

# Choosing to Teach in Urban Schools Among Graduates of Elite Colleges

Eran Tamir

*Brandeis University, Waltham, MA*

According to the research literature, there are three reasons that draw teachers into teaching: (1) gender-related reasons, (2) altruistic reasons, and (3) monetary rewards and job flexibility. Based on data from three teacher preparation programs, this article argues that teachers who were trained at elite colleges and who chose teaching in urban schools rarely referred to any of the three reasons. Instead, these teachers tend to (a) conceptualize teaching around issues of social justice and social change, arguing they joined teaching to improve society, and (b) seek leadership positions in urban education. Using Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital, these arguments are theorized and hypotheses for further research are developed.

**Keywords:** *teacher preparation; teacher retention; teacher career; teaching profession; Bourdieu*

Teaching has long suffered a low professional status. Teachers earn low salaries, endure challenging working conditions, and in general have limited access to rigorous professional development. In the past, the teaching profession was able to build on the service of talented and devoted women who were socially bounded and discriminated against by academic institutions and the job market which considered them to be intellectually inferior to men. This gender inequality in the labor force has started to shift during the 1960s and 1970s in response to the struggle of the feminist and human rights movements that challenged society to accept women as equal to men. As a result, the capacity of the teaching profession to attract talented women has significantly diminished. During the 1980s, the exodus of

---

**Author's Note:** The research reported in this paper has been part of the Choosing to Teach study supported by a grant from the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University. Please address correspondence to Eran Tamir, PhD, Senior Research Associate, Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, Brandeis University, 415 South Street, Waltham, MA 02454-9110; e-mail: [etamir88@brandeis.edu](mailto:etamir88@brandeis.edu).

talented women from the profession became a widespread and well-known phenomenon that triggered what came to be recognized during the 1990s as the “crisis of teacher quality.”

One of the solutions devised by policy makers and educators to address this problem of teacher quality was to actively recruit teachers from elite colleges. The assumption was that the hundreds of teachers colleges and state universities in the United States, which attract primarily students with average to low academic abilities (as measured by their SAT or ACT scores), can not prepare the high-quality teachers that schools and students need. To thrive, it was argued, teaching, like other professions, need the kind of talented students who attend elite schools and go through rigorous academic preparation.

This argument has taken many different forms in previous years. In the 1960's, for example, the Ford Foundation donated grants to create graduate-level teacher preparation programs (MAT) in several elite colleges (Sykes, 1984). In the 1980s and 1990s, these ideas have partly fueled the creation of the alternate route movement, which started in New Jersey in 1983 (Tamir, 2008; Tamir, in press a). Since then, alternate routes have mushroomed across the United States and are now operating in 47 states (Feistritzer, 2006). In the 1990s the same idea also led to the establishment of the national and highly desirable nonprofit Teach For America (TFA), which this year (2009) attracted 35,000 applications for approximately 5,500 teaching spots. Though this program and others are part of the alternate route movement, they all vary significantly in their mission, length of preparation, quality of instruction, and curriculum (Humphrey & Wechsler, 2007; Stoddart & Floden, 1995). Some of these programs, as well as others, take pedagogy seriously and are committed to enhance the quality of the teaching profession by recruiting college graduates from elite schools. The students who attend some of these programs and their decision to become teachers will be the focus of this article. This means that the preparation programs, where these teachers were socialized and which are likely to have had substantial impact on the way these teachers think about their role as teachers and on their practice of teaching, are going to take a back seat in this article.

In the past few decades, the literature on teachers' decision to enter the profession tends to be overly general, describing teachers as one coherent group (e.g., Lortie, 1975; Lacey, 1977) of women who are drawn to teaching because of their (a) gender, (b) altruistic nature, and (c) desire to enjoy monetary rewards as well as a flexible work schedule and job security. This study, focusing on elite college graduates who enter teaching, challenges

the above assertions, arguing that different groups are drawn to teaching because of other reasons. Indeed, when considering the vast career options that are currently available to elite college graduates, choosing to teach may seem almost irrational if one applies the common perception of middle- and upper-class groups on teaching, as a low-status, poorly paid semiprofession. For these individuals pursuing a teaching career would mean a significant loss of monetary rewards associated with their highly valued university degree, not to mention having to cope with the dismay of peers, parents, and society at large at the choice of such low status they made. So why against all odds, and contrary to what most would consider a rational decision-making process, do talented students from elite colleges still choose to become teachers?

Based on a pilot study and recent findings from two other case studies on the career path of similar teachers (Barraza & Quartz, 2005; Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003; Smulyan, 2004), I argue that these teachers develop a social conception of teaching that focuses on teaching mainly as a means for promoting social justice and social change. In other words, these teachers seek to have direct impact on social inequality by helping young children become successful despite all the harsh circumstances that are part of their daily reality in the inner-city neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup> This conception of teaching and the role of teachers in it is not common; it rather reflects what both Smulyan and Barraza and Quartz called a redefinition of teaching. Included in this unique conception of teaching as a vehicle for social change is also the idea of extending teaching outside of the classroom by becoming, for example, a principal or district administrator who will foster the same ideas from a higher level.

Here again, I would like to reiterate that this article is not going to elaborate on the effects that teacher preparation programs might have on teachers' conception of teaching and commitments. Indeed, teacher educators, like Cochran-Smith (2005), have argued in the past few years that

teacher education institutions, particularly those that prepare teachers for urban schools . . . are conceptualizing work for equity and social justice as an outcome of teacher preparation in and of itself. (p. 11)

I fully acknowledge this intended role that teacher preparation programs take to make an impact on the commitments of their graduates and thus devote a larger scope elsewhere to discuss it (Tamir, in press b).

Finally, I will use Bourdieu's concepts of social field and capital to offer a theorization of why elite college graduates who chose to become teachers

are likely to embrace social change and leadership as primary facets in their interpretation of the role of teaching. I also consider the long-term potential political implications of having such established subgroup of elite college teachers taking part in the teaching field.

