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RESEARCH

"I am a Teacher": Early Career Teachers in High Needs Schools

Tabitha Dell'Angelo and Maria DeGenova
The College of New Jersey, US
Corresponding author: Tabitha Dell'Angelo (dellange@tcnj.edu)

As many as half of the new teachers who begin each year will leave either the school or the profession of teaching within five years. In underperforming districts and in schools with low resources, the retention among teachers is even worse (Ingersoll, 2010; Ingersoll & May, 2011). This comic examines a group of early career teachers; their experiences demonstrate the challenges and opportunities that are the reality for many new teachers entering high needs schools. The major themes that were uncovered included culture, success and failures, and work satisfaction. We conclude that the use of the comic representation is important in conveying the thoughts and feelings of these teachers.

Keywords: arts-based research; comics; urban education; teacher identity; teacher retention

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to look closely at the experiences of beginning teachers. In the United States there is a long-standing discussion about teacher retention. As many as half of the new teachers who begin each year will leave either the school or the profession of teaching within five years (Ingersoll, 2010; Ingersoll & May, 2011). The teachers interpreted in this work have made a conscious decision teach in "urban" rather than "suburban" schools. They are making a choice that is less common and likely to be more challenging. The teachers in this work are all novice teachers working in historically underperforming schools. To be sure, these high needs contexts are some of the hardest to staff and some of the places where we see the most transitions, either out of the schools or out of the profession altogether. This comic is an opportunity to listen to their experiences and thought processes as they navigate this transition.

The teachers represented in this work give voice to some of the challenges and opportunities new teachers face. Teachers are at once hopeful and hopeless, inspired and beaten down, assured in their career path and considering leaving. The comic attempts to show the competing voices that can both sustain us in the face of challenge or incite a wave of doubt about the future. In many ways this is a portrayal of normative development – the way we all develop our sense of who we are. Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory [PVEST] (1995) helps to explain the dynamic bi-directional influences between teachers' self-appraisal processes and risks and the way they cope and form identities. In this model stress and vulnerability influence how one copes with challenges and the coping strategies employed influence identity formation. The comic attempts to elucidate the internal processes at work in forming a new identity as a teacher.

As we continue the conversation about how best to support new teachers and by extension provide the best possible opportunities for our students, we must listen to those who are in the classrooms. How can their direct experience help inform how we support their desire to become a teacher, remain a teacher, and be a great advocate for children?

Methods

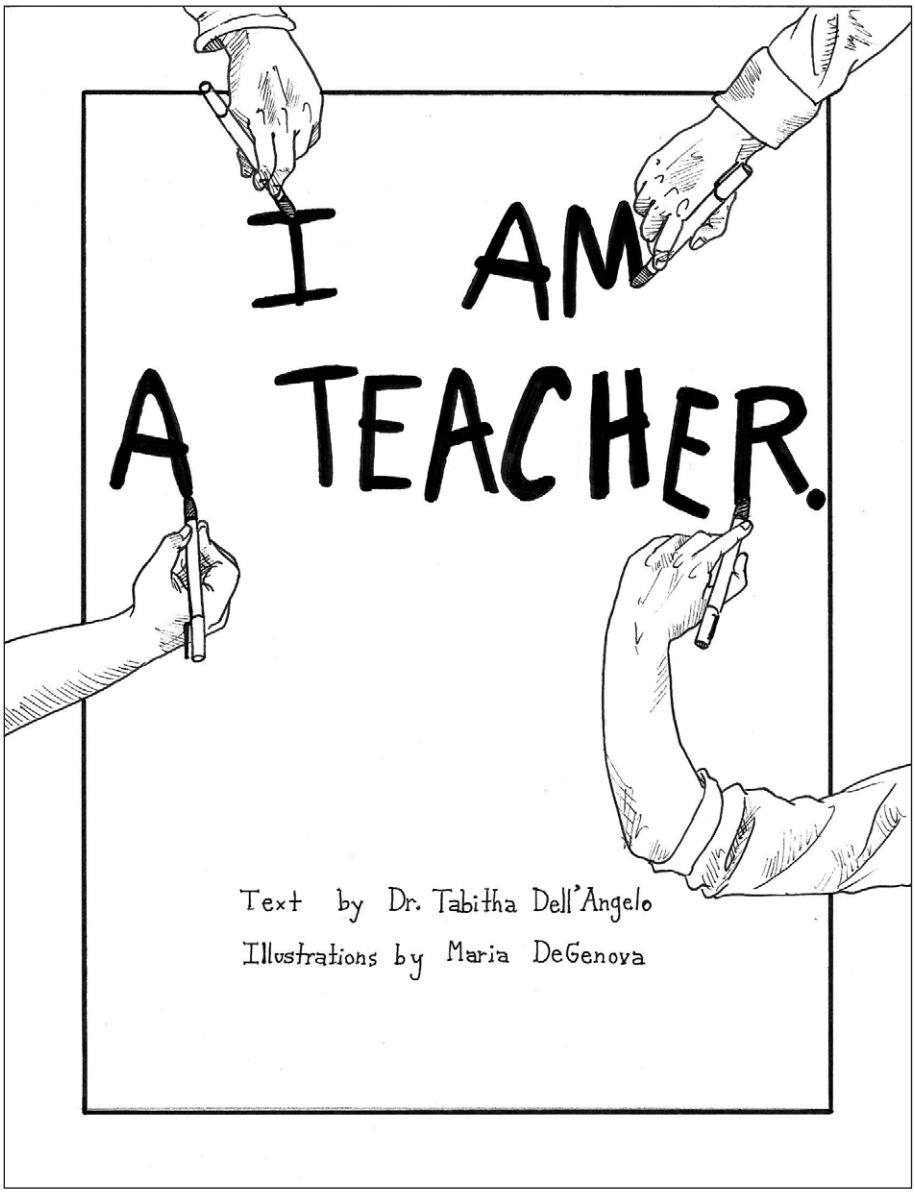
Data for this work were collected from novice teachers who had all graduated from the same *urban education program* at a small liberal arts college in the Northeastern, United States. The urban education program is focused on preparing teachers who want to work in historically underperforming schools with limited resources. The preparation program requires candidates to engage in critical self-reflection, challenge bias they may have, and prepare to respond to inequities in classrooms and schools. While the teachers are in school, those practices and beliefs are fully supported. However, when they are out in their own schools and classrooms they sometimes are confronted with viewpoints that differ and even conflict with the ideas they bring to their new career. These conflicting viewpoints can sometimes create a *borderland* where teachers need to try to square what they have been taught with what they believe and what they are experiencing. These challenges to one's core values have the potential to undermine a teacher's professional identity (Delaney, 2015).

