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## A benefit to the profession: Teacher retention in the middle years

Claire Vander Wiel  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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A BENEFIT TO THE PROFESSION:  
TEACHER RETENTION IN THE MIDDLE YEARS

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors with Distinction

Claire Vander Wiel  
University of Northern Iowa  
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This Study by: Claire Vander Wiel

Entitled: A Benefit to the Profession: Teacher Retention in the Middle Years

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation University  
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Date

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Dr. Sheila Benson, Honors Thesis Advisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

Teacher retention refers to a current national issue of teachers leaving the profession in large numbers after teaching for few years. This topic is in the public eye at the moment; many people have seen news articles about how many teachers leave the profession and varying opinions about what needs to be done about it. There have been countless research studies done on this topic, the vast majority of which focus on government and public policies that lead to a harsh environment for teachers. These policies include low teacher pay and benefits, low support from parents and administrators, and a lack of opportunity to make decisions, along with many other issues (Hahs-Vaughn and Scherff 23). All of these pose serious problems for teachers, across the country and across grade levels.

While there is a lot that needs to be done in order to remedy this situation, much of it resides at district, state, and federal levels to change policies affecting teacher retention. Unfortunately, these policies are not something that an individual teacher can directly change, although teachers clearly are able to influence these changes. There will likely be many more teachers leaving the profession until administrations and the government revise these policies. In the meantime, teachers need a way to handle these various stressors in order to continue teaching long term.

### **Purpose**

In recent years, there have been many teachers leaving the profession at a much higher rate of turnover than normal. This is at least partially due to systemic problems within the field of education at district, state, and federal levels. The vast majority of teachers face these same challenges, but not everyone leaves the profession. This creates a problem of schools having to cycle through a great deal of teachers in a fairly short span of time as teachers leave the profession and new ones come in to take their place. While there is a lot of information

concerning the first five years of the teaching career, the research drops off at that point. After five years, teachers are no longer new within the profession, but they are not veteran teachers either. The problems clearly do not resolve themselves after these five years, but there may also be unique issues for these teachers compared to their first five years because they are no longer “beginner teachers.” Even with this logic, teachers past the five year point tend to get ignored because they have experience, and therefore it is assumed that they are adequately prepared to operate completely on their own. They do not receive the same amount of attention in research, mentoring, or support systems as their newer peers.

It takes many years for teachers to gain experience and be as effective as possible in helping their students learn. When teachers leave, this causes schools to cycle through new teachers without as many teachers staying for long periods of time and gaining the necessary experience (Shaw and Newton 101). Even once the teachers make it through their first few years, they are still honing their craft to maximize their effectiveness in the classroom. The trend of teachers leaving can ultimately have a negative effect on the students in the school, as new teachers are less experienced in teaching students. This project’s purpose, through examining teachers experiencing these challenges, is to show what can make the difference between continuing to teach or leaving the profession and what happens in this particular stage of the teaching career. This information will bring to light some of what happens at this stage in the teachers’ careers, which is missing from current research. This will also help teachers to identify what they can do to make it through this time in their careers in order to stay in the profession. Through my research, I hope to add relevant data to the study of teacher retention as well as find strategies that I can use as a teacher to overcome the same trials. Even with a small sample size, the information will provide a window of insight into this group.

## Literature Review

Teacher retention has proven to be a consistent issue for schools across the nation recently. While the rumored statistic that fifty percent of teachers will leave in five years does not seem to be the case, there is still a significant number leaving the profession, especially in those first five years of teaching (Cochran-Smith 19). In a five year study of beginning teachers by Gray and Taie, ten percent of the group did not return to teach the next year, and the percentage that left the profession decreased each year after the first, with a total of seventeen percent leaving in those five years (Gray and Taie 9). However, that means that the total percentage of teachers that left in those five years was still remarkably high. This migration away from the profession at such a high rate is alarming, especially as experienced teachers can help provide quality education for students. This can vary from district to district, though it is generally more of an issue in high-poverty areas (Hahs-Vaughn and Scherff 23). Teachers are leaving before they gain very much experience in their practice, causing a cycle of schools hiring new teachers who may or may not stay for very long. This can affect the students who watch as teachers continue to leave their school. However, like many other studies, the statistics only focus on the beginning of the careers.