### **Choosing to Teach? Reviewing the Factors That Shape the Decision to Become Teachers**

Over the past three decades, many works have tried to generate data to address the fundamental question: Why teachers choose to teach? Most of this research tried to address this question, assuming teachers to be a fairly homogeneous group, disregarding in particular characteristics, such as type of academic preparation, which might create substantial differences among them. In some of these studies researchers used small qualitative samples, whereas others used large national surveys. Past research also varies in the methods that were applied for data analysis. Some researchers employed sophisticated quantitative procedures (Roberson, Keith, & Page, 1983), whereas others used simple descriptive analyses (Morales, 1994; Wood, 1978) or developed a complex narrative analysis of several case studies. Nevertheless, although research vary in terms of sample size, method, time in which it was conducted, and target population, several findings and themes seem fairly consistent across the literature.

Next, I will present a partial list of three major factors that intends to summarize a more extensive list of reasons that were described by others as drawing teachers into the profession. I later illustrate how the common explanation related to each factor becomes irrelevant or needs reinterpretation when applied to explain why teachers from elite colleges choose to become teachers.

#### **Altruistic Reasons**

In many studies, teachers reported being drawn to the profession for altruistic reasons; that is, teachers sought to help children and watch them grow through teaching (Morales, 1994; Wood, 1978). This notion is also related to Hansen's (1995) notion of teaching as a vocation and to Lortie's (1975) notion of teaching as a service. Hansen emphasizes the aspects of public obligation and personal fulfillment that are attached to what he calls having a sense of vocation. Vocation, he argues, "describes work that results in service to others and personal satisfaction in the rendering of that

service” (p. 3). It involves an active devotion of oneself to the practice of teaching in a way that would “enact one’s inner urge to contribute to the world” (p. 5). Lortie has a more structural, some would say simplistic, view on this issue. For him, service is one of five themes that draw teachers to teaching. Lortie notes, “Teachers have been perceived as performing a special mission in our society, and we can see the continuation of that conception among those engaged in the work today” (p. 28). Two decades later, Cohn and Kottkamp (1993) who revisited Lortie’s research found that teachers’ intrinsic rewards<sup>2</sup> remained similar across the years. When asked to rank “which of the following is the most important source of satisfaction to you,” teachers overwhelmingly (86.2% in Lortie’s 1964 study, and 86.7% in Cohn and Kottkamp’s 1984 study) replied: “the times I know I have “reached” a student or group of students, and they have learned” (p. 61).

Quite similarly, recent data about teachers’ satisfaction and retention support this notion, suggesting that new teachers stay in the profession if they feel they have a positive impact on students, what Johnson and Birkeland (2003) called a sense of success.

## **Gender-Related Reasons**

Researchers also agree that teaching has been historically shaped as the “woman’s ‘true’ profession” (Hoffman, 2003), thus making women far more likely than men to hold a teaching position (Roberson et al., 1983; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Except for the very early days of teaching in colonial times, teaching has been a predominantly feminine practice. Condliffe-Lagemann (2000) vividly described how teaching became women’s work and how teachers were subordinated to male administrators. Although teachers have struggled to increase their professional stature by organizing in unions, enhancing certification requirements and gradually adding more years of academic, as a group, on average, more years of academic work (Angus, 2001; Hoffman, 2003; Sedlak & Shlosman, 1986), the positioning of teaching as feminine has affected and continues to affect the economic and cultural rewards of teaching, making it a poorly paying profession with very little social status to offer (Labaree, 2004, 2005). For example, recent data show that teachers are underpaid when compared to other college graduates and that the gap between the groups is gradually increasing (e.g., Olson, 2000). All the while, even today, the profession continues to become more feminine than ever before. Recent reports show that women are approximately 82% of the teaching force compared to “74 percent in 1996, 71% in 1990 and 69% in 1986” (Feistritzer, 2005a). This means that although

women enjoy greater job opportunities than ever before, there are powerful social structures at play that still push primarily women with relatively low academic aptitude (Roberson et al., 1983) to teaching.

## Monetary Rewards and Working Conditions

Many researchers discuss how monetary and status rewards (what Lortie calls extrinsic rewards)<sup>3</sup> shape aspiring graduates' decision to enter teaching. According to Lortie (1975) and others (e.g., Lanier & Little, 1986; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005), teaching has been a means for upward social mobility and professional stability to many who have been first in their families to attend college and for immigrants and others who come from modest social background. For these groups, who form a significant portion of the teaching force, teaching is an invaluable opportunity to join the ranks of the lower middle class. In addition, researchers argue, teaching also provides women and their families with flexible working arrangements that allow them to raise their own children more comfortably (what Lortie calls ancillary rewards)<sup>4</sup>. About 45.8% of the teachers in Lortie's sample, compared with 51.5% reported in Cohn and Kottkamp's (1993, p. 59) work two decades later, reported that "the relative security of income and position" and "the schedule (especially summer), which can permit travel, family activities, etc." were things they liked best in teaching.

Nevertheless, Lortie (1975), Morales (1994), and Cohn and Kottkamp (1993), all found that monetary rewards had relatively weak effect on the teachers' decision to become teachers. One way of explaining these contrasting findings is to argue that teachers sometimes tend to emphasize the service dimension and might feel inconvenient mentioning monetary aspects as having impact on their decision. Morales suggested that teacher might respond this way because of two reasons: (1) They share the popular belief that teaching salaries are low, and (2) They tend to feel that being devoted and dedicated is not well aligned with thinking about monetary rewards.

Recent data from Johnson and colleagues' (Johnson & The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004) study on the new generation of teachers found that beginning teachers chose teaching knowing their salaries would not be as high as they would like them to be. Nevertheless, when asked, teachers raised concerns about their ability to sustain a family on such a low wage and on being dependent on their partner's salary.

What can we make out of these findings? While there is a lot to be learned about the factors that draw teachers to teaching in general, the various analyses fail to provide a nuanced look on the various groups of teachers and their particular reasons for choosing to teach. This is exactly the point I am

trying to make in the following part, concerning the special reasons that lead elite college students to choose teaching.

