Reflections of Resilient, Persevering Urban Teachers

By Beverly Hardcastle Stanford

Our knowledge of the career-perseverance of mature, resilient teachers who teach children of the urban poor is relatively limited. How do they explain their endurance and continued enthusiasm for their work? What are their sources of satisfaction and support? This article reports on a qualitative study of a group of remarkably persevering teachers in elementary schools in two of the most distressed environments in Washington, D.C.

The Need

Timing alerts us to seek the insights of positive veteran teachers before they leave the field. Over half of the teachers in the United States are expected to retire within the decade (Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., 2000). The high attrition rates of their potential replacements aggravate the problem. Linda Darling-Hammond reports that beginning teacher attrition rates are about 30 percent during the first three to five years of teaching (1998, p. 8). In the nation's urban centers, beginning teachers depart even more quickly, leaving critical shortages (Jones & Sandridge, 1997; Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., 2000).

In addition, the needs of urban children are great. As Hamburg, former President of the Carnegie Foundation, observed, "No problem in contemporary

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America is more serious than the plight of children and youth in our decaying cities" (1992, p. 1). Many of these children direly need a continuity of care from resilient, persevering teachers.

Teachers' Perspectives

This study also seeks to contribute to the literature that values teachers' perspectives on their practice, insights as researchers, and reflections on their lives. Schubert argues in his discussion of teacher lore, "It is curious that researchers can marvel at a fine study that logs 15,000 hours of investigation by researchers in classrooms...but essentially disregard over 30 *years* of inquiry by career teachers" (1991, p. 211).

Autobiographical accounts of elementary teachers' thinking about their work have enriched education literature over the years. Writings of Holt (1964), Kohl (1967, 1984), Ashton-Warner (1965), Marshall (1963), Hayden (1981), Carmichael (1981), and Paley (1979/1989 & 1995) are among the classics. Their candid discussions of struggles, questions, triumphs, and failures forewarned and aided several decades of pre-service teachers.

Prominent current works examine the thoughts of *other* teachers. The writings of Schubert and Ayers (1991), Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995), Delpit (1995), and Foster (1997) contribute to the field the relevancy and authenticity of teachers' perspectives. Each of the latter studies is small in terms of participants—eight "successful teachers of African-American children" in Ladson-Billings' study, 12 African-American and Native-American teachers in Delpit's work, and 20 elder, veteran, and novice black teachers in Foster's book. Yet their cumulative effect deepens our understanding of teachers' lives. The current report, which is part of a larger study, shifts and narrows the focus to urban elementary teachers and their reflections on resiliency.

Methodology

Following a grounded theory research approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I began the inquiry without hypotheses and was uncertain that I would even find resilient teachers in a distressed urban center. Grounded theory, as Patton reports, is "an inductive strategy for generating and confirming theory that emerges from close involvement and direct contact with the empirical world" (1990, p. 153). A benefit of the approach is that it allows the researcher to explore freely without preconceptions into "relatively uncharted waters" (Stern, 1980, p. 20). The purpose of the exploration is to discover and develop mid-range theory, as opposed to grand theory. In this study, the uncharted waters were the teachers' reflections on their career perseverance and high morale, and the goal was to generate lessons and insights from the journey.

The Researcher

With experience conducting grounded theory research (Hardcastle, 1982, 1985, & Stanford, 1994), a ten-year background of teaching in elementary schools, and a twenty-year tenure as a university teacher educator, I was comfortable with the study's process and participants. The content was familiar as well, because I had conducted an earlier study with a similar design and goal (Stanford, 1994). But the study's setting was new to me. I had never taught in urban classrooms and only rarely supervised student teachers in them. As a consequence it was not difficult to cast myself into the researcher role of *naïve learner* as recommended by Glesne (1999, pp. 83-84).

The Participants

Being a newcomer in the Washington, D.C. area and one who would be there only for a fall sabbatical semester made locating the participants a challenge. After a five-week search I discovered a good-hearted, retired teacher working in the D.C. chapter office of the National Federation of Teachers who became my ombudsman, providing entré into the D.C. schools.

