

## Choosing to Teach in Urban Schools among Graduates of Elite Colleges<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract

According to the literature, there are three reasons that draw teachers into teaching: 1. gender related reasons; 2. altruistic reasons, and; 3. monetary rewards and job flexibility. Based on data from three teacher preparation programs, this paper argues that teachers who were prepared at elite colleges and choose teaching in urban schools rarely refer to the above reasons. Instead, these teachers tend to: 1. conceptualize teaching around issues of social justice and social change, arguing they joined teaching to improve society, and 2. seek leadership positions in urban education. Using Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital these arguments are theorized and hypotheses for further research are developed.

## Introduction

Teaching has long suffered a low professional status. Teachers earn low salaries, endure challenging working conditions, and in general have limited access to rigorous professional development. In the past, the teaching profession was able to build on the service of talented and devoted women who were socially bounded and discriminated against by academic institutions and the job market which considered them to be intellectually inferior to men. This gender inequality in the labor force has started to shift during the 1960s and 1970s in response to the struggle of the feminist and human rights movements which challenged society to accept women as equal to men. As a result, the capacity of the teaching profession to attract talented women has significantly diminished. During the 1980s, the exodus of talented women from the profession became a wide spread and well known phenomenon that triggered what came to be recognized during the 1990s as the “crisis of teacher quality.”

One of the solutions devised by policy makers and educators to address this problem of teacher quality was to actively recruit teachers from elite colleges. The assumption was that the hundreds of teachers colleges and state universities around the U.S., which attract primarily students with average to low academic abilities (as measured by their SAT or ACT scores), can not prepare the high quality teachers that schools and students need. In order to thrive, it was argued, teaching, like other professions, need the kind of talented students who attend elite schools and go through rigorous academic preparation.

This argument has taken many different forms in previous years. Starting in the 1950s, for example, the *Ford Foundation* donated grants to create graduate level teacher

preparation programs (M.A.T) in several elite colleges (Sykes, 1984). In the 1980s and 1990s, these ideas have partly fueled the creation of the alternate route movement, which started in New Jersey in 1983 (Tamir, 2008; Tamir, in press). Since then, alternate routes have mushroomed across the U.S. and are now operating in 47 states (Feistritzer, 2006). In the 1990s the same idea also led to the establishment of the national and highly desirable non-profit Teach For America (TFA), which this year (2009) attracted 35,000 applications for what is probably going to be less than 5500 teaching spots. Though this program and others are part of the alternate route movement they all vary significantly in their mission, length of preparation, quality of instruction, and curriculum (Stoddart & Floden, 1995; Humphrey & Wechsler, 2007). Some of these programs take pedagogy seriously and are committed to enhance the quality of the teaching profession by recruiting college graduates from elite schools. The students who attend some of these programs and their decision to become teachers will be the focus of this paper. This means that the preparation programs, where these teachers were socialized and which are likely to have had substantial impact on the way these teachers think about their role as teachers and on their practice of teaching, are going to take a back seat in this paper.

In the past few decades, the literature on teachers' decision to enter the profession tends to be overly general, describing teachers as one coherent group (e.g., Lortie, 1975; Lacey, 1977) of women that is drawn to teaching because of their: 1. gender; 2. altruistic nature; and, 3. desire to enjoy monetary rewards as well as a flexible work schedule and job security. This study, focusing on elite college graduates who enter teaching, challenges the above assertions, arguing that different groups are drawn to teaching because of other reasons. Indeed, when considering the vast career options that are

currently available to elite college graduates, choosing to teach may seem almost irrational if one applies the common perception of middle and upper class groups on teaching, as a low status, poorly paid semi-profession. For these individuals pursuing a teaching career would mean a significant loss of monetary rewards associated with their highly valued university degree, not to mention having to cope with the dismay of peers, parents, and society at large at the choice of such low status they made. So, why against all odds and contrary to what most would consider a rational decision-making process, do talented students from elite colleges still choose to become teachers?

Based on a pilot study and recent findings from two other case studies on the career path of similar teachers (Barraza & Quartz, 2005; Quartz, 2003; Smulyan, 2004), I argue that these teachers develop a social conception of teaching that focuses on teaching mainly as a means for promoting social justice and social change. In other words, these teachers seek to have direct impact on social inequality by helping young children become successful despite of all the harsh circumstances that are part of their daily reality in the inner city neighborhoods.<sup>2</sup> This conception of teaching and the role of teachers in it is not common, it rather reflects what both Smulyan (2004) and Barraza and Quartz (2005) call a redefinition of teaching. Included in this unique conception of teaching as a vehicle for social change, is also the idea of extending teaching outside of the classroom by becoming, for example, a principal or district administrator who will foster the same ideas from a higher level.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that developing a social conception of teaching is not a new phenomenon. During the 1960s, backed with a leftist ideology that was critical of racism, capitalism, and social inequality, many white middle class women who attended elite colleges also entered teaching in order to make society a more equal and just place. One important difference, however, is that while for these women choosing to teach was a more socially accepted decision to make, today's graduates are expected to choose a lucrative well paying profession, like their men counterparts.