### **Reconsidering the Factors as They Apply to Teachers From Elite Colleges**

Most literature on the three factors presented above treat teachers largely as a homogeneous group. Recent research (e.g., Feistritzer, 2005a; Johnson & The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005), however, indicates that some segments in the teaching force, like alternate route graduates, consist of significantly “more males, more minorities and more older people than the population of teachers who obtain certification via the traditional route” (Feistritzer, 2005b, p. vi). Teachers also vary considerably in terms of their college preparation, with some attending nonselective colleges and others attending elite colleges. I argue that having this diverse workforce calls for a more nuanced analysis of teacher subgroups and the various reasons that draw them into the profession. In other words, the assumptions that led Lortie and other researchers to develop a general scheme to analyze and explain teachers’ decision to choose teaching should be revisited, as they are too general and partly inaccurate.

I illustrate this point in my discussion of recent data from two case studies and a pilot study conducted by the author and colleagues where I show that teachers who attended teacher preparation programs at elite colleges with an emphasis on urban teaching committed to social justice are more likely to choose teaching for a different set of reasons than those that were reviewed above.

## **Choosing to Teach Among Graduates of Elite Colleges**

### **Definition of Elite Colleges**

Consistent with many researchers who use student selectivity as the prime measure of college quality (Brand & Halaby, 2003; Davies & Guppy, 1997), I define elite colleges as highly selective institutions, which admit students who score relatively high on their SAT tests (roughly about 650 and higher across the three subject areas).<sup>5</sup> All three colleges that are discussed below fall into this category (“Where Will Your SAT or ACT Scores Take You?,” 2007): University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA; 650),

University of Chicago (710), and the elite liberal arts college studied by Smulyan (710).<sup>6</sup> The latter two have long enjoyed an established reputation of quality. For example, they have also appeared in *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges* (1969), which ranks the most prestigious colleges in the United States.

The assumption underlying this sort of institutional distinction that I make is that the U.S. higher education system, covering approximately 3,600 institutions, is highly stratified. The most prestigious institutions in this system, which are also the most selective ones, hold immense power and resources that are associated with their key role in the production and reproduction of society's political, economic, and cultural elites. These institutions' see themselves as prime players in the preparation of society's next generation of leaders. This article focuses on how and why students who study, live, and evolve as young adults in this social context of elitism and privilege being expected to excel and lead in anything they do, choose teaching and what does teaching really means for them?

### **Choosing to Teach at an Elite Liberal Arts College**

Smulyan (2004) studied the career path of 28 "women at an elite liberal arts college" (p. 517). Only 11 among the 28 students have become teachers. All students were interviewed annually for 5 consecutive years and then reinterviewed 5 years after their last interview, covering a period of 10 years. Most have remained in teaching for several years. Later, several of them went to graduate school. The women were asked about past educational experiences; relations with significant Others, gender, ethnicity; and the way these were related to their educational and career choices.

Smulyan (2004) suggested an alternative explanation that counters the general findings of the literature about choosing to teach. One may argue that the students in Smulyan's sample seem to choose teaching because of the same old reasons, that is, being a woman, looking for economic stability, and having the desire to help kids learn. However, Smulyan shows that students in her sample, who attended an elite college and chose a teaching career, took that decision in a different context from the one usually experienced by most teachers, and for different reasons and aims. They were women who chose teaching, regardless of the financial hardships, and despite knowing they had much more glamorous options available. Indeed,

Few of these women came to college expecting to teach; many dragged their feet as they considered the possibility, resisting the idea that they (like some



of their grandmothers, aunts, mothers) would fall into what they initially saw as the easy—and stereotypical—path of teaching. (p. 522)

In this case, according to Smulyan, the tension between their affiliation to a prestigious school and their inclination to choose a low-status profession, led the women to renegotiate the definitions of *teaching* and *success*:

To renegotiate definitions of teaching, these women often had to begin by taking their parents,' teachers' friends' and their own stereotypes of teachers and their contrasting expectations of what it meant to be "smart" and "successful" women. (p. 523)

Redefining *teaching* for these teachers meant developing a critical, savvy approach to teaching that is responsive "to a broad range of social inequalities" (p. 523) and acts relentlessly for social change. Smulyan's teachers refuse to conform to a model they believe confines teachers to their classroom and their children. For them, teaching is a public office carried out in the public sphere (not only in the classroom) that challenges the status quo and in particular social arrangements that are unjustified and unequal. More specifically, she argues that the women she interviewed adopted social justice awareness as part of negotiating their social status vis-à-vis what they saw as the social expectations from women to serve in a subordinated, narrowly conceived teaching profession.

On one issue, the financial security and benefits that are afforded by teaching, Smulyan's (2004) reports on mixed findings. She notes that individuals in her sample perceived teacher benefits based on their class:

Class can . . . work as a deterrent to teaching for those who want more financial security than they feel teaching provides. It can also be a positive influence, since teaching may provide more security and benefits than the individual and others in her community have experienced in the past (p. 526)

Though I don't dispute Smulyan's judgment concerning the small group of teachers she studied, I believe her argument makes less sense for elite college graduates in general, who, even when coming from a modest background, by the time they graduate, become part of a selective group that enjoys privileged access to lucrative occupations that bestow social, economic, and cultural capital that teaching can never match.

## Choosing to Teach Among UCLA, Center X Graduates

Since its inception in 1995 Center X at UCLA has worked diligently to prepare a cadre of talented urban teachers who would “beat the odds” by committing to teaching and other urban education–related jobs. Quartz and TEP Research Group (2003) reported that after 5 years, 71% of Center X graduates remained in teaching compared to a national average of 54% (Ingersoll, 2003). Center X teachers do even better, in terms of retention, when those who moved to other works within the field of urban education are included (88%). Barraza and Quartz (2005) reported that half of the center recruits graduated from UCLA and an additional quarter graduated from other UCLA-affiliated institutions, with “most graduating from UC Berkeley, the system’s most selective university.” So once again, I pose the question, why do these young individuals from elite colleges choose teaching?