She located ten teachers who met the study's four criteria: (1) matching a Profile of Teachers with High Morale (see Figure 1); (2) having ten or more years teaching experience; (3) teaching at the elementary level; and (4) working in schools in distressed urban environments (see Figure 1, next page). The Profile, developed for the earlier study (Stanford, 1994), was based on a review of the literature and my teaching experience. It outlined in abbreviated form four general descriptors of high morale: (1) Positive in attitude and in treatment of others; (2) Enthusiastic about teaching, their students, school, and the field; (3) Involved in their work; and (4) Are themselves. A short list of illustrations followed the first three general descriptors. The fourth general descriptor, adapted from Huberman's report (1989) on the career cycle of teachers, included adjectives for teachers in the highest career stage: *confident, idiosyncratically creative*, and *having their own style*. The principals nominated teachers on the basis of the Profile and the teachers' lengthy (ten or more year) tenures. In the initial interviews the participants confirmed that the profile characterized their attitudes and behaviors.

Nine teachers were located in one school and one in another. Five had taught in the same school for 30-33 years; a sixth had taught there 28 years; and the other four had 10-21 years of teaching experience. All K-6th grade levels were represented in the teachers' assignments. All were African American women, 37 to 55, with the average age being 49. They were well-educated, with seven continuing their studies past the bachelor's degree. Hunter College, Boston College, American University, Trinity, Howard University, and George Washington University were institutions they attended. Some held educational administration credentials; others earned graduate credits in counseling, hospital administration, and human resources. In their interviews and conversations, they were articulate, polite, and cooperative in

their treatment of me, and animated—sometimes passionate—when our talks moved into areas related to the children in their classrooms.

The Urban Schools

The two schools in the study were in Washington, D.C. in a district that was described publicly as seriously distressed. On the day that I began the study, a front-page *Washington Post* headline read: "D.C. Schools Called a Failure. Control Board Blasts System as It Readies Takeover Plan." It began:

> The D.C. financial control board gave the public school system in the nation's capital "an absolute F" yesterday, issuing a scathing report that said the city's school board and Superintendent…have wasted hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars and

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Figure 1
Profile of Teachers with High Morale

1. Positive   in attitude

                    never or rarely complain
                    have can-do attitude
         in treatment of others
                    students
                    fellow teachers
                    parents
                    staff-secretaries/bus drivers

2. Enthusiastic about Teaching, Their Students, School, the Field
                    express it
                    show it in actions
                    attendance
                    have reputation for enthusiasm

3. Involved in Their Work
                    workshop
                    learning
                    professional organizations
                    professional development
                    attendance
                    graduate school
                    initiate self-development

4. Are Themselves
                    confident
                    idiosyncratically creative
                    own style

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cheated the District's school children out of a decent education. (*Washington Post,* November 13, 1996, p.1)

The report announced a scheduled overhaul of the school system, removal of the superintendent, and the name of his replacement, an Army general. The school board was to be stripped of much of its powers and a "new, unpaid education panel" was to be put in place to oversee the system.

Nine teachers in the study taught in a 50-year-old, three-story brick school building that fronted on a city sidewalk, facing a bus stop and, beyond a second street of traffic, a strip mall containing a large grocery store. Ever present were the city noises of cars and buses, braking and shifting and honking. The frequent interruptions of sirens seemed to not register on the teachers and staff. Their conversations continued, without a pause or glance away, in spite of the roar of engines and piercing siren blasts.

A fast-food restaurant was the neighbor on the east. A thin, unkempt man regularly stood alone near its entrance, speaking angrily to the air. A hilly, untended tree- and shrub-filled vacant lot was on the west. A high chain-link fence enclosed the cement and asphalt playground and parking lot in the rear, separating the school from another street and a residential area with modest brick or frame homes reminiscent of a more prosperous past. Many houses had boarded-up windows, cluttered yards, and a bleakness about them that matched the winter sky.

