# Once a Teacher, Always a Teacher

One of my greatest fears is to be misperceived by the people that I respect the most. Through the Knowles Teacher Initiative and my school, I've become a member of two strong teacher communities. Both communities have been built through our connections as educators with passion for our profession and love for our students. I am proud to be a member of these communities. I've spent the last five years exploring what it means to teach alongside some seriously incredible teachers. I most definitely do not have everything figured out, but I've grown to strongly identify as a teacher and even a teacher leader. These teacher communities feel like home, a space where my ideas are valued and my voice is powerful. However, now that I am about to pursue a PhD, my teacher identity and sense of belonging in the teacher world feels at

## odds with my decision take a different turn in my career.

There seems to be a divide between academics and classroom teachers, where some academics do not respect the work and expertise of teachers and some teachers see academics as too far removed from classrooms. I am struggling with this rift because I believe I am both a teacher and an academic.

I can remember when my undergraduate education was coming to a close and it was time for me to decide what to do with my life. I was about to become the first person in my family to graduate from college. I had fallen in love with mathematics and the way it made me feel to be successful at it. I knew that I needed to pursue a job that would allow me to help others feel this same feeling.

My dad always told me that before I choose a career I should seek out professionals in that job and learn from their perspectives. In an effort to follow his advice, I searched for professors focused on math education and ways to improve it for people underrepresented in the subject area. This is how I came across the work of Jo Boaler. A fire was ignited as I dreamt of one day pursuing a PhD in math education. I wanted to transform secondary math education so that students could feel that feeling that I had fallen in love with. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I knew it was important. The one thing I knew for sure was that I needed to be in the classroom.

## I wanted to transform secondary math education so that students could feel that feeling that I had fallen in love with.

I was offered a teaching position at a new high school in South Central Los Angeles. The school plan was designed by teachers and the philosophy was exactly what I was looking for: focusing on restorative practices and collaborative learning. The population of students was 85% Latino and 15% African American, and the school offered 100% free breakfast and lunch. Although there were unexpected challenges the school faced in its infancy, it felt right to be at a school that cared

so deeply about its students and their particular needs.

I met Isabel[1] in my second year of teaching. She was a ninth grader enrolled in mostly tenth grade classes, intent on graduating a year early so she could go to college and ultimately get a well-paying job to help support her family. She came to the United States with her mother when she was seven years old to escape violence in El Salvador. From the moment Isabel started school in the United States, she was determined to be at the top of her class.

Over the next four years, I had the pleasure of teaching her both pre-calculus and AP Calculus, and we developed a close relationship. She loved math in the way that I love math. She had a thirst for learning that was unprecedented by anyone I've ever known. As a sophomore, Isabel collaborated easily with a class filled with juniors, often taking the extra time to help explain complicated topics to her peers. In her junior year, she took AP Calculus and consistently set an example for her peers of what it meant to think critically, ask deep questions, and persevere through difficult problems. I was ecstatic when she told me that year that she had decided she was going to become a math teacher.

Outside of the classroom, Isabel pushed through every challenge that she and her mother faced, becoming increasingly resourceful and resilient. She acted as a mother rather than a big sister to her baby brother so that her mother could return to work. She took on a part-time job to help her mother make ends meet. Even while facing these challenges, Isabel maintained almost perfect grades at school. Although she did not graduate a year early, her hard work and perseverance earned her the salutatorian title at her graduation and a place at the University of California, Berkeley.

What felt like a success and happy outcome for a deserving student ended up

becoming yet another challenge. Unfortunately, since Isabel is undocumented, she was not offered enough financial aid to cover the cost of attending. Instead, Isabel will attend the local community college and work to save money so that she can transfer to the University of Southern California (her dream school) and major in mathematics. She is still determined to be a math teacher when she graduates from college. I have no doubt that she will continue to persevere through this challenge to become an amazing and inspiring teacher.

Watching Isabel grow as a young woman, with so much drive and passion for learning, will always stick with me. I find myself constantly in awe of her maturity and selflessness. However, I can't help but feel like our education system did not do enough for her. She did her part; in fact, she did far more than her part. But it feels like the system didn't hold up its end of the deal. How could this be fair?

In my fifth year of teaching, our school community lost three students to three separate acts of violence.

My student Sean was killed after school one day in the middle of the school year. School had just let out for the day; he was walking to the local donut shop with some friends when he was shot. A large number of students witnessed the shooting and the loss of Sean hit our community hard. He was only a sophomore and described by many as a sweet and kind person, a big teddy bear.