There are countless research studies showing large-scale effects of teacher retention and external reasons why teachers leave the profession. Many of these issues appear nationwide, proving to be significant problems for teachers at various times in their careers. These include low salaries, problems with student discipline, a lack of support from parents and administration, poor working conditions, inadequate preparation, and little decision-making opportunity, according to large-scale studies of teachers (Hahs-Vaughn and Scherff 23). Most of these external factors come with the profession in the current educational climate and are not usually

within the teacher's direct control. For example, teachers cannot directly control which parents they interact with or what parents ask of them. That is a factor that they simply have to learn how to manage as they come across issues. While many studies show the reasons for large numbers of teachers leaving the profession, there is still work to be done on a smaller scale, looking in depth at the experiences of a few teachers (Hancock 432). In addition, most of these studies focus on beginning teachers, those in their first five years teaching.

There are other problems for teachers within the job itself that can create stress leading to a change in career. Many teachers are expected to lead extra-curricular activities on top of their already busy schedules, such as coaching, yearbook, or a debate team (Shaw and Newton 658). When they already work all day and have to grade homework or exams after school, this proves to be a high standard of how much time schools expect teachers to give up. There are also societal expectations for teachers that can be hard to live up to. Catherine Carter, a professor and researcher at Western Carolina University, describes how, especially thanks to Hollywood movies about teachers, society tends to view teachers as saints, doing the impossible to help students (Carter 65). While these stories can be uplifting, a teacher may enter a classroom expecting to see fabulous results, which rarely happens outside of movies. When there are great results because of someone's teaching, they may not always be apparent until many years later (Burke 30). Teachers do not always get to see their students succeed in the long run, as they usually only work with any given student for a year. This situation can lead to teachers feeling ineffective, even if they are in fact influencing the lives of their students in great ways. As many teachers choose the profession in order to make a difference for the next generation of students, a feeling of impotency could greatly affect how worthwhile they believe staying in the profession would be.

Some teachers, despite all of these obstacles, manage to survive and even thrive in the profession. There are many theories on why this may be the case, although more research needs to be done in this area. For instance, there are methods of coping with the problems that arise in the classroom. Sonia Nieto, in her book *Why We Teach*, cites one particular teacher who writes letters to troublesome students as a way to work through issues with them, whether they intend on delivering the letter or not (78). These methods of coping clearly vary from teacher to teacher, as not everyone writes letters as a specific way to deal with the stress. However, teachers with specific strategies in place may be better able to deal with whatever problems arise from day to day.

Experts have suggested reasons why some teachers manage to stay in the profession despite the problems they face day to day, even making active decisions to persevere through their obstacles. Many find personal growth and fulfillment in helping students achieve whatever it is that the student dreams of doing (Nieto 141). This fulfillment, for which many teachers enter the profession, can be a powerful motivator. Many teachers also stay because of a passion for social justice, and education is a way for them to help those that are in disadvantaged situations (Nieto 213). These are both examples of teachers' reasons for entering the profession in the first place, which may be powerful enough to help teachers through all of the issues they face. Resilience, the ability to adapt to issues as they appear and use support systems to cope, is a powerful trait that is necessary for teachers today (Doney 653). These are just a few of the internal traits that can aid teachers in this difficult environment. As many teachers survive their first five years and continue to teach, they need strategies to manage all the demands encompassed in their job.



The vast majority of current research focuses on these teachers in their first five years of teaching. Beyond this particular time, there is very little information about the struggles of teachers and their retention rates. This lack of research would suggest that once a teacher begins their sixth year of teaching, all these problems of retention vanish. However, this is not a reasonable conclusion that these teachers' situations change that dramatically between two seemingly trivial years in their careers. There is a large hole in the research surrounding teacher retention, especially for these teachers in the middle years of their careers. This study focuses on this lack of research beyond a specific demographic of teachers.

### **Research Questions to be Answered**

There are two main research questions that this project strives to answer, both related to the issue of teacher retention. These are interconnected, relying on one another to find solutions to this issue of retention and teacher satisfaction. The first question revolves around what happens in the “middle years” of teaching, which is currently missing from research which ends after five years of teacher experience in the classroom. Research has suggested that a substantial percentage of teachers leave the profession within five years of beginning their careers (Gray and Taie 3). What happens after the first five years compared to what experts already know about the first part of the teaching career? The second research question focuses more specifically on what is happening during this time as so many teachers are considering leaving. While the majority of teachers are facing similar challenges during this time in their careers, why do some teachers stay in the field while others do not in similar circumstances?

