

# Leaving a Profession After It's Left You: Teachers' Public Resignation Letters as Resistance Amidst Neoliberalism

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**Context:** *Though there is a growing field of research on what makes teachers leave, little research includes an analysis of narratives written directly by teachers. Yet, amidst a growing body of teacher writing and a surge in digital media, there has emerged a new genre of teachers' public resignation letters, many of which go "viral" when posted online. This research is contextualized by literature on teacher attrition and neoliberalism and framed within theories of teacher agency and teacher resistance.*

**Purpose:** *Within a context where the letters themselves are becoming more popular and the rates of teacher attrition continue to rise in troubling ways, this study explores a new genre by investigating the content and strategies employed in public resignation letters from teachers around the United States.*

**Research Design:** *This research employed a qualitative design, drawing on methods of content analysis, to analyze 23 publicly available resignation letters.*

**Conclusions:** *I argue that these letters represent a new form of public discourse. This discourse allows teachers to exercise their personal and professional agency in the form of resistance to dominant narratives about what public education is and should be and what current neoliberal reforms are doing to teachers and students. These among other reasons I uncovered through thematic coding are linked to contextual factors rather than individual ones, pointing to the limits of retention in a climate that does not support teachers' agency. Further, the majority of reasons for leaving are explicitly or implicitly tied to current neoliberal educational policies. According to their letters, teachers left the profession because (1) neoliberal reforms and policies threatened learning conditions and (2) these reforms had negative consequences for teachers' working conditions and beliefs. Specific neoliberal reforms and policies that were mentioned in the letters include: increased standardized testing and restrictions on curriculum, which teachers argued reflected a lack of care for students' socioemotional needs; decreasing pay/benefits; and punitive teacher evaluation systems. In addition, the consequences of these reforms meant that teachers felt: a lack of time, a mismatch between their beliefs and the reality of teaching in today's educational climate, and a lack of trust and respect for their profession, and a lack of control over their working conditions.*

I realize that I am not leaving my profession, in truth, it has left me. It no longer exists. I feel as though I have played some game halfway through its fourth quarter, a timeout has been called, my teammates' hands have all been tied, the goal posts moved, all previously scored points and honors expunged and all of the rules altered. (Conti, 2013)

When Gerald Conti (2013) of Syracuse, New York was in his 40th year of teaching, he decided to resign from his position for a variety of reasons, including low morale, a frustration with the amount of time spent on high-stakes testing, a lack of administrative support and commitment, and a general sense of feeling disrespected and devalued as a professional. Hundreds of miles away, James Weldon (2013) was feeling similarly: "After 22 years of teaching middle school ... I am quitting the North Carolina public schools. More accurately, the public schools quit me." And out in the Midwest, Illinois teacher Ellie Rubenstein (2013) delivered an emotional resignation via YouTube: "Over the past 15 years, I've experienced the depressing, gradual downfall and misdirection of education that has slowly eaten away at my love of teaching." Though states apart, these teachers left their positions for many of the same reasons, and the world knew it. This is because Mr. Conti, Mr. Weldon, and Ms. Rubenstein, as many others have begun to do, published their resignation letters online. In what is normally a private act, resigning from one's job, the public had a front-row seat to hearing about their concerns, their challenges, and ultimately, their intense sadness and disappointment, as they prepared to leave a profession that they felt had already left them.

As the public discourse has dovetailed with academic discourses on teacher retention and attrition with the media frequently highlighting new research on where, when, and why teachers leave (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014), there has emerged a new genre that represents, at once, a communal and a private act: the public teacher resignation letter. Published on websites and blogs, and then shared via social media, such letters have become increasingly popular in recent years. I first became aware of such letters when former students (now teachers) shared the letters with me, accompanied by messages such as, "This is how I feel" or "Is this how you felt when you left?" Thus, though the letters were written to achieve one particular purpose (resigning from one's teaching position), they achieved, whether intentionally or not, other purposes by being made public. How do we understand this comparably small number of letters within the contexts of the ever-growing body of teacher writing within digital media? I argue that such letters can be contextualized

within a wider genre of public writing that teachers now undertake, including blogging about their experiences, joining and contributing to Facebook groups devoted to teaching and/or educational activism, and participating in virtual dialogue through Twitter and other social media sites. In each of these virtual spaces, teachers' public writing is "integral to teaching practice and professional development ... a way for teachers to claim authority in decisions about education, and as a means to include their voices in debates that affect their work" (Whitney, Zuidema, & Fredricksen, 2014, p. 63). What is presented below could be considered a small body of data, but it is a unique set of data. The goal is not to compare it to other types of teacher writing, but rather to situate it and describe it as *one form* of teacher writing in a digitally-connected world.

Within a context where the letters themselves are becoming more popular and the rates of teacher attrition continue to rise in troubling ways, this study explores a new genre by investigating the content and strategies employed in public resignation letters from teachers around the United States. Though there is a growing field of research on what makes teachers leave (Byrd-Blake et al., 2010; Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & May, 2011; Macdonald, 1999; Santoro, 2011), none of this research includes an analysis of narratives written directly by teachers. To date, no research has examined the phenomenon of public resignation statements in any field, either in form or function.<sup>1</sup> This research attempts to fill those scholarly gaps through a critical analysis of public letters.

Why is such research imperative, and why now? I argue that these letters represent a new form of public discourse. This discourse allows teachers to exercise their personal and professional agency in the form of resistance to dominant narratives about what public education is and should be and what current neoliberal reforms are doing to teachers and students. Indeed, as D. A. Wilson (2014) writes, "the act of explaining" his departure publicly is as important as the act of leaving itself, as teachers are able to give concrete, visceral details about "the adverse effects of the corporate school 'reform' movement on public education." Scholars and the public should care about these letters because they offer firsthand insight into why teachers are leaving. In the literature review below, I detail the staggering costs of teacher attrition, both fiscal and contextual, as teachers leaving not only costs money but also threatens a positive school culture and harms students. Additionally, if we know why teachers are leaving, there are many steps that can be taken before teachers reach the point of writing public resignation letters. For example, we may be able to change the contexts that push them out by creating support structures that are targeted for their specific needs and involving them in more decision-making processes that will improve policy and practice. We may also be

able to enhance teacher education programs so that new educators are better prepared to enter such environments. Finally, we must understand why teachers are leaving because we know that what benefits teachers will benefit students. If the goal of educational research is, in fact, to provide the best learning opportunities for children, then we must articulate if and how teachers feel those opportunities are jeopardized.

In particular, I examine the following research questions in light of theories of teacher agency and resistance: (1) What are teachers' reasons for leaving the profession, as disclosed in their public resignation letters? and (2) What, if any, are the connections between their reasons for leaving and current educational policies?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study utilized two intersecting theoretical frameworks: a theory of teacher agency and a theory of teacher resistance. Below, I explicate each theory in turn and then argue that connecting the two in a novel way, as this article does, is vital to understanding teachers' emerging roles as public intellectuals in the fight for students' and educators' voices in educational reform debates.