Here again, I would like to reiterate that this paper is not going to elaborate on the effects that teacher preparation programs might have on teachers' conception of teaching and commitments. Indeed, teacher educators, like Cochran-Smith (2005) have argued in the past few years, that,

teacher education institutions, particularly those that prepare teachers for urban schools... are conceptualizing work for equity and social justice as an outcome of teacher preparation in and of itself. (p. 11)

I fully acknowledge this intended role that teacher preparation programs take hoping to affect the commitments of their graduates and thus devote a larger scope elsewhere to discuss it (Tamir, in press).

Finally, I will use Bourdieu's concepts of social field and capital to offer a theorization of why elite college graduates who chose to become teachers are likely to embrace social change and leadership as primary facets in their interpretation of the role of teaching. I also consider the long-term potential political implications, of having such established subgroup of elite college teachers taking part in the teaching field.

#### Choosing to Teach? Reviewing the Factors that Shape the Decision to Become Teachers

Over the past three decades, many works have tried to generate data to address the question – why teachers choose to teach? Most of this research tried to address this question assuming teachers to be a fairly homogenous group, disregarding, in particular from characteristics, like type of academic preparation that might create substantial differences among them. In some of these studies researchers used small qualitative samples, while others used large national surveys. Past research also vary in the methods that were applied for data analysis. Some researchers employed sophisticated quantitative procedures (Roberson et. al. 1983), while others used simple descriptive analyses

(Morales, 1994; Wood, 1978) or developed a complex narrative analysis of several case studies. Nevertheless, although research vary in terms of sample size, method, time in which it was conducted, and target population, several findings and themes seem fairly consistent across the literature.

Next, I will present, a partial list of three major factors that intends to summarize a more extensive list of reasons that were described by others as drawing teachers into the profession. I later illustrate how the common explanation related to each factor becomes irrelevant or needs reinterpretation when applied to explain why teachers from elite colleges choose to become teachers.

*Altruistic reasons*

In many studies teachers reported being drawn to the profession for *altruistic reasons*, that is, teachers sought to help children and watch them grow through teaching (Morales, 1994; Wood, 1978). This notion is also related to Hansen's (1995) notion of teaching as a vocation and to Lortie's (1975) notion of teaching as a service. Hansen (1995) emphasizes the aspects of public obligation and personal fulfillment that are attached to what he calls, having a sense of vocation. Vocation, he argues, "describes work that results in service to others and personal satisfaction in the rendering of that service" (p. 3). It involves an active devotion of oneself to the practice of teaching in a way that would "enact one's inner urge to contribute to the world" (p. 5). Lortie (1975) has a more structural, some would say simplistic, view on this issue. For him, service is one of five themes that draw teachers to teaching. He notes, "teachers have been perceived as performing a special mission in our society, and we can see the continuation of that conception among those engaged in the work today" (p. 28). Two decades later,

Cohn and Kottkamp (1993) who revisited Lortie's research found that teachers' intrinsic rewards<sup>3</sup> remained similar across the years. When asked to rank "which of the following is the most important source of satisfaction to you," teachers overwhelmingly (86.2% in Lortie's 1964 study, and 86.7% in Cohn and Kottkamp 's1984 study) replied: "the times I know I have "reached" a student or group of students, and they have learned" (p.61).

Quite similarly, recent data about teachers' satisfaction and retention support this notion, suggesting that new teachers stay in the profession if they feel they have a positive impact on students, what Johnson and Birkeland (2003) call, "a sense of success."

#### *Gender related reasons*

Researchers also agree that teaching has been historically shaped as the "*woman's 'true' profession*" (Hoffman, 2003), thus making women far more likely than men to hold a teaching position (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005; Roberson et. al. 1983). Except for the very early days of teaching in colonial times, teaching has been a predominantly feminine practice. Lagemann (2000) vividly describes how teaching became women's work and how teachers were subordinated to male administrators. Although teachers have struggled to increase their professional stature by organizing in unions, enhancing certification requirements, and gradually adding as a group, in average, more years of academic work (Angus, 2001; Hoffman, 2003; Sedlak & Shlosman, 1986), the positioning of teaching as feminine has affected and continues to affect the economic and cultural rewards of teaching, making it a poorly paying profession with very little social status to offer (Labaree, 2004; 2005). For example, recent data show that teachers are

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<sup>3</sup> Lortie argues that, "...psychic or intrinsic rewards... consist entirely of subjective valuations made in the course of work engagement; their subjectivity means that they can vary from person to person. But they are also constrained by the nature of the occupation and its tasks... (p. 101).



underpaid when compared to other B.A. holders, and that the gap between the groups is gradually increasing (e.g., Olson, 2000). All the while, today, the profession not only continues to be distinctly feminine, but it even becomes more so than ever before with a growing rate of 82 percent, compared to “74 percent in 1996, 71 percent in 1990 and 69 percent in 1986” (Feistritzer, 2005a). This means, that although women enjoy greater job opportunities than ever before, there are powerful social structures at play that still push primarily (but not only) economically disadvantaged women (Lanier & Little, 1983) with relatively low academic aptitude (Roberson et. al. 1983) to teaching.