So far, most research done on Center X did not respond directly to this question. However, there are several publications that report sporadically on some of the considerations that led teachers to choose teaching. For example, Olsen and Anderson (2007) described one of Center X’s teachers, Anthony, who “had planned to enter the medical profession but decided—against his family’s wishes—to shift his career path and make teaching his vehicle for change” (p. 12). A more comprehensive analysis can be found in Barraza and Quartz (2005), who argued,

Overwhelmingly, Center X candidates’ report that they choose to teach, because they are motivated by activist ideals. Nearly three quarters of incoming students stated that their belief that “teaching helps change the world and further social justice” was extremely important to their decision to pursue a teaching credential. (pp. 9-10)

In addition, 90% of the entrant teachers reported “that the program’s social justice emphasis was extremely or very important to their decision to enroll in the program” (p. 12).

Other reasons that led Center X teachers to choose their preparation program were “their desire to work in the program’s partner schools—some of the lowest-performing and highest-poverty urban schools in and around Los Angeles” (78%), and the “program’s reputation for quality” (90%; p. 12).

Interestingly, Center X teachers confirm once again the hypothesis that, overall, teachers of elite schools are less likely to enter the profession due to reasons related to job security and flexible schedule.

The powerful connection between women and teaching remains an undeniable fact also at Center X, which has a similar gender composition (79%

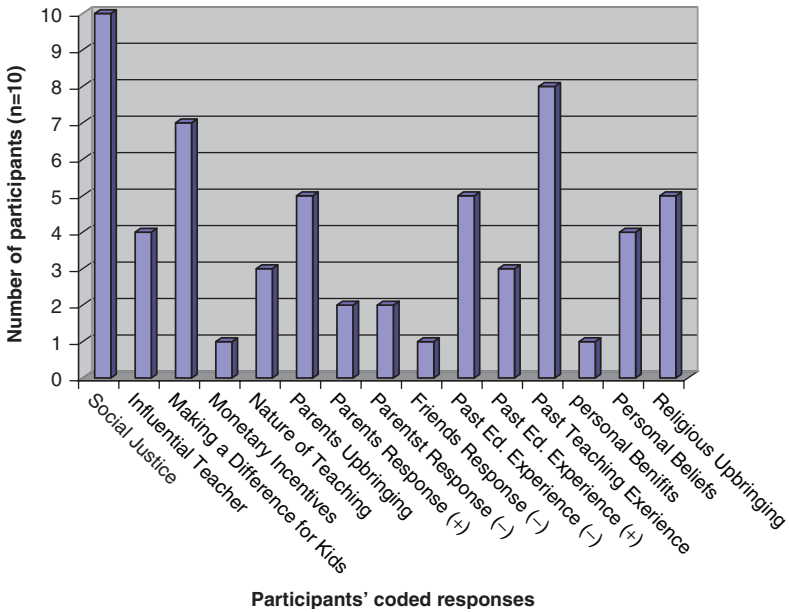
female) as in national data. However, in what seems to echo Smulyan's argument on elite college teachers' desire to redefine the conception of teaching, Barraza and Quartz (2005) also concluded that Center X teachers are critical and look to challenge social inequality and extend teacher's "professional role beyond the classroom [by] moving away from teaching and into administrative and other supervisory or student support roles" (p. 13). According to Center X data, this trend was across the board for males and females, though a survival analysis reveals that males who are between Year 3 and Year 7 of their tenure were 10% more likely than women to leave teaching and advance to leadership positions (Quartz et al., 2008).

### **The Pilot Study on University of Chicago Teacher Education Program (UTEP)**

The pilot study consists of 10 interviews with UTEP graduates, which took place in 2006 at the program's offices. These interviews are part of the *Choosing to Teach* study.<sup>7</sup> Interviews lasted 1 hour on average, following a standard protocol developed to elicit responses directed toward teachers' decisions to teach and decisions to teach in urban schools (see Appendix A). Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed in ATLAS.ti. data analysis software (ATLAS.ti. GmbH, Germany) to develop general descriptive categories of response to protocol questions.<sup>8</sup> I briefly describe these findings below and then turn to discuss in detail two major themes that have emerged from the interviews.

Figure 1 below summarizes participants' descriptions of the factors/reasons that affected their decision to choose teaching as a career. Readers should note that asking teachers to report on the factors that affected their decision to become teachers is *different* than trying to map (as Lortie, 1975, and Cohen & Kottkamp, 1993 have done in their studies) the various rewards that teaching careers has to offer. Indeed, as can be seen, teachers reported not only about the rewards (intrinsic, ancillary, and extrinsic) associated with teaching but also elaborated on a range of reasons related to their upbringing and past experiences. For example, as can be seen in Figure 1, all participants explicated a belief in social justice and social change as a prime motivation in becoming teachers (intrinsic reward), whereas 7 participants added that they decided to become teachers because they wanted to make a difference in children's lives (intrinsic reward). Only one of the 10 teachers mentioned monetary rewards as a substantial consideration that might help keep her in teaching for the short run,

**Figure 1**  
**Why Did You Choose to Teach?**  
**Distribution of Participants' Responses**



explaining that she needs to repay a sizable debt and that urban teaching could help her get a federal loan forgiven (extrinsic reward). Four teachers mentioned reasons related to the nature of teaching, such as teaching being a job that allows them to be creative, or collaborate with colleagues (ancillary rewards).

Other reasons that were mentioned by teachers include past experiences and interactions. For example, past teaching experience was mentioned by 8 teachers as a factor that helped them grasp the challenges and treats involved in teaching. Another example is from 5 participants who emphasized their parents' upbringing as an experience that shaped and guided their decision to become teachers. For example, one participant discussed her parents' involvement in social action for the poor as an activity that carved in her soul the importance of working for social justice. Another participant said that she learned much about good teaching and practice by

observing her mother's child-rearing techniques. Teachers also mentioned their religious upbringing as a source of meaning that helped them shape their conception of justice and commitment to fellow human beings. Others mentioned "negative" educational experience (e.g., learning in schools with teachers that they didn't respect) as a factor that encouraged them to choose teaching.