### **Methodology**

This project is comprised of semi-structured interviews with Iowa English teachers who are in their middle years of teaching. As the research works with human subjects, the

Institutional Review Board (IRB) first had to approve the study. After IRB approved the work, the researcher chose and contacted five English teachers through the Iowa Council of Teachers of English, a state affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English, the primary professional organization for English language arts teachers, with five to ten years of experience who self-selected to participate in this study. The interview questions then focused on the three main research questions. See appendix for the list of questions.

Because teachers are especially busy at the beginning of a new school year, the teachers were contacted during the summer to set up interviews, creating a higher likelihood of teacher willingness to participate. The interviews were scheduled at the teachers' convenience and were conducted either face-to-face or via a video chat application. The data was then compiled and analyzed during the University of Northern Iowa's fall semester 2016. In this report, participants are given pseudonyms to protect any privacy and confidential information.

## **Results**

These five teachers, while all teachers in Iowa, still come from different work experiences that affect how they view these problems. They all self-described their work environments, including demographics of the students and the climates of their particular schools and administrations.

The first teacher, Sara, is a middle school teacher at a small school in rural Iowa. Like many small towns, the school is fairly diverse, owing to large factory farms that bring workers to the area. This is also related to a high level of rural poverty within the school. Teaching in such a small middle school, Sara is the entire English department for her school, and she is responsible for teaching the entirety of two grade levels.

The second teacher, Molly, has taught in two very different environments. As a new teacher, she taught in a small town with a very high level of diversity, including many English language learners. In this school, she had problems motivating her students to do their work. Now, Molly teaches high school in an urban area with a high number of professional white collar positions. As a result, a lot of her students are highly motivated academically because of their parents and the environment that they have grown up in.

The third teacher, Olivia, has taught in the same school district for her full career in a medium-sized town in Iowa. She began teaching English at the high school level and is currently teaching both middle and high school level classes as a reading specialist. With this position, she teaches reading along with co-teaching English classes. Like many other towns this size in Iowa, they have seen an influx of diverse populations recently, including some migrant populations where students will move to town with their families for a period of time before moving away again.

The fourth teacher, Hope, has taught at four different schools at a variety of population levels, including one school where she was a long-term substitute teacher for a year. Her current school is a town with a high white collar population and very little diversity within the school.

Finally, the fifth teacher, Ellie, has taught middle school up until this year, when she began teaching high school. She started at an inner city urban school and moved to another middle school in a fairly urban area. At her first school, she encountered a very diverse population with many of the students speaking different first languages. This school is set up in teams of teachers that she interacted with and planned with every day. The second school is much less diverse, and it centers on individual teaching rather than in groups.

The five teachers talked about a wide variety of subjects in their interviews. Within these interviews, they all spoke about their experiences as a teacher past their first five years in the classroom. They showed the problems that they currently face in their jobs and how they go about managing them. With respect to the second research question on internal differences that can make an impact on teacher retention, three basic themes emerged: intentionality, perspective, and self-advocacy. For these women, much of staying in the profession for as long as they have is based on an intentionality of what they are doing and what they can do. Staying positive allows them to make the best of inevitable bad situations that arise. They also have to know what they can handle, both in interactive situations such as the teachers' lounge, number of papers they need to grade, and outside of work commitments. Related to this intentionality, they all keep a humble perspective on themselves and their situations as teachers. Teachers have to remember that they do not know everything that there is to know about their subject or about teaching as a practice and profession. Rather, they all have things that they can learn from their students and from each other, and this is important in helping them remember why things do not always go perfectly and to not expect them to. Finally, these teachers have all developed the ability to advocate for themselves, knowing what they need to stay effective and making sure that they get it one way or another.

These three categories, intentionality, perspective, and advocacy, have many different factors, and they intersect in many situations. However, these teachers have observed specific methods to continue to teach and stay satisfied with their job. This is something many teachers struggle with, and it may cause them to leave the profession. These teachers have slowly developed strategies to help themselves with these issues. These strategies could be connected to

internal reasons why some teachers leave the profession while others do not in similar circumstances.