Contrasting with its rough surroundings, the school's interior was attractive and welcoming. The hall floors were buffed to a shine, walls were freshly painted, and bulletin boards throughout displayed eye-catching posters with uplifting messages and photos of students being recognized for their accomplishments. The auditorium was decorated in a formal colonial style, blue wainscoting, green plants on tall pedestals, velvet curtains, and the traditional arrangement of rows of installed bench chairs with fold-up seats facing a stage.

On a wall in the entrance hall outside the auditorium hung a framed newspaper clipping praising the school. A child's discovery of a needle on the front steps prompted the report. The journalist noted that each day before the children arrive, the custodial staff routinely found needles and condoms on the steps and sidewalk in front of the school. The school reacted to the situation with an assembly on safety. The reporter, who attended it, commented on the children's articulateness, the fine quality of the school in general, and the distressed surroundings.

Miss J., the principal, explained that because 95 percent of the children qualified for free lunch, the Department of Agriculture had decided to put the whole school on the free lunch program. She also pointed out that the school population—students and faculty—was totally African American, with the exception of one teacher who was from a country in Africa.

One study participant taught a number of miles across town in an austere, four-stories-tall school building that abutted a sidewalk in the front and a busy city

thoroughfare. Parking along the street was not permitted. The factory-like structure and schoolyards took up most of the city block, with the section on the north dominated by a major business building in the throws of reconstruction. It was necessary to traverse a maze of gates and drives, crowded with equipment and vehicles, to reach the back entrance of the school. The area's ambiance was less distressed and more commercial than that of the other school.

The entry was lush with exotic green plants, like a terrarium. (The principal, Mr. Y., was promoting a school-wide study of the rain forest). The steady noises of construction next door and traffic whizzing by on the street in front of the school were muted in the high-ceilinged, fortress-like interior. When I entered the school for the first time, Mr. Y., with pager in hand, greeted me briefly and politely directed me to the teacher's classroom. On the climb up to the fourth floor, I noticed signs directing people to walk up the stairs on the right of the center rail, and down the stairs on the left. Though more institutional in feel than the other school, due in large part to its greater size and modernity, the classrooms themselves reflected the same flurry of student work. Students' artwork and reports were attractively displayed on walls in the halls and classrooms.

Data Sources

Four sources of study data were the participants' responses in semi-structured interviews, their choices in three ranking activities, my personal field notes, and a focus group discussion with three of the participants. The mixture helped reduce bias through data triangulation.

The interviews followed a protocol of open-ended questions about the teachers' attitudes toward teaching and thoughts on their resiliency. They took place at the school sites during free periods and before or after school and were completed in two 30-50-minute sessions per participant.

The ranking activities sought participants' preferences for sources of satisfaction, metaphors for what being in school was and should be like, and perceptions of the ideal and worst possible teaching life. The field notes contained my reflections on informal observations and conversations with staff during the five-week interviewing period. The videotaped focus group discussion with three participants addressed several initial findings.

Data Analysis.

Data analysis features were integrated into the design through the ranking activities and focused interview questions. In addition, I listened to the interview audio-tapes, reviewed the transcriptions and field notes, and summarized responses to key questions on charts and grids. From these I sought categories of meaning, repeated patterns, and salient themes. I also reviewed and analyzed the focus group videotape and transcription.

I sought verification from the participants by sending drafts of the report to

them, discussing their responses in telephone conversations, and corresponding with one participant via email. Five participants and their principal joined me in a poster session presenting an outline of the study at a national conference held in Washington, D.C. (Stanford, 1998).

Findings

From the data analysis five patterns emerged to help explain why the teachers had persevered positively for so long. The participants were similar in (1) their love of and commitment to children, especially "these" children, (2) their sources of satisfaction as a teacher, (3) their perceptions of their ideal and worst possible teaching lives, (4) their sources of support, and (5) their choices of metaphors.

