

# I Just Feel So Guilty: The Role of Emotions in Former Urban Teachers' Career Paths

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## Abstract

This article explores the dynamic structures of emotions used by former urban teachers as they negotiated the challenges of the profession. Drawing from a national sample of 25 former urban teachers, this article looks closely at the lives of two teachers who taught in urban intensive school districts. Specifically, the piece captures the emotional aftermath of leaving teaching around two themes: (a) recognition of guilt and (b) continued advocacy for their students. We found that teacher leavers continue to struggle emotionally with their choice to leave the classroom while remaining committed to affecting change in the educational system.

## Keywords

emotional labor theory, former urban teachers, teacher leavers, career path, guilt

## Introduction

The storied experience is a critical component of qualitative scholarship with teachers. Through stories, journaling, and life histories of teachers, we understand the intricacies behind the profession. This is often why the concept of “storying” is embedded into teacher development with journal writing as a

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common assignment and new teachers are encouraged to continue the practice during their first years of teaching. The job of a teacher has so many complexities, often unpacked through research into the lives of teachers (e.g., Mawhinney, 2014; Day & Gu, 2010; Hargreaves, 1994; Huberman, 1989). But there is a missing story in the scholarship on teachers' lives—the story of individuals who left teaching. Specifically, the stories of teachers who voluntarily left classroom teaching prior to retirement (hereafter termed *teacher leavers*) are essential but often neglected in the literature.

We argue that their stories are some of the most important due to the high rates of attrition currently seen in the field. Educational researchers, school administrators, and teacher educators are deeply concerned about the statistic: Nearly 50% of the teacher population leaves within their first 5 years (Gray & Taie, 2015; Ingersoll, 2003a). This revolving door is even more prevalent in urban districts where 50% of teachers, on average, leave within the first 3 years (Ingersoll, 2003a). Nationally, and even internationally, teacher attrition drains talent from the profession, often resulting in decreased achievement for students, high financial costs for schools, and deprofessionalization for teachers (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012; Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007).

There is a dearth of scholarship that captures the voices of teachers regarding their own retention and attrition decisions (e.g., Rinke, 2008, 2009, 2014; Macdonald, 1999; Quartz et al., 2008; Smethem, 2007). Teacher leavers are a challenge to locate and study as most of them are disconnected or cut off from their school-based associations. In essence, they disappear from the schools and from the research. Our study aims to understand this important, yet understudied, group of teacher leavers. We initially asked the research question, "How do teacher leavers, working across a variety of urban school contexts, experience their careers over time?"

This investigation into the life experiences of former urban teachers attends to the full professional life cycle of educators, expanding upon existing work that captures the life cycle of teachers within a school setting (e.g., Day & Gu, 2010; Huberman, 1989) and offering insights for constructing career pathways that reflect the realities of today's teacher career development. Following Milner and Lomotey's (2013) urban education research framework/agenda, this work is situated within the area of "Psychology, Health, and Human Development" by asking "What psychological factors shape the experiences and practices of students and teachers in urban environments?" (p. xvii). This article reports on an unexpected finding from our study: the role of teachers' emotions in their career development. Although some of the participants have been out of the field far longer than they were ever in the classroom, they still struggle with their decision to leave teaching.

These emotional tensions stem from the fact that they still view themselves as teachers—it is a significant part of their current identity. Yet, their choice to leave was fueled as a way to continue advocating for their students in a larger way. This article highlights the tensions around the choice to leave the classroom and the emotions behind it through two selected teachers from our larger study: Lily and Lora.

## The Missing Voices of Teacher Leavers

The voices of former teachers are extremely limited within the scholarship. As many teacher leavers are no longer associated with schools or school districts, they frequently disappear from the research literature after they leave the formal institutions of education. Analyses that do exist indicate that teachers typically leave for either personal or contextual reasons (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014; Patterson, Roehrig, & Luft, 2003), although some leavers are concerned with their ability to uphold their principles within a school setting (Santoro, 2011). Goldring et al. (2014) found that teacher leavers, including retirees, are more satisfied with their salary, work/life balance, professional prestige, and ability to make a difference outside of the classroom. However, transitioning out of the classroom can be a difficult process: Many teacher leavers struggle to transition into new careers (Rinke, , 2013), and 5.8% remain unemployed (Goldring et al., 2014).

There are very few large-scale, survey-based studies on teacher leavers from national data sets of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in part because of the difficulty of parsing out retirees from voluntary teacher leavers. One data set from NCES is the *Bachelorette and Beyond Survey*. Fowler and Mittapalli (2006) used the NCES data set to gauge the new jobs of teacher leavers. They found that most teacher leavers still stay in a field similar to education. Specifically, 38.1% became instructors (e.g., trainers, librarians, postsecondary instructors, etc.), administrators, or guidance counselors. The second most popular field was business owners or managers at 19%, followed by 11.7% going into sales and service. Hancock (2016) used the NCES Teacher Follow-Up Survey data set to explore music teachers' reasons for leaving. At the conclusion of the study, 10.8% moved to a different school and 1.8% left the profession. Of those who left, the main reasons were pregnancy/parenting (23%) and retirement (18%) with the minority leaving for better salary (5.3%).