### **Intentionality**

Many teachers spoke of the fact that they are large critics of themselves, especially when things go wrong, which they inevitably will. When a parent becomes angry about something the teacher said, or they are not able to get through to that one student, or they just simply have a bad day, all of them spoke of having to come to terms with what happened rather than being burdened by one interaction. While this on the surface seems like very simple advice, their stories were very profound given the situations that they found themselves in. Ellie spoke about this when she was doubting whether or not she was meant to be a teacher at all. Her solution was simple: “I have to acknowledge that I am a benefit to the profession. That’s not to say that I’m perfect or I have it all figured out, but that I am on the whole a positive influence on the world of teaching and not negative” (interview August 3, 2016).

Along these same lines, the teachers all spoke about being very intentional with how they viewed situations or what they did on a daily basis. Many teachers spoke about the “dreaded teachers’ lounge,” where typically negativity runs rampant. Teachers’ lounges are known as being places where teachers sit around and complain to one another, continuing a constant cycle of negativity (Whitaker and Breaux 110). None of these participants said that they avoided the situation altogether, but rather that they had to self-monitor in order to know what would be best for them on any given day. Ellie also spoke about this issue: “you don’t need to avoid the teachers’ lounge all together, but you have to know how you feel and how well you can handle it on a given day. You have to be able to say ‘I am in a good place today and if the conversation

goes negative I can be the voice of reason,’ or ‘If it is bad today I’m going down with the ship’” (interview August 3, 2016).

This particular piece of advice is very practical, pertaining to more than just the one situation of the teachers’ lounge. It speaks, rather, of a very deep sort of reflection and self-awareness, one that can be used as a defensive mechanism if the teacher begins feeling particularly negative or frustrated. Instead of going to a situation that can multiply those feelings for several people all in a room together, the teacher can intentionally do something that will lift them up, such as talking to one friend who can comfort them rather than intensify their feelings, or simply going on a walk and having some quiet time.

In addition, several teachers spoke about needing to keep their sense of humor active in their day to day lives. Rather than feeling angry or guilty about a situation with a student or teacher, they can choose to laugh about it and keep it from becoming bigger than the issue actually is. This is applicable to all teachers, regardless of their particular personality or sense of humor. Sara talked about her strategic positivity:

[It’s] not that you have to just be that happy person all the time. I’m certainly not, I always lean more towards sarcasm and saltiness than just pure happiness, but I guess the ability to recognize that you need positivity or when you need positivity . . . . That might be why a lot of people quit too, because it can be really easy to get sucked into the negativity that comes from both outside of schools, thinking it’s terrible, I’m doing a horrible job. (interview July 14, 2016)

This ability to recognize needs within oneself seems to be one particular factor that can help a teacher to stay in the profession, something teachers themselves can do to intentionally help themselves. While this clearly takes time to master, as all of these teachers have several years of

experience teaching and clearly state that they have not mastered this skill, many of them have gotten to the point, as they state, that they can recognize this need within themselves. This may come with time, perhaps more than the five years to which the literature would point to.

One ever present part of the teacher life, especially for those teaching English, is the paper load. If gone unchecked, the number of papers and assignments to grade can get to the point where teachers go home after working all day and stay up half the night grading to get the papers back to their students as soon as possible. Olivia explained how her typical day went when she started teaching:

The amount of work that goes beyond the school day was hard for me as a young teacher, that I'm there from 7:30 to 4:30 plus there's all these papers to check, so I ruin my evenings and weekends sometimes. I think good teachers are willing to do that, but it burns you out if that's what you're doing 7:30 in the morning to 8:30 at night plus on weekends. It's kind of an energy and time suck. (interview July 28, 2016)

Every participant in this study mentioned something about how they manage this, to avoid becoming what is known as an "English Martyr." As Ellie defined it, becoming a martyr means "sacrificing yourself for the job without putting yourself as a person into the equation. It can cause teachers to burn out fast" (interview August 3, 2016). The participants all spoke to the fact that English teachers especially can easily not keep themselves in check, and before they know it, they have spent all of their free time devoted to their job instead of intentionally setting time aside for themselves.