Their Love of and Commitment to Children, Especially "These" Children

The most prominent pattern to explain why the teachers persevered was their love of and commitment to children, especially "these" children. A determination to see their students learn and develop was evident in their individual answers to the question "What do you like the most about teaching?" A desire to make a difference for the children emerged in their responses to the question "What do you especially like about your school?"

When asked what they liked the most about teaching, eight mentioned watching children learn and develop. Typical replies were "watching them develop and mature" (Ms. G.); "when you can see the growth, one month to the next month, one semester to the next...." (Ms. P.); and "seeing the progress of children, using what they are taught" (Ms. J).

Many directly spoke of their desire to help "these children." Ms. D. endured in the field "because I want to make a difference in these children's lives." Ms. G. spoke of her "commitment to this community—African American children, Latino children, who need to experience success." Ms. P. was eager "for black children to succeed despite the handicaps." Ms. M. observed that "it makes me sad to think so many of these children do not have life skills." Her positive perseverance was due in part to the evidences she received that she had made a difference: "Children come back and tell me what an impact I had on their life," she explained. A young man she encountered socially a few weeks before the interview had thanked her for helping him, and said, "You stayed on my case."

Their Sources of Satisfaction

A similar theme, that of making a difference in students' lives and learning, was evident in the teachers' rankings of their sources of satisfaction. The first choice for seven participants was "making a difference in children's lives." Six ranked "seeing children's academic progress" in their top five choices. Another four ranked "a sense of achievement in reaching and affecting students" in their top five.

In addition, other relatively high rankings were for "participation in decision-making," "expression of creativity," and "opportunity for learning." These reflected the teachers' active involvement in their work. Their interest in learning was also evident in the extent and variety of their post-graduate studies.

Ideal and Worst Possible Teaching Lives

A sense of optimism regarding the future was evident in participants' responses in a Self-anchoring Scaling (Kilpatrick & Cantril, 1960) activity. In this exercise they provided descriptive phrases for their *ideal* and *worst possible* teaching lives, using phrases such as "necessary equipment and supplies," "no more than 21 students," and "parental support" for their *ideal* teaching life and "overcrowded classrooms," "irresponsible administrators," and "lack of supplies" for their *worst*. These were written on a paper, with positive phrases placed at the top and negative at the bottom. A ten-step ladder was drawn vertically connecting the two sets of phrases, and the steps were numbered 0-10, with Step Zero at the bottom. Participants indicated the step they perceived themselves to be located on for "now," "5 years from now," and "5 years ago." The reasons for their placements were discussed.

In the content analysis of the descriptors of *ideal* and *worst possible* teaching life, *parent support* was prominent, with 9 participants providing positive or negative phrases such as "Support of parents wanting the best for their children" (Ms. M.), "Parents understanding what we're doing" (Ms. J.), and "Parents working against you" (Ms. F.). Eight mentioned *material resources*, ranging from "poor furniture" (Ms. D.) to "books and supplies" (Ms.T.) to desks with "built-in computer/ calculator/ FAX and telephone" (Ms. D.). Other categories were *administrative support* (6); *personnel & program resources* (6), *motivated children* (6); and *small classes/spacious classrooms* (5). Average placements on the ten step ladder revealed clear optimism toward the future: 6.6 for "5 years ago"; 6.3 for "now"; and 8.1 for "5 years from now." (Three teachers on the verge of retirement did not make future projections).

Their Sources of Support

The teachers' reported sources of support were colleagues, their church communities, personal spiritual lives, and family and friends. The clearest responses to "What do you like especially about your school?" was their appreciation of colleagues: "The family atmosphere" (Ms. G.), "I have a lot of my friends here" (Ms. M.), "The comradeship. A lot of us have been here a long time" (Ms. P.), "Staff members. Know everybody, parents, everyone knows me—been here so long" (Ms. N.), "The camaraderie with co-workers" (Ms. B.), "Co-workers" (Ms. S.), and "My principal" (Ms. D.).

When asked whom they would turn to after "having a bad day, when they needed to renew their spirits," several mentioned their fellow teachers. Ms. T. would turn to "a bunch of teachers, we call each other." Ms. G. referred to "all of us up here

[floor where her classroom was]." Ms. M. answered, "People at church, but mainly people here [her school]."