Another national data set from NCES was the *School and Staffing Survey*. You and Conley (2015) used this data set to look at intentions to leave. The study looked at three points within secondary teachers' career stages (novice, mid-career, and veteran). They found three mediator variables that influenced

teachers' decisions to leave: job satisfaction, workplace commitment, and career commitment. These mediators varied depending on the career stage of the teacher. These quantitative approaches (Fowler & Mittapalli, 2006; Hancock, 2016; You & Conley, 2015) are a start to understanding teacher leavers through broad descriptors (e.g., work environment, job satisfaction, etc.), but the nuanced storied experiences of teacher leavers is missing.

Two recent qualitative studies have captured the storied voices of teacher leavers, one in Canada and the other in Hong Kong. Schaefer, Downey, and Clandinin (2014) pointed out that the storied experience of teacher leavers is a void in the literature. Interviewing four Canadian teacher leavers, they also note why teacher leavers might not want to share their stories in a study:

Teachers who leave also know that most often, if they tell these complex, layered stories, they run the risk of being seen as deficit, as selfish, as not able to “hack it,” as “not swimming but sinking,” Better to tell the safe stories of less risk. (Schaefer et al., 2014, p. 24)

In essence, teacher leavers create “cover stories to leave by.” For example, one of their participants Ali would say, when asked, that she left teaching to “be a mom” or “graduate school.” But, as the researchers explain,

while both are possible ways to tell her stories, they are also cover stories that silence the struggles and bumping places she experienced between composing narratively coherent stories to live by on her personal and professional knowledge landscapes. Her silence about the harder to tell more complex stories could have disrupted the professional knowledge landscape of schools. (Schaefer et al., 2014, p. 23)

Schaefer et al. (2014) highlighted the challenges of authentically representing the storied lives of teacher leavers.

The second study of storied experience comes from Hong Kong. Harfitt (2015) discussed the experiences of two teachers who left their schools in Hong Kong, only to return to the profession two years later. As the participants returned to teaching, they were able to be located more easily than those who remained outside of the school setting. Interestingly, the two case studies represented in Harfitt's work discuss how the teachers felt lonely, isolated, and overworked in teaching, but returned to the profession because they missed their students and felt wanted by administration. However, the stories of teachers returning to the classroom are a bit rare in the United States.

Thus, these storied experiences of teacher leavers provide richness to understanding the decisions behind leaving that need to be heard by the broader research community. Milner and Lomotey (2013) stated that urban

education scholars “need to address gaps in the work we do to build a more robust knowledge base in urban education to chart a course that will benefit students and practitioners in urban ecologies” (p. xix), and this article attempts to fill this void in the literature. We actively worked to identify teacher leavers and capture their storied experience both within and outside of classroom teaching. In doing so, we aimed to identify emergent factors that contribute to the high numbers of teachers leaving the field. We spent a year tracking down as many teacher leavers as we could find across multiple regions of the United States, to capture their voices. We sought to understand how a group of teacher leavers experienced their careers before, during, and after classroom teaching—and how their emotions and careers interact across time and context.

## Theoretical Framework

Teaching is a profession of constant personal interaction. The center of this interaction is emotion (Hargreaves, 1998; Jo, 2014; Nias, 1996; Yin & Lee, 2012), and emotions are ubiquitous to the teaching experience (Trigwell, 2012). Hargreaves argues that emotional teachers make some of the best teachers: “Good teachers are not just well-oiled machines. They are emotional, passionate beings who connect with their students and fill their work and their classes with pleasure, creativity, challenge, and joy” (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 835).

But teaching is not only emotional; it is also an emotional labor. Hochschild’s (2012) theoretical construct of emotional labor, in which some professions have to either create or suppress certain feelings, is often at play. Teaching is a profession where teachers use their emotions as part of their professional work, but also need to hide or produce emotions according to the expectations of others, in this case, students, administrators, colleagues, and parents. There are three characteristics of an occupation that require emotional labor:

First, [the job] require[s] face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public. Second, they require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person—gratitude or fear for example. Third, they allow the employer, through training and supervision, to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees. (p. 147)

Hochschild (2012) explained that not all professions that require emotional labor contain all these characteristics, but we argue that the teaching profession contains all of the above. Teachers are expected to interact face-to-face

with students and administration while interacting with parents and students voice-to-voice (in the case, either through the telephone, email, or social media) outside of school hours. Moreover, teachers are expected to manage their classrooms and the overall classroom experience with the production of emotions. Common emotions such as respect, appreciation, care, and sometimes fear are often emotions employed to manage students. Finally, school officials and administrators closely monitor teachers' use of their emotions, or how it is often referred to in the profession, their dispositions. There is a level of surface acting (Hochschild, 2012) that occurs as teachers are required to mask their true emotions. The expression of negative emotions (e.g., yelling, screaming, or crying) is simply not considered acceptable in the profession.