### **Emerging Themes From the Pilot Study**

Two major themes emerge from teachers' voices. First, teachers considered teaching to be a noble profession, where one can make a difference for children and society (social justice). The notion of social justice has some similarities to "altruistic reasons" cited in the literature as a major factor for choosing to teach, yet, as we also saw in the previous two case studies, social justice was conceived by teachers as an active approach aimed at changing society by reducing inequities and injustice. Moreover, teachers prepared at elite college used social justice as a conceptual platform to redefine teaching and distance themselves from more traditional conceptions of teaching that center around service, vocation, and the nurturing of children. Second, it seems that although these teachers chose to become teachers, their definition of *teaching* is expansive and untraditional. These teachers have strong commitment to social change in urban education and plan a career path that would allow them to pursue it in multiple roles and levels. When asked to explain why would they consider leaving the classroom, most say that their commitment to teaching is genuine, but so is their commitment to promote social change. In what follows, I elaborate each theme, bringing teachers' voices to bear.

### **Redefining Teaching Through Social Justice**

Social justice was a recurrent theme across all interviews, particularly when UTEP teachers spoke about why teaching is important to them and why they chose to enter the teaching profession. UTEP teachers discussed and interpreted social justice in various ways. Some viewed the concept of social justice as a way of changing society by gradually taking more responsibility over larger fractions of it (e.g., first by teaching a class and later by running a school). Others understood social justice as a multilayer commitment to empower students in the classroom, while seeking for ways to promote social change. An illustrative example of this complex conception of social justice is the following quote from a teacher:

The biggest reason that I want to do this program was I was interested in the social justice aspects. Like in the beginning of the program I realized that there is a lot more to teaching, to being a good teacher, than being all for the justice part. Like I cannot just focus on what is happening outside, or what is happening in the policies when I have my own classroom, right, because I have to be the good teacher that I want to be. So figuring out that this is what I need to do first, be a good teacher in the classroom, make that difference in the classroom, and then also try and think of ways that I can make a difference outside of it.

In the interviews, teachers also discussed the dimensions of social justice as a set of ideas aimed at having better and fair society, as well as a social obligation/mission to compensate children for the unjust and unequal conditions in which urban schools operate. The following two excerpts illustrate this perspective of social justice:

How I got into teaching was just trying to afford that [quality education] to children that didn't have the resources to go to a Catholic school or to go to a private school or to get bused out to an overnight boarding school.

I started to see that schools are one of the only institutions in a position to intervene in the repeating cycle of socioeconomic status determining a child's future, like the status of their parents determining their status as an adult. And I recognize that the school has been only marginally successful in trying to intervene in that cycle, but I think the school and the church probably are some of the only institutions that are in that position to help.

The way these teachers conceptualize teaching is inconsistent with what most literature on choosing to teach suggest. Instead, of Lortie's model of a compliant women who nurture kids and obediently help preserving the status quo in society, UTEP teachers appear to be critical, knowledgeable, and have a high level of ideological commitment and conviction in the potential power of education and teaching to change society and challenge inequality.

In doing so, UTEP teachers not only refuse to accept the marginal position of the teaching profession and seek to redefine it, but as we will see in the following, they also openly strive to change it from within by first becoming part of the profession and later occupying leadership positions in urban schools.

## **Expanding Teaching Outside the Classroom**

Though they chose to teach in order to promote social change, these teachers understand that social change cannot be achieved only through their actions in class. For many of them, pursuing a leadership position in education is a "natural" part of their career trajectory. In other words, they

view educational leadership as an expansion of their teaching commitment for social change and a tool that can help them gain more impact in directing the field toward this aim:

I think my commitment is to change the school system as it is right now, at least the Chicago public school system, and you can't really do that unless you understand the situation of the teachers, of the students, and that's part of the reason why my goal is to teach for five years, to just gain that experience and in the future there's a possibility that I might try to move up and do some administrative stuff where I can be more effective in the schoolwide level.

Another teacher notes,

I've considered going into administration, because that's where I really see change in schools happening. It's like, yeah, I can make my classroom a happy, safe place for my kids, but then what happens when they go on to 6th grade? I see other teachers in my school who don't teach at all like I do and I don't—they're very caring and thoughtful people, but I don't think that they're really—they're not preparing their kids the way that I want to prepare my kids. The greatest changes and impressive things I've seen in education were because of principals or people founding charter schools. That's definitely something I would consider to up the impact.

A third teacher was probably the most illustrative of the idea of expanding teaching outside the classroom, and she argued,

In the long-term I'm not going to stay in the classroom. In the long-term something more has to happen where I'm either training teachers or I'm a principal or I'm a legislator or I just give up entirely [laughs], because I feel like so many things have to be different.

These statements are not exceptions, but are rather representative of the 10 UTEP teachers who interviewed with the Choosing to Teach study. When asked about their likely career path, only 2 of the 10 teachers said teaching is likely to be their long-term career.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, most teachers said they would stay in teaching more than 5 years, and a few thought they would stay for less than 5 years.<sup>10</sup>

## Summary of Findings

As we have seen, past research on choosing to teach focused largely on variables such as gender, teachers' general inclination toward altruism and service, and monetary rewards and flexibility of work as reasons that draw

teachers to teaching. The UTEP teachers we interviewed, as well as the other teachers from the two case studies I reviewed, tell a different story. As graduates of elite colleges, most of these teachers could have pursued a career that pays better than teaching. Their decision to teach was mainly inspired by a sense of mission to change society and improve the lives of poor inner-city children. Thus, it is not surprising that they did not highlight economic rewards and flexibility of work as key factors in their decision to enter teaching. Finally, and this is the main point where our data do not differ greatly from general teaching force data: It seems that being a woman, even though the teachers are conscious about it and try to find creative ways to reinterpret its role in the teaching profession, continues to be strongly associated with the decision to teach.