Many of the teachers had specific strategies put into place to keep themselves from falling back into this trap that tends to happen early on in a teaching career. Sara, whose middle school classroom centers around writing, spoke about the struggle to keep those two different

ideas together: “I don’t think you can talk about English without dealing with the paper load and the fact that the one proven way to make kids better writers is to have them write frequently. . . . somewhere in those first few years of teaching, you lose track of how much you love reading and writing because you’ve turned into this editor or evaluator instead of an actual reader and writer” (interview July 14, 2016). This particular teacher handles this by selecting what should be truly graded and what is there for the students to write so that they can continually practice their craft. This, along with strategically pacing herself in how many papers she has to grade per day, helps keep her from feeling overwhelmed and ultimately burning out.

Based on the interviews with these five participants, intentionality seems to be a very important role in keeping a teacher, no matter the number of years of experience, from burning out. Intentionality can manifest itself in many different ways depending on the teacher, such as knowing when to be self-critical and when to acknowledge what they do well, or being aware of their current state of mind and what is going to be most helpful to them mentally in a given situation. No matter what the situation is, this ability to self-monitor helps these teachers to be in control of what they are doing and how they feel, allowing them to control their environment rather than simply reacting to it.

### **Perspective**

Along with intentionality, based on the actions of the teacher, all of the teachers brought up some examples of how they keep perspective within their jobs. Perspective is much more of a mindset, where the teacher remembers what their job is and what their relationship to the students should be. This can include things like a potential teacher ego that can build up from always playing the teacher role in the classroom rather than the student role, having a realistic view of students, and keeping in mind their experience level. The latter plays an especially



important role for these teachers in the middle years of their career, when they are no longer new but are not necessarily the veterans either. The participants gave a wide variety of responses to this question on their perceived veteran status.

Many of the teachers talked about keeping their ego in check. Even though these teachers all have experience in the classroom, they still struggle with feeling like they have it all together and remembering that they really do not. As Sara stated, it is easy to let the power of being a teacher go to your head: “I think there’s a real problem with letting it go to your head that you’re the expert in the classroom and then somehow that makes you feel like you know everything you need to know, because you know more than your students. I’m always going to be a better writer than 13 year olds. Good for me, you know?” (interview July 14, 2016). This perspective, perhaps a reality check, seems to be important to the participants. Many of them spoke also of the need to keep learning as a teacher, rather than become static as the all-knowing teacher who does not need to learn anything more.

Part of the difference between teachers in those first five years of teaching and in the next five years is their status in the school as a veteran, novice, or somewhere in between. Relating to the first research question, these teachers seem to have to hold a perspective on their veteran status that is not always clear. All participants were asked whether or not they are considered veterans in their schools, but none of them gave straightforward answers. The middle time between five and ten years of teaching seems to be an odd in between phase for many of them. They have been there for a few years, and yet they can still be seen as novices, especially if they have switched schools. As Molly said, “I feel that teaching is something nobody’s ever going to be good at. You’re always constantly changing and learning new things and getting better than what you were. So I don’t think I’ll ever be a veteran teacher, or feel like it. The number of

whatever, I can be in this profession for 10 years and I think I'll still feel like a newbie” (interview July 21, 2016). None of them definitely said that they are the expert, or that they know completely what they are doing.

Some of the teachers were more confident than others with respect to this question about their veteran status. However, there was a definite sense of humility in their views of themselves. For example, Molly was the most outright in saying she was not a veteran, nor will she ever be. Sara said that she does have quite a few years of experience now, but people do not necessarily view her as one of the older teachers, even though she has leadership positions within the school. Hope, on the other end, talked about the administration's confidence and trust in her teaching abilities. None of the teachers had straightforward answers to the question of their veteran status within the schools, though they all have five to ten years of experience. These teachers in their middle years are in a place that is difficult to define. However, they all needed some frame of reference for what their status is within the school when they fall between the new teachers and those that have been teaching for decades.

In addition to keeping their abilities in perspective for their own sanity, Hope also mentioned looking at her own strengths and weaknesses and using that as a way to inform her practice and figure out how she can be a better teacher:

I think that's being very realistic, knowing what you can improve on, working to improve it from year to year, especially the weaknesses. You don't want to be thinking negatively all the time either, but if you're thinking about the things that you need to improve on, the things that you can do better, and if you're actually working to do that, I think you're going to become a better teacher, a better person. (interview July 30, 2016)

Considering the fact that most of these teachers do not view themselves as veterans, Hope uses this strategy specifically to make sure that she does not stay static as a teacher but is always working on improving.