Over the years, various studies have looked at the application of emotional labor within the field of education (Mawhinney, 2008a; Mawhinney, 2008b; Brennan, 2006; Keogh, Garvis, & Pendergast, 2010; Yin & Lee, 2012). Schutz and Lee (2014) discussed how emotional labor is connected and almost intertwined with teacher identity. Instruments such as the Teacher Emotional Labor Scale (TELS) used on high school teachers have shown that surface acting (Hochschild, 2012) relates to emotional exhaustion (Çukur, 2009). More recently, Acheson, Taylor, and Luna (2016) studied five foreign language teachers and what they term, "the downward spiral of burnout." They found that although several variables contribute to burnout (e.g., "disproportionate burden for motivation, unsustainable emotional labor, emotional exhaustion, lack of self-efficacy, [more] emotional exhaustion, and job burnout" (p. 532), the most prominent is unsustainable emotional labor.

Persistent emotional labor can make for a destructive situation. Some researchers argue that the lack of teacher retention is attributed to the highly emotional nature of the work (Schutz & Lee, 2014; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009). The most dangerous of these emotions is guilt.

### *The Emotional Labor of Guilt*

Almost 20 years ago, Hargreaves (1994, 1998) argued that guilt is an emotion expressed in teaching and is part of the emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012) expected within the profession. Guilt is a factor embedded into teaching on an international level. Macmillan and Meyer (2006), in their research around Canadian special education teachers, found that teachers express guilt when they compare their practice with the standard and identify an inability to reach the perceived expectations. Farouk (2012) worked with English primary teachers, and van Veen, Slegers, and Van de Ven (2005) conducted research with one teacher from the Netherlands and his adaptations to reform. Both studies found that guilt resulted from a sense of not living up to

expectations. Lamb (1983) mentioned that the emotion of guilt itself, whether it comes from a rational or irrational place, will continue to make demands on the guilty party. Moreover, “. . . we can only feel guilty about our *actions* (provided that we take them to be our actions), our *intentions to act*, and what we *take to be* our actions” (Lamb, 1983, p. 340). It is almost as if guilt is a common, almost expected, emotion for teachers to grapple with, one that can lead to consequences such as burnout and attrition.

Hargreaves (1998) explained how guilt can burnout teachers, and this dynamic has not changed over the decades, particularly in today’s high-accountability context. He explains that

. . . overpersonalizing and overmoralizing about the emotional commitments of teachers without due regard for the contexts in which teachers work will only add to the intolerable guilt and burnout that many members of the teaching force already experience. (p. 836)

When discussing his research on active teachers, Hargreaves (1994) explained that there are two forms of guilt found in teaching—guilt traps and guilt trips:

Guilt traps are the social and motivational patterns which delineate and determine teacher guilt; patterns which impel many teachers towards and imprison them with emotional states which can be both personally unrewarding and professionally unproductive. Guilt trips are the different strategies that teachers adopt to deal with, deny, or repair this guilt. (p. 142)

Issues of burnout and leaving the profession fall under guilt traps. The guilt traps themselves, according to Hargreaves, are an intersection of four components of teachers’ work: “the commitment to goals of care and nurturance, the open-ended nature of the job, the pressures of accountability and intensification, and the persona of perfectionism” (p. 145). We explore and unpack this concept of guilt that still resounds for teacher leavers—even years after leaving the profession.

## Method

To capture the storied experience of these former teachers, we utilized a life history methodology through a narrative inquiry lens. Teachers’ past educational and life experiences shape their approach to the profession (Costigan, 2004). Capturing these experiences helped to unpack their professional choices and their career trajectories out of the classroom. Life history interviews tend to explain how “individuals have found their centers through their chosen profession . . . [and] illustrate the primacy . . . of the quest for life’s

meaning” (Atkinson, 1998, pp. 16-17). Foster (1997) even goes on to argue in her classic research on Black teachers’ lives that life history work can capture teachers’ lives and provide a direct link to a deeper understanding of society. As teachers’ stories and experiences are often connected to their pedagogical practice and understanding (Carter & Doyle, 1996; Clandinin, 1986), we used this method to capture their career lifespan (Goodson & Sikes, 2001) from their entry into the profession, their experiences as a teacher, and their transition out of the profession.