*Monetary rewards and working conditions*

Many researchers discuss how monetary and status rewards (what Lortie calls *extrinsic rewards*)<sup>4</sup> shape teachers’ decision to enter teaching. According to Lortie (1975) and others (e.g., Lanier & Little, 1983; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005), teaching has been an avenue for upward social mobility and professional stability to many who have been first in their families to attend college, for immigrants, and others who come from modest social background. For these groups who take up a significant portion of the teaching force, teaching is an invaluable opportunity to join the ranks of the lower middle class. In addition, researchers argue, teaching also provides women and their families with flexible working arrangements that allow them to be paid and raise their own children (what Lortie calls *ancillary rewards*)<sup>5</sup>. 45.8% of the teachers in Lortie’s sample compared with 51.5%, two decades later, in Cohn and Kottkamp’s (1993, 59) reported that “the relative

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<sup>4</sup> “Extrinsic rewards... [include] what we usually think of as the “earning” attached to a role and involves money income, a level of prestige, and power over others...” (Lortie, 1975, 101).

<sup>5</sup> “Ancillary rewards are simultaneously objective and subjective; they refer to objective characteristics of the work which may be perceived as rewards by some...” (Lortie, 1975, 101).

security of income and position” and “the schedule (especially summer), which can permit travel, family activities, etc.” were things that they liked best in teaching.

Nevertheless, Lortie (1975), Morales (1994), and Cohn and Kottkamp’s (1993) all found that teachers mentioned monetary rewards to have a weak effect on their decision to become teachers. One way of explaining these contrasting findings is to argue that teachers sometimes tend to emphasize the service dimension and might feel inconvenient mentioning monetary aspects as having impact on their decision. Morales (1994) suggested that teacher might respond this way, because of two reasons: 1. they share the popular belief that teaching salaries are low; and, 2. they tend to feel that being devoted and ‘dedicated’ is not well aligned with thinking about monetary rewards.

Recent data from Johnson and Colleagues (2004) study on the new generation of teachers found that beginning teachers chose teaching knowing their salaries would not be as high as they would like them to be. Nevertheless, when asked, teachers raised concerns about their ability to sustain a family on such a low wage and on being dependent on their partner’s salary.

What can we make out of these findings? While there is a lot to be learned about the factors that draw teachers to teaching in general, the various analyses fail to provide a nuanced look of the various groups of teachers and their particular reasons for choosing to teach. This is exactly the point I am trying to confer in the following part, concerning the special reasons that lead elite college students to choose teaching.

*Reconsidering the factors as they apply to teachers from elite colleges*

Most literature on the three factors presented above treat teachers largely as a homogeneous group. Recent research (e.g., Feistritzer, 2005a; Johnson et al., 2004;

Zumwalt & Craig, 2005), however, indicate that some segments in the teaching force, like alternate routes, that now operate in most states and are responsible for a considerable portion of the new recruits in New Jersey, California, and Texas, have been reported to have significantly “more males, more minorities and more older people than the population of teachers who obtain certification via the traditional route” (Feistritzer, 2005b, p. vi). Teachers also vary considerably in terms of their college preparation, with some attending non-selective colleges and others attending elite colleges. I argue that having this diverse workforce calls for a more nuanced analysis of teacher sub groups and the various reasons that draw them into the profession. In other words, the assumptions that led Lortie and other researchers to develop a general scheme to analyze and explain teachers’ decision to choose teaching, should be revisited as it is too general and partly inaccurate.

I illustrate this point in my discussion of recent data from two case studies and a pilot study conducted by the author and colleagues, where I show that teachers, who attended teacher preparation programs at elite colleges with an emphasis on urban teaching committed to social justice, are more likely to choose teaching for a different set of reasons than those that were reviewed above.

### Choosing to Teach among the Graduates of Elite Colleges

#### *Definition of elite colleges*

Consistent with many researchers who use student selectivity as the prime measure of college quality (Brand & Halaby, 2003; Davies & Guppy, 1997), I define elite colleges as highly selective institutions, which admit students who score relatively high

on their SAT tests (roughly around 650 and higher across the three subject areas).<sup>6</sup> All three colleges that are discussed below fall into this category (The Princeton Review, 2007); University of California Los Angeles (650), University of Chicago (710), and the elite liberal arts college studied by Smulyan (2004) (710).<sup>7</sup> The latter two have long enjoyed an established reputation of quality. For example, they have also appeared in *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges* (1969), a book that have listed the most lucrative colleges in the U.S.