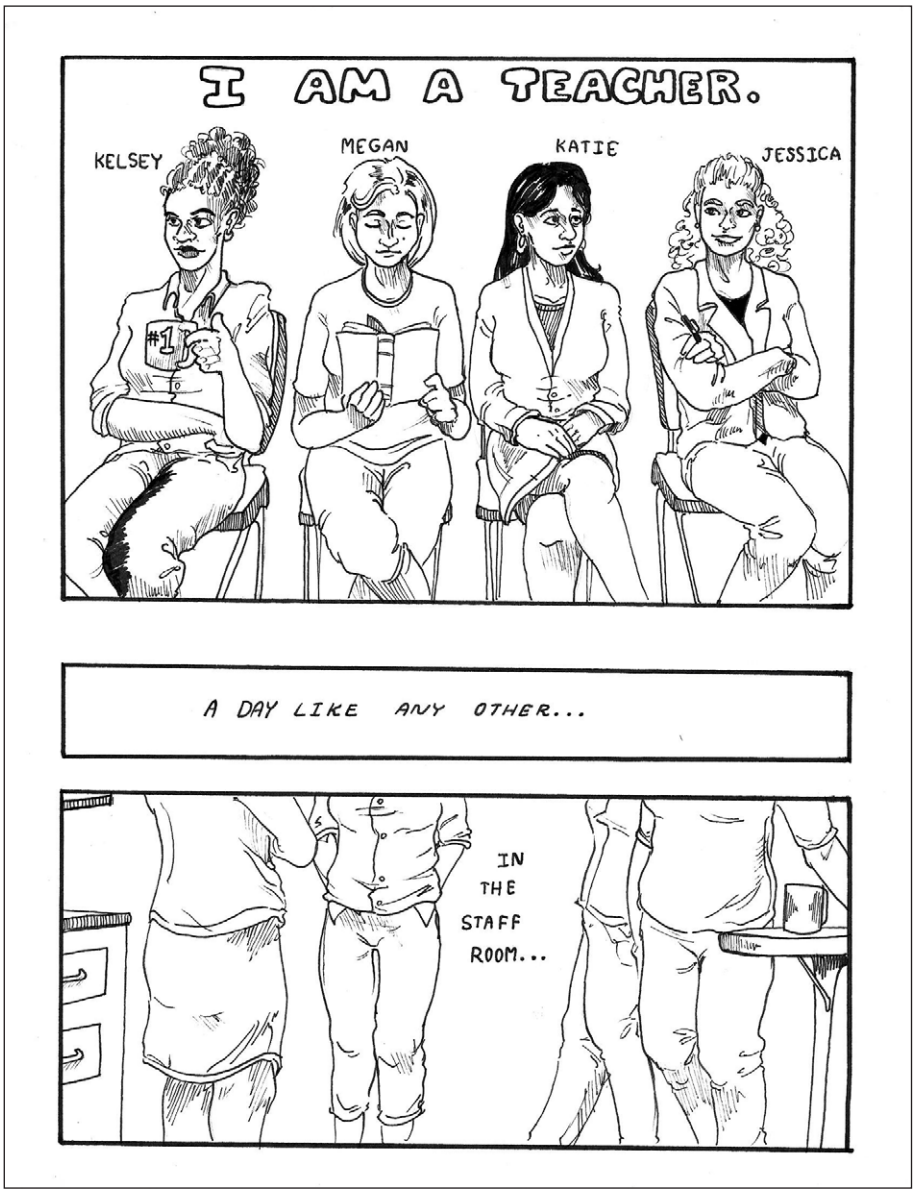
Data were derived from semi-structured interviews and classroom journals. The interviews sought to capture the thoughts and feelings of the teachers as they make the transition from school to their career as a teacher. They responded to queries about finding a job, successes in the classroom, and challenges they face. The second data source were the classroom journals generated as part of the reflective process when the teachers were still in the teacher preparation program. The journals were part of coursework that required processing ideas related to critical pedagogy and field work in which they were engaged. Both the content of the journals and transcriptions of the interviews were used to generate the dialogue in the comic. All necessary permissions were secured via our Institutional review board at the author's home institution and all names found in this text are pseudonyms.

