

Tensions & TRIUMPHS

IN THE EARLY YEARS OF TEACHING



Real-World Findings and Advice for **Supporting** New Teachers

Susi Long

Ami Abramson

April Boone

Carly Borchelt

Robbie Kalish

Erin Miller

Julie Parks

Carmen Tisdale

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Introduction

Susi Long

It was Monday or Tuesday that I left for work feeling so apathetic. It was one of those beautiful fall mornings. I wanted to be excited about where I was going and what I was doing, but I wasn't. I didn't dread going to work; I simply wasn't excited or enthusiastic. How sad. I've wanted to teach since I was a little girl. Not because it was an appropriate thing for a little girl to grow up and do, not because I wanted a job compatible with raising a family, and certainly not because it was "easy" or "nondemanding." I described my desire to teach in my essays for job interviews as a passion. Until this year, it was a passion. Now, it's not.

These are the words of a first-year teacher. She is one of seven teachers who tell their stories in this book. Ami, April, Carly, Carmen, Erin, Julie, and Robbie graduated with master's degrees from an initial certification program.¹ Excited and full of energy, they set out to look for teaching jobs. They shared specific beliefs about teaching and learning, and a real vigor for bringing those beliefs to life. They were knowledgeable, confident, and had an overwhelming desire to make a difference in the lives of children and in the field of education. Knowing that university study was just the beginning of their education, they looked forward to learning from and with passionate colleagues and administrators. At the same time, they were aware of a pedagogical status quo in public schools that was increasingly defined by fears related to high-stakes testing. They worried about the narrowing of curricula as more and more schools addressed testing pressures by focusing on discrete skills, often at the expense of in-depth, intellectual explorations of ideas. Having experienced opportunities to learn through inquiry-based collaboration with other learners and having observed public school settings that valued the same depth of teaching and learning, they felt strongly about bringing those kinds of experiences into their own classrooms. They believed it could happen. They were positive and hopeful.

Then realities hit. While most of them were encouraged by their first days in the classroom, it didn't take long for them to encounter barriers as they worked to bring visions of great teaching to life. For some, the challenges seemed almost insurmountable. After only weeks in the classroom, excitement, confidence, energy, and enthusiasm were

replaced by self-doubt, feelings of isolation, and disappointment. They said things like: “I had such hopes and dreams for how my classroom would be. It seems so far from that”; “There is too much to even write about. The problems run so deep that no matter what I do, I can never seem to get to the heart of it”; and “I felt horrible all day long. I came home and cried harder and longer than I have all year.” Some of them were so disillusioned they began to question their own competence: “What if I just don’t have what it takes?”; “My biggest fear is that I’m not talented enough to pull this teaching thing off.” Most disturbing was the deep disappointment experienced by some as they felt the heart and soul of the teachers they hoped to be slipping away. One new teacher wrote, “I’m losing a sense of who I am. I don’t even know the person who graduated less than a year ago. If I leave now, maybe I can find her again. If I don’t leave, I think I’ll soon be unrecognizable to us all.”

What happened to these amazing young teachers? Why did some lose their self-confidence and passion for teaching so quickly? Why did they begin to second-guess their knowledge and convictions? Was it merely inexperience? Did they simply need to mature as teachers? Or were there other barriers that made teaching so difficult? For those who did not experience such disappointment, what made the difference?

This book draws from data collected over seven years—retrospective data from the preservice year and data collected during their first six years in the classroom—as these teachers negotiated their way in the teaching profession. The intent of the study was to better understand barriers and support in the early years of teaching: What challenges cause new teachers to question their ability to teach and their desire to remain in the profession? What kind of support sustains and exhilarates them? As a university instructor in their graduate program, I initiated the study, but, as described in Chapter 2, we soon became collaborators in a joint endeavor. By the end of the first year, the work was no longer defined as professor-studying-teachers; we were full partners in the study. As co-researchers, we made research decisions and collected, organized, analyzed, and wrote about data together. Our collaboration meant that parallels to my experiences also became a part of the data. And it meant that we became co-authors as dreams of this book became a reality.

The findings shared in this book build from the preservice days, the job hunt, and the first days of teaching, through the next six years. We share stories of success, but we also illuminate tensions and challenges. We describe struggles, not to dwell on the negative but to address a national dilemma—the fact that we lose almost a third of all new

teachers within the first year of teaching and almost half of them by the end of their fifth year (Ingersoll, 2002). Through our analysis of seven years of data, we offer insights about conditions that drive new teachers out of the profession or that allow them to slip toward the very status quo they set out to change. We hope that our work provides a foundation for asking hard questions about the responsibility of every educator to prevent struggles and to provide support as new teachers work to bring visions of great teaching to life.

This Book: What You Will Find as You Read

Before completing the final manuscript of this book, we sent drafts to twenty-seven outside readers representing a range of educators—preservice teachers, new and experienced teachers, school and district administrators, and university faculty. We discussed their responses at length and used them to deepen our analyses of data. Responses from outside readers also helped us address interests and concerns from the broad audience we hoped to reach. University faculty, for example, often looked for our ability to build strong arguments based on solid analyses of data that included anomalies as well as consistencies. Classroom teachers affirmed our conviction that stories from our personal lives, while not typically found in professional books, were integral to our teaching stories. They wanted to know us as human beings who bring personal histories and family realities to our work as teachers. They helped us see that many of the challenges new teachers face are not unlike those that experienced teachers face every day. Administrators helped us see that there are many sides to every story, which led to deeper convictions about the importance of working together to promote open conversations that encourage real communication. Teacher-researchers pointed out that descriptions of methodology—how we planned and carried out our study—help others see possibilities for collecting and analyzing data in their own work. And new teachers urged us to validate their concerns and frustrations, but also to provide suggestions they could use in negotiating their own early years of teaching.