The assumption underlying this sort of institutional distinction that I make is that the US higher education system of roughly 3600 institutions is highly stratified. The most prestigious institutions in this system, which are also the most selective ones, hold immense power and resources that are associated with their key role in the production and reproduction of society's political, economic, and cultural elites. These institutions' see themselves as prime players in the preparation of society's next generation of leaders. This paper focuses in understanding how, and why students who study, live, and evolve as young adults in this social context of elitism and privilege, being expected to excel and lead in anything they do, choose teaching, and what does teaching really means for them?

*Choosing to teach at an elite liberal arts college*

Smulyan (2004) studied the career path of 28 "women at an elite liberal arts college" (p. 517). Only 11 among the 28 students have become teachers. All students were interviewed annually for five consecutive years, and then re-interviewed five years after their last interview, covering a period of 10 years. Most have remained in teaching

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<sup>6</sup> This definition may seem narrow, but it is widely used and show high correlations with other indicators like institutional prestige (Clark, 1983), or net student tuition (Davies & Guppy, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Although Smulyan (2004) concealed the institutional affiliation of the students she studied, several details in the text and from her biography led me to identify the institution. I used this information only to find out about the institution's SAT requirements and confirm my hypothesis regarding to its elite status.

for several years. Later, several of them went to graduate school. The women were asked about past educational experiences, relations with significant others, gender, ethnicity and the way these were related to their educational and career choices.

Smulyan (2004) suggests an alternative explanation that counters the general findings of the literature on choosing to teach. Yet, at a first glance, one may argue that the students in Smulyan's sample seem to choose teaching because of the same old reasons; being a woman, looking for economic stability, and having the desire to help kids. Smulyan, however, shows that students in her sample, who attended an elite college and considered a teaching career, came to their decision in a different context from the one usually experienced by most teachers, and with different reasons and aims in mind. They were women who chose teaching, regardless of the financial hardships, and despite knowing they had much more glamorous options available. Indeed,

few of these women came to college expecting to teach; many dragged their feet as they considered the possibility, resisting the idea that they (like some of their grandmothers, aunts, mothers) would fall into what they initially saw as the easy – and stereotypical-path of teaching (Smulyan, 2004, p. 522)

In this case, according to Smulyan, the tension between their affiliation to a prestigious school and their inclination to choose a low status profession, led the women to renegotiate the definitions of teaching and success.

To renegotiate definitions of teaching, these women often had to begin by taking their parents', teachers' friends' and their own stereotypes of teachers and their contrasting expectations of what it meant to be "smart" and "successful" women (p. 523)

Redefining teaching for these teachers meant developing a critical, savvy approach to teaching that is responsive “to a broad range of social inequalities” (p. 523) and acts relentlessly for social change. Smulyan’s teachers refuse to conform to a model they believe confines teachers to their classroom and their children. For them, teaching is a public office carried out in the public sphere (not only in the classroom) that challenges the status quo and in particular social arrangements that are unjustified and unequal. More specifically, she argues that the women she interviewed adopted social justice awareness as part of negotiating their social status vis-à-vis what they saw as the social expectations from women to serve in a subordinated narrowly conceived teaching profession.

On one issue, the financial security and benefits that are afforded by teaching, Smulyan’s (2004) reports on mixed findings. She notes that individuals in her sample perceived teacher benefits based on their class:

Class can... work as a deterrent to teaching for those who want more financial security than they feel teaching provides. It can also be a positive influence, since teaching may provide more security and benefits than the individual and others in her community have experienced in the past (p. 526)

While I don’t dispute Smulyan’s judgment concerning the small group of teachers she studied, I believe her argument makes less sense for elite college graduates in general, who, even when coming from a modest background, by the time they graduate, become part of a selective group, which enjoys privileged access to lucrative occupations that bestow social, economic, and cultural capital, teaching can never match.

*Choosing to teach among UCLA, Center X graduates*

Since its inception in 1995 center X at UCLA has worked diligently to prepare a cadre of talented urban teachers who would “bit the odds” by committing to teaching and other urban education related jobs. Quartz (2003) reports that after 5 years, 71% of Center X graduates remained in teaching compared to a national average of 54% (Ingersoll, 2003). Center X teachers do even better, in terms of retention, when those who moved to other works within the field of urban education are included (88%). Barraza and Quartz (2005) report that half of the center recruits graduated from UCLA and additional quarter graduated from other University of California institutions, “most graduating from UC Berkeley, the system’s most selective university.” So once again, I pose the question, why do these young individuals from elite colleges choose teaching?