### AGENCY THEORY

Agency is both "a central concept in modern educational theory and practice ... [and] a key notion and issue in contemporary social theory" (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 5). In brief, a theory of human agency refers to the capacity to act on one's free will and make independent choices. Bandura (1989) describes agency as a "capacity to exercise control over one's own thought processes, motivation, and action" whereby "because judgments and actions are partly self-determined, people can effect change in themselves and their situations through their own efforts" (p. 1175).

In educational research, while there is some variance in the definitions of teacher agency, the vast majority of definitions revolve around teacher agency in the context of educational reform, thus illuminating a connection to Bandura's definition and the sociological concept of agency being an interaction between individual and environment. For example, Pignatelli (1993) describes agency as "what a teacher can do, in light of Foucault's ideas of 'how power, identity, subjectivity, and freedom intersect and inform each other'" (p. 412). Lasky (2005), also connecting the individual to the context, defines agency as "the belief that human beings have the ability to influence their lives and environments while they are also shaped by social and individual factors" (p. 900). Definitions of agency also contain contradictory ideas, as demonstrated

by R. Wilson's (2013) argument that it is "a quality within educators, a matter of personal capacity to act usually in response to stimuli within their pedagogical environment" (p. 1), as opposed to Priestley, Biestra, and Robinson's (2012) argument that agency is, in fact, "an emergent phenomenon rather than as a capacity residing in individuals" (p. 2), which "influences from the *past*, orientations towards the *future* and engagement with the *present*" (p. 3).

Other scholarly definitions make explicit the use of agency as a political tool for particular purposes and with particular strategic moves. Moje and Lewis (2007) see it as "the strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embedded within relations of power" (p. 18). Anderson (2010) argues that teachers are agentic when they use their "capacity to make choices, take principled action, and enact change" (p. 541), and Cardozo (2015) sees agency in educators' "space to manoeuvre ... [and] the consequent strategies they adopt as potential agents of change" (p. 3).

This balance of individual and contextual factors, as well as the use of agency to achieve certain aims and changes, is especially salient when research continues to find that teachers struggle with their own agency in light of educational reforms. Such reforms include school restructuring (Pignatelli, 1993), policy mandates and state standards (Lasky, 2005), curriculum making (Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012), and curriculum enacting (Priestley, Biestra, & Robinson, 2012). Research also shows that that "the extent to which teachers are able to achieve agency varies from context to context based upon certain environmental conditions of possibility and constraint" (Priestley, Edwards, et al., 2012). Despite some studies, like Schweisfurth (2006), that show teachers were able to act agentially because their contexts supported them in terms of personal commitment, professional expertise, and peer support, the vast majority of scholarship demonstrates that that teacher agency is "increasingly rare in the educational world of prescriptive improvement" because reformers undervalue and even dismiss teachers' expertise (R. Wilson, 2013, p. 1).

## RESISTANCE THEORY

Foucault (1978, p. 2) once argued, "Where there is power, there is resistance," and later, advancing a subaltern argument that those who resist are also exerting a type of power, Abu-Lughod (1990, p. 42) responded, "Where there is resistance, there is power." In writing about a theory of resistance, Giroux (1983) argues, "Resistance theory assigns an active role to human agency and experience as key mediating links between structural determinants and lived effects. Consequently, there is the recognition that

different spheres or cultural sites—schools, families, mass media—are governed by complex ideological properties that often generate contradictions both within and among them” (p. 285). Resistance, then, does not have to involve overt and visible acts of rebellion, as Locke envisioned in his early writings about a theory of resistance. Resistance can also take the form of everyday resistance, according to Scott (1985). Everyday resistance, as explained by Vinthagen and Johansson (2013), is “quiet, dispersed, disguised or otherwise seemingly invisible” (p. 4). In many ways, the work of teachers in response to educational reforms often takes the form of everyday resistance. We hear of teachers “closing doors and doing what needs to be done,” even if what needs to be done is not on the standardized test. We hear of teachers who speak quietly in hallway corners and teachers’ rooms about what they do when preparing for an observation, such as writing the standard in the corner of the board and putting up a word wall just minutes before the supervisor is supposed to appear. Yet, by making their resignation letters public, are the teachers who write these letters moving from a sense of everyday resistance to more overt resistance? Are they only able to do this because they have the security of resigning?

Connecting theories of resistance to schooling is something that Giroux does well in his 1983 work. He views resistance in relation to teachers and students as “a significant critique of school as an institution [that] points to social activities and practices whose meanings are ultimately political and cultural” (p. 282). He argues that “not all oppositional behavior has ‘radical significance,’ nor is all oppositional behavior a clear-cut response to domination” (p. 285), thus challenging scholars to be cautious in their interpretations of what does or does not constitute resistance in response to oppression or domination. Though this study is about teachers specifically, Giroux’s arguments about student resistance hold true, in many ways, for educators as well as their pupils:

The concept of resistance ... celebrates a dialectical notion of human agency that rightly portrays domination as a process that is neither static nor complete. Concomitantly, the oppressed are not seen as being simply passive in the face of domination.... Inherent in a radical notion of resistance is an expressed hope for radical transformation, an element of transcendence. (pp. 289–290)

The study presented here, then, fills an empirical gap by examining one form of educators’ resistance. Combining the theories of agency and resistance allows for a nuanced and contextualized examination of teachers’ public resignation letters. Such an investigation offers an opportunity to consider if and how these letters are a form of both resistance and agency.

This is not to say that teachers who stay or join collective efforts to fight neoliberal reforms are not also exercising their resistance and agency, but rather that teachers who leave (even one by one) and make public statements about why they do so are also resisting neoliberalism and being agentic, albeit in a different form than those who take collective action and/or those who stay. If they have been working in an environment where they feel little agency, is resistance, in the form of leaving and of publicly resigning, the way they get their voices back? That is, do the letters represent a form of resistance that is their agency in action?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This study draws upon two oft-disconnected, yet closely related, bodies of literature: teacher attrition and neoliberalism. Teacher attrition literature is most often cited and explored in teaching and teacher education scholarship, while neoliberalism is most often investigated in relation to educational policy. Yet, in recent years, scholars have connected the two fields as more studies point to the links between neoliberal reforms and teachers' reasons for leaving the classroom. In the sections below, I describe existing research and highlight gaps in knowledge that this study attempts to fill in both areas.

### TEACHER ATTRITION

Teacher turnover costs over \$2.2 billion each year and has been shown to decrease student achievement in the form of reading and math test scores (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). In fact, teacher turnover has increased over the past 30 years (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012), and risen from about 9% to 20% just between 2009 and 2014 (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). In a recent national study of the sources of an impending teacher shortage, high teacher attrition was listed as one of the primary causes; the authors argued that the 8% rate of yearly attrition in the U.S. was nearly double that of other nations like Finland and Singapore (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). In some states like North Carolina, where several teachers in this study were located, the attrition rate is even higher (14.84%) and continues to rise (Department of Public Instruction, Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015).