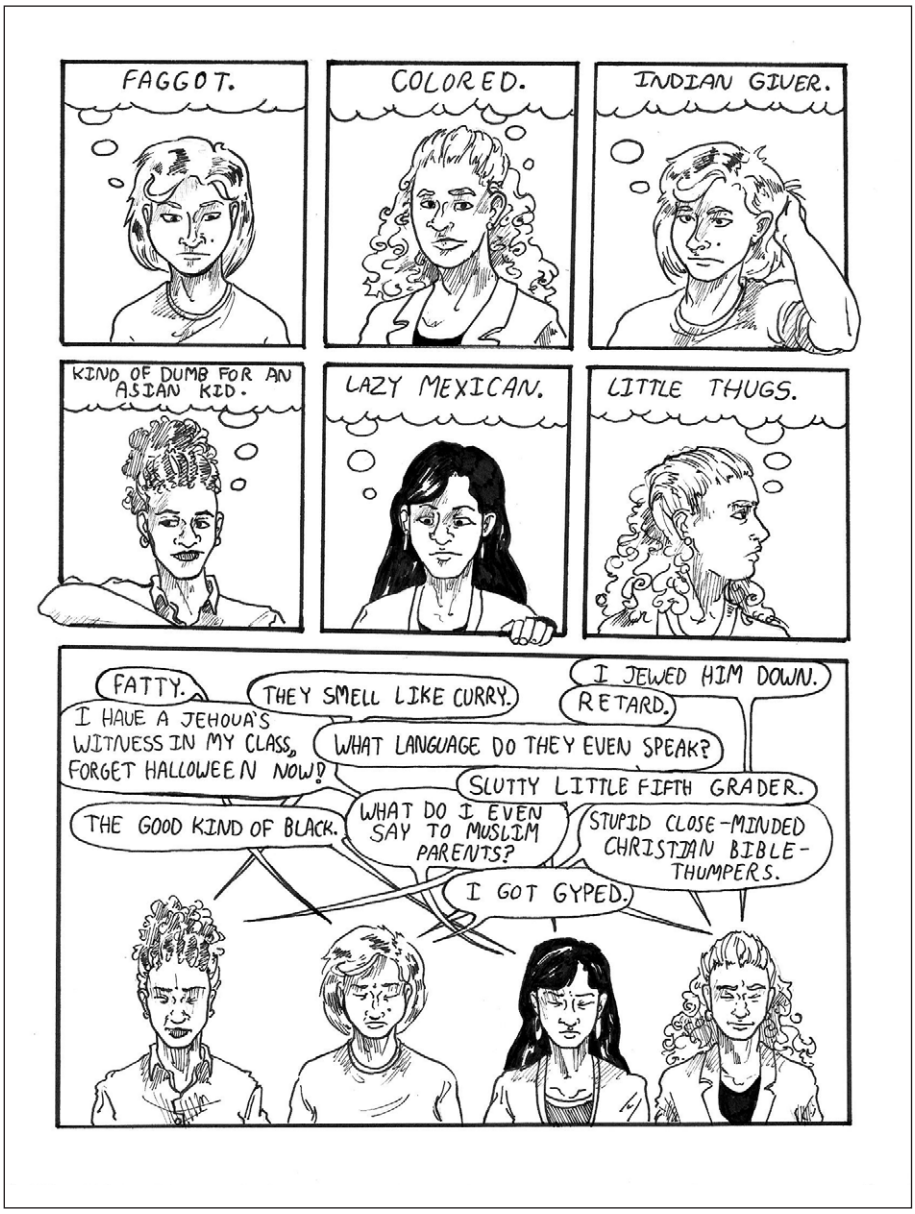
The study utilized a phenomenological approach (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). This approach allows the analysis to focus on the subjective experiences of the participants and the ways in which they interpret their experiences (Dell'Angelo, 2016). The analysis included an inductive coding process that yielded the themes and big ideas that were retained for the text of the comic. Additionally, the codes that were generated were used to reduce the twelve teacher participants to four composite characters who appear in the comic. Each character represents a disposition toward their circumstance – idealism, cynicism, pragmatism, and realism. In truth, all the teachers interviewed expressed a variety of ideas and opinions. Sometimes in the same interview there would be expressions of idealism and cynicism and the like. But, for the sake of the comic, composite characters were created that represent each distinct approach to coping with the realities of being a new teacher in a challenging context.

Main insights

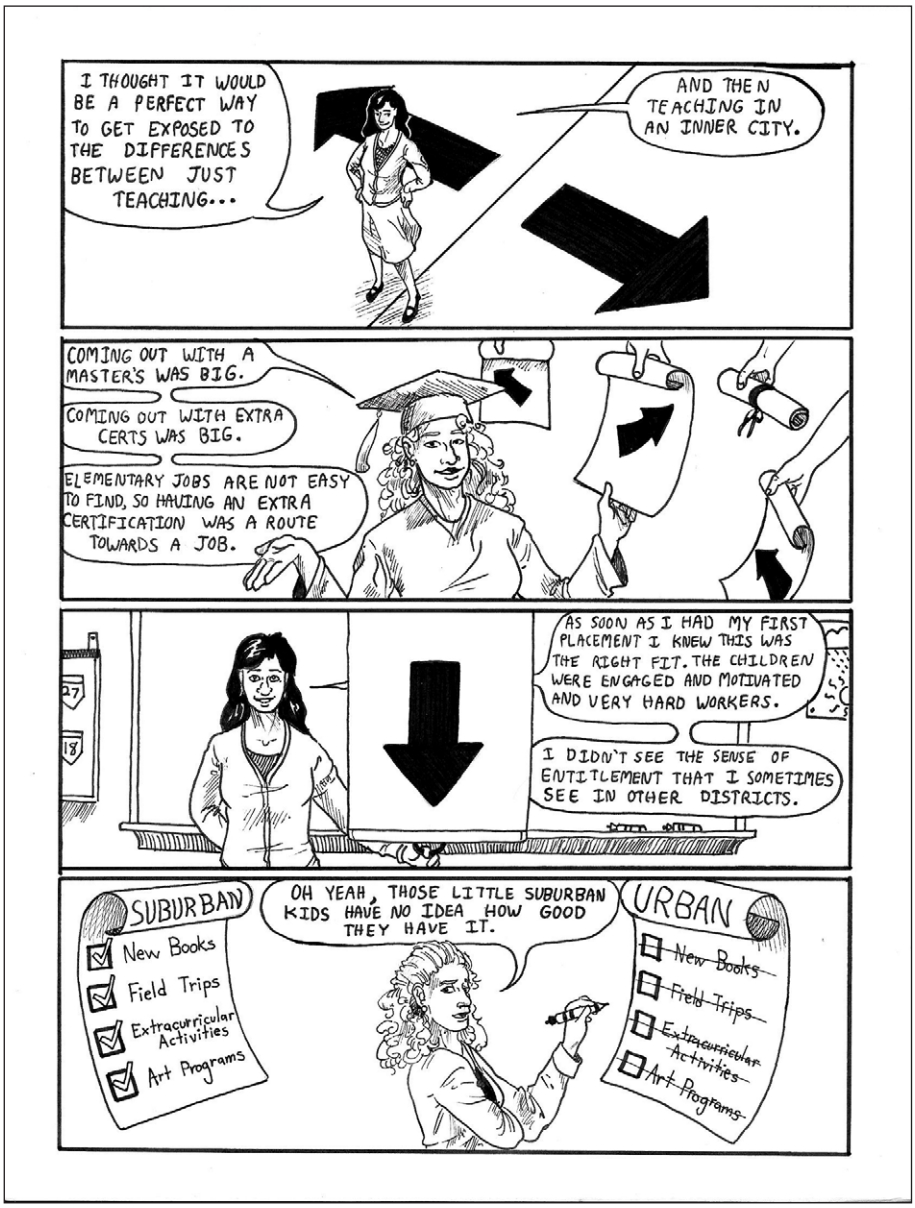
The major themes that were uncovered included culture, success and failures, and work satisfaction. Each of the four characters encounters opportunities and challenges related to these themes from a different perspective. The use of the comic representation is important in conveying the thoughts and feelings of these teachers. As Sousanis argues, "images are not subordinate to words, but equal partners in the articulation of thought" (Finch, 2015).