Many teachers also mentioned that it is easy for them to begin blaming their students for problems rather than remembering that the kids generally mean no harm and do not know how they affect teachers. As several teachers pointed out, this switch in perspective has helped them stay away from bitterness that can arise in different classroom environments. Molly talked about this, especially in her first school where she had trouble getting her students motivated: “And always just keeping in mind that there are good kids there. They’re all out there, they’re all good kids. They just have some kind of issue, and you can’t fix everything, but you can always try” (interview July 21, 2016). Oftentimes, when students do act up in some way, it is because of an underlying problem, not simply something for which the teacher is responsible. However, in the moment when dealing with a problem in the classroom, it is easy for teachers to overlook this and find a simpler answer that has to do with the students themselves. As Molly and several others pointed to, a perspective change that keeps these variables in mind makes it much easier to deal with these situations and not become burned out.

This idea of perspective manifests itself in many different ways in the classroom. When entrenched in one environment day after day, it is easy to overlook things and only see people in one way. Instead, these teachers have discovered that they have to actively think about their perspective on the issues so that they do not become entrapped in one way of thinking. These perspectives can exist between teacher and student and also between teachers. With regards to their relationships with students, teachers have to remember that, although they are the teacher in the classroom, they are not all-knowing. This ego-check helps them to not feel superior to the

students that they are teaching just because they have had more years of experience studying a particular author or practicing writing. They also have to remember that kids are going to be kids, and their students will not always act in the most mature or responsible way. This is not something that they should always worry over, because it is not necessarily due to something they did.

When thinking about relationships between teachers, these participants had a wide variety of answers, but most of them centered around remembering that they do not have it all together. These teachers, having between five and ten years of classroom experience, for the most part said they do not consider themselves to have veteran status in the schools. Rather, they all recognize that they are still learning and will probably never finish learning. Overall, the participants demonstrated how changing their perspective in their jobs alleviates stress and helps them to feel satisfied in what they are doing.

### **Advocacy**

An overwhelming theme arose out of the study that teachers want and need professional development to remain happy and satisfied in the profession. However, their administrations were not always supportive in helping them to find worthwhile professional development. Thus, these teachers advocated for themselves within their schools to make sure they had the opportunity to take part in the programs that they needed. Several teachers spoke specifically of programs that saved them when they were at the point of not being able to take any more from the profession. For example, one teacher spoke of a summer development program that pulled her back into enjoyment of teaching: “And then I actually got accepted for a program with the Folger Shakespeare library in DC, and that month that I was there just replenished me, and it really made me feel important and that I can do a lot of things” (Interview July 21, 2016). Every

teacher had a unique story of what exact program helped them to stay in the profession and improve their teaching.

Interestingly, this idea stands in contrast to the general rumor that teachers need more accountability measures to make sure that they teach in an effective manner (The Every Student Succeeds Act: Explained). Instead, every single teacher spoke about the fact that they want professional development to improve their practice and usually have to fight to get the days off, whatever the professional development may be. Several spoke of Master's programs; others spoke of conferences and specific programs, such as Molly's Folger Shakespeare program in Washington D.C. This served several purposes for the participants: they learned new techniques and lessons to directly apply to their classrooms, they gained community with other people in similar situations going through the same doubts and problems, and they gained respect within their schools and departments because they were taking charge of their own learning.

One concept that was the same across the board from all participants in the study was the importance of finding community, no matter what stage in their career. Every single teacher talked about needing a group to connect with, specifically people within the same profession. Several noted how the community did not come automatically with their position. Instead, they had to use a form of advocacy to seek out their own form of community with other teachers. Ellie talked about the change she experienced going from a supportive department to a department more individually focused: "I did not have the colleague relationships. It was the junior high set up, now things are a little different in terms of how we're supporting people at the junior high level, but it was an isolating experience. Everybody was welcoming, relatively, but moving from a team philosophy to an isolated experience was very challenging" (interview August 3, 2016). A community of others in similar situations can provide support for the many

scenarios that can come up that a teacher has not experienced. This is especially common for newer teachers who simply do not have as many hours of classroom experience. Though it is very helpful to have people in the immediate department to help, there are still opportunities for those that are not in that situation.