Of particular concern are high-needs schools, where teachers leave at a rate 50% higher than that of their affluent counterparts (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). Research has shown the difficulty of recruiting and retaining teachers for urban schools (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Dunn, 2013; Dunn & Durrance,

2014; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Marinell & Coca, 2013) Despite popular opinion that teachers leave urban schools because of difficulties with students or retirements, scholars like Ingersoll have made a career of disproving myths about teacher recruitment and retention (Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & May, 2011). Extensions on Ingersoll's work, especially those done in the post-No Child Left Behind era of increased accountability measures, continue to demonstrate that job satisfaction is more related to workplace factors and that teachers would be more likely to stay if they had better working conditions (Byrd-Blake et al., 2010; Johnson, 2006; Ladd, 2011; Santoro, 2011; Scheopner, 2010; Sutchter et al., 2016). Rated even higher than a larger salary are teachers' desires for autonomy in their curriculum, more and better resources, respect for the profession and their time, less bureaucracy and paperwork, and more administrative support (Gardner, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics 2014; National Education Association, 2003). Indeed, according to a 2014 report from the National Center for Education Statistics, "about 51 percent of public school teachers who left teaching in 2012–13 reported that the manageability of their work load was better in their current position than in teaching. Additionally, 53 percent of public school leavers reported that their general work conditions were better in their current position than in teaching" (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014, p. 3).

Often framed in the media as the reason that schools and students are failing, teachers are charged with raising student test scores, using "teacher proof" scripted curricula, and following district and school pacing guidelines and benchmarks (Kumashiro, 2011). One study found mathematics teachers were leaving because of such persistent blame placed on today's educators (Curtis, 2012), while another found mathematics teachers leaving because of a lack of instructional autonomy (Ingersoll & May, 2012). We know that these factors add increased pressure and stress, but there is little research that examines how retention is influenced by these more recent political moves. Even in large-scale data sets from NCES, there are not findings that drill down to the specific policies and practices that are subsumed in "dissatisfaction" or "working conditions" as a whole category of analysis. This project pays particular attention to the reasons that teachers say they are leaving, identifying what happens if teachers' personal values differ from neoliberal values imposed by contemporary policies and reforms.

## NEOLIBERALISM

Neoliberalism, a set of economic beliefs in favor of market-based competition and privatization, has developed a stronghold in political and educational discourse (Apple, 2001; Giroux, 2004). Neoliberals believe that the state should not be involved in economic or social life. The core of neoliberalism is its inherent focus on the market and, thus, making a profit. When neoliberalism's market principles are applied to education, parents and students become the buyers or consumers, and instruction (and thus instructors) become the products and services rendered. According to this philosophy, schools will improve if they are in competition with one another and market forces are allowed to commodify education, thus valuing profit over people, as Chomsky says (Apple, 2001; Chomsky, 1999; Giroux, 2004; Saltman, 2007/2009).

Neoliberal reforms in education also advance the privatization of public schools because of neoliberals' ongoing suspicion of public services and, as a result, have progressively stopped investing in public education. For them, public resources are at risk because the state is too large and bureaucratic, whereas the private sector has the freedom to be more efficient and responsive to individual needs (Saltman, 2007/2009). Though many scholars argue that neoliberal doctrine is "crafted and employed for reasons of power and profit" (Chomsky, 1999, p. 39) as opposed to the welfare of the country's neediest citizens, many politicians and citizens contend that neoliberal policies are designed as the great equalizer in a broken educational system. Indeed, because the language of neoliberalism is one of civil rights and advancing democracy, broad ranges of individuals find its tenets appealing.

Despite an extensive body of knowledge on neoliberal reforms in education, little research moves into classrooms to see the effects of such policies on the lived experiences of educators. As I have done in my previous work, primarily (Dunn, 2013), this research connects two bodies of literature by focusing on teachers' narratives but also examines how their stories overlap and intersect with larger state and social structures.

## METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative design, drawing on methods of content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Content analysis can be either quantitative (by counting a number of times certain words or phrases appear in any analyzed texts) or qualitative (by identifying major themes within and across texts). The findings presented here are primarily qualitative in nature, though basic quantitative counting of terms was also used as a way to provide additional evidence to support qualitative findings for some themes.

## CONTEXT

The first public resignation letter I was able to locate was from 1991, published in the *New York Times* before the advent of virtual letters and social media. John Taylor Gatto, who later became an educational author and activist, wrote about his career as a New York City public school teacher. In language strikingly similar to those of the online letters from the 2010s, Gatto (1991) explained:

I've taught public school for 26 years but I just can't do it anymore. For years I asked the local school board and superintendent to let me teach a curriculum that doesn't hurt kids, but they had other fish to fry. So I'm going to quit, I think ... I teach how to fit into a world I don't want to live in. I just can't do it anymore. I can't train children to wait to be told what to do; I can't train people to drop what they are doing when a bell sounds.

Beyond Gatto's letter, however, there appears to be a dearth of public letters until 2012, when they began appearing online. Venues for publication, in general, include personal and public blogs, websites about education and/or educational activism, and op-eds in local newspapers that were republished online. Sources of dissemination included social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. Though there are likely many more published online, the ones selected for this study are ones that went "viral," or that received so much press (in the forms of hits, "likes," and tweets), that the authors' messages moved beyond their initial small audience of local communities or schools and into the national conversation. These authors' letters may have been republished by popular education writers like Diane Ravitch, discussed on local or national radio, or even reposted through national news sources like the *Today Show* and CNN. For example, one teacher who posted his letter on YouTube has over 520,000 views (Round, 2012). Another YouTube letter has over 635,000 views (Rubenstein, 2013), and its author was later covered in stories in *Huffington Post*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. Merely from sharing it on his personal Facebook page, a New York social studies teacher's letter went viral, garnering over 120,000 "shares" in two days (Conti, 2013).

The "viral" nature of these letters is important to contextualize. In another study (Dunn, Farver, Guenther, & Wexler, 2017), I conducted interviews with eight of the letter writers to learn more about what happened after their letters went viral and how this impacted their feelings about the profession. From that study, it is clear that their intentions were, as discussed below and as revealed in the letters themselves, to offer insight into the current state of the profession, not to go viral on the internet. Indeed,

the majority of participants in that study did not know about the other letters or videos before writing their own. Of those who said they had read one or two before crafting their own resignation letter, data revealed that reading other letters (1) helped convince them that their voices were worth sharing and (2) provided a way for thinking about distribution, in terms of how to share via Facebook, Twitter, or on blogs. Even those who knew that earlier letters had gone viral did not share the same expectation for their own words. Thus, in the Discussion section below, when I explore the dialogic nature of socially mediated resignation letters, the dialogue that I describe is primarily between the initial letter writers and those who commented on or shared the letters, rather than those who may have used the letter as a model for their own.

## DATA COLLECTION

A graduate research assistant and I each independently conducted a comprehensive internet search to find as many resignation letters as possible. Data were collected between October 2014 and January 2015. I restricted letters to those published online since 2012, representing a 3-year time span. The initial sample included 27 letters, but I developed several exclusion rules that brought the final sample to 23 letters. Excluded were those letters that had no identifiable author or that were written on behalf of someone else, such as when a husband wrote about his wife's resignation. The final data set of 23 letters represents, as much as possible, diversity in: (1) years of teaching experience, (2) grade level, (3) content area, (4) geographic location, and (5) type of school (urban, suburban, rural). Table 1 below lists the documents analyzed in this study, organized by authors' names, as well as other relevant personal and professional characteristics, if disclosed in the letters. Unlike in other social science research with human subjects, pseudonyms are not used in this study because the analysis was conducted upon publicly available documents in which teachers self-disclosed their identity.