Feedback also helped us see that the book can be read in different ways. As one reader said, “it can be read from front to back or a chapter as needed.” While that is true, the text is, at its heart, the story of eight educators seeking to understand what happens to new teachers. As such, we think readers will have a greater appreciation for and understanding of important issues and implications if the text is read

as the story unfolds. Groundwork is laid in the early chapters that brings deeper meaning to stories told later in the book.

Chapter 1, “That September Evening,” opens as our group met at Erin’s house in September of their first year of teaching. The chapter describes the excitement with which we came together and the rapid deterioration of the façade that all was well—the exposure of realities behind the happy talk. We use the events of the evening to introduce issues explored in detail throughout the rest of the book. The chapter moves from the collective voice of the seven teachers to my voice, explaining how and why I initiated the study, and then into autobiographical narratives that allow each of us to shake hands with readers—to share who we are, how we became teachers, and what led us to this project.

Chapter 2, “Becoming Us: Eight Teacher Researchers,” describes the evolution of our group from our first days together through the last days of writing the manuscript that became this book—how we grew as researchers, writers, and friends through the process of collecting, analyzing, and writing about data. It is an important process to follow. To appreciate the impact of issues described in later chapters, it is helpful to know what we did to capture and understand early teaching experiences. This chapter communicates the depth, breadth, and rigor of our research while helping readers see possibilities for examining teaching and learning in their own contexts.

Chapter 3, “The Teachers We Hoped We Would Be,” uses stories from the preservice year to describe these teachers’ beliefs as they left the university. To appreciate the triumphs as well as tensions expressed later in the book, it is important to know the beliefs they held entering the profession. This chapter also provides a basis from which implications for university preservice experiences are considered in Chapter 8, as well as a foundation for drawing comparisons and contrasts to convictions expressed seven years later, described in Chapter 9.

Chapter 4, “We Were Going to Be Teachers *for Real*,” moves from the end of the preservice year into the job hunt and the first weeks of school. Ideas embedded throughout the chapter will be helpful for new and prospective teachers as they look for jobs, set up classrooms, and meet their students for the first time. In this chapter, triumphs are shared, but the first tensions also begin to appear as new teachers work to put their beliefs into practice.

Chapter 5, “Living Up to a Vision: The Being Perfect Disease,” is an exploration of issues faced as these teachers tried to live up to their visions of great teaching. They share stories that illuminate their disap-

pointment in slipping toward the status quo, what happens when visions and mandates collide, frustrations in trying to pin down and implement ideas from graduate school, their love-hate relationship with professional books, the struggle to engage every child, the sense of being overwhelmed with *stuff* that teachers have to do every day, and the challenges of trying to juggle work and life.

Chapter 6, “Administrators and Colleagues, We Need You,” focuses on the critical roles of administrators and colleagues in the lives of new teachers. The stories in the first half of this chapter describe ways that administrators can set the tone for schools that foster collaboration, joy in teaching, and professional growth, or, conversely, how their actions can contribute to teachers’ loss of confidence, passion, and delight in the profession. In the second half of the chapter, we discuss collegial relationships, mentors, and induction programs. Stories from our data contrast the feeling of being alone in a school to that of being in the company of kind, supportive colleagues who are fellow learners.

Chapter 7, “Being Political: New Teachers, You *Do* Have a Voice,” shares ways in which these teachers effected change even when they felt the least successful. We wrote this chapter to show how easy it is for new teachers to overlook the strong and wonderful things they do—the actions they take that make a difference in their own lives, in the lives of children, and in the profession at large. We raise questions about how institutional policies, high-stakes testing in particular, are often at the core of barriers that new teachers may perceive as merely personal challenges.

Chapter 8, “How Can You Help?,” is divided into separate sections, each speaking directly to specific educational stakeholders: administrators, directors of induction and mentorship programs, colleagues of new teachers, university faculty and internship coordinators, job seekers, and new teachers. The chapter provides suggestions in answer to the question: What might every educator, including the new teacher, do to support the energy, fragility, knowledge, and drive that new teachers bring to the profession?

Chapter 9, “Our Visions Today,” returns to individual narratives to ask: Where are we now? What are our current beliefs? What triumphs and tensions do we experience today, seven years after graduation from our teaching certification program? What questions remain? Although this chapter ends the book, it does not provide “I’ve-come-full-circle” stories or happy endings in a traditional sense. We describe convictions and beliefs that are stronger than ever, but also challenges that remain.

Voice

This book is written as one voice, reflecting our mutual passion for examining every issue. The text shifts from *we* to *I* and back again as we move between collectively written narratives and quotes from data. This allows us to honor our individual voices and experiences while co-authoring every paragraph. No chapter is written by any one group member. As in any group, however, some of us are heard more through our actions than our words. That is why, at times, you may see more representations of one group member than another.

Our writing style is to draw heavily on data quotes—our own words from reflective journals, email messages, and transcribed conversations—to illustrate points we hope to make and to enrich explanations of issues and ideas. In many places, data quotes *are* the explanations. Because many of our quotes provide analytical commentary, more of them are embedded in the text than would be the case when strictly following style guides.

When we share the words of a group member, we usually name that person. Sometimes we do not. When speakers are not named, it is because we want to give voice to a critical issue while recognizing the importance of protecting ourselves and others. Pseudonyms are used for all children except our own offspring. To honor colleagues, principals, and university faculty who have supported and inspired us, we use their real names.

Subheadings in this book are usually quotes drawn from data chosen to guide the reader through the text by reflecting key ideas we hope to convey. When a quote is used as a subheading, it is usually found again embedded in that section of the text and attributed to the speaker. Quotes are printed verbatim except where excessive repetition of words and phrases does not further the meaning of the message and where simplification of grammatical structures allows a smoother translation from spoken to written genre.