I AM
A TEACHER.
Text by Dr. Tabitha Dell'Angelo
Illustrations by Maria DeGenova


I AM A TEACHER.
KELSEY
MEGAN
KATIE
JESSICA
#1
A DAY LIKE ANY OTHER...
IN THE STAFF ROOM...


FAGGOT.
COLORED.
INDIAN GIVER.
KIND OF DUMB FOR AN ASIAN KID.
LAZY MEXICAN.
LITTLE THUGS.
FATTY.
THEY SMELL LIKE CURRY.
I JEWED HIM DOWN.
RETARD.
I HAVE A JEHOVA'S WITNESS IN MY CLASS, FORGET HALLOWEEN NOW!
WHAT LANGUAGE DO THEY EVEN SPEAK?
SLUTTY LITTLE FIFTH GRADER.
THE GOOD KIND OF BLACK.
WHAT DO I EVEN SAY TO MUSLIM PARENTS?
STUPID CLOSE-MINDED CHRISTIAN BIBLE-THUMPERS.
I GOT GYPED.

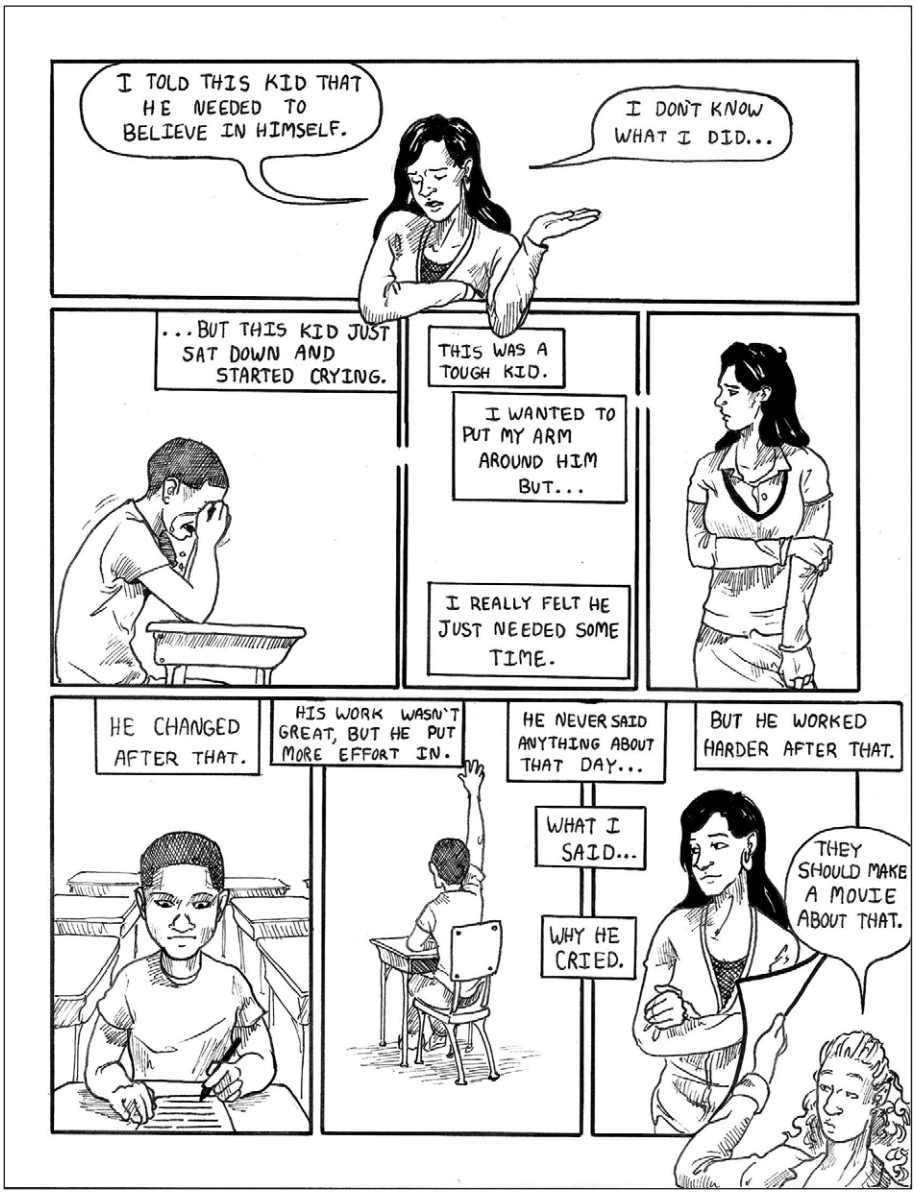
COLORED.
FATTY.
FAGGOT.
I GOT GYPED
RETARD
I'VE SAID OR THOUGHT ALL OF THESE THINGS. HOW CAN I POSSIBLY BE A GOOD TEACHER OF OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN? I AM A FRAUD.
ME TOO.
AS AN UNDERGRAD, I DID A LOT OF VOLUNTEER WORK IN A LOCAL URBAN DISTRICT AND FOUND THAT I REALLY ENJOYED WORKING WITH INNER CITY POPULATIONS.
I DECIDED URBAN EDUCATION WAS A GOOD CHOICE FOR ME BECAUSE I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING IMPACTFUL AND REWARDING.


