What keeps teachers going? What keeps teachers developing?

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Abstract

What helps great teachers persevere – in spite of everything? This paper describes how some teachers are solving the everyday challenges of our profession. My interest in the question goes beyond mere perseverance, however; I also look at teachers who continue to be energized, fascinated and happily committed to teaching. These are the ones who keep going to conferences, keep reading new books on teaching, keep learning from other teachers and from their students. What keeps these teachers developing – in spite of everything? And what are the implications for teacher education?

Introduction

Through my long association with IATEFL (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language), I have had the privilege of considerable exposure to teachers’ organizations like KOTESOL, and I have noticed that those who volunteer to serve in teachers’ organizations tend to be those teachers who remain passionate and jazzed about teaching. I have long had an interest in what it is that makes people do things differently from the norm, and so this time I wanted to study people like us.

This paper will cover the following topics:
- Why teachers go into teaching
- Why teachers drop out
- Why teachers stay in the profession
- Why teachers not only stay in the profession, but actively keep developing
- Implications for teacher education

Why Teachers Go into Teaching

It is possible to consider three categories for why teachers go into teaching: practical or external reasons, personality type, and passion.

Practical or external reasons
Some of you became teachers because you were good in the subject of English, and so you found yourselves encouraged or even channeled into becoming teachers of English. In other cases, when parents were also teachers, there can be an inclination towards the teaching profession or
an expectation of following the family career path. For others, it is the only job possible under given circumstances.

**Personality type**
What types of personality are attracted to teaching? Maslach, in her book *Burnout, the Cost of Caring* (2003) states that people who choose the helping professions (including nursing, social work and police work as well as teaching) tend to have high needs for approval, and heightened expectations of ourselves. Nieto, in *What Keeps Teachers Going*, her 2003 study of teachers who remain in the profession in spite of challenging contexts, found that the attraction is the opportunity to teach well and know it matters. A related belief was that teachers could change lives. One of the teachers in the inquiry group she formed to gather research for her book stated that teaching was “a life’s work that is very, very dignified and very high level because you grow every day, you learn every day, and you change people’s lives. And I don’t know what else there is” (ibid., p. 61).

Some describe it as a vocation, a calling. A 2000 study of nearly 900 teachers in public and private schools in the U.S. found that an impressive 865 believed that only those with ‘a true calling’ should be teachers, while 72% said that what was most important in teaching was contributing to society and helping others (Farkas, 2000).

Ayers, in his book *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher*, sums it up:

People are called to teaching because they love children and youth, or because they love being with them, watching them open up and grow and become more able, more competent, more powerful in the world. They may love what happens to themselves when they are with children, the ways in which they become their best selves. Or they become teachers because they love the world or some piece of the world enough that they want to show that love to others. In either case, people teach as an act of construction and reconstruction and as a gift of oneself to others. I teach in the hope of making the world a better place.


**Passion**
Related to a sense of calling is one of passion. We can differentiate between what passionate teachers are and what passionate teachers do. Fried (1995) states that:

To be a passionate teacher is to be someone in love with a field of knowledge, deeply stirred by issues and ideas that challenge our world, drawn to the dilemmas and potentials of the young people who come into class each day – or captivated by all of these. A passionate teacher is a teacher who breaks out of the isolation of a classroom, who refuses
to submit to apathy or cynicism. … I believe that we all have it within ourselves to be passionate teachers, and that nothing else will quite do the trick.

As for describing what they do, Fried goes on to say that passionate teachers organize and focus their passionate interests by getting to the heart of their subject and sharing with their students some of what lies there – the beauty and power that drew them to this field in the first place and that has deepened over time as they have learned and experienced more. These teachers are able to convey their passion to their students by working as partners in learning with them. “As partners, they invite less experienced learners to search for knowledge and insightful experiences, and they build confidence and competence among students who might otherwise choose to sit back and watch their teacher do and say interesting things” (ibid., p. 23).

Intrator, in his book Teaching with Fire: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Teach (2003), describes passion in teaching as he shares the recollection of one of the teachers in his study: “One of the first things I learned when I started college was which teachers to take and which to avoid. There are two lists that students circulate to each other: teachers with heart and teachers without. Teachers with heart are passionate, caring, alive, present, inspiring, and real. I am drawn to these teachers because they possess a love for what they are teaching and for their students” (ibid., p. xxx).

