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Activism through attrition?: An exploration of viral resignation letters and the teachers who wrote them

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teacher-resigners' goals were to raise public awareness, express solidarity, and stand up against harmful policies.
- Writing public letters validated teachers' ideas and served as a therapeutic exercise.
- Teacher resigners continued to identify as lifelong educators, writers, and activists.

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has emerged a new phenomenon in response to contemporary educational policies: public teacher resignation letters. Through the theoretical frames of participatory democracy and identity, and analyzed in light of literature on teacher attrition and activism, we investigate the following questions with 8 teacher resigners: (1) What are the rationales of and implications for teachers to resign in public ways? (2) How are teachers' public resignation letters a reflection of their personal and professional identities?

I just wanted [the administration] to know that this is not a disgruntled employee … This is somebody who loves teaching. I am passionate about this profession and I have to leave … And I wanted it to be a wakeup call for them. –Pauline Hawkins, former teacher

What will happen if teachers become sufficiently courageous and emancipated to insist that education means the creation of a discriminating mind, a mind that prefers not to dupe itself or to be the dupe of others? … It will then have come about that education and politics are one and the same thing. –John Dewey, 1922, p. 141

1. Introduction

When Ellie Rubenstein made a YouTube video of herself reading a resignation letter, she had no idea it would go "viral." She did it in two takes (because she was crying too much in the first one), titled it "In Pursuit of Happiness," and sent the link to several fellow teachers and family members. Her intent was to share her personal and professional story, including the challenges, and explain what was leading her to resign. She did not think about accruing thousands of "likes" and "shares" on social media, being invited onto local and national radio shows, and being interviewed for national news stories–or even for this research study. Yet, despite her intentions, in this age of social media, Ellie's story went far beyond her school and her town. She became part of a growing cadre of educators who resign in public ways, posting their resignation letters or resignation videos on blogs or through national news outlets like *The Huffington Post* and *The Washington Post*.

The purpose of this study is not to examine the reasons why teachers resigned (discussed in Dunn, in press) or the features of such letters (Dunn, Deroo, & VanDerHeide, 2017), but rather the rationales behind why teachers chose to resign in such *public* ways. Or rather, why did these teachers decide to let the world know why they were resigning? And what does that choice say about their

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personal and professional identities?

This research explores the stories of eight teacher resigners, interviewed between 2 and 4 years after they posted their initial resignations online. Interviews focused on their personal and professional journeys–both before and after their resignation letters went viral–as well as the specifics of writing and sharing the letters themselves. Through the theoretical frames of participatory democracy and identity, and analyzed in light of literature on teacher attrition and activism, we investigate the following research questions: (1) What are the rationales of and implications for teachers to resign in public ways? (2) How are teachers' public resignation letters a reflection of their personal and professional identities?

Such research is vital in helping us understand teachers at the point of departure, a point where teachers often are so tired or so burned out that they leave quietly and without much fanfare. Only by hearing directly from teachers about their experiences can researchers and policymakers ever truly understand what happens in classrooms today and how contextual factors may support or inhibit teachers' decisions to remain in the profession. We need such insights now more than ever, as teacher attrition rates continue to rise, as teacher shortages grow, and as enrollment in teacher preparation programs plummets. The inquiry undertaken here explores a this new genre and its creators in the hopes that their experiences can offer insight into the micropolitical contexts in which today's teachers find themselves and what they do when these contexts are in conflict with their identities.