I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE A PERFECT WAY TO GET EXPOSED TO THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN JUST TEACHING...
AND THEN TEACHING IN AN INNER CITY.
COMING OUT WITH A MASTER'S WAS BIG.
COMING OUT WITH EXTRA CERTS WAS BIG.
ELEMENTARY JOBS ARE NOT EASY TO FIND, SO HAVING AN EXTRA CERTIFICATION WAS A ROUTE TOWARDS A JOB.
AS SOON AS I HAD MY FIRST PLACEMENT I KNEW THIS WAS THE RIGHT FIT. THE CHILDREN WERE ENGAGED AND MOTIVATED AND VERY HARD WORKERS.
I DIDN'T SEE THE SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT THAT I SOMETIMES SEE IN OTHER DISTRICTS.
SUBURBAN
New Books
Field Trips
Extracurricular Activities
Art Programs
OH YEAH, THOSE LITTLE SUBURBAN KIDS HAVE NO IDEA HOW GOOD THEY HAVE IT.
URBAN
New Books
Field Trips
Extracurricular Activities
Art Programs

I DEFINITELY KNOW THAT MY KIDS ARE AWARE OF THE FACT THAT I'M WHITE.
YA THINK?
IT'S BEEN MORE DIFFICULT THAN I EVER COULD HAVE IMAGINED.
THESE KIDS ARE SO OUT OF CONTROL. I AM WHITE, YOUNG-LOOKING, STRESSED OUT, OVERWHELMED, AND I DON'T KNOW HOW TO HANDLE THEM.
DAMN, THESE WHITE GIRLS LOVE TO PLAY THE RACE CARD.
I HATE TALKING ABOUT BEHAVIOR CHALLENGES, I DON'T WANT TO SEEM LIKE I'M STEREOTYPING. BUT... CHALLENGES DO EXIST AND I WAS NOT PREPARED FOR THEM.
IS IT A STEREOTYPE IF IT'S REAL?
I'M GOOD AT BUILDING CULTURE, ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS, AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT.
I AM NOT THAT GREAT AT TEACHING THE ACTUAL CONTENT.
?
GREAT, THAT'S WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR IN A TEACHER!

I THINK I CAN CONNECT A LITTLE MORE WITH THEIR CULTURE BECAUSE I AM LATINA,
SO I UNDERSTAND THE LANGUAGE.
SHE'S PORTUGESE.
MY PRINCIPAL TOLD ME I HAD TO DO MORE HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES...
HA? SOME OF MY KIDS DON'T EVEN SHOW UP WITH A PENCIL. IF THEY DO...
THEY WANT TO THROW IT ACROSS THE ROOM.
THE ADMINISTRATION WANTS ME TO DO FULL BLOWN EXPERIMENTS WITH CHEMICALS?
I DON'T THINK SO.
WE HAVE TO TRY... DON'T WE OWE IT TO THE KIDS?

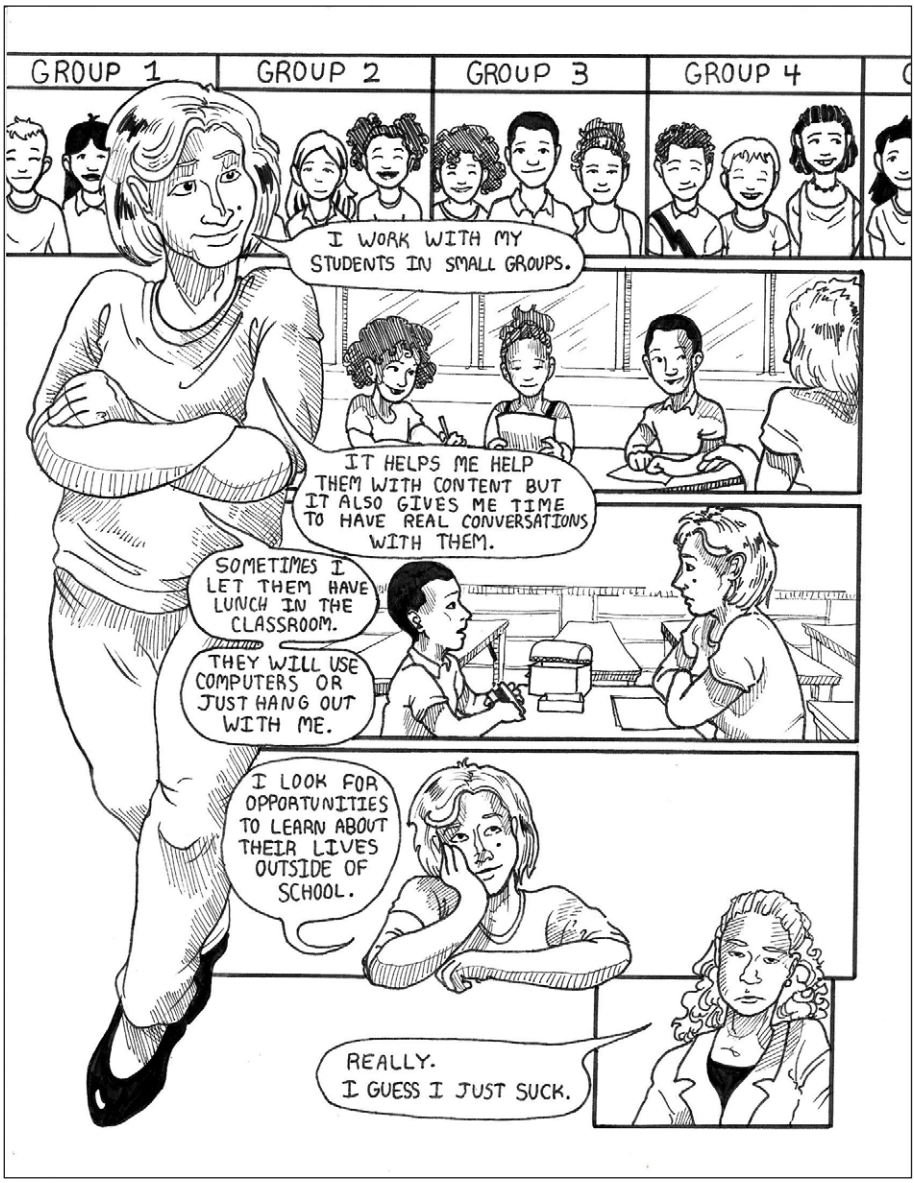
I REACHED OUT TO HELP A LITTLE GIRL WHO HAD BEEN STRUGGLING...
SHE WAS SMART BUT SHE SEEMED SO ANGRY AND OUT OF IT. I WANTED TO MAKE SURE SHE KNEW SHE HAD SOMEONE WHO CARED.
CRASH
I SAT NEXT TO HER, SOFTLY TOLD HER THAT I BELIEVED IN HER, I WALKED HER THROUGH HER WRITING PROMPT.
SHE TURNED TO ME AND SAID...
GET AWAY FROM ME UGLY!
SO THAT HAPPENED.