As I began to try to process this loss with other teachers that knew and loved Sean, it became apparent that several adults in his life felt some form of blame. He was a student with special needs and a documented Individualized Education Plan. We knew that there was some heightened tension amongst the local gangs, and Sean's family was involved with one of them. Throughout his time at our school, several adults had made efforts to support Sean in his learning and protect him from falling into the pressures of the gang. Each of us built relationships with him and his family; one mentor tried to get him involved in the football team. My co-teacher gave him individual attention every time he made it to math class to catch him up. We praised the work and thinking that he did in an attempt to prod him into loving school, or at least our math class, but it was not enough.

When Sean passed away, there was a feeling of “If only we had found a way to get Sean more involved in school, if only we had pushed him a little harder, if only we had done more to step in when he seemed to tune out…”

Isabel and Sean and students like them have shaped me as a person. They’ve changed the way I see the world because they’ve shown me realities of our education system beyond what I experienced as a high school student. My students have opened my eyes to a different world— a world filled with the realities of growing up in a place blessed with strong families and culture and challenged by poverty and violence.

These stories have shown me the urgency of education and access to it and have complicated my love for math. They’ve also shown how our education system is not set up to support all students. These stories impassion me to understand what needed to be different so that Isabel could get the support she rightfully earned. What needed to be different so that Sean’s story didn’t end like that? These complexities in providing high quality mathematics education and the reality of inequality compel me to change course. Equity means everyone gets what they need. My students did not get what they needed. It shouldn’t be like this.

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With this new, more nuanced understanding of education, I am currently preparing to leave the classroom to pursue a PhD in math education. I am pursuing a dream that started almost ten years ago. However, the lens with which I view this pursuit has changed greatly.

I used to think that becoming an academic would be a light and airy conquest. I thought I would be ready to embark on the journey with no question to whether or not it was the right choice. But now, when I think about this next step, I am overcome with a myriad of emotions. The most striking is that it does not feel as good as I thought it would. The decision to leave the classroom is much more

complicated and emotional than I could have known. My students hold a special place in my heart and I have grown to see myself as a teacher leader. My hope is that these things will carry me through this next journey and keep me focused on my goal to be an agent for educational improvement.

Talking about leaving my teaching position to attend graduate school has evoked a wide range of reactions from happiness to shock, from encouragement to disappointment. When our school lost another student, Christopher, this past school year, I came to check in with another teacher that knew him well. We were both in mourning over the loss of a charming student who had greatly impacted our teaching. In the midst of our conversation about Christopher, she paused and said, “Aren’t you glad you won’t be here next year?”

When I told one of my close friends at work that I had accepted my admissions offer, she excitedly responded, “You’re going on to do bigger and better things! Now’s the time to do that, when you’re young and don’t have other responsibilities yet, like kids.” I had a hard time understanding her response; calling graduate school “bigger and better” than teaching feels like a disrespect to teaching, and I don’t feel that way. In fact, teaching has been the most impactful thing in my life so far. Teachers are the people I respect the most. My hope is that my future work will be in service of teachers.

It seems as though my decision to leave the classroom is interpreted to mean that I have decided teaching isn’t for me, or that I must not want to be with my students any longer. I have feared that my decision to leave might be the equivalent of abandoning my students or my identity as a teacher. I fear that my work these past five years could not be enough, and maybe I failed at serving the students of south LA. I feel guilty for leaving my students now that I understand the urgency of education—how impactful a positive teacher-student relationship can be on a young person’s life, how the absence or failure of these relationships can be detrimental.

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# nation, who is? If I don’t leap to get a seat at that table, who will? If I don’t tell my story, which story gets told?

I recognize that privilege is a large contributor to my circumstance. I am white, middle class, and have had few obstacles to overcome in my academic and career ventures. However, as I move into academia, my voice will presumably gain a different kind of power than it has now. This is something about which I am not sure how to feel. In some ways I feel unworthy: why should my voice be heard more loudly than someone else’s? Then again, gaining the power that comes with earning a PhD could allow me to have a voice in the national conversation of education reform. If I am not the voice for my students and students across the nation, who is? If I don’t leap to get a seat at that table, who will? If I don’t tell my story, which story gets told?

It feels risky to be sharing this story in both the teacher world and the academic world, but it’s important to me that my intentions for leaving the classroom are clear and my respect for the teaching profession is apparent. My pursuit of a PhD is driven by my love for my students and my belief that all students deserve quality math education. My hope is that my story can start a conversation about who qualifies as a teacher and what forms teacher leadership may take. In my heart, I know I my identity as a teacher will always be the biggest part of me. I will always be interested in finding ways to support young people like Isabel, Sean, and Christopher. I will be a teacher even when my formal role is something else because: once a teacher, always a teacher.

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[1]All student names are pseudonyms.

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