Perspective

In this book, we share eight perspectives on issues and events in the early years of teaching. Others may interpret the same events differently, but the point of this text is to provide an opportunity for educators to read “this-is-how-it-feels-in-the-moment” stories that are sometimes difficult for new teachers to share and therefore go unheard. It is a perspective often dismissed as others sometimes focus on new teachers’ inexperience rather than the serious nature of the issues they bring to

the conversation. Reading about events and issues described as they occurred, however, we gain insights into possible reasons why so many leave the profession or compromise their vision to such an extent that they lose passion for teaching. While the teachers in this book don't profess to speak for all new teachers, we predict that their stories will resonate with many.

Shouting from the Rooftops

The teachers who share their stories in this book demonstrate that it was far more than inexperience that created barriers to living the teaching lives they envisioned. They began their careers wanting to make a difference in the lives of children. They realize now that an important part of that process is working to make a difference in the profession at large. Presenting issues they faced, they hope to prompt others to take action. They want people to *do* something. As the facilitator of the study in which these teachers and I collaborated, I join their voices. This book is, as Carly put it, our way of "shouting from the rooftops." Working with them and paying attention to other stories locally and nationally, it is easy to see the need to shout.

In many situations, barriers exist that push the knowledge, drive, and excitement of new teachers far underground. Their struggles continue while too little is done to change school and district cultures, university structures, and mentorship and induction programs so that new teachers are embraced and nurtured in lasting ways. Rather than sustain and build on the energy that new teachers bring, we lose many to mediocrity or to other professions. It is time to look carefully and honestly at their experiences and put real solutions into place. For these reasons, we write teacher-to-teacher, but also teacher-to-administrator, university professor, and experienced colleague. We hope that our stories will encourage you to look beyond the rhetoric that too often dominates programs and practices to create environments that truly welcome and care for the energy and innovation as well as the inexperience and self-consciousness that new teachers bring. We invite you to read, consider, and go out and make a difference for every new teacher who leaves your university, enters your school district, walks across the threshold of your school, or moves into the classroom next door. New teachers, we hope our stories will give courage and provide hope. We write to tell you that you do indeed have a voice and you can use it to work with colleagues and administrators to contribute to education as a profession that consistently and reflectively moves forward. Most important, we write to let you know that you are not alone.

Note

1. At that time, the teaching certification degree available from their university was a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT), a fifteen-month program designed for students who held bachelor's degrees in other fields, sometimes with an education minor. Since then, an undergraduate certification program (BA) has been implemented in addition to the MAT.

1 That September Evening

We still wanted to be exuberant clones of teachers in professional books and in classrooms we visited. To us, those classrooms represented the ideal. But many of us felt we were not living up to those ideals and we could not figure out why it was so hard.

Seven New Teachers Begin the Story



Figure 1.1. Toasting the first days of teaching. Our smiles don't tell the whole story. (Two teachers in this photo were not able to continue with the group, Carmen had not yet joined us, and Susi is taking the photo.)

It is difficult to remember exactly how we felt that September evening when we met as a group of brand new teachers (Figure 1.1). We look back and try to remember details—how hot or cool it was or what we ate and drank—but those details do not come easily to mind. We were at Erin's house. Photographs remind us that Susi brought champagne to toast our first weeks in the classroom. The rest of us brought potluck dishes. It seems strange that, for an evening that became so important in our lives, we cannot remember more details. Maybe that's because it was much more than a meeting or a gathering of friends. We had grown to know and care for one another through our preservice teacher education program. We had developed a special bond through experiences within and beyond the university classroom: an inquiry project about Gullah culture on St. Helena Island, driving a university van from South

Carolina to The Ohio State University's Children's Literature Conference, a holiday party at Robbie's house, all-night authors' circles at Julie's house, and completing our comprehensive exams. Since graduation, we had been meeting all summer to discuss the job search and the excitement of setting up our first classrooms. But this evening was different. It was the first meeting after the school year started. And it was the first time that we truly let our vulnerabilities show. The photograph of our champagne toast reveals only the surface. Soon after the photo was taken, façades began to crumble and raw emotions surfaced. The struggle to live up to the teaching lives we envisioned was already more difficult than we had expected. Tears, anger, and disappointment began to break through the pretense that all was well.

We left our graduate program with such high hopes.

At that point, we still wanted to be what Carly called "exuberant clones" of teachers in the professional books we read and the classrooms we visited during the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program. To us, those classrooms represented the ideal. Vivid descriptions of fabulously organized, smoothly running centers of learning left an enormous impact. We wanted to emulate the teachers who created those classrooms. Our convictions were strong. We believed that the pursuit of meaningful inquiry and engagement in purposeful interaction were foundational to learning. We knew that instruction should be informed by getting to know children in many different ways. We were insulted by scripted programs that tell teachers what to say and do, and believed that skills taught in isolation contributed little to children's learning. Our classrooms would not be driven by worksheets and basal reading programs. We understood literacy learning as a strategic, meaning-making process that is supported when children have opportunities to learn about reading and writing by using it for real purposes. But many of us felt that we were not living up to those ideals, and we could not figure out why it was so hard. We had left our graduate program with such high hopes. For some of us, it felt like we were already failing miserably. Unexpectedly, that September evening became the moment when we first took risks to voice our disappointments and fears.

I never imagined it would be this way.