**Table 1. Data Sources**

Author	Date	Location	Content Area(s)**	Years Teaching**
Aimi G. (no last name)	March 15, 2014	NC	ELA/HS	16
Blake, Emily	July 28, 2013	NC	ELA	4
Breaux, Abby	March 10, 2013	LA		25
Conti, Gerald	April 6, 2013	Syracuse, NY	SS/HS	40
Edgerton, Adam Kirk	September 5, 2012	Boston, MA	English/HS	3
Harper, Stuart	January 25, 2014	UT	Physics/HS	
Hawkins, Pauline	April 7, 2014	Colorado Springs, CO	ELA/HS	11
Howard, Deborah	May 6, 2013	Brockport, NY	Elem	17
Lauer, Maria (later returned to teaching)	June 21, 2013	Douglas County, CO	Elem	15
Lowe, Trisha Joy	October 19, 2013	NC		nearly 20
Maggiano, Ron	May 26, 2013	Fairfax County, VA	SS/HS	33
Nielsen, Kris (later returned to teaching)	October 25, 2012	NC, OR, NM	Math/MS	5
Round, Stephen	December 18, 2012	Providence, RI	2nd grade	
Rubenstein, Ellie	May 24, 2013	Highland Park, IL	4th grade	15
Schwartz, Leslie Contreras	July 16, 2014	Houston, TX	Elem	1
Sluyter, Susan	Feb 12, 2014	Cambridge, MA	Kinder	25+
Taylor, Melissa	March 14, 2014	Raleigh, NC	Elem–5th grade	13
Waldron, Josh	June 2, 2014	Waynesboro, VA	HS	6
Weldon, James	June 6, 2013	NC	ELA & SS/MS	22
Wiener, Gary	July 7, 2014	NY	English/HS	33
Wilson, David Aram	August 9, 2014	NM	Elem	34
Xirau, David	December 2014	MA	Math/HS	7 1/2
Zentner, Eric	June 1, 2014	Milwaukee, WI	English/HS	18

\*\* If publicly available and disclosed

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed using open coding techniques in which I and a research team of four doctoral students examined the letters through multiple rounds of coding. First, the team read two letters as a group and established a method for coding. Then, each research assistant coded half the letters, with at least two research assistants coding every letter. I coded every letter in the sample, so that, by the end of the first stage of coding, each letter had been coded by three researchers. In this way, we established interrater reliability and worked iteratively to reform and enhance our understandings of the coding scheme. We moved from 18 codes in the initial round of coding to 10 codes in a second round of coding.<sup>3</sup> For example, in our initial round of coding, we used codes such as “beliefs about teaching not being met” and “moral/ethical quandaries.” Later, we collapsed these codes into “mismatch between beliefs and reality.” In a third and final round of coding, we compared our existing codes to previous literature on teacher attrition and neoliberalism, as well as theories of resistance and agency, to arrive at eight final codes, organized within two major themes. Using a similar two-round process, I also coded the public comments on each viral letter, examining how readers of the letter or viewers of the video letters responded on social media. In the sections below, I include representative public comments. Throughout the process, I kept a researcher’s journal, memoing after each research meeting and each round of coding in order to track the process and engage with emerging themes and ideas as they were uncovered. The findings below represent how I have integrated the emerging themes with existing literature and theories to explain teachers’ reasons for leaving and how their reasons are connected to contemporary educational policies.

## LIMITATIONS

This study is limited in its generalizability because the participants’ letters were those posted publicly. It is possible that their situations may be “worse” than those of other teachers who stay or leave, or they may possess unique characteristics or demographics that would make them resign in this public way. However, the alignment between the findings in this study of such letters and other existing research on teacher attrition and the impact of neoliberal policies on learning conditions suggests that these letters offer characteristic glimpses into teachers’ professional lives in public schools today. The study is also limited in the use of solely written narratives; future work is ongoing so as to supplement this study’s findings with data from interviews of the letters’ authors. Finally, these letters represent only a subset of the current public writing that teachers are doing about the conditions of their work.

## RESEARCHER'S PERSPECTIVE

Much like other academics who write about teacher attrition and retention, I come to this work as a teacher leaver myself. For several years, my research has focused on the relationship between teacher morale, neoliberal policies, and teacher attrition (e.g. Dunn, 2013, 2015; Dunn & Downey, 2017; Dunn, VanDerHeide, & Deroo, 2017). This body of work—and the current article—represents both a personal and professional area of inquiry for me, as I seek to contribute to the existing literature on teacher attrition while also trying to understand what it is that makes so many of my colleagues and even former students leave the profession, particularly in urban areas. My research assistants, as doctoral students in teacher education, have also left their PK–12 classrooms in the U.S. and abroad, although none of us wrote public resignation letters upon departing.

Discussions about our own positionality in relation to this work occupied much of our time in research team meetings, as we worked to exercise self-reflexivity in considering how our own experiences and potential biases may have informed our reading of others' letters. Further, as a teacher educator, I struggle with what it means to prepare a new generation of teachers to work in an environment that is constantly pushing them down and burning them out.

## FINDINGS: NEOLIBERALISM AT WORK

The findings from this study indicate many reasons for teachers' resignations, as outlined in their public letters. Some teachers' letters presciently foretold the themes that other educators' statements confirmed, as in Weldon's (2013) description of "the usual suspects" that constrained teachers:

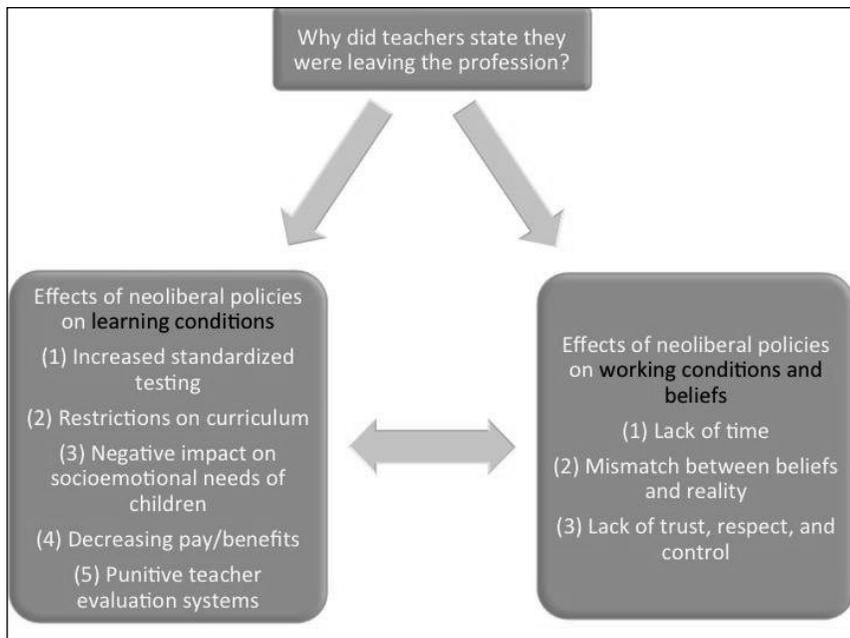
inadequate pay, burdensome mandates that rob teachers of precious time, obsession with high-stakes testing that reduces children to numbers, creation and tracking of ever more data in the name of accountability and contemptuous disregard of classroom teachers by both the public and school administrations.