For some teachers, however, this passion is not enough to keep them in the profession. The dropout rate amongst teachers is high, with some of the reasons being burnout; isolation; and lack of status, respect and rewards.

**Why Teachers Drop Out**

Even under the best of circumstances, teaching is a demanding job, and most teachers do not work under the best of circumstances. The enthusiasm and idealism that bring them to teaching dissipate quickly for many. This is not a new problem: As early as 1963, a study reported that the annual net loss of teachers through what was called “teacher dropout” was 8%. A look at recent statistics confirms the continuing high rate of teacher turnover: About 20% of new teachers leave during the first three years of teaching, and the rate has generally increased in the recent past. Even more alarming, the schools most affected by teacher dropout are those that could most benefit from stability in the teaching force: Researchers have found that nearly half of all new teachers in urban public schools quit within five years (Stinnett, 1970; Nieto, 2003).
Burnout is certainly one significant cause. Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. It culminates in a build-up of negative feelings about our students, colleagues and administration. As motivation decreases and frustration increases, we lose the desire and energy to be creative, developing teachers. Physical and emotional stress play on self-esteem as we lose the sense of being in charge of our lives. The three sources of burnout are:

- Involvement with people,
- The particular job and its environment, and
- The personal characteristics of those of us who choose the helping professions.

The burnout syndrome appears to be a response to chronic, everyday stress, rather than to occasional crises. Teachers, especially those in less than ideal learning environments, often find themselves involved in a continuous and limited focus on what their students are NOT able to do. As our view of people is affected by their responsiveness to us, if in spite of all efforts to make an appreciable difference in someone else’s development as a learner, nothing has changed or improved, feelings of personal failure and ineffectiveness may set in, and it becomes all too easy to blame our students for their problems by seeing them as inherently defective, unmotivated, bad or weak (Maslach, 2003; Barduhn, 1989).

Isolation is another cause. As will be discussed below, peer support amongst colleagues is one of the strongest forces for teachers not only staying in the profession, but remaining enthusiastic. The opposite of this is found in staff rooms where teachers do not talk to each other, perhaps because of being on different schedules or the stress of the job. This may occur even when the school has teacher development sessions, for one obstacle to true dialogue is that many teachers are reluctant to expose to others what they perceive to be their shortcomings. If teachers are to develop as intellectuals, having to engage in what may be disquieting dialogue is part of the price to be paid (Nieto, 2003).

Other reasons for teacher dropout are lack of status, respect and rewards. What Jacques Barzun said about teaching 70 years ago remains true today, at every level of education: “Teaching is not a lost art, but the regard for it is a lost tradition” (Barzun, 1945, p. 12). Parker Palmer, the author of The Courage to Teach (1998) was the son of two teachers. When he informed his father that he had decided to go into teaching, his father was dismayed. When Palmer asked him why, he said:

> Throughout history, sons followed in their fathers’ occupational footsteps. Sons of carpenters became carpenters. Sons of tailors became tailors. Sons of artists became artists. There was honor in passing the family trade across generations. The father was honored to have the son follow in his stride because society cherished the work of the father. But our society and the system I worked in offers only lip-service honor – false honor. There’s not a lot of honor in the way schools work and the way society treats and compensates teachers... What’s sad is that you come to the job
eager to do wonderful things, but it’s hard to sustain your heart. If a teacher doesn’t have energy and if a teacher’s heart is not in his work, everybody loses and nothing will get better.”

(Intrator, 2003, p. xxvi)

Palmer’s father went on to say, “We’d better figure out how to get good people into our classrooms and then figure out how to keep them fresh and alive. We don’t recognize how hard teaching is on the spirit. We think it’s about little techniques and tricks, but techniques only take you so far. We need teachers who care about kids, who care about what they teach, and who can connect with their students. On top of that, they need to have faith in the importance of their work. Keeping that faith over time hasn’t been easy for me” (ibid.).

One of the contributors to Intrator’s 2003 publication expresses a similar sentiment:

I am at a decision-making point. I truly enjoy teaching, but I feel buffeted by the public assault on teachers; the strain of dealing with especially needy students; the day-in, day-out structure of teaching; and my own personal development issues. At times I feel drained, uninspired, and just plain tired. I’ve considered leaving teaching and in fact have taken classes in preparation for a change in career. I want to love this job, and there are times that I do. But I’m getting jaded, and I’m losing my vim and vigor fast. I came to teaching to be there for students, but every memo and missive that comes through my mailbox tells me to prep for the test or remind students about how important their scores are. Important for whom? Important for the institution, maybe. I came to teach students, but that’s feeling harder and harder to do. (ibid., 2003, p. xxxviii).