Participant selection was guided by predetermined criteria. Specifically, we selected teacher leavers who had taught at least one year within a public school district, left teaching on their own accord prior to retirement, and entered the teaching profession through either traditional methods (e.g., undergraduate or masters programs in education) or through alternative routes (e.g., Alternative Route programs, Teacher Residency programs, or City Fellows programs). Second, our participant sample contained discipline-specific teachers, but this article is focused on English (language arts) teachers because they struggle with the most significant workload when compared with all the other secondary specializations (Hancock & Scherff, 2010).

We actively worked to identify leavers from all four regions of the United States (East, Midwest, South, and West). Through selective purposive sampling (Patton, 1990), we leveraged social networks, social media, and listservs to identify participants. With an established common protocol, we conducted semi-structured interviews either face-to-face, via Skype, or a few cases, over the phone, most of which lasted between 75 min and 90 min. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and distributed back to participants for member checking.

### Defining “Urban”

A total of 25 urban teacher leavers from 14 different states across the United States participated in this study. The breadth of urban teacher voices spans some of the largest metropolitan school districts in the country to smaller urban districts. The concept and definition of “urban” is often neglected in educational research (Irby, 2015; Milner, 2012) and adds to the “definitional gap” of conceptualization within the literature (Milner & Lomotey, 2013). In an attempt to more clearly operationalize urban education research, we use Milner’s (2012) typology of urban education. Participating urban teacher leavers taught in two main types of schools in the typology: (a) *urban intensive schools*, namely, schools located in large metropolitan areas, and (b) *urban emergent schools*, namely, schools located in cities with fewer than one million people. The third school in the typology, *urban characteristic*, comprises schools

not located in big cities...but may be beginning to experience increases in challenges that are sometimes associated with urban contexts [such as] an increase in English language learners in a community. These schools may be located in what might be considered rural or even suburban areas. (Milner, 2012, p. 560)

Three of our participants were in urban characteristics schools: one rural and two suburban.

*Participant Overview*

The majority of our 25 participants matched the current White, female, monolingual majority in teaching (Papay, 2007). The selected teacher leavers were 84% female and 16% male, 68% White, 12% Black, 4% Asian, and 16% from multiple backgrounds. Fifty-six percent earned their teaching certificate through university-based teacher programs, whereas the other 44% earned their certificates through alternative routes. As of the study, 56% remained in nonteaching roles in education, whereas 44% are engaged in fields completely outside of teaching (e.g., medicine, science, business, religion, government, or family caregiving).

We utilize qualitative life history interviews (Atkinson, 1998) for all participants and, for the purposes of this article, focus specifically on the experience of two teacher leavers: Lily and Lora (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Overview of Case Study Participants.

Participant	Gender	Race/ ethnicity	Teacher preparation	Years taught	Subject taught	Current field
Lily	F	White	Alternative	6	English	Education
Lora	F	Black/Asian	Alternative	6	English	Education

In this article, we concentrate our analysis on these two teacher leavers to provide a rich description of Lily and Lora’s teaching experiences—highlighting their career trajectory, the emotions and emotional labor around their career decisions, and their continued advocacy for marginalized students years after leaving. There are three reasons why we selected these two participants to represent the voice of the whole project. First, these two women taught public school in the same urban intensive school district on the East coast. The district is located in one of the top 10 largest school districts in the United States and is representative of U.S. urban education. Second, we wanted one participant who represents the demographic majority in teaching—White

females (Lily)—while also providing the storied experience of a teacher of color (Lora). Finally, both Lily and Lora were trained through alternative programs, albeit not the same program. Yet, they both lasted significantly past the typical contractual 2-year period of most alternative program participants, while surpassing the average 3-year period for most urban teachers (Ingersoll, 2003a). In essence, Lily and Lora debunk the typical alternative trained urban teacher, but their voices clearly represent the 28% of participants we found struggling with emotions around leaving the profession. The rich stories of these two individuals offer a representation of the more comprehensive experiences found across our national sample of urban teacher leavers.

### *Data Analysis*

Interview analysis incorporated both within- and cross-participant analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Twenty-seven a priori codes were created for the data analysis, focusing on the chronology of life history events and participant interpretation of those events. Emergent codes were also used, based on the participants' responses. Three key emergent themes came out of the analysis: emotions around leaving, guilt around leaving, and advocacy/social justice choices.

### **Findings**

In the findings, we aim to provide a holistic perspective on Lily and Lora's experience. We first present each participant's career overview to provide a background on their path into teaching and their reasons for leaving the classroom. This professional life history serves as background for the later discussion of Lily and Lora's emotions around leaving and their continued advocacy missions.