The night began with food and some "I love my class" kinds of sharing—happy talk. Then Erin began to talk about the teaching situation in which she found herself. Her school rigidly mandated a scripted read-

ing program that told teachers what to do and say while emphasizing “worksheet after worksheet” used to teach skills in isolation. From our graduate school experiences, we knew enough to be on the lookout for mandates that were merely myths—“They say you have to”—but these directives seemed very real. Feeling that she could not use her “hard-earned knowledge” about teaching and learning, and terrified at what she was beginning to see in herself, Erin said, “I’m at the point where I understand why my elementary school teachers were always so mean. I feel like I’m turning into that kind of a person. I hate what I have to teach, and the kids hate it. And that doesn’t make me like what I do as a teacher. I never imagined it would be this way.” She continued:

Yesterday, the second-grade teachers planned. You would cry if you saw my lesson plan book. From 9:00 to 9:30, I literally have to read word-by-word instructions from a phonics card. That includes dictating meaningless sentences and meaningless vowel sounds that my students have to write. I was told that, no matter what, I should not finish phonics early. Teachers even gave me hints on how to drag out phonics because the principal would be in my room to be sure I was implementing it just that way.

We were all shocked at the absence of autonomy Erin experienced and saddened by the disillusionment she felt (Figure 1.2). Her honest articulation of deep disappointment opened the door for others to share difficult experiences. Although April’s teaching was not governed by strict mandates, she described the sense of aloneness that comes with teaching differently from colleagues. Like many of us, she felt isolated by her beliefs and practices:



Figure 1.2. Our faces reflect the shock and sadness we felt as Erin told us about her teaching situation.

All of the other kindergarten teachers do letter-of-the-week. I'm proud that I'm holding my own and teaching letters and sounds in more meaningful ways, but I really feel like a loner. Sometimes I lose confidence and worry that, if everyone else is teaching one letter a week, then my children might be missing out. I do my own thing, but I'm not as bold as some to step out and share my ideas.

We passed the tape recorder around the living room, establishing a habit we continued for the next six years—recording our monthly meetings. Transcripts of those conversations, along with weekly email reflections that we posted on our group's listserv, became the heart of our study, the data we eventually analyzed to better understand the early years of teaching. As Julie held the tape recorder that night, she began to talk about how discouraged she felt trying to find a balance between home and school. Describing her attempts to be a good mother to her two-year-old while creating the classroom she envisioned, she said, "How am I going to balance all of this? I'm responsible for educating kids at school, but then I've got my own child who misses me. I don't want to miss out on her life, so sometimes I give worksheets to my students 'cause I can't find the time to plan in other ways. But I feel so guilty for doing that or for using the textbook." She continued in tears:

It has been overwhelming trying to figure everything out, just sorting out all the paper they've given me. I can only deal with so much at a time, so the kids just might get some worksheets. I want to be doing other things, but it's probably gonna take a year or two to get where I'd like to be. I can't do anything more.

An atmosphere of unhappiness and guilt began to grow as those of us who were also experiencing rocky beginnings took risks to share what was *really* happening in our classrooms. Even those who experienced less despair were concerned that they were falling into the habit of using worksheets, textbooks, and "basals with boring stories" just a little too easily. We look back now and recognize the courage and trust it took to admit our fears and disappointment. Erin, having landed in a school with a very different perspective on learning and teaching from the one with which she left the preservice program, said, "I would have fainted before I would have let anyone see my classroom in the state it was in with phonics cards adorning the wall." Robbie and Carly, although their school was more welcoming of diverse practices, also felt tensions. On their way to the meeting that evening, they had discussed whether they felt comfortable admitting to what they called their failures: "Should we tell them we use the textbook? Do we admit to this?"

Sharing the admission that we were not the teachers we hoped to be was particularly difficult because Susi was there. She had been our instructor in several courses. She had supervised some of us during our internships. It was hard to tell her that we weren't always teaching according to the beliefs we'd developed in the MAT program. We didn't want to let her down. We had a vision of the *perfect teacher* and that's what we wanted to be—for Susi, for the MAT program, and for our students.

The talk that Erin initiated was difficult, but it led to a real sense of relief when we realized that, with this group, it was safe to risk exposure. Later, Carly wrote:

At the beginning of the meeting, I was too ashamed to admit that I'd been using worksheets. It was like the 8th deadly sin. When everyone finally broke down and began confessing that their worst nightmares were coming true, I confessed too to using the dreaded worksheets. Finding out that I was not the only one was like having the Pope forgive my vilest sins.

That evening we did have happy moments to share, but, as Ami said, "no one wanted to flaunt good situations in light of friends' pain." In spite of their worksheet and textbook disappointments, for example, Robbie and Carly "couldn't wait to share the exciting things that were happening." Ami and April also had positive stories to tell. Later, Robbie wrote, "We felt really bad sharing any of the good stuff because it was so difficult for everyone else," and Carly said, "I resisted telling more about my successes because I felt it was more important for the others to find some peace in their fears."

It didn't take long, however, to see that everyone was facing a challenge of one kind or another and needed a place to voice frustration and disappointment. Some of us were frustrated with the worksheet-driven, textbook-oriented curricula that dominated our schools. Others had quickly become disillusioned trying to be perfect at everything at once. All of us longed for colleagues who embraced the kind of pedagogy we were eager to make our own. Some had even experienced ridicule from colleagues about teaching ideas. A few of us felt wronged by the MAT program: How could they have led us to believe it would be so easy? Teaching was not what we expected it to be.

Most demoralizing was the feeling that we were not living up to our own expectations. Erin voiced a frightening possibility that, for her, felt very real: "When you leave a university excited about changing the world through education and find yourself in a school that hates the very meaning of change, it becomes easier and easier to give in to the

pressure to conform to what is going on around you. Before you know it, the person you once were, full of hope and energy, slowly disappears." Susi had seen this kind of disappointment and disillusionment before. It is what had led her to initiate our research group just four months earlier.

