

Chapter 7

Teaching as Literacy: The Discourses Required for Success in the Title I School

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ABSTRACT

*This chapter is a qualitative meta-analysis that discusses the growing trend of teacher attrition in Title I schools. Recent literature on teacher attrition was reviewed and analyzed in combination with literacy theories. This study describes teaching as a form of literacy that the teacher must learn and is based primarily on Gee's (1989) ideas of discourse acquisition, Freire's (1993) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and Delpit's (1995) *The Politics of Teaching a Literate Discourse*. The researchers explain, through the lens of literacy theories, how viewing teaching as a form of literacy can help us to understand the problem of attrition. Analyzing the problems faced by these teachers through these theories can provide individuals in the field of education with the means for understanding the challenges that often prevent well-meaning and talented teachers from becoming successful in the high-poverty setting. This study has the potential to bring to light the problem of teacher attrition in Title I schools throughout the nation and promote improvements in teacher education to better prepare upcoming teachers for the challenges that they will face in the Title I school.*

INTRODUCTION

Miss Smith heaved a labored sigh as she glanced around her vacant classroom one last time: the year was finally over. Just a few days before, this room had been filled with students, desks, chairs, and one computer. An overhead projector occupied the back corner of the room, which was lined with

chart paper. A pile of student whiteboards, which she had bought with her own money, had been a daily method of student engagement throughout the year. She had spent over \$1,000 of her salary on supplies just to keep the classroom running, although she herself was barely getting by.

Miss Smith would not be returning to this classroom for the following year. Just a year ago, she had been hired for her first teaching job in a high-poverty setting. Nothing that she had learned

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in her formal training had prepared her for the realities that lay ahead. As a first-year teacher, Miss Smith was overwhelmed by the duties she was required to fulfill. In addition to the responsibilities of the profession itself, she struggled with receiving parental support. When she was able to converse with parents, they were equally frustrated with their children and did not know where to turn. Toward the end of the school year, she discovered that she did not have the necessary skills for working in this school. Her first year had consisted of managing a classroom of difficult students, communicating with confused and sometimes belligerent parents, and trying to decipher the often confusing expectations of the administrators. While she enjoyed teaching, these issues made it difficult for her to focus on teaching and, ultimately caused her to transfer to a suburban magnet school for the following year. Like many other teachers in the high-poverty setting, Mrs. Smith found that there is a specific set of skills essential for teachers in the high-poverty setting that is often not shared in the university classroom, and this skill set is somewhat unreasonable to expect a new teacher to master within the first few years of classroom teaching without some intervention strategies.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Miss Smith is a representation of the 22% of teachers who leave the high-poverty setting (Ingersoll, 2001, p. 9). This chapter will investigate the teacher retention rates in high poverty schools and how they are related to the skills required of teachers in these schools. Perhaps the most well-known form of a high poverty school is the Title I school, which is defined by the US Department of Education (2011) as “Schools in which children from low-income families make up at least 40 percent of enrollment.” For the purposes of this investigation, the terms “Title I school” and “high poverty school” will be used interchangeably. It is worth

noting, however, that many schools are heavily populated with low-Socioeconomic Status (SES) students but are not considered Title I schools. Teachers in these schools face similar challenges.

The skills required of teachers in high poverty schools differ from those in more affluent schools. This chapter investigates the relationship between the skills that teachers are expected to learn and the impact of lack of these skills on high attrition rates in high poverty schools. These skills, collectively, make up a discourse that teachers are expected to acquire over a short period of time. According to Gee (1989), acquiring a discourse requires the functional use of an “identity kit,” which he defines as “the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (p. 526). The chapter will include an analysis of the Gee’s “identity kit” required for these teachers for the reader to comprehend the challenges that these teachers face in the beginnings of their careers.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between teacher attrition rates for high poverty schools and the challenges involved in learning the skills required to become successful. For the purposes of this chapter, these skills will be referred to as the *discourses of teaching*. The discourses of teaching do not come automatically when a teacher steps into the classroom for the first time; the skills, attitudes and knowledge are acquired over time and practice with both informal and formal training.

Ingersoll (2001) argues that, in comparison to other schools, teacher turnover is most severe in high-poverty schools in the urban setting at 22% (p. 9). Keigher and Cross (2009) found that the overall attrition rate for public school teachers in the 2008-2009 year was 15.6% (p. 7). Donaldson and Johnson (2011) argue that it is necessary to investigate this trend due to its long-term impact

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