1.1. Setting up the context: Teaching amidst neoliberalism

In order to understand much of the teachers' writing, it is important to first understand the context in which teaching and learning occurs in contemporary U.S. schools. This study highlights teachers' experiences in an era of neoliberalism, an economic ideology that favors privatization, competitiveness, and deregulation. Though beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore neoliberal theories and policies, a brief overview is helpful here. Neoliberal policies primarily have three aims:

> (1) The redistribution of wealth upward to the ruling elites through new structures of governance; (2) transformation of education systems so that the production of workers for the economy is the primary mandate; and (3) the breaking down of education as a public sector monopoly, opening it up to strategic investment by for profit firms. (Robertson, 2008, p. 12)

As such, education policymakers in this neoliberal era have implemented reforms aimed at improving education efficiency and reducing public expenditures by introducing competition in education, such as through high-stakes testing, accountability, and voucher programs (Hursh, 2004). Seemingly, two of the results of these reform policies are that control of education is taken away from teachers (Tatto, 2007) and teaching has been deprofessionalized. As suggested in an earlier work related to this study, the majority of reasons for teachers leaving the profession are explicitly or implicitly tied to current neoliberal educational policies, which they found constrictive and detrimental to student learning (Dunn, in press).

2. Theoretical framework

For the purposes of this study, we utilized two theoretical lenses to analyze the experiences of teachers who publicly resigned. First, the theory of participatory democracy offers insight into the ways that teachers used their voices, positions, and letters as political acts. Second, theories of identity help us to understand the ways that participants see themselves individually and how they develop into various "kinds of beings" in concert with others and with society.

2.1. Participatory democracy

Freire (1970) reminds us that education is a political act and, therefore, teaching is also a political act. Cochran-Smith (1991) similarly argues that "teaching is fundamentally a political activity in which every teacher plays a part by design or by default" (p. 280). The act of teaching–as well as the act of leaving it–is not a neutral enterprise, as the decisions to enter, remain in, or leave the profession are informed by a wide range of social, cultural, historical, and political contexts. For the purposes of this study, we focus primarily on the political context and utilize the theoretical framework of participatory democracy. This framework aligns with the view that teaching is inherently political, in the sense that decisions made for and by teachers have implications for both macro- and microlevel political outcomes.

Parker (1996) argues that democracy is best enacted when it makes use of citizens' voices. Such enactment of democracy is more pluralist in nature in that citizens see themselves as part of a collective. Coined in 1960, the idea of Participatory Democracy was first established in the "Port Huron Statement," a document created by university students demanding participation in university governance, while offering critiques of professors they viewed as anti-participatory (Cunningham, 2002). As explained by Levstik and Barton (2001), advocates of participatory democracy view/advance politics as "an engaged and active citizenry, dense and diverse networks of associational life, public discourse and action centered on the common good, and a conscious, sustained effort to expand the range of voices that make up the [public] debate" (p. 125). Under a participatory democracy model, citizens do not choose representatives to voice concerns, but rather actively participate in the decision making process (McCowan, 2006). The scholarship of participatory democracy centers on ideas of political dissent (Soder, 2001; Sunstein, 2003; Gordon, 2009). We see participatory democracy in action when citizens (in this case, teachers) are "active participants in the shaping of and response to public policy" (Stitzlein & Quinn, 2012, p. 191). According to McCowan (2006), "the current interest in [participatory democracy] has risen in response to the increasing marginalization of certain groups from power, and in opposition to neo-liberal conceptions of the citizen as consumer, positing participation as choice in the market rather than influence on decision-making" (p. 457). Citizens' voices are essential to this enactment of democracy and in response to neoliberal framings of citizenship. Thus, the teachers' letters serve as citizens' voices in response to the public policy of neoliberal reforms.

The two primary elements of participatory democracy are that citizens make their participation public and that they respond to issues in the public sphere, including educational policy. We draw our use of this framework for research on public resignation letters from the work of Stitzlein & Quinn (2012), who studied teacher dissent in online blogs. Specifically, they claim that, "participatory democracy is a fitting theoretical framework for research in online spaces because these spaces are inherently public … Insofar as blog and discussion board contributions are an active part of the public domain, they signify participation" (p. 191). We agree with using this framing and have adopted this theoretical framework in our analysis of another public, digital community and its citizen participants voicing their concerns and dissent with neoliberal reforms. In our study, teachers have made the conscious choice to respond publicly to the marginalization they have experienced,