Susi's Turn

I heard comments from our graduates like, "I find myself becoming just like the boring, old-fashioned teachers I said I would never be."

When I came to the University of South Carolina as a beginning professor, it was immediately clear to me that many students graduated with master's degrees from the initial certification program with an impressive foundation for a career in education. They had a strong theoretical and practical knowledge base, confidence, and a desire to make a difference. Visiting local schools, however, I found little evidence that their learning had become a part of school and district cultures. The Center for Inquiry (Mills & Donnelly, 2001) was a stunning exception, and there were pockets of innovation in schools here and there; but on the whole, graduates' energy and enthusiasm for new ideas seemed to disappear as they found themselves sucked into the world of high-stakes testing and programmatic mandates. I heard comments like, "I find myself becoming just like the boring, old-fashioned teachers I said I would never be"; "My new colleagues tell me, 'Forget what you learned in the MAT program. It's crap. It's not the real world'"; and "What happened to me? Somehow, the teacher I was going to be got buried when I started teaching."

Certainly, this suppression of innovation is not intentional on the part of administrators, university faculty, and experienced teachers in schools. Administrators and school district personnel are frantic given the challenges of high-stakes testing, competition for federal funding, and school report cards in a culture that "mistakes measuring schools for fixing them" (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 9). Experienced teachers struggle to find their way in the midst of mandates to implement programs that tell them what to do and when to do it, feeling the pressure to teach to the test when "a good school is one that either has very high test scores or is moving toward them at a prescribed rate of improvement" (Meier, 2004, p. 67). In a society of what Karp (2004) calls "counterfeit accountability" (p. 58), it is easy to see why administrators begin to believe the rhetoric of publishing companies who promise high test

scores and why teachers succumb to the same kinds of pressures. For university faculty, opportunities to focus on sustainable support of graduates are rare. Professional collaboration between universities and schools is something that gets crammed into already overloaded schedules in both institutions.

This problem is not exclusive to South Carolina, nor is it a recent phenomenon. It is a pattern repeated across the country as many new teachers abandon ideas from their preservice programs and draw instead from the local status quo or from memories of their own public school experiences (Hayes, 1998). Instead of infusing the profession with new ideas and energy while learning from the wisdom of experienced teachers, a frightening number of new teachers conform or leave the profession altogether. Almost a third of teachers in the United States leave the field sometime during their first three years, and nearly half leave after five years (Ingersoll, 2002). In low-income communities and rural areas, rates of attrition are even higher (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2002). This attrition rate has been a point of concern and discussion for decades. New teachers "leave the profession in such numbers and so rapidly that newcomers do not stay around long enough to fill the vacancies for the long haul" (McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005, p. 3).

There are, of course, exceptions. Sonia Nieto (2003) writes that "when teachers are treated as professionals and intellectuals who care deeply about their students and their craft, they will be enticed to remain in the profession" (p. 128). We see this with the implementation of long-term professional study groups like those evolving from the work of Kathy Short and her colleagues in Tucson, Arizona (Birchak et al., 1998); the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Reading Initiative (Smith & Hudelson, 2001); and in our state, the South Carolina Reading Initiative (Donnelly et al., 2005; Morgan et al., 2003). Teachers and administrators developing intellectual professional communities are also described in the work of small schools such as the Central Park East Schools in New York (Meier, 1995), the Mission Hill School in Boston (Meier, 2002), and South Carolina's Center for Inquiry, where teachers nurture one another through regular curricular conversations (Mills et al., 2001). When these kinds of opportunities do not exist, new teachers can find themselves alone. The struggle to sustain their knowledge and continue to grow is enormous. Pressure to teach to the test becomes overwhelming and confusing as they try to justify their practices. Without recognizing subtle shifts in their practice, new teachers find their dreams of innovation beginning to slip away. Before they

know it, they find themselves conforming to school norms that may or may not reflect the most recent understandings in the field.

While I suspected that these issues were at the root of new teachers' struggle to hold on to understandings from their preservice programs, I wanted to know more. What happens to them day to day? What are their stories moment to moment? What incidents, issues, and attitudes cause so many new teachers to struggle not only to hold on to their knowledge and convictions but also to deepen and expand their understandings? What barriers do they find to living the professional lives they envisioned? What support sustains them? How might universities, school systems, and local schools work together to create cultures that celebrate and nurture the energy, knowledge, and passion for learning and teaching that characterize many new graduates? These questions led me to ask my first cohort of preservice teachers if I could follow them through their first year of teaching. Eight students expressed interest and, two weeks after graduation, we began meeting regularly. Within a few months, for various reasons, two group members decided they could not continue, and another MAT graduate joined us. By January of the first year of teaching, we had become the group of eight—seven classroom teachers and a university professor—that continues today.

Teacher Research Is More Than Just Data: Getting to Know Eight Women

Bound by common convictions about many things, we also represent diverse backgrounds and experiences.

From our first days in the MAT program, we watched one another grow and change. We have developed an even stronger affection and admiration for one another that allows us to share fears, failures, confusions, and successes with trust and gratitude. We support one another not only as teachers but also through joyous as well as difficult personal times. We care deeply about our stories and are committed to telling them.

Bound by common convictions about many things, we also represent diverse backgrounds and experiences. Our worldviews range from conservative to liberal and everything in between. We vary in our religious beliefs and cultural histories. We were raised in large and small families and come from a range of economic backgrounds. Some of us were born in South Carolina, but we also come from Florida, Georgia, and New York. These aspects of our lives—what we value, who we cherish, what worries us, what cheers us, what motivates us—are criti-

cal to telling our professional stories. They are embedded in our work as teachers and as researchers.