#### *Lily*

*Career overview.* Lily's interest in education fueled her decision to do a dual major in educational studies and public policy as an undergraduate. Her interests lay in educational policy work, but she wanted to gain experience in teaching before moving into the policy realm. As Lily explained it, "I had a typical alternative-certification, out-of-college mindset where I was like, 'I'm not gonna teach for that long. It's just gonna be something I do to gain some experience before I do policy.'" Lily decided to enter teaching through a Teaching Fellows program with this mission in mind. The Teaching Fellows program require participants to sign a 2-year contract. During that 2-year term, participants earn their master's degree while teaching full time, receiving both a salary and graduate tuition remission.

Lily worked in a fifth- through eighth-grade middle school, teaching special education and language arts. The first time she walked into her classroom was a memorable experience:

I always remember walking into my classroom when I first got it, and it was empty. There was a hole in the wall. You could see through the wall to the outside. I mean, just stuff that would be covered with duct tape. I covered it with a poster.

Like many teachers in under-resourced schools, Lily found herself with no textbooks, classroom management issues, and constant district reforms. But despite all of this, Lily really loved teaching and developed a strong rapport with the students. Lily explained, “After my second year, I decided that I really loved teaching and I was gonna stay for the long haul. I was happy there. I love the school.” Thus, Lily changed her “typical alternative-certification, out-of-college mindset” and continued teaching in the school district.

During Lily’s sixth year of teaching, the workload started to become too much. Lily reflected,

Some Saturdays I would be writing IEP’s and crying at the same time because I was so stressed about getting everything done . . . I shouldn’t be doing all this work right now. This isn’t one person’s job. This is three person’s job.

The continued stress of the workload and the compromise of Lily’s personal life made her question if she could really be a teacher “forever” toward the end of her sixth year. Lily decided to apply to a PhD program because “. . . it was always in the back of my head. I think going into that [Ph.D. program] I thought that I would return back to my educational policy roots. So I applied.”

Lily was accepted to the program and left her middle school classroom after 6 years of service.

**Recognizing the guilt.** By the time of Lily’s interview, she had already been out of the classroom for 2 years; yet, she still continued to struggle with her decision to leave. She still had a strong identification with the school and continues to go back to the school regularly to work with the teachers. But this strong identity with the school carried with it a mass of emotions for Lily around her decision to leave. She started processing her emotions during a dialogue around her recent scholarly studies:

I’ve been reading a lot on teacher demoralization, and when I look back on myself, I think that I was feeling pretty demoralized because I couldn’t—I couldn’t do my job. I couldn’t do really the right thing for my students.

Lily discussed the difficulty of mastering all her students' various learning abilities while also keeping them engaged in their learning. She found this to be an almost insurmountable task, as the only adult in the classroom:

I just felt like no matter what I did, everyone was not getting what they should have gotten, including myself, because I wasn't able to take care of myself personally sometimes because I was just trying to get my work done. I think that had that not happened to me and had I not had those feelings, I wouldn't have pursued the Ph.D. I think I would have stayed in teaching longer . . . But I do think it [Ph.D. program] was the right move, and I'm really glad that I did it, even though I have the feelings of guilt for leaving when I talk about it.

This mention of guilt around leaving continually came up during Lily's interview. It was strong at times, with Lily even questioning if she had undermined her own principles by leaving. Lily explained,

I constantly feel like maybe I sold out a little bit and I should still be teaching, 'cause I can do it . . . I don't know—and that maybe I should get back in there and do it.

Lily's guilty emotions around leaving the classroom seemed to be a constant tug on her. She even explained that the emotional part of leaving was the biggest continuing challenge she faced in leaving the classroom. Even though Lily had settled into a new career and was 2 years removed from the classroom, she still struggled with her decision:

I definitely always feel like maybe I should have stayed in teaching, but I feel I guess guilty for leaving. I think that's my greatest challenge. But I think that I'll get over that if I can—once I have a job and once I—I think that I am making a difference now with some of the things I'm doing. I think that all adds up, I'll get over that.

Lily continued to harbor the idea that teachers, on the front lines, make more of a difference than those in higher education. She struggled to reconcile that difference during the interview itself. Ironically, Lily felt that if she went back to teaching today, she would be more prepared:

I think that if I went back to teaching, I would be an even better teacher because I'm aware of so much more, and I think that whatever flame was inside of me for social justice in terms of education, it's grown so much bigger.

*Continued advocacy.* The flame of social justice is part and parcel of why Lily decided to leave. She wanted to use her doctorate to become an advocate for students within educational policy. Lily thought that, with a PhD, she would be able to have more of an impact on urban students:

The whole reason I went into it [Ph.D. program] is because I wanted to make an even bigger difference. I don't know now if I want to be a professor. Maybe I want to use my Ph.D. to work for a nonprofit or to work for a school district, something where I can be more involved in what happens to students and teachers, 'cause my interests definitely lie in teaching and learning.