I TOLD THIS KID THAT HE NEEDED TO BELIEVE IN HIMSELF.
I DON'T KNOW WHAT I DID...
...BUT THIS KID JUST SAT DOWN AND STARTED CRYING.
THIS WAS A TOUGH KID.
I WANTED TO PUT MY ARM AROUND HIM BUT...
I REALLY FELT HE JUST NEEDED SOME TIME.
HE CHANGED AFTER THAT.
HIS WORK WASN'T GREAT, BUT HE PUT MORE EFFORT IN.
HE NEVER SAID ANYTHING ABOUT THAT DAY...
WHAT I SAID...
WHY HE CRIED.
BUT HE WORKED HARDER AFTER THAT.
THEY SHOULD MAKE A MOVIE ABOUT THAT.

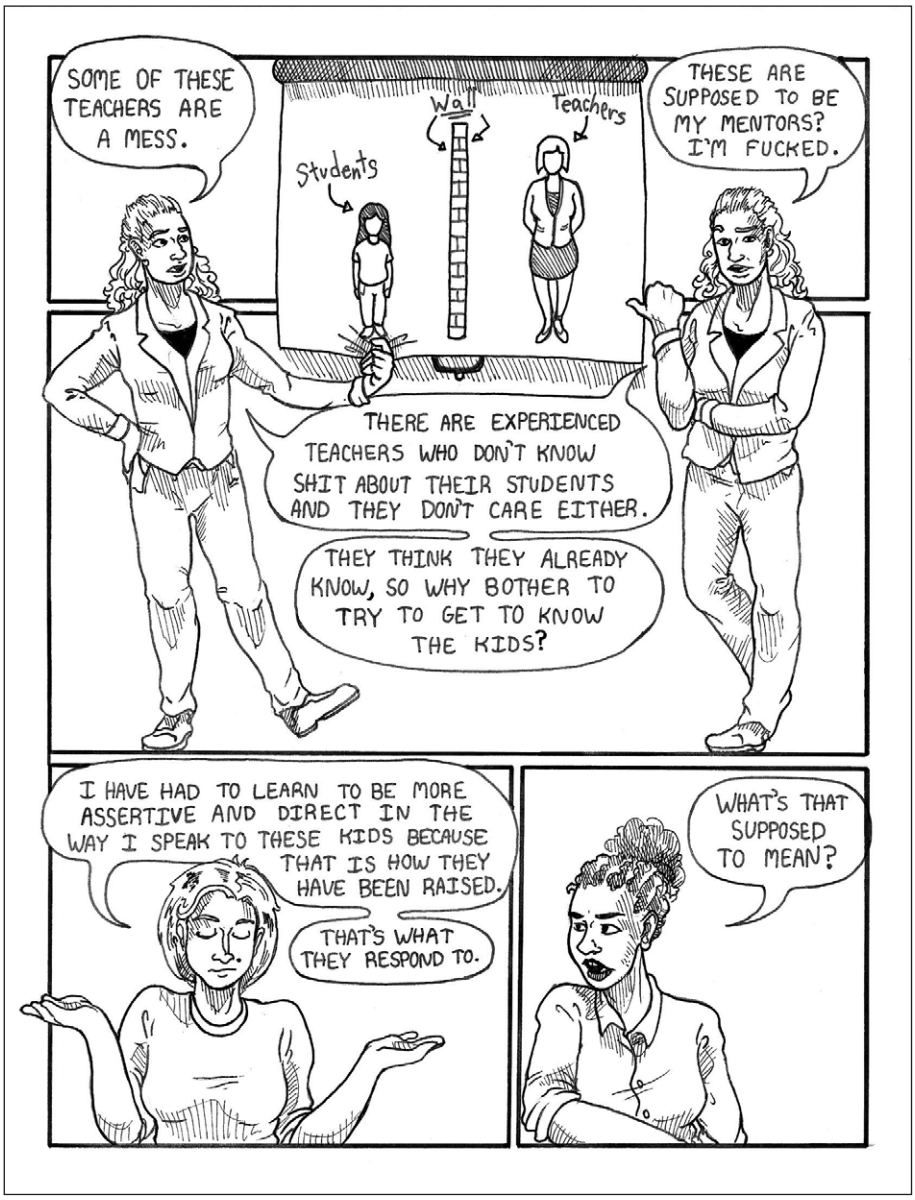
THERE ARE DAYS I GO HOME AND CRY AND I DON'T WANT TO GO TO WORK THE NEXT DAY.
YOUR FIRST YEAR IS JUST A LOT OF TRIAL AND ERROR.
...
YOU JUST HAVE TO EXPECT THAT AND NOT GIVE UP AND KEEP WORKING AND TRYING NEW THINGS.
WHEN I STARTED WORKING IN THIS DISTRICT ALL OF THE OLDER TEACHERS WOULD SAY:
WELCOME TO TRENTON! YOU SURE YOU WANT TO DO THIS?
THEY GAVE ME WHAT THEY CALLED A "CLASSROOM".
IT WAS A CLOSET.
LITERALLY, IT HAD BEEN USED AS A STORAGE CLOSET FOR YEARS.