Because of our belief that teaching is much more than day-to-day life in classrooms and that research is more than methodology, we introduce ourselves through the following personal narratives. They lay a foundation for weaving connections to our personal lives throughout the book and provide a touchstone to which readers can return as our teaching stories unfold. And so we begin the story of our early years of teaching by introducing ourselves as teachers, yes, but also as daughters, mothers, wives, sisters, and friends.

Ami



I am a fourth-generation teacher. I grew up surrounded by fabulous teachers who gave me lots of hands-on experience in classrooms from a very early age. My great-grandma, grandmother, brother, and both my parents are teachers. My dad worked with children in special education programs in New York for

thirty-four years. I grew up learning beside my mom, who implemented best practices before they were called best practices. My mom's classrooms were safe havens for children to love learning. She created learning communities that made all children feel important and loved. She always filled her classrooms with literature; I cannot count the books—thousands and thousands. She is a natural teacher and my greatest role model.

I was raised in Westchester, New York, just a few miles north of New York City. My family's house resembled a huge school. Our bedroom walls were painted with chalkboard paint, and my two brothers and I were given creative reign to paint, stencil, draw, and create. It was a hippie household with educational toys everywhere, many of which ultimately became treasures in my own classroom. My family spent summers traveling across the country. From my parents, I inherited a passion for exploring new places.

After high school, I ventured south to the University of South Carolina, where I completed undergraduate and graduate degrees. I began my teaching career in a first-grade classroom. The next year, I looped with my students to second grade. Then I piloted a multiage class of six-, seven-, and eight-year-olds. This was an exciting change. I loved the family atmosphere and endless possibilities for teaching and learning that the multiage classroom held.

I joined our research group after graduate school when Susi asked if she could follow us through our first year of teaching. At first I was excited to stay in touch with my friends. Within a few months, I couldn't imagine teaching without the support of such amazing people.

April



Ever since I can remember, I wanted to be a teacher. When I was in elementary school, I always asked my teachers for leftover copies of worksheets so I could take them home and play school with my friends. I even had one of those old one-piece student desks

with the little cubby on the bottom. I always imagined myself as a teacher.

I began teaching and still teach kindergarten in a small, rural primary school. It was always my dream to teach kindergarten. Even now, I have no desire to teach at a different level. Kindergarten children keep me motivated and on my toes with their enthusiasm for learning, their curiosity, and the comments they make about anything and everything.

I grew up in West Columbia, South Carolina. My husband Terry and I met in high school and married after college. We are very involved in our church. We teach Sunday school and work as members of the youth staff, and I sing in the choir. We have a daughter, Abigail, who just turned two years old. She steals our hearts every day with her smiles, giggles, songs, and squeals.

I got involved in this research project when Susi invited us to participate at the end of the MAT program. She wanted to see what our

first year of teaching would be like, how schools would accept and support us, and what impact we would have in our classrooms. It sounded like an exciting project and I wanted to be a part of it. I thought it would be a great way to stay in contact with a professor I loved and with other members of my cohort. I felt as though I would still be connected and not alone in the teaching world.

Carly



If someone had told me when I was a teenager that I'd be a schoolteacher in a few years, I would have laughed my socks off. I was never the type of girl who dreamed of being just like my favorite teacher or forced my dolls and friends to play school with me.

In fact, I was a bit of a rebel as a student. Many of my teachers would probably faint to know that I am one of them.

My first taste of teaching began during my undergraduate years when a sociology professor involved me in reviving a volunteer program. I tutored middle school students and adults. Later, I stumbled on City Year, an Americorps-based community service organization. Through opportunities with them, I worked as a teaching assistant in first-grade classrooms. I would never have become a teacher if it had not been for my City Year experience. Through it I learned so much about myself and the world around me. Soon after, I made the decision to enter the MAT program at USC.

I began teaching in a fourth-grade classroom. Two years later, I worked for a year as a Title I reading teacher with fourth and fifth graders. When my daughter Karis and later my son Caleb were born, there was no question whether I would stay at home with them. With my children, I found a sense of peace I'd never experienced before. At the same time, I missed the intellectual stimulation of being in a school and found myself becoming a little too complacent about important educational issues. I guess I realized that completeness doesn't happen

through one person or one part of your life. It has to be the sum of all of these parts. After three years at home, I made the decision to go back to teaching part time in a fourth-grade job share.

Seven years ago, when Susi asked if she could follow us into our first year of teaching, I jumped at the chance to join. I knew it would provide me with invaluable support in that first year. Little did I know that I would need our group for many years to come.

Carmen



When I think about what made me want to teach, I have to think about *who* made me want to teach. I believe that my strong compassion for children began as I watched my mother work with autistic children. She was phenomenal. When I

think about the way my heart loves, I think about my mother. Over the years, I watched as she gave unconditional love to all children. She and other wonderful teachers in my life—Mrs. Loftis, Mr. Dean, Mrs. Roberts, Mr. McInnis, and Susi Long—made me want to teach and contribute to others' lives as they contributed to mine.

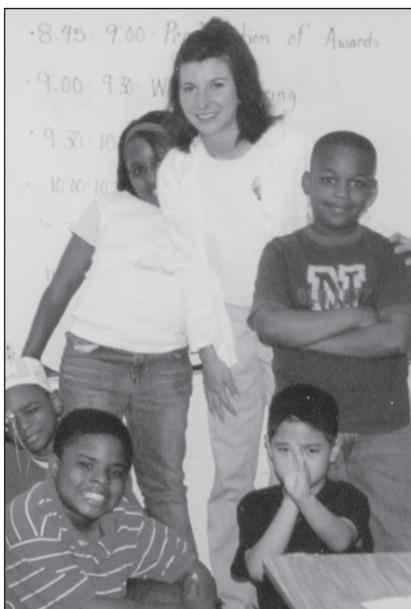
I did not initially go into education when I entered college. Although I desired to teach, I listened to the comments of others who said that teaching didn't pay enough and that children had become too difficult to handle. After stints in retail and banking, however, I knew that my purpose was not being fulfilled. I quit my job, took a leap of faith, and entered the MAT program. It was one of the best things I could have done.