So far, most research done on Center X did not respond directly to this question. However, there are several publications, which report sporadically on some of the considerations that led teachers to choose teaching. For example, Olsen and Anderson (2007) describe one of Center X’s teachers, Anthony, who “...had planned to enter the medical profession but decided – against his family’s wishes – to shift his career path and make teaching his vehicle for change” (p. 12). A more comprehensive analysis can be found in Barraza and Quartz (2005), who argue that,

Overwhelmingly, Center X candidates’ report that they choose to teach, because they are motivated by activist ideals. Nearly three quarters of incoming students stated that their belief that “teaching helps change the world and further social justice” was extremely important to their decision to pursue a teaching credential. (pp. 9-10)

In addition, 90 percent of the entrant teachers reported “that the program’s social justice emphasis was extremely or very important to their decision to enroll in the program” (p. 12).

Other reasons that led Center X teachers to choose their preparation program were “their desire to work in the program’s partner schools – some of the lowest-performing and highest-poverty urban schools in and around Los Angeles” (78 percent), and the “program’s reputation for quality” (90 percent) (p.12).

Interestingly, Center X teachers confirm once again the hypothesis that overall teachers of elite schools are less likely to enter the profession because of reasons related to job security and flexible schedule.

The powerful connection between women and teaching remains an undeniable fact also at Center X, which has a similar gender composition (79% female) as in national data. However, in what seems to echoes Smulyan’s argument on elite college teachers’ desire to redefine the conception of teaching, also Barraza and Quartz (2005) conclude that Center X teachers are critical and look to challenge social inequality and extend teacher’s “professional role beyond the classroom [by] moving away from teaching and into administrative and other supervisory or student support roles” (p. 13). According to Center X data this trend was across the board for males and females, though a survival analysis reveals that males from year 3 to 7 were 10% more likely than women to leave teaching and advance to leadership positions (Quartz et al. in press).

#### The Pilot Study on University of Chicago Teacher Education Program

The pilot study consists of 10 interviews with University of Chicago Teacher Education Program (UTEP) graduates, which took place in 2006 at the program’s offices.



These interviews are part of the *Choosing To Teach* study.<sup>8</sup> Interviews lasted one hour on average, following a standard protocol developed to elicit responses directed towards teachers' decisions to teach and decisions to teach in urban schools (see Appendix A). Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed in ATLAS.ti. to develop general descriptive categories of response to protocol questions.<sup>9</sup> I briefly describe these findings below and then turn to discuss in detail two major themes that have emerged from the interviews.

Figure 1 below summarizes participants' descriptions of the factors/reasons that affected their decision to choose teaching as a career. Readers should note that asking teachers to report on the factors that affected their decision to become teachers is *different* than trying to map (as Lortie, 1975; and, Cohen & Kottkamp, 1993 have done in their studies) the various rewards that teaching careers has to offer. Indeed, as can be seen, teachers reported not only about the rewards (intrinsic, ancillary, and extrinsic) associated with teaching, but also elaborated on scope of reasons related to their upbringing and past experiences. Thus, I divide teachers' responses to two: 1. intrinsic, ancillary, and extrinsic rewards, and 2. explanatory reasoning. For example, as can be seen in Figure 1, all participants explicated a belief in social justice and social change as a prime motivation in becoming teachers (intrinsic reward), while seven added that they decided to become teachers because they wanted to make a difference in children's lives (intrinsic rewards). Only one of the ten teachers mentioned monetary rewards as a substantial

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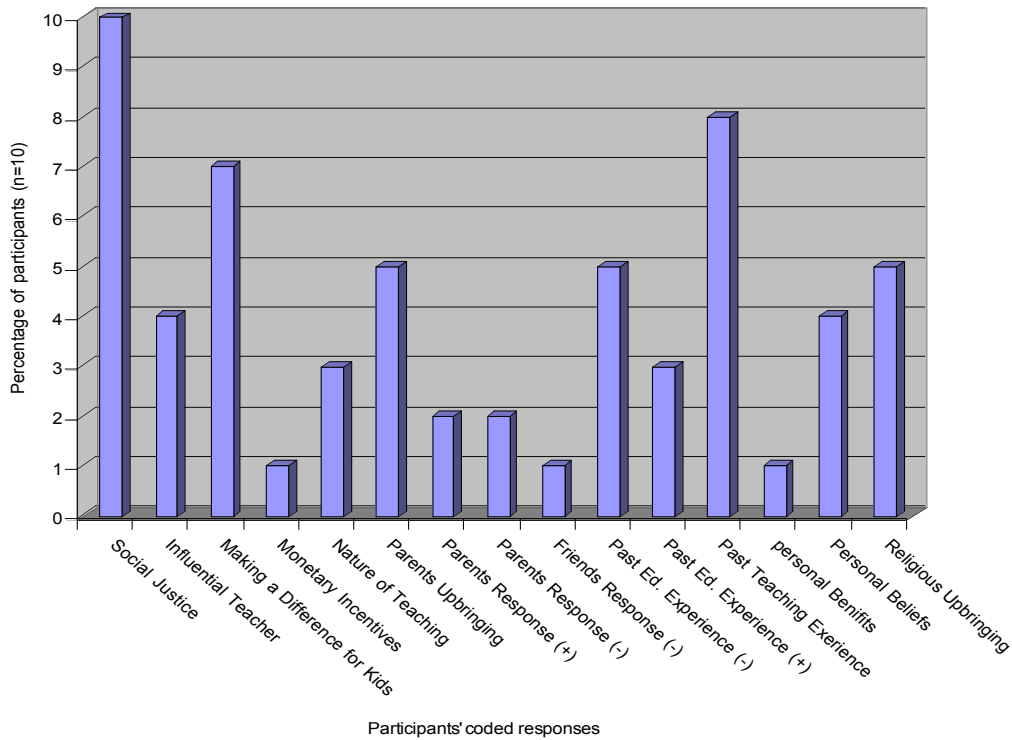
<sup>8</sup> For more details regarding to the scope, rationale, and recent publications and presentations that have come out of the study, please check the *Choosing To Teach* website:

<http://www.brandeis.edu/mandel/projects/choosingtoteach.html>

<sup>9</sup> Detailed discussion of these findings and others can be found in the *Choosing to Teach Study report, Urban Teacher Education Program (UTEP) Report*, by Eran Tamir, John Watzke, Susan Kardos, and Sharon Feiman-Nemser (2007).

consideration that might help keep her in teaching for the short run, explaining she needs to repay a sizable debt and urban teaching could help her get a federal loan forgiven (extrinsic rewards). Four teachers mentioned reasons related to the nature of teaching, like teaching being a job that allows them to be creative, or collaborate with colleagues (ancillary rewards). Explanatory reasoning includes various past experiences and interactions that shape one's beliefs and values. For example, past teaching experience was mentioned by 8 teachers as something that helped them grasp the challenges and treats involved in teaching. Another example is from five participants who emphasized their parents' upbringing as something that shaped and guided their decision to become teachers. For example, one participant discussed her parents' involvement in social action for the poor as an activity that carved in her soul the importance of working for social justice. Another participant said that she learned much about good teaching and practice by observing her mother's child rearing techniques. Teachers also mentioned their religious upbringing as a source of meaning that helped them shape their conception of justice and commitment to fellow human beings. Others mentioned "negative" educational experience (e.g., learning in schools with teachers that they didn't respect) as a factor in their decision to become teachers.

Figure 1: Why did you Choose to Teach? Distribution of Participants' Responses



*Emerging themes from the pilot study*

Two major themes emerge from teachers’ voices. First, teachers considered teaching to be a noble profession, where one can make a difference for children and society (social justice). The notion of social justice has some similarities to “altruistic reasons” cited in the literature as a major factor for choosing to teach, yet, as we also saw in the previous two case studies, social justice was conceived by teachers as an active approach aimed at changing society by reducing inequities and injustice. Moreover, teachers prepared at elite college used social justice as a conceptual platform to redefine teaching and distance themselves from more traditional conception of teaching that center around service, vocation, and the nurturing of children. Second, it seems that although these teachers chose to become teachers, their definition of teaching is expansive and untraditional. These teachers have strong commitment to social change in urban

education and plan a career path that would allow them to pursue it in multiple roles and levels. When asked to explain why would they consider leaving the classroom, most say that their commitment to teaching is genuine, but so is their commitment to promote social change. In what follows, I elaborate each theme, bringing teachers' voices to bear.

*Redefining teaching through social justice*

Social justice was a recurrent theme across all interviews, particularly when UTEP teachers spoke about why teaching is important to them and why they chose to enter the teaching profession. UTEP teachers discussed and interpreted social justice in various ways. Some viewed the concept of social justice as a way of changing society by gradually taking more responsibility over larger fractions of it (e.g., first by teaching a class and later by running a school). Others understood social justice as a multi layer commitment to empower students in the classroom, while seeking for ways to promote social change. Illustrative example of this complex conception of social justice is the following teacher;

The biggest reason that I want to do this program was I was interested in the social justice aspects. Like in the beginning of the program I realized that there is a lot more to teaching, to being a good teacher, than being all for the justice part. Like I cannot just focus on what is happening outside, or what is happening in the policies when I have my own classroom, right, because I have to be the good teacher that I want to be. So figuring out that this is what I need to do first, be a good teacher in the classroom, make that difference in the classroom, and then also try and think of ways that I can make a difference outside of it.

In the interviews teachers also discussed the dimensions of social justice as a set of ideas aimed at having better and fair society, as well as a social obligation / mission to compensate children for the unjust and unequal conditions in which urban schools operate. The following two excerpts illustrate this perspective of social justice;

How I got into teaching was just trying to afford that [quality education] to children that didn't have the resources to go to a Catholic school or to go to a private school or to get bused out to an overnight boarding school.

I started to see that schools are one of the only institutions in a position to intervene in the repeating cycle of socioeconomic status determining a child's future, like the status of their parents determining their status as an adult. And I recognize that the school has been only marginally successful in trying to intervene in that cycle, but I think the school and the church probably are some of the only institutions that are in that position to help...