A second dominant source of support was the teachers' church communities and personal spiritual lives. The question "What aspects of your out-of-school life promote your high morale and career perseverance?" prompted such responses. Ms. B. replied, "Probably being involved with the church and praying." Ms. M. explained, "I'm involved with my church, my center of my life....[Church] keeps me going. My pastor, a former teacher, he is encouraging." Ms. N. said, "My church activities. I work in Sunday school." Ms. S. listed several aspects related to her church: "Church. Sunday school teaching, youth group, sing in the choir, family and God."

A number gave similar answers to the question and probes: "Do you have a support system that you draw upon when you are discouraged? Whom do you turn to when you have had a bad day? When you need to renew your spirits?" Ms. F. said, "God first. Then some colleagues here." She discussed participating in "a prayer group for personal situations." Ms. D. said, "I pray." Ms. M. and Ms. P. included "people at church" in their responses. Ms. J. explained that her support system was "Jesus. I'm a born again Christian and an ordained reverend," and explained that she came from "a family of teachers and preachers."

The third source of support, family and friends, mingled with the other two sources - school colleagues and friends at church. Two mothers, a husband, a sister, a grandmother, an aunt, and a cousin were mentioned.

Metaphor Choices for "Being in School"

Metaphor selections for "being in school" also reflected participants' appreciation of social support. In this activity, participants selected metaphors in four categories: (1) what being in school was like for teachers, (2) what it should be like for teachers, (3) what it was like for urban children, and (4) what it should be like for urban children. In each category 13 choices were provided, including an option to write in their own metaphors. Seven of the participants chose more than one metaphor in some of the categories.

Metaphor choices for teachers' experiences were positive, similar, and reflected preferences for a familial and collegial school climate. Being *on a team* was chosen for the real (5) and the ideal (6) school experience. Being *in a family* was chosen by three each for the real and the ideal experience. Other choices for what being in school was like were *in a business* (3), *in a war* (3) and *in a prison* (1); and for what being in school should be like were: *in a business* (4) and *in a garden* (1).

The metaphor choice for urban children's school experience was *in a family* for the real (6) and the ideal (5). Other choices for what being in school is like were *in a war* (2), *in a business* (2), *in a crowd* (1), and a suggested metaphor *a safe haven*. Selections for what school should be like also included *in a business* (2), *in a garden* (1), *on a theater stage* (1), *on a team* (1), and the suggested metaphor *a safe haven*.

Discussion

Two major themes that emerged from the study merit further consideration and raise important questions. First, the positive veteran urban teachers seem to have endured so long and so well because they found deep meaning in their work. The teachers' commitment to making a difference in their students' lives and learning was a prominent motivation. The rankings of sources of satisfaction reinforced this theme. However, the teachers' talk was not of dazzling success stories but rather of seeing growth occur month to month and receiving occasional thanks from former students. Clearly something more than efficacy was a part of their resiliency. Do urban teachers need a deeper meaning in their work in order to persevere positively? Do they need to be solidly optimistic individuals?

Secondly, the sources of support that the teachers found most helpful included something that was unexpected. The finding that the teachers appreciated the social support of colleagues, family, and friends was predictable given the loneliness for adults that teachers of the young often experience, working full days in classrooms separate from other adults. That finding was strengthened by the family and team metaphors the teachers selected and their common high rankings for both what being in school should be and what it is like. The family- and team-sense of their school cultures were what they felt they should be.

The surprise was the discovery that the teachers' spiritual and church lives were a similarly strong source of support. Was this discovery unique to the group being studied? What role does the spiritual life of teachers play in their morale and perseverance?

The Influence of Meaningfulness on Perseverance

Psychologists and theologians have written for generations about the need for humans to make life meaningful. Frankl's (1946) personal account and clinical examination of life in a concentration camp were driven by the question—why did some prisoners endure the dehumanizing and spirit-defeating conditions, while others gave up and died? He proposed that those who survived found a meaning that helped them persevere. Quoting Nietzche, Frankl observed that "he who has a *why* to live, can bear with almost any *how*." Frankl regarded "the striving to find a meaning in one's life [as] the primary motivational force in man" (1963, p. 154).