This invariable response from these teachers can be traced back to where they all learned of this study. All of these participants were found through the Iowa Council of Teachers of English, a professional organization that helps teachers to connect to one another and give each other support with any specific problems that might arise in their classrooms. Thus, it makes sense that these teachers in particular would find community important, but that does not negate this response. They all realize the value of this organization where they can participate in discussions with other professionals. Regardless of where this community comes from and whether it is in person or online, all teachers need a support system in order to protect themselves.

In addition to advocacy in speaking up to administration about getting time for professional development and taking initiative in finding a community, teachers can also advocate for themselves in terms of how much time teaching takes in their lives. One of the most common complaints, especially for English teachers, is the time commitment to the job. Every single participant brought this up somewhere in the interview as a difficult part of their position. Molly shared the battle inside her head when she feels stretched for time: “As a teacher, you feel guilty if you’re not always grading or not always doing something about it. And so when you are there and you have time for yourself, you kind of feel guilty because you should be doing other things or planning lessons or things like that” (interview July 21, 2016). This guilt that Molly described is very common among teachers, and it leads to many problems. However, teachers

can advocate for themselves by finding methods of protecting themselves from the stress that can create dissatisfaction and burnout.

Rather than fighting themselves constantly to keep up with everything that they have to do outside of school, many teachers decide to reorganize their classrooms so they work to their advantage. Many times, this reorganization can even work to the advantage of their students, which is ultimately what is important to them. Even with modifying their classes, however, the actual workload can go either way, or vary depending on what students need on that particular day. For example, Ellie cited a time when she had to adjust everything because it was not going to get done otherwise: “I didn’t have time this Saturday to grade, so instead I had 2 minute conferences with each student about their thesis instead of me taking home those 100 theses to grade” (interview August 3, 2016). This simple change gave her a needed break for that weekend, but it also gave the students the opportunity to talk directly to their teacher about their thesis rather than reading her comments later on a piece of paper.

Other situations can add work to the teacher’s plate, but more meaningful work does not necessarily have the same burnout effect. Rather than mindlessly grading papers because they were supposed to be assigned, Sara spoke about how she made her classroom more authentic:

I’ve been happier but I don’t know if it’s been easier, because if anything I’ve actually created more work for myself in my effort to continually grow and change and try new things and change them . . . . And so I think better classes for me, better practice for me, led to just more happiness. I’m happier, my kids are happier, I actually want to be there. Way more fulfilling, because it’s authentic. It’s not just showing up for the job.

(interview July 14, 2016)

In this particular situation, the teacher technically added work to what she had to do because she is always planning and trying to improve her practice. However, she also talked about a feeling of satisfaction she has with improved effectiveness in her classroom. Theoretically, a busy yet effective classroom could make for a more satisfied teacher who is less likely to leave the profession than a classroom where the teacher does not feel like it is as effective as it could be, but they have less work outside of the average school day.

All of the participants spoke about learning to advocate for themselves in several areas of their jobs in order to remain in a place where they can continue teaching long term. This can take place in how they organize their classrooms to protect their free time, how they find community and people to lean on and share struggles with, and how they interact with administrators and get time to go to professional development.

Overall, these teachers in their middle years have found strategies that have helped them to remain in the profession and feel satisfied about what they are doing. Most of them have gone through times where they considered leaving the profession, based on their environments and how they interacted with what is happening around them, be it administrations, other teachers, or students. However, all of them are still active teachers past the five year mark that most current research states is where teacher retention is an issue. These participants have used intentionality, perspective, and advocacy to create environments that allow them to work at a sustainable level and feel satisfied in what they do.

### **Limitations**

This study started by finding teachers through the Iowa Council of Teachers of English, meaning that all of these teachers are active participants in the organization to have found the announcement in the first place. Beyond that, they all self-selected, meaning that they



volunteered to do the study, most likely because of a preexisting interest in the topic. This could potentially bring a bias to the study, as these may all be teachers who have thought about or researched this issue extensively before talking about their views. In future research, departments as a whole could be interviewed one on one to see the range of responses from a department or several schools. This could increase the likelihood of getting wider ranges of responses.