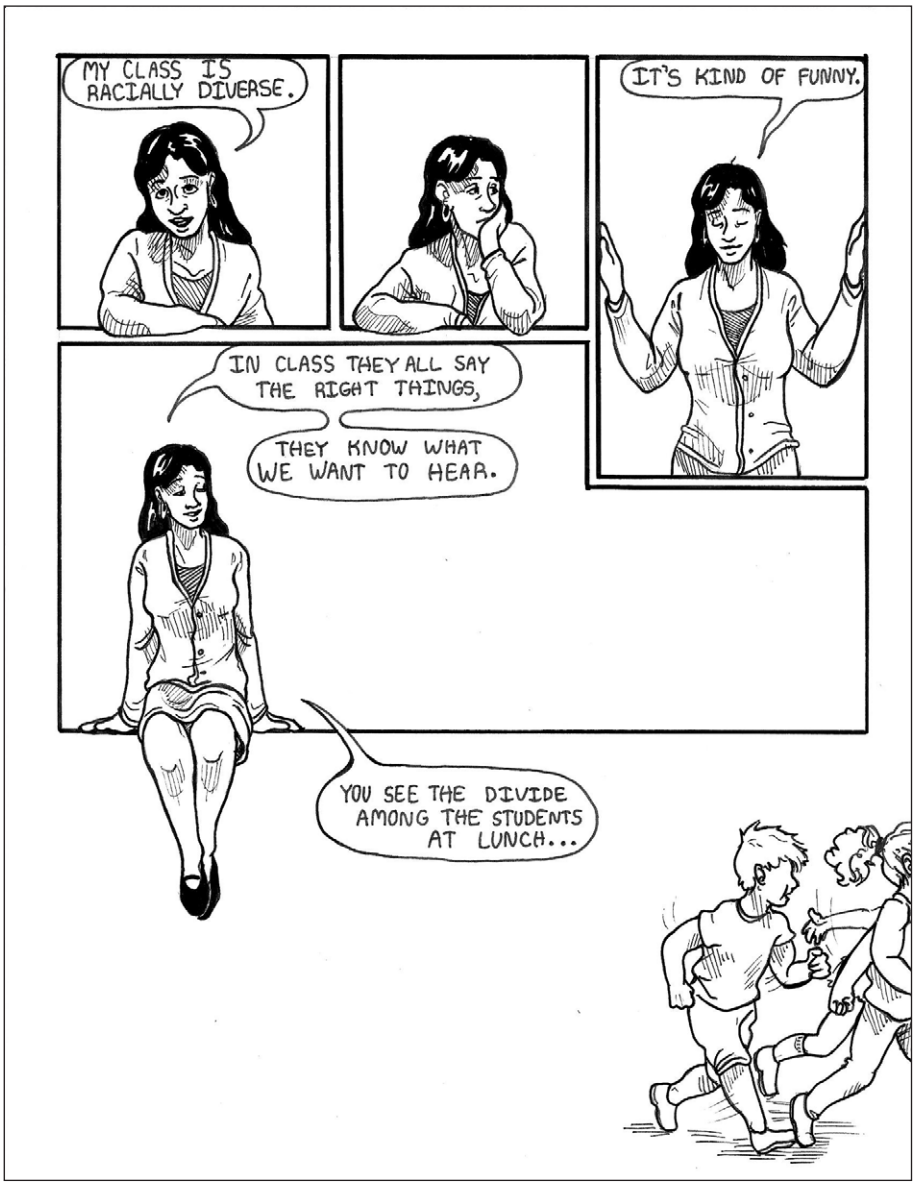
I FEEL VERY COMFORTABLE GOING TO MY ADMINISTRATION FOR HELP.
THEY ARE SUPPORTIVE AND I DEFINITELY FEEL LIKE I HAVE HELP AND RESOURCES WHEN I NEED IT.
OF COURSE SHE DOES.
I DON'T KNOW, MY JOB IS A LITTLE IFFY RIGHT NOW. AT THIS MOMENT... I DON'T KNOW IF MY DEPARTMENT IS EVEN GOING TO BE AROUND MUCH LONGER.
I AM NOT SURE IF I WANT THIS JOB EVEN IF IT IS OFFERED TO ME FOR NEXT YEAR.

I AM AN ELL TEACHER FOR K-8 AND HAVE ABOUT 100 STUDENTS IN MY CASELOAD.
TO BE IN COMPLIANCE, I AM SUPPOSED TO SEE THEM FOR 90 MINUTES EVERY DAY.
HMM... SO LET ME SEE.
I MEAN I WASN'T A MATH MAJOR, SO MAYBE I HAVE THIS WRONG, BUT LET'S SEE...
100 students X 90 mins
IF I HAVE 100 STUDENTS FOR 90 MINUTES EACH, THAT IS A BOUT 150 HOURS OF INSTRUCTION THAT I NEED TO PACK INTO A 6.5 HOUR WORKDAY.
100 students X 90 mins
100 students / 1 day x 90 min / 1 stud x 1 hr / 60 mins =
150 hrs
6.5 hrs
IF I CAN FIGURE OUT HOW TO FIT 23 DAYS INTO ONE DAY...
I CAN GET CAUGHT UP!


GROUP 1
GROUP 2
GROUP 3
GROUP 4
I WORK WITH MY STUDENTS IN SMALL GROUPS.
IT HELPS ME HELP THEM WITH CONTENT BUT IT ALSO GIVES ME TIME TO HAVE REAL CONVERSATIONS WITH THEM.
SOMETIMES I LET THEM HAVE LUNCH IN THE CLASSROOM.
THEY WILL USE COMPUTERS OR JUST HANG OUT WITH ME.
I LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN ABOUT THEIR LIVES OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL.
REALLY. I GUESS I JUST SUCK.

I DECIDED TO DO "TEACH FOR AMERICA".
THERE WAS A 6-WEEK TRAINING MODULE.
IT WAS THE WORST 6 WEEKS OF MY LIFE.
WEEK 1
WEEK 6
I TOLD A STUDENT THAT I LOVED THE WORK I SAW HANGING IN THE HALLWAY...
BUT I WASN'T SURE WHO DID IT BECAUSE THERE WAS NO NAME.
AFTER THAT HE WROTE HIS NAME PERFECTLY ON ALL HIS PAPERS.
JONAH