Such a *striving for meaning* may be an essential survival tool for teachers who choose to teach in schools in distressed urban environments. Before deciding to work in such settings, teachers need to confront and examine their reasons for wanting to do so. Do they feel a commitment to the community? Do they believe they can make a difference in the lives of their students? Do they believe that they are investing in their own futures? Without such sources of meaning, they may not endure. More seriously, they may not help their students endure. Their lack of a

stubborn commitment could do damage to the very students who most need strong advocates.

Such a commitment to students is one that Dewey proposed in 1902—"What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children" (p.3)—and Noddings refined in 1992: "We must start with a vision of ourselves as wise parents of a large heterogeneous family and ask, What do I want for all of them? For each of them?" (p. 180.) Such an attitude of respect and hope for children was termed *regard* and defined as "an acknowledgment of one's personhood as well as trust in what is and is to come" by Yamamoto (1988). The meaning for working in schools in distressed urban environments must be grounded in this regard for students, an optimistic belief in them both now and in the future.

The Influence of Spirit on Morale

Related to Frankl's discussions of *striving for meaning* is Mother Teresa's concept of a *poverty of spirit*. Mother Teresa believed that more people suffered from it in the developed nations and observed that "it is easier to feed the physically hungry than to deal with material privilege and poverty of the spirit" (Poplin, 1997, p. 7). Mother Teresa, whose Sisters of Charity work in the United States as well as third world countries, was often heard saying that

> ...it is emptiness, loneliness, rejection, boredom, lack of purpose, and despair that they work against most often. These people may have food for their stomachs...but live their lives in great desperation and without a sense of purpose. (Poplin, 1997, p. 7)

The teachers in this study clearly had no poverty of spirit, and most seemed to have filled that potential vacuum with their religious faith. They integrated their faith naturally and extensively when they discussed their work and their morale. They spoke of drawing on it as a support and of engaging in church activities as a means of renewal.

Because historically in the African-American culture people deeply wove religion into their daily lives, it should not surprise us to find that the teachers did the same, even though they were teaching in public schools. In response to my questions about this finding, Ms. S. explained, "You have to understand. It's part of our culture." Ms. M. added, "I didn't even KNOW anyone who didn't go to church when I was a child."

If a religious faith was so helpful for these urban teachers, what can be said for those without a faith entering urban teaching? Can they endure with high morale without a personal faith? It would seem that they would need to have a reservoir of strength, one that is filled with a set of personal values, a religious faith, or a social philosophy that they can draw upon for support and renewal. Those preparing to teach in such schools, and ideally in any schools, would serve themselves well by examining that reservoir. What they prepare there should aid them in persevering well in their future work, more so than by exploring the areas of self-reflection

ordinarily encouraged—their preferred teaching styles, learning styles, communication styles, and intelligences. Evaluating and selecting the educational philosophies that they prefer is a good place to begin. But they then will need to look more thoughtfully and deeply if they are to provide themselves with a reservoir of strength.

Most importantly urban teachers in schools in distressed environments should believe in their students, in their abilities to learn, to do well, and to become contributors in society. They should invest in their students, regarding them as partners on the trail to a better future. As Yamamoto concludes in his book *Their World, Our World: Reflections on Childhood*, teachers need to see more clearly their students' "inside-out view of reality, appreciate more deeply their concerns and dreams, and relish them more clearly as our trail mates" (1993, p. 157).

While such guidance is well worth the research journey, I found the real treasure in this study was the discovery of the group of remarkably strong, wise, positive, compassionate, and persevering teachers. How many others like them are in schools across the nation, battling "the plight of children and youth in our decaying cities," and doing so, unnoticed? Their days in the classroom are approaching an end. We need to listen to their wisdom before they go.

Author's Note

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