As these participants alluded to, some teachers are not this satisfied or content with their jobs after the five year mark. Some stay in the profession, but they do not have these same strategies for coping. With cross-sections of interviews rather than purely self-selected participants, the odds of finding these other voices in the conversation would be much higher.

In addition, this study consisted of only five teachers who were interviewed. For the results to be conclusive, many more teachers would have to be interviewed from this demographic group. Perhaps these specific teachers, based on one of many possible factors, all fall on the same side of these issues, and there are other opinions that did not appear in this study.

### **Further Research and Conclusion**

While most of the teachers spoke along the same themes when asked these questions, Olivia stood out as an outlier in many of her responses. If more research is to be done on this issue, it would be interesting to interview more teachers along this same mindset to see if any themes arise. While most teachers spoke for thirty minutes or more during the interview, Olivia did not have as much to say. This could be an issue simply of being quieter, or it could be a lack of reflection where she does not have as much to say on this subject. In the content of the interviews, in addition, Olivia spoke about the issues facing teachers very differently. For example, most teachers spoke about the fact that blaming the kids has not helped them to come

to terms with the stresses of their positions. Olivia, contrastingly, mentioned this generation of students as being one issue that challenges her as a teacher. She also spoke about teaching becoming easier after five years because at that point they are on “cruise control.” By comparison, other teachers spoke about giving themselves more work by revamping classrooms and feeling more satisfied that way. There are many possible reasons why these answers could be different from the other four teachers who were interviewed. In a continued study, teachers like her could be interviewed and observed to see differences in teaching style and how they manage themselves in the profession. There are many things that could differentiate, such as how much reflecting happens, which is often recommended for all teachers to improve their practice.

In addition to some variation in responses, this demographic group of teachers with between five and ten years of experience in the classroom is very underrepresented in the research on this topic in general. Most research focuses on the first five years of teaching in the classroom, as that is when the majority of teachers seem to leave the profession. However, the problems do not stop after year five, as these participants all demonstrated. For there to be an understanding of what is really happening to these teachers in terms of retention rates and satisfaction in the profession, more research needs to be done on a much larger scale. Rather than finding answers to all of these questions, this project was meant to be the start of a national conversation on teacher retention past the five year point that is currently missing from research.

This study shows the need for further research with this particular demographic of teachers who have passed the five year point in their careers. These teachers who, according to traditional research have surpassed the point where retention and satisfaction is an issue, clearly have not achieved a status of not needing guidance or intentional support for themselves. In these middle years, teachers have gained experience and developed strategies that have helped them

stay in the profession up to this point, including an intentionality in their attitudes and workload, perspective on their environment and students, and advocacy in getting professional development and their classroom environment. These may be internal factors that could help teachers stay in the profession in addition to the external factors that current research cites. However, there are still significant issues that these teachers face daily like all teachers do, despite differences in their levels of experience.

By opening research to a broader range of teachers with varying experiences, teachers across the spectrum of years in the classroom could be helped to remain satisfied and teach long-term. This outcome would be to the benefit of teachers, schools, and students. Teachers would have the time to refine their craft and become the most effective educators possible. Schools would have more teachers staying from year to year and therefore have a more consistent faculty. Students, most importantly, would benefit from the best possible teachers with years of experience. Continued research within the field of teacher retention would benefit the profession as a whole.

## **Appendix**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **First five years compared to years five through ten**

How many years have you been teaching?

Do you see any challenges unique to your current stage of teaching?

Are you considered a veteran teacher in your school? A fairly new teacher?

Does anything change after the first five years or so in the profession?

Why do you think research focuses on the struggles of teachers in their first five years of teaching?

Are these struggles the same for teachers with more experience?

#### **Differences between those who stay and those who leave**

What are some of the challenges you personally face as a teacher?

How do you deal with the problems and stress of your career?

Have you ever considered leaving the teaching profession?

If yes, what caused you to consider this?

What do you think are the main reasons why teachers leave?

Do you see any individual characteristics/internal factors that make a difference in continuing to teach?

Why did you become a teacher in the first place?

#### **Advice for a Preservice Teacher**

Is there any advice you would give me as a preservice teacher looking at the issue of teacher retention?

Is there any way that I can help myself to be able to teach long term?

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