### **Elite Schooling and Teacher Preparation**

So far I have shown that teachers who studied in elite colleges are likely to choose teaching for reasons that differ in some important ways from the traditional reasons documented in the literature. In this final section I draw on Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital (Bourdieu, 1985, 1986) to help account for the emergence of this subgroup of teachers and to speculate about its potential influence on the field of teaching in the future. I argue that teachers from elite colleges with their unique mission and social vision of change should be considered as a group that has its own explicit agenda and is likely to seek ways to make maximum impact on the internal politics of the field of teaching. In previous research of the New Jersey alternate route to teaching (Tamir, 2008; Tamir, *in press*) I used Bourdieu's conceptual tools in a similar way to analyze how different policy groups (e.g. the governor, the Department of Education, teacher educators, teacher unions) pushed their preferred policies as embodied in their different visions of teacher certification to achieve more control over the field of educational policy. Here I use the same theory to consider the emergence of a distinct subgroup of teachers prepared at elite schools who hold a unique vision of teaching and are committed to redefine their field.

Indeed, according to Bourdieu (1985), every field has individuals and subgroups, which hold different visions about the nature of the field and vie for positions of influence and power. Sometimes they struggle over competing visions; more often they struggle over scarce resources. In this dynamic, new groups constantly press the status quo in their field and, depending on the circumstances, are sometimes successful in acquiring more power and pushing their political agenda forward.



## **The Role of Cultural and Symbolic Capital in the Formation of Elite College Teachers as a Distinct Subgroup of Teachers**

Though many groups and individuals may try to further their agenda and power in the field of teaching, their capacity to achieve such an aim is closely related to the types and volumes of capital they possess. Following Bourdieu's lengthy discussion on symbolic capital and academe (1996), I argue that teachers prepared at elite colleges represent a distinct and potentially influential subgroup of teachers. As members of this subgroup, their credentials and preparation entitle them to special respect in society and access to positions of power and influence. Bourdieu would say they have cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1996; see also Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The former derived from learning over time in formal prestigious institutions, whereas the latter derived from social acceptance and general belief among the public that associate elite schooling with the image of leadership, responsibility, excellence, distinction, and public service. Most important, this public image results in a perception that views elite college graduates as fully entitled to authority and power.<sup>12</sup>

The ways in which elite school teachers reconceptualized what teaching meant for them is closely aligned to these public images and noble ideals that are associated with elite colleges. These teachers perceive education as a promising avenue through which a large-scale solution for social inequality could be achieved. Teaching position in poor urban schools, according to this perspective, ceases to be the unrewarding and undesirable position most teachers consider it to be. Instead, teaching becomes a way to explore and fulfill social ideals. Indeed, it seems that elite college teachers developed their conception of teaching because it allowed them to devote their energy to a grand mission of social change, a commitment that would allow them also to maintain a sense of a leading vanguard and cultural elite, worthy of its position. From this perspective, elite college teachers who are profoundly interested in leaving a positive mark on society share many similarities with their peers who became business managers, physicians, and lawyers who are also interested in leadership, power, and innovation, though many times from a very different political standpoint.

I argue, that given their excessive symbolic and cultural capital, their professional aspirations and promise, and the kind of critical agenda they seek to promote, it seems that elite college teachers are relatively well positioned to pursue their agenda and hold the potential of becoming an

influential group in the field of teaching. Bourdieu's theoretical perspective is helpful here because it clarifies the role of capital in shaping the lives of elite college teachers, their decision to teach in urban schools, their conception of teaching, and potential impact on the field

## **Future Research**

Some of the data highlighted in my analysis support the various hypotheses offered in this last section. For example, data from the pilot study of UTEP and from Center X suggest that these elite college teachers viewed themselves as a vanguard group that seeks to change society by staying in urban school (counter to the overwhelming number of teachers who flee urban schools as quickly as they can; Ingersoll, 2001) as teachers and leaders.

However, in order to test these assertions and the overall theory that suggests looking at elite college teachers as a distinct subgroup in the field of teaching, a more representative sample of teachers prepared at elite colleges is needed. In addition, there is a need to develop longitudinal research to see whether elite college teachers are indeed more likely to stay as teachers in urban schools, how many of them choose a leadership path as leaders in urban education, and how many leave urban schools in favor of suburban schools or other professions. Second, further research is needed to analyze the impact of this subgroup of teachers on the field of teaching and urban education. Do these teachers as they become leaders continue to hold more or less the same "progressive" ideas of social justice and change? Or do they adopt the mainstream ideas that are prevalent in their field? An interesting way to study these issues is by checking what leadership positions in the urban districts of Los Angeles or Chicago (where Center X and UTEP operate) are occupied by the programs' alums and whether these individuals promote an agenda that correspond to the social ideals they used to hold.

## **Summary**

Some may argue that social justice has been on the agenda of teacher education before and that recruiting teachers from elite colleges is also not a new story. I agree. Still, this does not mean that most teachers or teacher preparation programs are genuinely committed to social justice in the context of urban education. National data on teacher attrition from urban districts are indeed astounding evidence that this commitment is fading. The teachers from the three programs described in this article sought to revive and

reinvent these ongoing commitments for social justice. They represent a clear voice that views social justice as the main mission of teaching.

In this article, I have identified a gap in the research on teachers that requires further attention. I have shown that not all teachers choose teaching and conceptualize teaching in the same way. In particular, I focused on illuminating why elite college teachers were drawn to teaching and how their perspective of teaching redefines the common role and responsibilities of teaching. Using Bourdieu's notions of field and capital, I argued that though the decision of elite college teachers to choose teaching may seem irrational from a first glance, the particular ways in which they conceptualize teaching and act on their commitments correspond well with their image in society as a selective group who is expected to initiate, take leadership positions, and push for changes, with their image of themselves as a visionary vanguard who seeks to change society and make it a better place.