Lily understood graduate school as a way of gaining a stronger voice:

I've become a lot more assertive, I think. When I was a teacher, I definitely always did what was asked of me, and I definitely—I don't think I spoke up a lot . . . now I've acquired that skill . . . So I think that will help me if I want to have a higher-up position in a school district or in a nonprofit. I think that I'm better at speaking my mind.

Lily's notion of advocacy was already put to use serving the larger urban intensive school district. Lily partnered with her neighbor to build a "friends of our local public school association." The purpose was to encourage families to send their children to the local, urban school in her neighborhood and to discourage "white flight" from the community:

We're working on keeping local parents in the school and having them actually consider that [local, urban] school as an option, because so many people are just like, "Well, as soon my kid is four, I move because I can't send them to a public school." And they don't even know that we have this little gem right down the street from us.

The association also developed outreach to the teachers in the local school. Aside from working with the parents, Lily also created partnerships with the teachers to help provide them with the supports they needed:

I'm working with supporting teachers, so I get to go into schools and support new teachers, which I love because I could have used more support as a new teacher. I like being able to give that to them and tell them that they're doing a good job instead of the opposite, which I think is what new teachers get a lot. So I'm just getting all these opportunities to explore my interests.

In a way, Lily's support of teachers came full circle. She herself experienced demoralization as a teacher, but now works actively to provide those supports she herself missed by advocating on behalf of the parents, students, and teachers of her community.

### *Lora*

*Career overview.* Similar to the majority of the participants in our study, Lora did not enter college interested in becoming a teacher. During her undergraduate years, Lora studied psychology with a minor in Japanese. Lora discussed how she was so focused on her studies that she neglected to think about the next steps of her life until the last semester of her senior year. It was during this semester that a Teach for America recruiter approached Lora, based off a recommendation, asking whether she might be interested in the program. She went to an information session, where the recruiter really sold Lora on the idea of teaching:

It was the whole portraying of Black and Brown kids not having access to a college education . . . I didn't know that the statistics about certain populations being underachieving and many grade levels behind . . . So as soon as I heard those statistics, those numbers, and sort of heard just pulling on the emotional strings, I was like "Oh yeah. This is my mission. I want to do this."

Reflecting back on the situation, Lora recognized, "I do admit I had this sort of like hero mentality in some sense, more so it was like I really just wanted to do something that provided empowerment." Lora explained how Teach for America really framed this idea of "the hero savior situation," but Lora was hooked and wanted to give this a try, so she submitted her application.

Teach for America accepted Lora's application, and she ended up moving from the West Coast to the East Coast to teach. Lora taught middle school language arts for 6 years in a large, urban intensive school district. Lora remembers her first year, similar to Lily's experience, with the challenges of classroom management, constant school reform, and lack of resources:

It was a tough first year, and eye-opening . . . to be in that environment, to be like wow, there's mice and there's chipped paint on walls, and why is it like this? So I had just a mix of emotions, just sadness, anger, frustration, stress, and how do I address all of this?

Lora also dealt with culture shock and adjustment coming from the West Coast to the East Coast and how that played itself out in the relationships with students.

Lora stayed at the school for 3 years before yearning for an experience to grow her teaching. She went to Japan to teach for a year and then came back to the district for another 2 years before deciding to leave. Lora entered teaching with a mission for social justice for Black and Brown children. Six years later, Lora's decision to finally leave teaching was for the same mission:

I just felt like I was in a really oppressive environment and I was enabling this machine that I wanted to destroy. I didn't feel like I could kill it from within, I had to kill it from outside. So I thought, okay, I don't really feel like I have much voice here to do what I want to do, I feel like I need to do.

Similar to Lily, Lora actually entered a PhD program to make educational change from the outside. Yet, the feelings of guilt around this decision also came through in her life history narrative.

*Recognizing the guilt.* Lora discussed at great length her feelings and why she felt guilty for leaving teaching. She discussed a situation where she had a lively and animated discussion with her students. The volume was loud, but the students were participating in the class. Then the administrator came flying into the room red faced and screaming at the students and Lora simultaneously for the loud volume. Lora recalled the experience with the students:

We were all sort of just lost, kind of felt demeaned, and it was a horrible feeling. I just couldn't take it anymore, and I felt guilty afterwards because I felt like I didn't want to be in that environment, but I left my kids in that environment.