The majority of Weldon's reasons and the others that I uncovered through thematic coding are linked to *contextual* factors rather than *individual* ones, pointing to the limits of retention in a climate that does not support teachers' agency. Further, the majority of reasons for leaving are explicitly or implicitly tied to current neoliberal educational policies.

According to their letters, teachers left the profession because (1) neoliberal reforms and policies threatened *learning* conditions and (2) these

reforms had negative consequences for teachers' *working* conditions and beliefs. Specific neoliberal reforms and policies that were mentioned in the letters include increased standardized testing and restrictions on curriculum, which teachers argued reflected a lack of care for students' socioemotional needs; decreasing pay/benefits; and punitive teacher evaluation systems. In addition, the consequences of these reforms meant that teachers felt a lack of time, a mismatch between their beliefs and the reality of teaching in today's educational climate, a lack of trust and respect for their profession, and a lack of control over their working conditions. Figure 1 illustrates these findings, and in the subsections below, I highlight illustrative excerpts from teachers' letters that point to these themes. I have also included representative comments made on social media, such as comments directly posted on each letter or video, as a way to illustrate the resonance of these statements to other educators and the possibilities of public letters as a form of public dialogue.

**Figure 1. Findings and themes**



## THREATS TO LEARNING CONDITIONS

Across all resignation letters, there was one neoliberal policy that rang the loudest: standardized testing and increased assessments. Appearing in 100% of the statements and described as “irresponsible” (Howard, 2013), this “obsessive emphasis on standardized test scores” (Maggiano, 2013) was seen as “a dangerous path away from free, productive, creative public education” (Howard). A loss of creativity in the classroom was mentioned in several other letters, like Maggiano’s, where he argued that a “testing regime [was] suffocating creativity and innovation in the classroom.” In his video resignation letter, Round (2012) said, “Rather than creating lifelong learners, our new goal is to create good *test takers*. Rather than being the recipients of a rewarding and enjoyable educational experience, our students are now relegated to experiencing a confining and demeaning education.” Teachers were concerned that this over-reliance on testing and accountability meant that schools were becoming “increasingly evaluation and not knowledge driven” (Conti, 2013), pursuing a “teach-to-the-test mentality for our teachers and stress and anxiety for our students” (Hawkins, 2014). As Howard summarized, “instruction is turning into test prep and authentic learning is taking a back seat because of it.” In his lengthy letter about the learning conditions in North Carolina, Nielsen (2012) included administering standardized assessments among a list of things he “refused” to do that, while part of his job, were tearing him and his students apart: “I refuse to subject students to every ridiculous standardized test that the state and/or district thinks is important. I refuse to have my higher-level and deep thinking lessons disrupted by meaningless assessments.”

Closely connected to the issue of standardized testing was the challenge of new and increasing restrictions on curriculum, including the adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which also threatened authentic learning. On the CCSS, Harper (2014) stated decisively that “the way it has been implemented, and the reforms which have accompanied it are wrong. They are unsound, of poor quality, take power from local government, and further empower federal agencies and policy makers.” Many public commenters on these letters specifically mentioned CCSS as a problem, linking it with a devaluation of critical thinking and instruction. As one public commenter wrote on Round’s public resignation video: “wow. my hat goes off to you Mr. Round. I applaud your bravery. you Sir, have done a very honorable thing. we really need to STOP common core. we are not machines we are HUMANS!!!” Writing about new standards and curricula in Louisiana, Breaux (2013) describes what she interprets as district mandates to “reinvent the wheel”

via new curricula: “You make us pilot all of these new programs year after year that have been tried already (just under another name), not worked-and tried again... You have made us information pushers, test givers, and paper passer outers. LET US TEACH!!!”

Similarly, Howard (2013) was concerned that “the increase in ‘rigor’ ... meant to get our students better prepared for ‘college or career’ has, rather, placed students and teachers in a very stressful setting” where “expectations are exceedingly high.” About the curriculum mandated in her school, Rubenstein (2013) argued: “Authentic literature has been replaced by dry, uninteresting reading texts, and teachers are being forced to do away with constructive projects” in order to fit in all those mandated instructional minutes and assessments. Rubenstein, like other authors of teacher resignation letters, feared that this growing emphasis on mandated curriculum “has shifted from fostering academic and personal growth in both students and teachers to demanding uniformity and conformity.” Many commenters on Rubenstein’s video mentioned that their own districts were facing similar challenges. As one wrote: “Well said. It’s almost like you have just dwelled in my brain and written a script based on what I’m thinking! But you actually feel like this and that to me has made me feel a little better. Unfortunately I have nothing else to fall back on. I will make sure my students will get what they need. A human teacher, not an android teacher!”

Round (2012) expressed similar sentiments as he lamented the disparity between his “determination to be creative and open-minded enough to try new approaches to teaching” and “the powers that be say that if it isn’t in the accepted curriculum and done at the appropriate time, it can’t be used.” Taylor (2014) contrasted such mandates with other classroom realities, lamenting “the feeling of absolute disrespect that I feel every time a new ‘expectation’ is mandated for our classrooms while all of our resources are being taken away.” One particular letter that speaks vividly to the challenges of working with a mandated curriculum, especially one that is vastly different from what teachers believe to be the best instruction for their students, is Schwartz’s (2014), addressed to an administrator she refers to as “Dr. Principal.”

While the classroom two doors down read a story about a mischievous frog to learn about main idea and summarization (something I refused to do and was reprimanded after I debated the issue with my team), I invited my students of refugees, English language learners and barely literate students to the carpet so I could read Kafka, Sherman Alexie, the biography of a world-record female swimmer. (“Swimming to Antarctica”)

A corollary of the increased focus on standardized testing and restricted curriculum meant that teachers felt students' socioemotional needs were not being met. Teachers' letters contrasted what they saw as practices that were successful, such as "a focus on the children, their individual learning styles, emotional needs, and their individual families, interests and strengths" (Sluyter, 2014), and those that threatened the learning environment and students' best interests. Rubenstein (2013) argued administrators' claims to "do what's best" for students was "pretense and disingenuous" when the results of their policies meant "no recess or breaks for students during the day, less classroom support for students with special needs, more tracking of students, less understanding of student differences, more emphasis on data, no room for innovative teaching or engaged learning, no opportunities for teachers to establish that which is critical to a student's success—the teacher-student connection." Hawkins (2014) describes the way her students responded to the pressures by "giving up their lives already," using powerful descriptors such as "decline in student morale," "wounded students," "self-harm and bullying, "lost and in pain." Describing even younger children, Howard (2013) finds similar struggles: "I have seen young children filled with anxiety, not enthusiasm... It seems as if our youngest students, who were once eager to come to school, have been showing signs of depression, anxiety, fear, and humiliation."