My first teaching job was in second grade in the South Carolina town where I grew up. This meant a lot to me because I could teach the children of people I knew and be close to my family. My grandmother has eighteen children, so you can imagine what a blessing they are to me. We share a lot of laughter. I'm told we are a unique bunch.

I took a year off from teaching after my fifth year. The reason for my sabbatical was marriage to my wonderful and funny husband Kenneth and our move to California and then to Virginia. Now I've settled into teaching again, this time in third grade.

As for this group, I wasn't there that September night at Erin's house; I joined a few months later. Once I heard about the meetings and the listserv, I asked to be a part of the group. Now I feel even closer to them, close enough to share my insecurities and inhibitions. They give me affirmation and understanding.

Erin



I was raised to believe I could do anything in this world and that I should choose to do something I absolutely loved. I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. My parents continue to be very driven by their careers, my mother's in education and my father's in science. Work has simply always been a fulfilling part of our lives. I grew up outside of Orangeburg, South Carolina, on a family farm. The farm has grounded me my whole life. No matter where I am, I feel pulled back there. Both of my sisters, my brother, my parents, and I live within an hour of one another, and our lives are incredibly intertwined. Our family get-

togethers at the farm help us all remember that home and family are the two things that matter most in life.

When I was in graduate school, the seed for lifelong learning about teaching was planted and continues to thrive. I love learning about pedagogy. My first teaching job was in a second-grade classroom. After four years, I became a Reading Recovery teacher and worked one-to-one with struggling first graders.

Since I began teaching, I have married and had three children. Ella, Livie, and Max helped me see the need for balance in my life. After teaching for six years, I reached the point where I questioned whether I could continue to teach passionately while parenting my young children. I ultimately decided to scale back from the demands of teaching full time. I now work as a liaison between the University of South Carolina and a local professional development school. I supervise student teachers and teach undergraduate courses in literacy.

I became involved with this project after being asked by Susi if she could follow us into our first year of teaching. I didn't want to lose touch with my classmates and with the knowledge I gained in the MAT program.

Julie



I am a wife, a mother, and a teacher. I married my best friend and we have three children. Although I am in a profession that could become an obsession, my family keeps me grounded. I didn't always plan on being a teacher even though I went to college with every intention of going into education. Growing up with a mother who was a teacher, I was exposed to the profession through her experi-

ences in the classroom, as well as through her after-school tutoring. But if working with children was a first love, art was a close second. In college, with encouragement from my art professors, I went into graphic design and then worked for a design firm in New York. But deep inside I knew my desire to work with children was unfulfilled. I decided to change careers when I was twenty-nine years old and began course work in the MAT program.

My first teaching jobs were in second- and first-grade classrooms. After three years of teaching, I gave birth to twins and stayed at home for a year with Joanna and Jacob and our daughter Jessica, who was then four years old. I've now been back in the classroom for four years teaching kindergarten. I absolutely love it! I enjoy my students' eagerness and passion for learning.

I joined our research group because I wanted to be able to share my experiences with like minds. I felt that this would keep alive my enthusiasm for trying new teaching strategies. We had all been such good support for one another in the MAT program, and I hoped that would continue. I soon realized that the emotional support was just as important as the teaching support.

Robbie

I have been a teacher since the day my parents installed an old chalkboard in our garage. I decided at an early age that I wanted to teach, but before that, I wanted to be a brain surgeon, a mechanic, and a beautician. I owe the decision to teach to my fourth-grade teacher, Bonnie Iseman. She believed in me when others did not. I wanted to be that kind of teacher. I am fortunate, however, that my undergraduate

school didn't have a program in education, because those four years allowed me to study anthropology, experiences that I use every day in my classroom.

Neither of my parents is a teacher, but they raised three daughters who are involved in education. I think that is a pretty amazing commentary on the way they raised us to be compassionate and giving. I began teaching in a fifth-grade classroom in a rural school outside of Atlanta. I moved back to South Carolina two years later when my husband Page entered law school. I took a job teaching third grade. Now we have a beautiful daughter, Josie. Just before she was born, I moved to teaching half days in a preschool program. I love being a mom more than anything in my life.

I joined this group as soon as it was suggested. Susi was going to study our transition from being student teachers to being teachers in our own classrooms. She wanted to see if our ideals, dreams, wishes, and fears changed in that first year. When we met that first time at Susi's house, I remember thinking, "This will be sort of fun, to be in a professional study and have Susi write an article about us."

Susi

My father was the most significant influence in my decision to become a teacher. Everyone who comes in contact with him goes away touched by his excitement for life and for, as he says, "the world of ideas." He always sees possibilities where other people see barriers. I grew up hearing my father talk about great educators—John Dewey, Herbert Kohl,



Sylvia Ashton-Warner, and A. S. Neil. Once he even wrote to apply for a job at Neil's school, Summerhill. Dad was a professor in a college of education for thirty years, a vibrant leader and an innovative educator.

I began teaching—and met my husband Jan—in 1974 in a wonderfully progressive elementary school in Clearwater, Florida.