Lora's interaction with the administration also fueled these emotions of guilt. When Lora told the principal that she was accepted into graduate school, the principal's response was, "You know what you should do? You should stand in front of your class and tell them why you are deserting them." Although Lora's immediate reaction was, "Really?!? Oh, okay, because I thought I would tell them that this is what you need to be doing too. You need to be seeking opportunities, you know, and bettering yourself." Reflecting back 4 years after leaving the classroom, she still internally struggles with the decision to leave:

I left because I want to make a bigger impact, what I think is a very common response for people who were in the classroom. What's the greater impact you can have than the one-on-one in the classroom, right? Like, and now you're just talking about it, you're just talking about them [students] as opposed to being there. It's just this weird space, but definitely guilt, like you deserted your kids, you know.

Her principal's words continued to echo in her head, years later.

*Continued advocacy.* Four years removed from teaching has not stopped Lora on her mission for advocacy for social justice. This concept of support for Black and Brown children continually came out in her philosophy:

It's [large, urban school districts] this monster, to me. Now, I don't want to use that to say there's not great things happening, because at the end of the day, there's so many educators out there doing fantastic, amazing things in their classroom, but I don't mean to say that there's not great educators and schools and classrooms, but just the machine. It's frustrating that we can't figure out, or that people turn a blind eye to the fact that everyone doesn't have not even just equal, just like sufficient, like adequate opportunities.

Although Lora was actively working toward her goal of a PhD, she continued to tutor students one-on-one to help them achieve the hurdles set in front of them by the urban school district.

As Lora was finishing her degree, she still questioned if this degree would help her debunk "the machine" of the school system, "I still don't know, what the hell do I do about that? Does having this degree gonna help me to do that? So just trying to find my own strategy to do that." While searching for her own strategy, Lora summarized her concepts of advocacy for urban students and teachers:

I feel like society just accepts the fact that it's okay for certain folk to not have anything, and we sort of determine which kids deserve opportunities and which kids don't. You know, closing the schools,<sup>1</sup> blindly, like without really even regard for who that's affecting and that's frustrating to me. It's just that—in particular, I feel like in terms of like again, Black and brown, kids, I just feel like they obviously get the short end of the stick. My frustration is it just continues on every day.

## Discussion

These findings offer two key insights into the experiences of teacher leavers. First, leaving teaching can be an emotionally painful process that weighs on teachers for years after the decision is made. And, although painful, that emotion also drives future actions, often on behalf of students, schools, and communities.

### *The Emotional Labor of Guilt Revisited*

The lives of these 25 teachers highlight the understudied component of emotional guilt, highlighting how the guilt itself and its complexities continue

years after teachers left the classroom. Most teachers in the larger study experienced a range of conflicting emotions, including guilt upon leaving the profession and continued to struggle with these emotions years later. Lily and Lora are not alone in their feeling “guilty” or “selling out” on their students, as this was a theme we found consistently with our participants. Twenty-eight percent of the participants explicitly shared their guilt about leaving the classroom. Hargreaves (1994) discussion of guilt traps frames the issues of burn-out and leaving the profession, as in the case of Lily and Lora.

Both Lily and Lora felt the pressure of accountability and intensification within the school system—Lily with overworked expectations and Lora with the “oppressive machine” that was beating down on her and her students. The limited resources, the changing reforms, and the administrative pressures all seemed to play into the emotional labor of guilt. The care that both Lily and Lora displayed for their students seemed to be the most salient reason for their continued guilt trip.

The guilt that Lily and Lora expressed generates a number of questions for the field. Should they feel guilty for leaving their students? As guilt is generated from emotional labor, is the guilt real or only perceived? Although these questions can bring forth various avenues of theoretical debate, they both felt and experienced the emotion, whether it is expected in the profession or not, and whether it comes from a rational place or not (Lamb, 1983). In essence, whether justified or not, the guilt was real for them. For Lily or Lora, and most of our participants, this guilt placed a demand on the participants to use it as a fuel for their advocacy agenda. They experienced the guilt from their actions of leaving the profession, but they were using the guilt to continue to care and provide for their students in a broader societal sense.

Macmillan and Meyer (2006) found when teachers cope with their guilt in positive ways, they are able to seek solutions from within or outside of policy. When they negatively cope with addressing guilt, there is often no resolution, no change, and the teachers are left feeling debilitated. It can be argued that Lily and Lora did not cope with their guilt in positive ways, which eventually ended their careers as teachers. But, we found that they currently use their guilt in positive ways to provide advocacy for students outside the classroom.

### *Guilt as Fuel for Advocacy*

For Lily and Lora, their guilt came from the fact that they just could not cope with the system any longer. Lily discussed a further catalyst for her guilt, in that she has become a better teacher but still chooses not to do the job. Lamb (1983) explained that guilt and shame can grow out of an inability to continue doing something or a choice to avoid it, which is exemplified in Farouk’s (2012) and van Veen and colleagues’ (2005) work on teachers who

experience guilt when they are unable to meet certain standards. For Lily, her ability to continue teaching can be viewed as a form of avoidance that continues to enhance her guilty conscious. Although capacity and avoidance are salient in Lily and Lora's stories, they also demonstrate how guilt itself is the fuel for their continued advocacy.