So what is it that undermines the energy and vitality of teachers? Teachers say they feel underappreciated, undermined, overwhelmed, isolated and vulnerable. In the next section we will look at what factors are significant in keeping teachers in the appreciation.

**Why Teachers Stay in the Profession**

In spite of the difficulties, many teachers persevere. The reasons that will be presented below are peer support, early rewards, student success, knowing the subject matters, enjoying the intellectual challenge, enjoying the life of a teacher, the combination of hope/optimism/faith, empowering experiences working within an educational system, and variety and opportunities for risk taking.

**Peer support**

Studies show that turnover among teachers, even under the most difficult conditions, is remarkably lowered when successful peer support exists. The people who are best-qualified to
provide job-related help and support are the people on the job – your co-workers. Peers can provide help, comfort, insight, comparison, rewards, humor and escape. Burnout rates are also lower when good working relationships with supervisors flourish, and this happens when supervisors are able to relate as peers, share personal experiences and sensitize staff to the risk of burnout (Maslach, 2003).

**Early rewards**
Some teachers early in their careers receive validation from their institutions and this proves motivating. Others had been successful as students themselves, and thus teaching provides a rewarding environment on its own. Some teachers are given early responsibility, such as mentoring a teacher even newer to the profession. Being mobile and able to change jobs means that some teachers are able to seek out a rewarding context early in their careers.

**Student success**
Positive, observable student success is a great motivator for novice teachers. Caring teachers are often at the center of student success. We may think we are teaching grammar or literature or exam preparation, but studies have shown that the amount of success which students experience is less dependent upon the knowledge and experience of the teacher than it is on three factors or attitudes: congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathy (Rogers, 1989).

In 1976 Aspy and Roebuck conducted a major research project to learn more about how these qualities actually affected learning. They recorded and assessed nearly 3,700 hours of classroom instruction from 550 elementary and secondary teachers. They found that students whose teachers were high in congruence, positive regard and empathy missed fewer days at school, had increased scores on measures of self-concept, made greater gains on academic achievement measures, presented fewer disciplinary problems, were more spontaneous and used higher levels of thinking than students with teachers low in these qualities. This is a clear correlation between student success and teacher attitude.

**Knowing that the subject matters**
Students know when a subject is of use to them, and many learners (and parents) these days recognize the importance to their futures of being an accomplished speaker of English. This is certainly not true in all contexts, but teachers of students who have a keen desire to learn the subject matter enjoy a mutually positive influence.

**Intellectual challenge**
The first official “graduate tedium index” was published on July 27, 2006 on the U.K. government news network. “Pollsters interviewed more than 2,000 graduates aged from 21 to 45, and found half said they "often feel bored at work." But there were big differences in the answers from different professions. The least bored were teachers, who made up for modest salaries with great work satisfaction. Four out of five said they found the job interesting and no two days were the same. (The Guardian, July 27, 2006). The poll found 86% of teachers said they enjoyed being involved with people and 64% appreciated the opportunity to use their creativity.
Enjoying the life of a teacher
A non-teacher, seeing this title, would perhaps immediately think of the long summer vacations that teachers in public sector schools often have, but they come at a cost: long days and weekends of planning and responding to student work. A member of Nieto’s inquiry group (2003), when asked what advice she’d give to a new student teacher, made this reply:

I think I’d say, “Thank you for coming in.” Every day, “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you for coming into the Boston public schools! You really could be doing other things and make so much more money and have much better [working] conditions. But one thing I said when Chris, [her student teacher] was talking about how all the student teachers, once they come in here, they’re like, “I don’t have a life anymore! I don’t have a life!” And I said, “You know something? This IS a life!” You come in, you grow, you learn, it’s never the same, it’s always different. You heal, you help, you love. What’s wrong with that? Is that a life or is that a life?” (ibid., p. 61-62)

Hope/Optimism/Faith
In The Dialectic of Freedom (1988), Maxine Greene writes, “My focal interest is in human freedom, in the capacity to surpass the given and look at things as if they could be otherwise” (ibid., p.53). The capacity, in fact, the NEED to look at things “as if they could be otherwise” is a good definition of hope. Hope explains why many teachers – in spite of the hardships and low status and working conditions – continue to teach. They have an abiding faith in the promise of education. For teachers who have remained in teaching for more than 20 years, it can well be said that it is because of hope, even though this hope is constantly tested. It is also optimism and faith and confidence in trusted colleagues that holds these teachers in the profession.