Hawkins (2014) garnered over 500 individual comments, the vast majority of which were from other educators or parents who attested to the "truth" of her narrative, the "bravery" of her statement, and the "power" of her actions. Because she hosted the letter on her own blog, Hawkins responded to many of the comments, including negative comments and critiques. One comment and response is illustrative, pointing to Hawkins' commitment to supporting other educators even as she is leaving, as well as how deeply her experiences resonated with other teachers around the country:

*Deb:* Thank you for sharing your experience—I am retiring from teaching after 36 years—the testing and pressures on 3rd grade students in Oklahoma have taken the fun out of teaching. It is time to move on. I don't feel like I gave one minute to build confidence in students.

*Pauline:* Thank you, Deb, for sharing your experiences in the classroom! Your dedication to your students and your community is honorable!

A third reform the teachers mentioned in their resignation letters were changes to their pay and benefit structures, cuts that some scholars have connected to global neoliberalization of education (Hill, 2005). What Waldron (2014) calls the “basic storyline” of budget, salary, and benefits cuts was repeated in other resignation letters. Hawkins (2014), Nielsen (2012), and Taylor (2014) wrote about the personal impact of salary cuts on their abilities to provide for their families, while Zentner (2014) and Waldron expressed frustration with the widening gap between expectations and compensation. As Hawkins explained, “As a newly single mom, I cannot live in this community on the salary I make as a teacher... It has become financially impossible for me to teach in this state.” Taylor, writing from North Carolina, concurred: “I had no choice but to search for a job that will allow me to provide for my family and to pay back the thousands of dollars in college loans that I took to be a teacher.” Similarly, Blake (2013) recalled her plans to save \$500 per month, but quickly realized “how little [she] actually made” when “after the first month of teaching, I had less than \$20 in my bank account, and needless to say, nothing in my savings account ... after purchasing supplies for my classroom, paying my student loan bills, and paying rent.” Weldon (2013) spoke specifically about an ongoing pay freeze, citing the problematic result that “a teacher hired this year earns more than a nine-year veteran, who happens to be our teacher of the year.”

Aimi G. (2014; last name not included in letter) devoted most of her letter to writing about the difficult conditions in which she and her family were placed when “North Carolina decided that I was not worth paying a living wage.” Because of the unique nature of her letter, a lengthy excerpt is useful here:

I cannot count the number of times we [teachers] have lamented the 20th of the month because we get paid on the 25th and no one has gas money. We borrow from our elementary aged children’s birthday stash to fill our gas tanks. We joke that pasta and butter are the staple in the house, but there is a cruel seriousness to it. We cancel doctor appointments because we can’t afford the co-pays... Please understand that I am not leaving for selfish reasons. I do not want to be rich, have a bigger house, or a nicer car. I just want to pay my bills and buy groceries.... You are bleeding educators and it is getting worse.

One teacher’s letter directly connected concerns with salary to another issue that many teachers discussed: problems with newly implemented teacher evaluation systems. Lauer (2013) wrote that her “salary is tied to an evaluation rubric that speaks to so little of what my actual job is.” Based

on the descriptions across teachers' letters, it is clear that the models employed by their districts were at least partially based on student test scores and brief principal observations, as is common with the value-added measures (VAMs) required in states that receive Race to the Top (RTTT) funding. Similar to the empirical problems expressed by opponents of using VAMs to evaluate teachers (e.g., American Statistical Association, 2014), individual teachers wrote compellingly about their concerns. Rubenstein (2013) connected the system to a general undervaluing for the profession: "The disrespect for teachers is painfully evident in the new teacher evaluation system. It's designed to allow administrators to fire at will. An excellent, tenured teacher can be dismissed if she receives just one needs improvement on an evaluation." Such concerns were shared by Hawkins (2014), who wrote: "Instead of weeding out the 'bad' teachers, this evaluation system will continue to frustrate the teachers who are doing everything they can to ensure their students are graduating with the skills necessary to become civic minded individuals."

In sum, the findings above illustrate how teachers conceptualize what neoliberal reforms are doing to students' learning conditions. Consequently, their frustration with the changes in learning conditions causes them to leave the profession. As Weldon (2013) writes, some of these reasons may be "the usual suspects," these research findings offer a nuanced understanding of those "usual suspects" in teachers' own words. Demonstrating the importance of the socially mediated space, the letters' public nature also allowed the writers' former students to engage in the dialogue. On many letters and videos, one can find statements from students who once sat in the teachers' classrooms and who attested to the teachers' interpretations of what happened and also to the power of their pedagogy amidst such conditions. One illustrative example is this response to Nielsen's (2012) letter reprinted in the *Washington Post*, which also included the students' email addresses:

Mr. Nielsen, it's Caroline and Maria from your 7th grade class at Community House. We were talking about how we missed you, and we were trying to find out where you taught so we could come visit you. Then, we came across this. We were both moved to tears when we read this, we couldn't agree more. You've always been an inspiration to us. We hope to hear from you soon.

## EFFECTS OF POLICIES ON TEACHERS' WORKING CONDITIONS AND BELIEFS

The results of this study also illustrate that teachers report leaving the profession because of how policies and practices impact their working conditions and beliefs about themselves and about education. In this section, I explore how their departures are informed by (1) a lack of time, (2) a mismatch between their philosophies and the reality of teaching in today's educational climate, (3) an increasing concern about the effects of reform on their students, and (4) a lack of trust and respect for their professionalism.

First, authors of public resignation letters described how educational policies—like those outlined in detail above—changed the amount of time they had for planning and implementing meaningful curricula, developing positive relationships with students, collaborating with colleagues, and spending time with family outside of school. Regarding the lack of time in the classroom, for example, Conti (2013) outlined the impact of “a constant need to ‘prove up’ [teachers’] worth to the tyranny” of annual performance reviews: “there is little time for us to carefully critique student work, engage in informal intellectual discussions with our students and colleagues, or conduct research and seek personal improvement through independent study.” Time spent on related activities that kept teachers away from their families was also a powerful factor that teachers said pushed them out. Breaux (2013) summarized some of these factors, including classroom hours plus volunteering as coaches, chaperones, and club sponsors, noting that “sometimes our students are getting more time than our families.” Finally, Zentner (2014) spoke powerfully about the tension of caring for one's own children while teaching other people's children: “the truth is that I have a family of my own, and I already bring home enough work that I often feel like I am neglecting them.”