Lily worked on the ground to help a local school by working with parents, teachers, and continuing to live and work in the community. She may have left a classroom, but she remains an integral part of the urban school. Although Lora did not know what she wanted to do specifically with her degree, she has kept the agenda of supporting Black and Brown students at the forefront of her mission to work with urban districts and teachers.

Lily and Lora are not unique in their continued advocacy for their urban students, school, and communities. The concept remains relevant for most of the participating teacher leavers. From our larger pool of participants, 56% of the teacher leavers continued in education or nonprofits to make a larger impact on schools and students. Amodio, Devine, and Harmon-Jones (2007) explained how "guilt implies a desire to repair one's transgression" (p. 529). It is almost as if their continued emotional labor of guilt thrives even after leaving the profession as they still have a teacher identity embedded. Most are still working in education and teaching in some capacity to make "bigger change." We are not implying that guilt was the catalyst for continued educational advocacy for all our participants, but it certainly played a role for Lily and Lora, although not without some pain during the process.

These findings indicate important theoretical implications for understanding the career trajectory of teachers. Although emotional labor has been seen an integral to the act of teaching, here we see that it remains relevant for years after leaving the profession. These teachers, who rarely discuss their emotional struggles with leaving teaching, came forward with powerful emotions during the life history interviews. The emotions continue under the surface as teachers and teacher leavers shape their ongoing careers as student advocates.

## **Implications**

Lily and Lora provide a holistic look into the storied experience of former teachers and demonstrate the need for more emotional support for teachers while in the classroom and as they transition into new careers. The guilt traps (Hargreaves, 1994) that Lily and Lora experienced are ones we heard consistently and continually throughout the interviews. We provide two specific strategies that administrators and school officials can use to lessen guilt traps and provide an emotionally healthy context for teachers. These strategies may also be applied to the teacher preparation context. To counter the

“theory-to-practice gap” (Milner & Lomotey, 2013) within the urban education literature, we provide practical examples that can be utilized in schools to lessen the emotional load for teachers.

### *Helping Teachers Stay More Happy: A Guilt-Free Recipe*

*Resiliency and teacher care.* Drawing upon Day and Gu’s (2009) work, which focused on 300 veteran teachers in the United Kingdom, we emphasize the importance of school administration fostering a context of care. Day and Gu describe how seasoned teachers had a renewed sense of motivation and commitment to their work when there was “sympathetic and supportive management” (Day & Gu, 2009, p. 454) built around a sense of professional trust. When teachers connect identity, commitment, and perceived self-efficacy, they become more resilient and offer a greater “reservoir of care” for their students (Day & Gu, 2013). Sustaining teachers’ “commitment, resilience, and effectiveness in the profession is a quality retention issue and that provision of appropriate in-school support is key to securing the professional quality of veteran teachers” (Day & Gu, 2009, p. 454). When school administration supports teachers in achieving their goals, they also foster a resilience that can counter the emotion of guilt.

Just as a guilt trap involves teachers committed to goals of student care (another component of guilt traps), we argue that schools should have the same commitment for the teachers themselves. Care, in this sense, is all-inclusive, as the physical self helps the body to cope with the emotional self. There are stress-reduction practices that can be offered to teachers right after school for only 30 min. Some examples are exercise classes, walking/running clubs, meditation times, knitting clubs, and the like. The idea is that providing these events right after school and on school grounds, at least twice a week, will make it easier for teachers to participate and to forge bonds that can be used for mutual support. In essence, their participation will help themselves physically and emotionally, and in turn, that will make them a stronger educators and professionals.

*Shut down mode.* As teacher care assists in diminishing two components of the guilt trap, the other two components (open-ended job and perfectionism) can also be reduced through “shut down mode.” The advent of technology has brought many advances to the teaching profession, but it has also created an environment that escalates perfectionism and the open-ended nature of the job, as teachers are continually accessible to the administrator, parents, and students. This creates added stressors that can easily be assisted with the school’s email server. We argue that schools should shut down their servers

from 6 p.m. to 7 a.m. on weekdays and on weekends. There are a number of European countries and corporate institutions that are following this model to alleviate stress on their employees, and we feel this small, yet powerful, change is a movement that should also be happening in the schools.

The implications for teacher care and shut down mode are small, yet achievable, steps for all schools—even those with limited resources. They are not cost intensive, and they can certainly alleviate guilt traps and work toward the goal of sustaining more teachers in the field.

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### Note

1. In the urban intensive district where Lora taught, there were around 24 school closings due to budget issues. All of the schools closed were majority Black and Latinx schools.

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