Empowering experiences working within an educational system
Burnout rates are also lower when good working relationships with supervisors flourish, and this happens when supervisors are able to relate as peers, share personal experiences and sensitize staff to the risk of burnout. Institutions which do not operate exclusively top-down in their management can give opportunities for the staff to share positions of responsibility, which gives the teachers opportunities to learn about the operation of the school as well as to influence its development. I worked for over ten years at such an institution (International House London) and the commitment of the teachers to the institution and to its development was indeed powerful.

Variety and opportunities for risk taking
I’ve mentioned variety above in being able to try out multiple roles in management and administration. Variety in teaching ages and levels and materials is also essential for avoiding burnout, as is having opportunities for risk taking. “Passionate teachers are always taking risks, and they make at least as many mistakes as anybody else (probably more than most). What’s different is how they react to their mistakes: they choose to acknowledge and learn from them, rather than to ignore or deny them. Thus, they help make the classroom a safer place for students to make their own mistakes and learn from them” (Fried, 1995, p. 27).
All these factors above in why teachers stay in the profession are illuminating. My interest goes further, though, to those teachers who not only stay in the profession, but who are devoted to their own professional development.

**Why Teachers Not Only Stay in the Profession, But Actively Keep Developing**

Perhaps another way of saying this is simply persistence. I realized this when I was attending a talk about persistence in literacy students who keep at it until they are successful. The talk wasn’t about which techniques were most effective for achieving success, but looking at the students, and what was in their personal make up and experience that made them the ones who persisted.

"Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan, 'press on' has solved, and always will solve, the problems of the human race."

(John) Calvin Coolidge (1872-1933), 30th US President

All of the reasons for why teachers remain in teaching apply, of course, but I think we can consider further these topics: growing with colleagues; a commitment and joy in lifelong learning; making opportunities for reflection; intellectual satisfaction (revisited); respect and belief in our students; and congruence, or what might be called presence, during teaching.

**Growing with colleagues**

Some teachers are blessed by working in institutions in which there is rapport and support amongst the staff, but those who thrive on learning and sharing with colleagues will find or make these opportunities if they don’t exist at hand. Certainly one reason often cited for teachers accepting volunteer leadership in IATEFL is the enjoyment of being part of the IATEFL “family.” Sonia Nieto (2003) wrote:

> Although most teachers don’t have many school-sanctioned opportunities to meet with colleagues to prepare classes or talk about the latest research or just to try out ideas they’ve been playing with, some teachers nevertheless make the time to do these things in other ways. In spite of the limited time they have on their hands, some teachers join inquiry groups and professional organizations; they attend and participate actively in conferences; they present workshops together; and, in a myriad of other ways, they demonstrate that collegiality is essential for good teaching. For them, having colleagues in whom they can trust is one of the ingredients that keeps them in teaching.  
>  
> (ibid., p. 58)
In a writing group, mentioned in the same book, the question was posed: What do we do for us, to keep our batteries charged, so that we can do our best for our students? This question is key, for if we are truly to remain growing, developing teachers, the focus must first be on us.

**A commitment and joy in lifelong learning**

It is at conferences that you will most often find those teachers who are not only keen to remain at the cutting edge of their profession, but are often the ones doing the cutting through. They may not be the most famous in our profession, nor the ones remunerated the best, for it is the joy in learning and discovery and development that provides the reward.

**Making opportunities for reflection**

“Experience alone, as John Dewey reminds us, is hollow without reflection. My own evolution as a teacher might not have resulted in any particular insights were it not for the ongoing opportunities I’ve had to think about my experiences as part of the larger context in which education takes place” (Nieto, 2003, p. 9).