The way these teachers conceptualize teaching is inconsistent with what most literature on choosing to teach suggest. Instead, of Lortie's model of a compliant women who nurture kids and obediently help preserving the status quo in society, UTEP teachers appear to be critical, knowledgeable, and have high level of ideological commitment and conviction in the potential power of education and teaching to change society and challenge inequality.

In doing so, UTEP teachers not only refuse to accept the marginal position of the teaching profession and seek to redefine it, but as we shall see below, they also openly strive to change it from within by first becoming part of the profession and later occupying leadership positions in urban schools.

*Expanding teaching outside the classroom*

Though they chose to teach in order to promote social change, these teachers understand that social change can not be achieved only through their actions in class. For many of them pursuing a leadership position in education is a “natural” part of their career trajectory. In other words, they view educational leadership as an expansion of their teaching commitment for social change and a tool that can help them gain more impact in directing the field toward this aim.

I think my commitment is to change the school system as it is right now, at least the Chicago public school system, and you can't really do that unless you understand the situation of the teachers, of the students, and that's part of the reason why my goal is to teach for five years, to just gain that experience and in the future there's a possibility that I might try to move up and do some administrative stuff where I can be more effective in the school wide level.

Another teacher notes,

I've considered going into administration, because that's where I really see change in schools happening. It's like, yeah, I can make my classroom a happy, safe place for my kids, but then what happens when they go on to 6<sup>th</sup> grade? I see other teachers in my school who don't teach at all like I do and I don't-- they're very caring and thoughtful people, but I don't think that they're really-- they're not preparing their kids the way that I want to prepare my kids. The greatest changes and impressive things I've seen in education were because of principals or people founding charter schools. That's definitely something I would consider to up the impact.

A third teacher was probably the most illustrative of the idea of expanding teaching outside the classroom, arguing that

In the long-term I'm not going to stay in the classroom. In the long-term something more has to happen where I'm either training teachers or I'm a principal or I'm a legislator or I just give up entirely <laughs>, because I feel like so many things have to be different.

These statements are not exceptions, but are rather representative of the ten UTEP teachers who interviewed with the Choosing To Teach study. When asked about their likely career path, only two of the ten teachers said teaching is likely to be their long-term career.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, most teachers said they would stay in teaching more than five years, and a few who thought they would stay for less than five years.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Summary of findings*

As we have seen, past research on choosing to teach focused largely on variables like, gender, teachers' general inclination toward altruism and service, and monetary rewards and flexibility of work, as reasons that draw teachers to teaching. The UTEP teachers we interviewed, as well as the other teachers from the two case studies I reviewed, tell a different story. As graduates of elite colleges, most of these teachers could have pursued a career that pays better than teaching. Their decision to teach was mainly inspired by a sense of mission to change society and improve the lives of poor inner city children. Thus, it is not surprising that they did not highlight economic rewards

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<sup>10</sup> In what might imply of the same tendency seen in Center X, males in UTEP also seem slightly more likely than women to pursue leadership roles.

<sup>11</sup> For a more through analysis of *Choosing To Teach* teachers' careers and retention trends, see: Tamir, E. (in press). The retention question in context-specific teacher education: Do beginning teachers and their program directors see teachers' future career eye to eye. *Teaching and Teacher Education*.

and flexibility of work as key factors in their decision to enter teaching. Finally, and this is the only point where our data do not differ greatly from general teaching force data, it seems that gender, despite of the teachers being aware of it and trying to find creative ways to reinterpret its role, continue to have an effect on these teachers' decision to teach.<sup>12</sup>

### Elite Schooling and Teacher Preparation

So far I have shown that teachers prepared in elite colleges are likely to choose teaching for reasons which differ in some important ways from the traditional reasons documented in the literature. In this final section I draw on Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital (Bourdieu, 1985; 1986) to help account for the emergence of this sub group of teachers and to speculate about its potential influence on the field of teaching in the future. I argue that teachers from elite colleges with their unique mission and social vision of change should be considered as a group that has its own explicit agenda and is likely to seek ways to impact the internal politics of the field of teaching. In previous research of the New Jersey alternate route to teaching (Tamir, 2008; Tamir, in press) I used Bourdieu's conceptual tools in a similar way to analyze how different policy groups (e.g. the governor, the Department of Education, teacher educators, teacher unions) pushed their preferred policies as embodied in their different visions of teacher certification in order to achieve more control over the field of educational policy. Here I use the same theory to consider the emergence of a distinct sub-group of teachers prepared at elite schools who hold a unique vision of teaching and are committed to redefine their field.

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<sup>12</sup> UTEP, Center X, and the third institution described by Smulyan reported having 80%, 80%, and 100% respectively, of women in their programs.