## **Appendix A: Interview protocol**

---

### Decisions to teach

1. Tell me about your decision to teach.
  - a. How did you arrive at this choice?
  - b. Why is teaching important to you?
2. Is there something about your personal beliefs or values or religious beliefs that influenced your decision to teach in any way?
  - a. Did anything else influence you?

### Possible Probes: childhood, childhood environment, own schooling, family

3. What did/do you hope to achieve by becoming a teacher?
4. Have you ever considered other career directions, aside from teaching?
5. How long do you think you'll stay in teaching?

### Decisions to teach in Catholic, Jewish, public urban schools

6. Tell me about your decision to teach in an Urban school.
7. Can you see yourself teaching in another kind of school? Please explain.

### Teaching practice

Next, I'm interested in learning more about your teaching.

8. What is your image of good teaching?
9. If I were to observe you in your classroom, what would I see you doing that fits your image of good teaching?
10. How does being a teacher fit with how you see yourself as a person?
  - a. How does being a teacher fit with your commitments to social justice?

---

*(continued)*

### Teacher education

Now let's talk about your teacher education program.

11. Did/Does your teacher education program have an image of good teaching in an Urban school?

- a. How would you describe that image?
- b. How did you learn about that image in your program?

12. How does that image fit with your own vision of good teaching?

Let's talk about the relationship between the teacher education program and your work as a teacher.

13. In what ways has the program influenced your classroom teaching?

- a. Can you be specific?

14. In what ways has the program influenced your interactions with your students?

- a. Can you be specific?

15. In what ways has the program influenced your interactions with the teachers in your school?

- a. Can you be specific?
- b. Who are your important colleagues?

16. In what ways has the program influenced your views of parents, students and the community in which you teach?

17. In what ways has the program influenced your definition of yourself (or how you see yourself) as a teacher?

- a. Can you be specific?

18. In what ways has the program influenced your sense of yourself as someone teaching as a means of achieving social justice?

19. Did/Does the program's philosophy or mission fit with your own values and beliefs? In what ways? Are there ways in which it doesn't fit?

- a. Did/does the program stance towards social justice fit your own views?

### School contexts

Let's talk about the school in which you work.

20. What is the image of good elementary school teaching promoted by your school?

- a. How do you know?

21. In what ways does your school enable you to teach that way?

22. Does the school's image of good teaching fit with your image of good teaching?

23. Does the school's philosophy or mission fit with your own values or beliefs? How does the fit or lack of fit affect you?

- a. Does the school's image (the school you are currently placed in) of appropriate urban education fit with yours? How does the fit or lack of fit affect you?

24. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me or any questions I can answer for you?

## Notes

1. It should be noted that developing a social conception of teaching is not a new phenomenon. During the 1960s, backed with a leftist ideology that was critical of racism, capitalism, and social inequality, many White middle-class women who attended elite colleges also entered teaching to make society a more eAppendix A: Interview protocol place. One important difference, however, is that though for these women choosing to teach was a more socially accepted decision to make, today's graduates are expected to choose a well-paying profession, like their male counterparts.

2. "Psychic or intrinsic rewards . . . consist entirely of subjective valuations made in the course of work engagement; their subjectivity means that they can vary from person to person. But they are also constrained by the nature of the occupation and its tasks. . . ." (1975, p. 101).

3. "Extrinsic rewards . . . [include] what we usually think of as the "earning" attached to a role and involves money income, a level of prestige, and power over others . . ." (Lortie, 1975, 101).

4. "Ancillary rewards are simultaneously objective and subjective; they refer to objective characteristics of the work which may be perceived as rewards by some . . ." (Lortie, 1975, p. 101).

5. This definition may seem narrow, but it is widely used and show high correlations with other indicators like institutional prestige (Clark, 1983) or net student tuition (Davies & Guppy, 1997).

6. Although Smulyan (2004) concealed the institutional affiliation of the students she studied, several details in the text and from her biography led me to identify the institution. I used this information only to find out about the institution's SAT requirements and confirm my hypothesis regarding to its elite status.

7. For more details regarding the scope, rationale, and recent publications and presentations that have come out of the study, please check the *Choosing to Teach* Web site: <http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/projects/choosingtoteach.html>

8. Detailed discussion of these findings and others can be found in *Choosing to Teach Study: Urban Teacher Education Program (UTEP) Report*, by Tamir, Watzke, Kardos, and Sharon Feiman-Nemser (2007).

9. In what might imply of the same tendency seen in Center X, males in UTEP also seem slightly more likely than women to pursue leadership roles.

10. For a more thorough analysis of *Choosing to Teach* teachers' careers and retention trends, see Tamir, E. (in press, b). "The Retention Question in Context-Specific Teacher Education: Do Beginning Teachers and Their Program Directors See Teachers' Future Career Eye to Eye?"

11. UTEP, Center X, and the third institution described by Smulyan reported having women in their programs at 80%, 80%, and 100%, respectively.

12. Bourdieu developed this argument in numerous publications. See in particular, *The State Nobility*, where Bourdieu (1996) analyzed the Grandes Écoles, France's elite higher education sector that enjoys a monopoly in preparing the economic, cultural, and state bureaucracy elites.

## References

- Angus, D. L. (2001). *Professionalism and the public good: A brief history of teacher certification* (Ed. J. Mirel). Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.
- Baron's Educational Series, Inc. (1969). *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*. Woodbury, NY: Author.