I taught first grade

and, later, combination first/second-grade classes, looping (back then, we just called it “moving up with the kids”) as the children became second and third graders. In 1980, Jan and I took jobs as teachers in American schools overseas. We lived overseas for seventeen years. During that time, our daughter, Kelli, was born. She brought us into Dutch, Icelandic, and British worlds as she attended local schools. We moved back to the United States shortly after Kelli turned thirteen. Today, at twenty-two, she is off enjoying the adventures of becoming her own person. It brings us the greatest joy that she continues to involve us in her new worlds.

In 1997, I became a faculty member at the University of South Carolina, and the following year I initiated the study on which this book is based. From the time they were my MAT students, these teachers, now my research partners, have touched my life in incredible ways. The depth of their commitment to children, to me, to one another, and to our work is impossible to convey. They are treasured and irreplaceable in my life.

Moving Forward as One: Eight Voices Write as a Collective

The evening marked a new beginning for us as a real community, a place where we could be honest and not perfect.

Our experiences together as teachers, researchers, writers, and friends began during the preservice year and continue today. The September

evening at Erin's house was a first turning point in that journey. As Ami put it, the evening marked "a new beginning for us as a real community, a place where we could be honest and not perfect." But the evening was not simply a time to vent. Conversations filled with despair were also tempered with a sense of pride and optimism that would continue to reemerge even in our most difficult moments during the years to come. The next day our emails to one another revealed characteristics of the group that we were just coming to know—the ability to pick each other up, remind one another that we were not alone, and give each other hope. We wrote:

Robbie: You know what the good part is? At least we know that we want to teach differently. At least we know there's something better. But we're still all learning. We learn a little bit and we take it and adjust it. And next year, we'll rely on worksheets and textbooks a little bit less.

Julie: Even if we're not doing it all right now, we know that we *can* do it, and we have it inside of us and we know that it's possible. We're not going to let each other be like, "Oh well, we'll just give it up."

Ami: I think we all need to take baby steps and celebrate each tiny step.

Erin: The conversation last night was so necessary. I keep having this refreshing "ah-hah—I'm not alone." I was so afraid that everybody would completely surpass me and leave me behind in a sea of worksheets. But that's not so. I'm gaining experience like everybody, but I'm struggling like everybody.

Susi: I know we all can make a difference in education, so don't beat yourselves up. Allow yourselves and me to be learners, and feel comfortable with that. You are all fabulous for kids. I see it in your smiles and your hugs and your commitment to always moving forward.

Carly: I love you all to the moon and back. Don't ever give up. I say this as I plan another wonder worksheet for tomorrow's map skills lesson. But, hey, then we go to the library to research our cities, so maybe next year I can bypass that worksheet and think of a better way to teach latitude and longitude and scale and distance. But right now I've got a fiancé to go and see, and then I have a skate night and my kids would love to see me there. So I'm prioritizing.

In the next years, much took place that helped us get to the point at which we could look back and say, "Look how far we've come!" But we also looked back and said, "Did it really have to be so hard?" After

carefully documenting our experiences for so many years, we have much to share about settings, structures, attitudes, and behaviors that support new teachers and those that sap us of the desire to make a difference. The following chapters describe our journey: the process of the research that became this book, the development of beliefs that shaped our visions of great teaching, issues met as we attempted to live up to those visions, the roles of administrators and colleagues in our lives, the voices we possessed but didn't recognize, thoughts about how educators might work to end the cycle of struggle and disillusionment for new teachers, and our current visions.

As experienced teachers today, we can see how easy it might be for other experienced teachers to read our words and say, "Well, of course the early years are difficult. Get a grip, this is teaching." We, too, wonder at the intensity of our younger selves. But because we have captured our early thoughts, fears, and concerns through data collected in-the-moment, we are able to give credence to the new teachers we once were. *We must listen to them as intently as we wanted to be heard then.* While some of our struggles were certainly due to inexperience, we know now that there is much more to the story. Learning to be a teacher is an intense journey that involves thoughtful and often difficult reflection, but the journey doesn't need to be filled with barriers that cause new teachers to lose confidence, vigor, and the desire to effect change.

We share our experiences as teachers and as teacher-researchers. For some of us, this means traveling back to places that are unpleasant to visit. For others, it means looking at current challenges that, as experienced teachers, we continue to face. For all of us, it is an opportunity to answer Susi's initial questions that have evolved to become our own: What happens to the enthusiasm, confidence, knowledge, and energy of new teachers as they enter the profession eager to make a difference? What barriers do they find? What is the support that sustains them?

Like thousands before them, the seven teacher-authors of this book started their first teaching jobs full of energy and excitement. They were eager to implement the thoughtful practices and ideas they learned in their methods courses in order to make a lasting difference in their students' lives and to make a positive change in the profession.

Then reality hit.

After a few weeks in the classroom, some of the teachers found that their excitement and confidence were replaced by self-doubt, isolation, and disappointment. Instead of challenging the status quo in their school systems, some of the teachers found themselves slipping toward it as they tried to bring their teaching visions to life.



In a climate where nearly half of new teachers leave the profession in the first five years, many early-career teachers are facing the same disillusionment and challenges. That's why these seven teachers got together with a university researcher to study what life is *really* like for new teachers. The authors recount their experiences from the preservice year through the first six years of teaching. They share moments of joy and success, but they also tell hard stories about

obstacles that drive the knowledge, enthusiasm, and energy of new teachers underground and cause many to leave the profession.

Their stories will resonate with both new and experienced teachers, offer important advice for job seekers, and provide much-needed insights for university faculty, school administrators, colleagues of new teachers, and district leaders to think about how they can better embrace the energy and innovation that new teachers bring while supporting them in moments of insecurity and vulnerability. New teachers will know they are not alone and that even when they feel the least empowered, they actually *do* have a voice and can use it to effect change.

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National Council of Teachers of English
1111 W. Kenyon Road
Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096
800-369-6283 or 217-328-3870
www.ncte.org