Indeed, according to Bourdieu (1985) every field has individuals and sub-groups, which hold different visions about the nature of the field and vie for positions of influence and power. Sometimes they struggle over competing visions; often they struggle over scarce resources. In this dynamic, new groups constantly press the status quo in their field and depending on the circumstances are sometimes successful in acquiring more power and pushing their political agenda forward.

*The role of cultural and symbolic capital in the formation of elite college teachers as a distinct sub-group of teachers*

While many groups and individuals may try to further their agenda and power in the field of teaching, the capacity to attain such aim, is closely related to the types and volumes of capital each agent possesses. Following Bourdieu's lengthy discussion on symbolic capital and academe (1996) I argue that teachers prepared at elite colleges represent a distinct and potentially influential sub group of teachers. As members of this sub-group, their credentials and preparation entitle them to special respect in society and access to positions of power and influence. Bourdieu would say they have cultural and symbolic capital (1986; 1996; see also, Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The former derived from learning over time in formal prestigious institutions, the latter derived from social acceptance and general belief among the public that associate elite schooling with the image of leadership, responsibility, excellence, distinction, public service. Most importantly, this public image results in a perception that views elite college graduates as fully entitled to authority and power.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu developed this argument in numerous publications. See in particular, *The state nobility*, where Bourdieu (1996) analyzed the Grandes Écoles, France's elite higher education sector that enjoys a monopoly in preparing the economic, cultural, and state bureaucracy elites.

The ways in which elite school teachers re-conceptualized what teaching meant for them is closely aligned to these public images and noble ideals that are associated with elite colleges. These teachers perceive education as a promising avenue through which a large scale solution for social inequality could be achieved. Teaching position in poor urban schools, according to this perspective, ceases to be the unrewarding and undesirable position most teachers consider it to be. Instead, teaching becomes a way to explore and fulfill social ideals. Indeed, it seems that elite college teachers developed their conception of teaching, since it allowed them to devote their energy to a grand mission of social change, a commitment that would allow them also to maintain a sense of a leading vanguard and cultural elite, worthy of its position. From this perspective, elite college teachers who are profoundly interested in leaving a positive mark on society, share many similarities with their peers who became business managers, physicians, and Lawyers who are also interested in leadership, power, and innovation, though many times from a very different political standpoint.

I argue, that given their excessive symbolic and cultural capital, their professional aspirations and promise, and the kind of critical agenda they seek to promote, it seems that elite college teachers are relatively well positioned to pursue their agenda and hold the potential of becoming an influential group in the field of teaching. Bourdieu's theoretical perspective is helpful here, since it clarifies the role of capital in shaping the lives of elite college teachers, their decision to teach in urban schools, their conception of teaching, and potential impact on the field

*Future research*

Some of the data highlighted in my analysis support the various hypotheses offered in this last section. For example, data from the pilot study of UTEP and from Center X suggest that these elite college teachers viewed themselves as a vanguard group that seeks to change society by staying in urban school (counter to the overwhelming number of teachers who flee urban schools as quickly as they can (Ingersoll, 2001)) as teachers and leaders.

However, In order to test these assertions and the overall theory that suggests looking at elite college teachers as a distinct sub-group in the field of teaching, a more representative sample of teachers prepared at elite colleges is needed. In addition, there is a need to develop longitudinal research to see whether elite college teachers are indeed more likely to stay as teachers in urban schools, how many of them choose a leadership path as leaders in urban education, and how many leave urban schools in favor of suburban schools or other professions. Second, further research is needed to analyze the impact of this sub-group of teachers on the field of teaching and urban education. Do these teachers as they become leaders continue to hold more or less the same “progressive” ideas of social justice and change or do they adopt the mainstream ideas that are prevalent in their field. An interesting way to study these issues is by checking what leadership positions in the urban districts of LA or Chicago (where Center X and UTEP operate) are occupied by the programs’ alums, and whether these individual promote an agenda that correspond to the social ideals they used to hold.

### Summary

Some may argue that social justice has been on the agenda of teacher education before and that recruiting teachers from elite colleges is also not a new story. I agree.

Still, this does not mean that most teachers or teacher preparation programs are genuinely committed to social justice in the context of urban education. National data on teacher attrition from urban districts are indeed astounding evidence to this fading commitment. The teachers from the three programs described in this paper sought to revive and reinvent these ongoing commitments for social justice. They represent a clear voice that views social justice as the main mission of teaching.

In this paper I have identified a gap in the research on teachers that requires further attention. I have shown that not all teachers choose teaching and conceptualize teaching in the same way. In particular, I focused on illuminating why elite college teachers were drawn to teaching and how their perspective of teaching redefines the common role and responsibilities of teaching. Using Bourdieu's notions of field and capital, I argued that while the decision of elite college teachers to choose teaching may seem irrational from a first glance, the particular ways in which they conceptualize teaching and act upon their commitments correspond well with their image in society as a selective group who is expected to initiate, take leadership positions, and push for changes, and with their image of themselves as a visionary vanguard that seeks to change society and make it a better place.

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