- Barraza K. L., & Hunter-Quartz, K. (2005). *Aligning potential and opportunity: Recruiting non-traditional teacher candidates through specialized urban teacher education*. Retrieved June 6, 2007, from <http://www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/utec/wp/pdf/03.pdf>
- Bourdieu, P. (1985). The social space and the genesis of groups. *Theory & Society*, 14, 723-744.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-260). Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Bourdieu, P. (1996). *The state nobility*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An introduction to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brand, J. E., & Halaby, C. N. (2003). *Regression and matching estimates of the effects of elite college attendance on career outcomes. Working paper*. Retrieved June 6, 2007, from [http://66.102.1.104/scholar?hl=en&lr=&q=cache:dSWZyWMiPsoJ:www.ssc.wisc.edu/~jlowry/elite\\_jbrand\\_rev1203.pdf+Brand+%26+Halaby,+2003](http://66.102.1.104/scholar?hl=en&lr=&q=cache:dSWZyWMiPsoJ:www.ssc.wisc.edu/~jlowry/elite_jbrand_rev1203.pdf+Brand+%26+Halaby,+2003)
- Clark, B. R. (1983). The higher education system: Academic organization in cross-national perspective. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (2005). The new teacher education: For better or for worse? *Educational Researcher*, 34(7), 3-17.
- Condliffe-Lagemann, E. (2000). *An elusive science: The troubling history of education research*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Davies, S., & Guppy, N. (1997). Fields of study, college selectivity, and student inequalities in higher education. *Social Forces*, 75, 1417-1438.
- Feistritzer, E. (2005a). *Profile of teachers in the U.S. 2005*. Washington, DC: The National Center for Alternative Certification.
- Feistritzer, E. (2005b). *Profile of alternate route teachers*. Washington, DC: The National Center for Alternative Certification.
- Feistritzer, E. C. (2006). *Alternative teacher certification: A state-by-state analysis 2005*. Washington, DC: The National Center for Alternative Certification.
- Hansen, D. T. (1995). *The call to teach*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hoffman, N. (2003). *Woman's "true" profession: Voices from the history of teaching*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Humphrey, D., & Wechsler, M. E. (2007). Insights into alternative certification: Initial findings from a national study. *Teachers College Record*, 109, 483-530.
- Ingersoll, R. M. (2001). Teacher turnover and teacher shortages: An organizational analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37, 499-534.
- Ingersoll, R. M. (2003). *Is there really a teacher shortage?* Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania. Retrieved April 6, 2009, from <http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/Shortage-RI-09-2003.pdf>
- Johnson, S. M., & Birkeland, S. E. (2003) Pursuing a "sense of success": New teachers explain their career decisions. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40, 581-617.
- Johnson, S. M., & The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. (2004). *Finders and keepers: Helping new teachers survive and thrive in our schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Labaree, D. F. (2004). *The trouble with ed schools*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Labaree, D. F. (2005). Life on the margins. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 56, 186-191.
- Lacey, C. (1977). *The socialization of teachers*. New York: Methuen.
- Lanier, J. E., & Little, J. W. (1986). Research on teacher education. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (3rd ed., pp. 527-569). New York: Macmillan.
- Lortie, D. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- Morales, C. A. (1994). Education majors: Why teaching as a career? *Education*, *114*, 340-343.
- Olsen, B., & Anderson, L. (2007). Courses of action: A qualitative investigation in urban teacher retention and career development. *Urban Education*, *42*, 5-29.
- Olson, L. (2000, January 13). Sweetening the pot. *Education Week/Quality Counts*, pp. 28-34.
- Quartz, K. H., & TEP Research Group. (2003). Too angry to leave: Supporting new teachers commitment to transform urban schools. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *54*, 99-111.
- Quartz, K. H., Thomas, A., Anderson, L., Masyn, K., Barraza, K. L., & Olsen, B. (2008). Careers in motion: A longitudinal retention study of role changing among early career urban educators. *Teachers College Record*, *110*.
- Roberson, S. D., Keith, T. Z., & Page, E. B. (1983). Now who aspires to teach? *Educational Researcher*, *12*(6), 13-20.
- Sedlak, M., & Schlossman, S. (1986). *Who will teach? Historical perspectives on the changing appeal of teaching as a profession*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Smulyan, L. (2004). Choosing to teach: Reflections on gender and social change. *Teachers College Record*, *106*, 513-543.
- Stoddart, T., & Floden, R. E. (1995). *Traditional and alternate routes to teacher certification: Issues, assumptions, and misconceptions* (Issue Paper 25-2, #48824-1034). Washington, DC: National Center for Research on Teacher Learning. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 383697)
- Sykes, G. (1984). Teacher education and the predicaments of reform. In C. E. Finn, D. Ravitch, & R. Fancher (Eds.), *Against mediocrity: The humanities in American high schools* (pp. 172-194). New York: Holmes & Meier.
- Tamir, E. (2008). Theorizing the politics of educational reform: The case of New Jersey's alternate route to teacher certification. *American Journal of Education*, *115*, 65-95.
- Tamir, E. (in press, a). Capital, power, and the struggle over teacher certification. *Educational Policy*.
- Tamir, E. (in press, b). The retention question in context-specific teacher education: Do beginning teachers and their program directors see teachers' future career eye to eye? *Teaching and Teacher Education*.
- Tamir, E., Watzke, J., Kardos, S., & Feiman-Nemser, S. (2007). *Choosing to teach study: Urban teacher education program (UTEP) report*. Retrieved June 6, 2007, from [http://www.brandeis.edu/centers/mandel/Mandel%20Documents/UTEP\\_Program\\_Report\\_05\\_15\\_07.pdf](http://www.brandeis.edu/centers/mandel/Mandel%20Documents/UTEP_Program_Report_05_15_07.pdf)
- Where will your SAT or ACT scores take you? (2007). *The Princeton Review*. Retrieved June 6, 2007, from <http://www.princetonreview.com/college/testprep/testprep.asp?TPRPAGE=295&TYPE=SAT-ACT-HOME>
- Wood, K. E. (1978). What motivates students to teach? *Journal of Teacher Education*, *29*, 48-50.
- Zumwalt, K., & Craig, E. (2005). *Teachers characteristics: Research on the indicators of quality. Studying Teacher Education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

**Eran Tamir** is a senior research associate at the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, Brandeis University. He is a sociologist and an educational policy analyst and his research focuses on the social context of educational policy, teacher certification policy, teacher preparation, teacher careers, teacher professionalism in religious and urban public schools, and politics of education.

---

For reprints and permissions queries, please visit SAGE's Web site at <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>.