attention to teachers' need for financial stability and growth.

### ***Profession building***

The experiences of these teacher leavers indicate that they were pulled toward more socially prestigious and attractive careers, while maintaining coherence around their passions. Among our participants, 87.5% of the former English teachers pursued graduate school in the field of education, whereas only 20% of the former science teachers went that route, instead selecting higher status and higher paying careers in fields such as technology and medicine. This finding may reinforce the idea of opportunity costs for teaching, particularly for those who have more lucrative career alternatives (Murnane & Olsen, 1990). Similarly, Scott et al. (2001) suggest that it is not only the internal features of a teaching career, but that career in relation to larger societal trends such as career status and professionalism that influence teachers' career pathways.

Implications from this study of teacher leavers also include a comprehensive process of professional building to increase the status of teachers within society. Studies demonstrate that in countries where teaching commands higher status, it is easier to attract high-performing individuals into the profession (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). International comparisons also show that higher achieving countries invest in a systematic process of profession building that incorporates recruitment, attractive working conditions, and support (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012). Ongoing opportunities for learning and autonomy in developing curriculum and assessment systems are also key features of these highly professional systems (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011). While some branded marketing campaigns have emerged in the US in response to looming teacher shortages (e.g. TeachNY

Advisory Council, 2016), a more comprehensive and systematic approach is needed to strengthen and sustain the teaching profession.

### **Limitations and conclusion**

While this study expanded on earlier research with its geographic diversity within the US, it remains limited by its smaller sample size and national focus. A multinational comparison of teachers' personal and professional experiences should be considered as a possible next step in understanding the experiences of teacher career development. This study also focused on the experiences primarily of secondary teachers of science, with a control group of English teachers. An analysis of teachers in the primary grades would offer a productive comparison, particularly with respect to relative status (Hoyle, 2001).

In conclusion, this study of 24 US teacher leavers sheds light upon the important dynamic of push and pull influencing teacher attrition. Implications include actively recruiting individuals into the teaching profession, constructing workplace contexts supportive of teacher resilience with financial stability, and developing a comprehensive system for profession building. Together, these insights suggest the need for a broader lens, one that looks beyond the classroom to situate teachers' careers within a national and international setting as well as social, economic, and professional contexts. We can no longer view teacher attrition as simply individuals tiring of the demands of the classroom; we must instead view teacher attrition as a complex negotiation among multiple competing factors. Adopting this broader lens will promote a dynamic and responsive teaching profession for years to come.

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