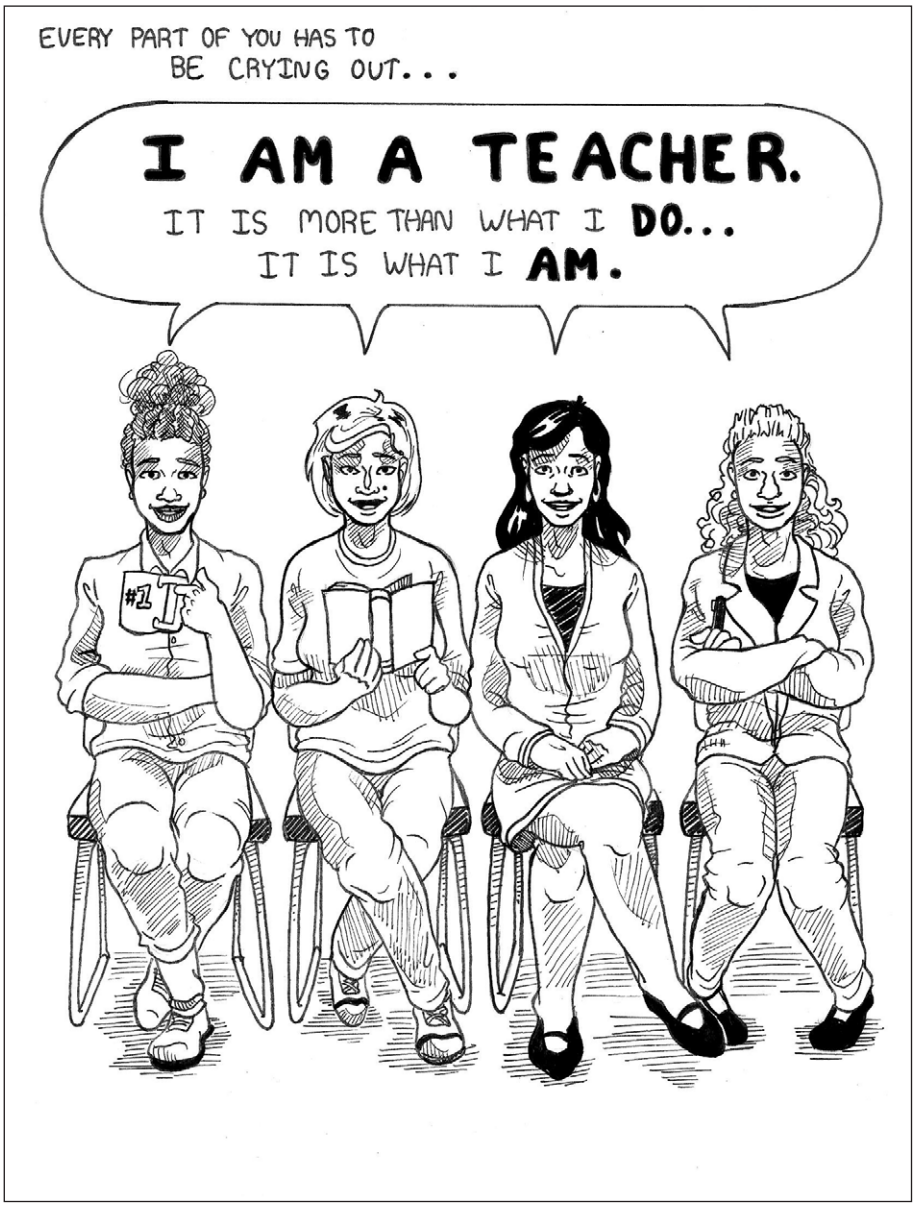

SOME OF THESE TEACHERS ARE A MESS.
Wall
Teachers
Students
THESE ARE SUPPOSED TO BE MY MENTORS? I'M FUCKED.
THERE ARE EXPERIENCED TEACHERS WHO DON'T KNOW SHIT ABOUT THEIR STUDENTS AND THEY DON'T CARE EITHER.
THEY THINK THEY ALREADY KNOW, SO WHY BOTHER TO TRY TO GET TO KNOW THE KIDS?
I HAVE HAD TO LEARN TO BE MORE ASSERTIVE AND DIRECT IN THE WAY I SPEAK TO THESE KIDS BECAUSE THAT IS HOW THEY HAVE BEEN RAISED.
THAT'S WHAT THEY RESPOND TO.
WHAT'S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?


MY CLASS IS RACIALLY DIVERSE.
IT'S KIND OF FUNNY.
IN CLASS THEY ALL SAY THE RIGHT THINGS,
THEY KNOW WHAT WE WANT TO HEAR.
YOU SEE THE DIVIDE AMONG THE STUDENTS AT LUNCH...

I WILL SPEND OVER 40 YEARS IN A CLASSROOM.
I NEED TO BE HAPPY WHERE I'M AT.
I AM WILLING TO GIVE UP TENURE.
I AM WILLING TO TAKE A MINOR PAY CUT.
I JUST NEED TO BE HAPPY WITH WHAT I'M DOING.

ANYONE THAT OBSERVES ME TELLS ME THEY CAN FEEL A SENSE OF DIGNITY AND LOVE IN MY CLASSROOM.
THAT WAS BASICALLY MY MAIN GOAL — TO GET MY STUDENTS TO FEEL LIKE A FAMILY.
IT'S BEEN REALLY SWEET, BECAUSE NOW —THE SCHOOL YEAR IS ALMOST OVER— AND MY KIDS ARE SAYING TO EACH OTHER...
I SUPPORT YOU
WE ARE FAMILY
THANK YOU
... STUFF LIKE THAT.
I'VE SAID THESE THINGS TO THEM OVER AND OVER. AGAIN, LIKE A BROKEN RECORD. AND WHEN I HEAR THEM SAYING IT TO EACH OTHER...
... IT'S THE SWEETEST THING, I AM REALLY PROUD OF THAT.

IF YOU ARE LISTENING WITH YOUR HEART, NOT YOUR FEAR, YOU ARE ONE STEP CLOSER TO BEING A GOOD TEACHER.
YOU'VE GOT TO SHOW UP, BE FULLY PRESENT... DON'T THINK ABOUT A PARTY YOU WANT TO GO TO OR HOW TIRED YOU ARE.
JUST REALLY BE IN THE MOMENT.
IF YOU ARE GOING TO BE ONE OF THE GREATS --
SUCCESSFUL TEACHERS OF OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN --
IT MUST BE SOMETHING YOU FEEL IN YOUR HEART AND SOUL.


EVERY PART OF YOU HAS TO BE CRYING OUT...
I AM A TEACHER.
IT IS MORE THAN WHAT I DO...
IT IS WHAT I AM.
#1 T

Editorial Note

This article is part of the Graphic Science Special Collection, edited by Nicolas Labarre and Ernesto Priego. This piece was peer-reviewed by Mike Cook, Benoît Crucifix, Moss Pike and Nicolas Labarre.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

For more information about the larger study, please see Dell'Angelo, T. (2016) Voices from the Field: Preparing Teachers for High Need Schools. The Qualitative Report, 21(9), pgs. 1728–1729.

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