Opportunities for reflection enable teachers to apply these constructive approaches to coping with burnout:

- Working smarter instead of working harder
- Setting specific, realistic goals rather than noble, abstract ones
- Doing the same thing differently, while changing what can be changed
- Breaking away, including honoring breaks as time to refresh oneself
- Taking things less personally
- Accentuating the positive
- ‘Knowing thyself’ (perhaps keeping a daily Stress & Tension Log)
- Rest and relaxation techniques
- Making a real transition between work and home each day
- A life of one’s own
- And, when necessary, changing jobs

(Maslach, 2003)

**Intellectual satisfaction**

A famous quotation attributed to Henry Moore is that “The secret of Life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to ... and the most important thing is – it must be something you cannot possibly do!” This harkens back to the statement that teachers find no two days the same; there are always new challenges, new learnings. “Good teachers think deeply and often about the craft of teaching and the process of learning. They are not simply technicians who know how to write good lesson plans and use collaborative groups effectively, although this, too is part of what they do. Above all, excellent teachers are engaged every day in intellectual work, the kind of serious undertaking that demands considerable attention and thought. … As intellectuals, they will combine reflection and action” (Nieto, 2003, p76).
Respect and belief in our students
In his book Lives on the Boundary (1989), Mike Rose describes teaching as “a kind of romance.” If respect and belief can be said to be equated with love for our students, love is one major force for keeping our passion for teaching alive. Our effectiveness as teachers pivots around the ways in which we demonstrate our love and how our students respond to these demonstrations.

Teachers at every level walk into their classrooms and literally close the door on their work, isolating themselves in ways that make collegial connections unlikely. Of course, self-isolation takes a great personal toll. But when teachers reach out, they find themselves less lonely, less afraid, less exhausted, less bored, and more alive. And the fruits of reaching out are professional as well as personal; a teacher who connects more deeply with students and colleagues is likely to find his or her work life transformed. Connecting with the need of our students leads us to challenge all the ways in which ‘business as usual’ fails to serve them well. Connecting with our colleagues gives us the collective courage necessary to make our teaching less responsive to arbitrary rules and more responsive to the truth of our students’ lives” (Intrator, 2002, p. xxii foreword by Parker Palmer).

Congruence, presence, JAZZ!!
The definition for congruence is in the section above on student success: Whatever the teacher is on the inside is also what he or she is on the outside. Parker Palmer in his seminal work The Courage to Teach (1998) wrote: “In every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students and to connect them with the subject depends less on the method I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my own selfhood – and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning (ibid., p. 11). Parker Palmer is also well known for stating that “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (ibid., 1998, p. 10). We teach who we are.

A colleague of mine who, like me, has been teaching for over 30 years, believes that for those of us who stay in the profession and continue loving it, the increasing fascination is with presence, being truly aware and mindful during teaching, connecting with the energy and dynamics of the actual learning that is taking place at each moment.

Implications for Teacher Education

Awareness of burnout should be available at the workplace and as part of training. If trainees had more accurate expectations about the work they are getting into and what the future offers in that profession, there would be fewer reality shocks. Training should also include developing the special ‘people skills’ that will be required to deal with delicate problems such as telling students that they have failed, for example. The value of learning to use both objective detachment and sensitive concern could be explored before the emotions are pushed.
Numerous researchers over the years have found that there are characteristics in common of successful teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse students. These teachers:

- Are among the most experienced teachers
- Place a high value on student’s identities (culture, race, language, gender, and experiences, among others)
- Connect learning to students’ lives
- Have high expectations for all students, even for those whom others may have given up on
- Stay committed to students in spite of obstacles that get in the way
- View parents and other community members as partners in education
- Create a safe haven for learning
- Dare to challenge the bureaucracy of the school and district
- Are resilient in the face of difficult situations
- Use active learning strategies
- Are willing and eager to experiment
- View themselves as lifelong learners
- Care about, respect, and love their students

(Nieto, 2003, p. 38-39)

What leaps out from this list is that so few of the professional development activities in which teachers engage (university courses in teacher preparation, in-service workshops, and so forth) focus on these skills or qualities. How, for instance, are prospective teachers taught to hold high, rigorous expectations for all students? Where do they learn to challenge the bureaucracy in schools? (Nieto, 2003, p. 39).

Teacher education programs need to emphasize that in the long run what energizes and re-inspires teachers are lifelong opportunities to grow with colleagues, a commitment to and belief in the value and joy of lifelong learning, opportunities for reflection and intellectual satisfaction, belief in our students, and the power and fascination of being truly present during teaching.

Closing

TO BE OF USE

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
Who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward.
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in the common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil
Hope vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

Marge Piercy

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References


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