Teachers also reported leaving the profession because of a mismatch between their philosophies and the reality of teaching in today's educational climate. Due in large part to neoliberal policies that constrained curriculum, testing, and teacher voice, the letters' authors expressed moral and ethical quandaries with remaining in a profession that no longer aligned with their values and ideals. Fourteen of the 23 letters spoke in some way about this dilemma. For example:

I began to feel a deep sense of loss of integrity. I felt my spirit, my passion as a teacher, slip away.... I began to feel I was part of a broken system that was causing damage to those very children I was there to serve. (Sluyter, 2014)

Ethically, I can no longer work in an educational system that is spiraling downwards while it purports to improve the education of our children... I can no longer be a part of a system that continues to do the exact opposite of what I am supposed to do as a teacher. (Hawkins, 2014)

Over this time, I've lost my optimism and question a mission I once felt wholly committed to. (Waldron, 2014)

I refuse to be a part of the problem. (Harper, 2014)

I am no longer willing to operate under the old rules while the weight of our educational bureaucracy crushes our country. (Edgerton, 2012)

I can either devote my time to teaching or I can help the district produce its precious data. But I can't do both. I am morally and ethically incapable of doing each task at only 50 percent. (Xirau, 2014)

My career is no longer in sync with my values. (Howard, 2013)

I am an honest person. I cannot, in good conscience, go along with this... I have come to the difficult conclusion that for ethical reasons I am no longer able to continue my employment. (Zentner, 2014)

I don't think I'm leaving the education system. I think the education system left me. (Maggiano, 2013)

The excerpts above demonstrate teachers' feelings that they are complicit in a system they see as broken. In public comments posted online, many of those who identified themselves as teachers shared similar sentiments about their frustration with "being part of the problem." As one wrote on Facebook, "I don't feel comfortable writing a letter like this because I'm still in the classroom. But I am so glad you did. I don't know how to tell myself that I'm still doing good when I'm part of the problem." Echoing Santoro's (2011) descriptions of "principled leavers," these educators construct themselves as needing to leave a profession whose changes have made it almost unrecognizable when compared to their visions and ideals for teaching and learning.

Finally, teachers noted the increasing lack of control they have over professional decision-making and the associated lack of respect and trust in their skills and abilities. Breaux (2013) recognizes the disconnect between those creating policies and those charged with implementing them: "No one ever really asks us what the real problems are, nor do they ask US

how to solve them.” Similar to how Rubenstein (2013) argues that “the classroom teacher is no longer trusted or in control of what, when, or how she teaches,” Blake (2013) points to a specific example of how teachers are not trusted: “On the [teacher] evaluation, there are absurd standards that require me to care about my students and teach my curriculum. I would not have gone into the profession if I did not have students’ best interest in mind.” Zentner (2014) mentions a lack of trust multiple times in his letter, arguing that teachers must acquiesce to “district policy [that] consistently treats us with distrust, like we must be closely monitored and constantly held to account.”

A lack of voice is particularly troubling to Hawkins (2014), who feels “defeated and helpless” and laments that “the irony is I cannot fight for [students’] rights while I am working in the system.” Many of the letter writers expressed deep frustration that their voices and their students’ voices were not heard in the policymaking process. Instead, they felt as if they had little control over their working conditions and as if they were trapped in a system that rendered them without agency. As Edgerton (2012) poetically writes,

I quit teaching because I was tired of feeling powerless. Tired of watching would-be professionals treated as children, infantilized into silence. Tired of the machine that turns art into artifice for the sake of test scores. Tired of being belittled, disrespected and looked down upon by lawyers, politicians, and decision-makers who see teaching as the province of provincials, the work of housewives that can be done by anyone.

Interestingly then, as Hawkins and Edgerton point to, teacher resigners sought out an opportunity to use their voices in a way that their current positions did not allow or, as Rubenstein (2013) said about her resignation, “I won’t go into their cage.”

## DISCUSSION

The findings above reveal participating teachers’ multitudinous reasons for leaving the profession, as disclosed in their public resignation statements. Their reasons were primarily related to changing learning conditions and changing working conditions, nearly all of which they tied to various neoliberal educational policies. Thus, these letters provide insight into why some teachers are leaving the profession, beyond what we already know about those who leave for personal reasons like retirement and family. Further, they add complexity to large-scale databases that also demonstrate that teachers leave for reasons linked to working conditions

yet do not drill down to the micropolitics that are enacted and deeply felt at the classroom level. Additionally, though these letters cannot be generalized to the overall teaching population, they offer the public a glimpse into how some teachers are attempting to make sense of and respond to policies like standardized testing and teacher evaluation systems that lead into professional deskilling and a lack of respect. They illuminate and add nuance to what might be viewed as more “objective” and larger scale studies of working conditions.

In the end, the public nature of such letters offers heartbreaking insight into the very personal reasons these teachers had as they decided to leave a profession that is a practice of human improvement (Cohen, 1989). The vulnerability of such a profession is revealed in these letters as teachers struggle to decide not only what is best for students, but what is best for themselves as humans. As Rubenstein (2013) writes, “Everything I loved about teaching is extinct... I have to get out before my sense of self and self-worth are completely obliterated.” Aligned with the work of Schaefer, Downey, and Clandinin (2014), the letters can be viewed as “stories to leave by” (p. 9). The teachers, then, are also storytellers.<sup>4</sup>

A critique of this study, and other studies that focus on teachers who leave, may be that working conditions are better understood through studies of teachers who stay, including those who may have been working in the same contexts as those who wrote public resignation letters. I concur that it is vital to understand why teachers stay, and there are important texts illuminating what sustains teachers in trying times (see, for example, Nieto’s *Why We Teach Now*). We also know that teachers who stay, for a multitude of reasons, are constrained in what they can say, how they can say it, and when they can say it. Thus, this research offers a different lens from which to analyze today’s classrooms. Such perspectives are from teachers who, in their own words, finally feel free to “tell it like it is.” This is not to say that other teachers who engage in public writing about their professions are not telling the truth, but rather to consider the new information that these teachers provide us: the view from the liminal space of insider-outsider. They exist on the *limen*, the boundary or threshold of a transitional time/space (Turner, 1969) between being a classroom teacher and being a former teacher. The letter writers are not exactly present, but they are not exactly gone yet either. The teachers who occupy this “liquid” space can be seen as “simultaneously transforming and being transformed by [the context] as he or she moves through it” (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 380). For us, the readers, in an anthropological sense, they are making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar.

The above findings advance, complicate, and enhance understandings of neoliberalism, teacher attrition, teacher agency, and teacher resistance.

First, commonalities across teachers' resignation letters show the insidious nature of neoliberal policies, demonstrating that they have become supposedly common sense (Kumashiro, 2009) across contexts without regard for what they do to teachers and students. The letters illustrate that neoliberal policies and their effects on teaching and learning extend within and across states, as well as across different types of school systems, including urban, suburban, and rural. Findings also illustrate, as my previous research does, that teachers' lives and working conditions are affected by policies at all levels, from school and district-level policies to state- and national-level factors. The variety and scope of these letters appear to point to a startling and troubling conclusion: it is no longer possible for some educators to escape the influence of neoliberal policies. While teachers previously were able to "just close your classroom door and do what needs to be done," as many shared they used to do, such strategic avoidance of neoliberal reforms appears to no longer be realistically possible.

The letters also complicate the "teacher blame game" and the master narrative of the "bad" teacher (Kumashiro, 2011), whereby teachers are frequently blamed for society's and schools' failures, a common neoliberal trope used to advance accountability measures to evaluate teachers. Teachers' letters, rather than painting educators as disinterested and lazy, illustrate their intense emotion. They are filled with emotion, with regret, and with an overarching personal and professional commitment to the best needs of the children. They are evidence of working hard in difficult conditions. Some might argue that these teachers are just whining, that they can't "cut it." However, though I cannot say that every teacher who wrote a letter is a good teacher, I also cannot say that they are conclusively bad teachers either. Based on what they wrote, there is compelling evidence that, for the majority the teachers, their ideologies and stated commitments to students align with what research says are effective dispositions and beliefs for teachers.

Secondly, findings add to the knowledge base on teacher attrition. These letters provide clear and explicit evidence that neoliberal policies lead to teacher attrition; there is no denying this connection any more. Also of import is that the letters demonstrate that attrition due to the effects of neoliberal policies affects both novice and veteran teachers alike, as we see, for example, first-year teacher Schwartz's (2014) sentiments echoing those of 40-year-veterans like Conti (2013). Extending the work of Santoro (2011), public resignation letters highlight both (a) the gap between many educators' ideologies and the realities of teaching today, realities that are the result of, and perpetuated by, neoliberal reforms; and (b) what happens as this gap grows and widens to the point where teachers' beliefs no longer align with what they are being asked to do. (And what happens, as discussed above,

is that teachers leave the classroom.) Finally, this study shows one way that teacher attrition has moved into the public eye. Rather than just being a private act, resignations have now become a public statement.

Simultaneously, this research reveals new findings about teacher agency in an era of neoliberal reform. I argue that public resignations are a new form of social and political action; that is, they are teachers' agency in action. In some ways, it appears that delving into this new genre is what teachers feel is their only agentic act left to take, when contexts inhibit agency in other ways. They are seeking to regain their agency not only by leaving but by publishing these public statements. Just as it is possible to view these letters through a lens of agency, it is also possible to see them as an act of resistance. As illustrated in the quotations above, teachers' commentary acts as a defiance of neoliberalism and of a lack of agency resulting from stifling reforms that constrain learning and working conditions. Giroux's theory of everyday resistance is instructive here, as these letters appear to combine everyday resistance with more overt resistance. Ultimately, the pedagogical nature of the letters is also vital to understanding resistance. Even if not intended as such, the letters are pedagogical in nature. They, like the teachers who wrote them, offer new understandings of humanity and society. In this way, a final act of resistance is also an act of teaching.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The findings from this study have broad-reaching implications for research, policy, practice, and teacher education. Based on the above findings and discussion, one might imagine that the implications might all be negative, or view the situation as hopeless for the future. Yet amidst the causes for concern that this study raises, I hope these implications also illuminate the promises and possibility of truly equitable public education.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

While it is of value to analyze teachers' written narratives, this study can also be extended and enhanced by follow-up research with the authors. In a forthcoming study, for example, I investigate what has happened since they wrote the letters: How did the public respond? How did other educators respond? How, if at all, are they still advocating or teaching? Future research might also consider how other types of discourse and social media use are acts of teachers' agency and resistance, such as open letters, petitions, or other social media postings. In what ways do teachers, both those leaving and remaining in the profession, seek to reclaim their agency in public spheres and through the use of community-based technology?

Importantly, what is the difference between teachers who leave as an act of resistance and teachers who stay as an act of resistance, such as the educators who support each other through social media venues like the online Twitter community of #educolor or Badass Teachers Association?

An important consideration, beyond the scope of this study but having implications for future research, is the racial and ethnic composition of public resigners. What does it say about voice and privilege that most of the authors are White? Is this a reflection of the teaching profession, or does this say something about who has the power and privilege to speak out, even as they are leaving? Thus, a helpful contribution might be additional research using critical frameworks, such as critical race theory, to analyze the letters or other forms of public teacher resistance.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Building on previous research about the threats of neoliberal reforms to equitable teaching and learning, findings from this research provide additional evidence that neoliberal policies do more harm than good. As teachers' testimonies and departures reveal, policymakers must support a systemic move away from efforts to marketize, capitalize, incentivize, and privatize public education in order to do what is best for children, not for the bottom line. In the absence of such moves, teachers' working conditions, and thus students' learning conditions, are likely to remain in jeopardy.

This study also has broad implications for teaching practice. It is vital to ensure teachers feel supported while in the classroom. Studies, like this one, that provide insight into why teachers are leaving hold the promise of improving those factors proactively. That is, if we know why teachers are leaving, how can we change those conditions before they feel like they have to and want to depart? Addressing these factors will not only improve teacher agency, but teacher retention as well. Another important question to consider is what are the implications—of this particular exercise of teacher agency and resistance that has become a public movement—for teachers who stay? For example, how do teachers who stay feel when they read statements like D. A. Wilson's (2014): "I can no longer continue to 'just do my job' knowing that my job perpetrates crimes against children—and teachers, too, for the exploitation of teachers leads to the exploitation of children." Are the authors implying that they are more or less courageous, or politically committed, or moral/ethical, than those who stay and, whether this is their intention or not, what are the consequences for how teachers who stay make sense of their identities and professional commitments?

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

Finally, this research offers implications for teacher education. Given the public nature of these resignation letters, what does it mean to prepare preservice teachers when they could potentially be seeing/reading these letters at the same time? Further, how do we recruit new teachers into this climate? These are questions that teacher educators must approach with care and reflection, as we balance offering students hope with preparing them for the very real struggles facing public educators today.

One way that this implication can be directly addressed is by speaking with preservice teachers about what they know about the current state of teacher working conditions and how they know it. How do they make sense of the potential disconnects between their visions of teaching and statements in public resignation letters or by other public figures who discourage them from entering the profession? In what ways do they need and want support from current teachers, administrators, and their professors to negotiate the landscape of public education today?

Overall, if teachers' voices are heard and listened to in the policymaking and implementation process, this research and subsequent scholarship, policies, and improvements to professional development and teacher preparation hold promise for turning the tide of high teacher attrition. As an emerging form of public discourse and public resistance, teachers' resignation letters offer departing educators a way to exert their long-stifled agency in a profession to which they have devoted much time, energy, and passion. The letters themselves also offer the public insight into teachers' minds and experiences in unique way, as we are all the recipients of these teachers' final lessons.

## NOTES

1. While this manuscript was under review, another study of resignation letters was published. See Santoro (2016).

2. This important contrast was first made in Vinthagen and Johansson (2013).

3. One theme that emerged (the impact of leadership) was found to be beyond the scope of the study because I was unable to determine which level of leaders the teachers were discussing, be it school, district, state, or federal level. While some letters pointed to “administration” and “leadership” as a problem, others used the same terms to describe allies in the struggle or those who were similarly “rail-roaded” by educational reforms. Thus, given the information contained in the letters, it was impossible to accurately code and analyze themes related to leadership. Future research is planned to clarify the relationship between resigners’ reasons for leaving and leadership at all levels.

4. Though beyond the scope of this manuscript, an instructive body of research may be found in the literature on storytelling for social change and political action. See, for example: Bell, L. A. (2010). *Storytelling for social justice: Connecting narrative and the arts in antiracist teaching*. New York, NY: Routledge; and Zingaro, L. (2009). *Speaking out: Storytelling for social change*. Left Coast Press: Walnut Creek, CA.

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