Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning, 2020, Vol. 14, Issue 28

"No Amount of Tinkering Around the Edges:" A Qualitative Study of Teacher Narratives About Leaving Conventional School Teaching and Discovering Self-Directed Learning Spaces

Kevin Currie-Knight

Abstract

In this paper, I qualitatively analyze written and audio (podcast) accounts from eight teachers who left the field of conventional school teaching and went on to found or work in self-directed learning centers. Studies on teacher attrition tend to focus on teachers who leave education entirely (or continue teaching by working through hardships). The experience of these teachers - who neither remained in conventional schools or left careers in education - highlight an interesting middle-space. I review the similarities and differences of these former-teachers' journeys, as well as compare their reported experience to existing literature on teacher attrition.

Keywords: k-12 education, teacher attrition, self-directed learning

The field of k-12 education has had a persistent teacher attrition problem. In the United States - the focus of this study - teacher attrition figures indicate consistently that around 50% of teachers will leave the field, often within the first five years of entering the profession (Rinke, 2014). Even among those who stay in the field, burnout and demoralization are often a problem at some point in teachers' careers (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Rinke, 2014; Santoro, 2018). Some teachers find a way to cope with these struggles and remain in the profession, others leave the

teaching profession entirely, and a third group - that Rinke (2014) calls “shifters” - remain in k-12 education spaces but find positions within those spaces that better suit them.

In this paper, I will qualitatively analyze written and audio accounts from former teachers who occupy an interesting middle space similar, but not identical to, “the shifters.” The former teachers whose stories make up this study left conventional k-12 educational spaces, but rather than leave the field of education behind entirely, created or found roles in self-directed learning spaces - learning centers or schools like Sudbury or “democratic” schools that lack most or all of the structures of conventional schools (like compulsory curriculum or classes, grades, formal tests or a conventional teacher-student dynamic).

The results of my analysis show that these eight accounts (taken from books, articles and blog posts as well as podcast guest appearances by these figures), reveal interesting similarities in the narrative accounts of why and how they got into teaching, why and how they made sense of their disillusionment with the profession, and the ways in which they discovered and came to embrace of self-directed learning alternatives. In addition to exploring the answers to these questions, I will compare these eight peoples’ reported experience to literature on teacher attrition and why teachers leave or persevere in the field.

Literature Review

There is a wide variety of research on teacher turnover and attrition (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Long et al., 2012; Macdonald, 1999). The research points to a number of factors that can influence whether struggling teachers stay or leave the field, from perceived lack of support and unrealistic work expectations to challenges dealing with students and parents (Buchanan et al., 2013).

This research often focuses on the binary of "attrition" and "retention" - struggling teachers that either decide to leave the field entirely or persevere in their current role (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Buchanan et al., 2013). Yet, some research recognizes a third category of "shifters:" dissatisfied teachers who choose to stay in the teaching profession but change schools or roles to better suit their needs and aspirations (Hammerness, 2008; Rinke, 2014; Santoro, 2018). Arguably, the present study will explore the written/told accounts of people who fit into this "shifter" category, however unlike the shifters described in other studies, those in this study did not shift into different careers within the conventional k-12 system, but left conventional k-12 education to find roles in SDLC spaces very different from conventional schools.

Another distinction, made most prominently by Santoro (2011, 2018), is the distinction between two broad categories of reasons for teacher attrition: burnout and demoralization. Santoro describes the difference this way: where "burnout is a category based on individual teacher psychology, rather than an assessment of the state of the practice" (Santoro, 2011, p. 10), demoralization "is better understood as a process of continually being frustrated in one's pursuit of good teaching" (Santoro, 2011, p. 17). Demoralized teachers find that "moral rewards are elusive in a practice that had previously afforded access to the satisfaction of doing good work" (Santoro, 2011, p. 17). Teachers who experience burnout are more likely to leave than persevere the more they believe the sources of their burnout are beyond their locus of control (Wright, Shields, Black, Banerjee, & Waxman, 2018), and teachers who experience demoralization are no different: Santoro argues that they are less likely to leave the more they believe they can control or affect the sources of their moral dissatisfaction (Santoro, 2018).

Methodology and Subjects

In this paper, I engage in a content analysis, qualitatively analyzing published print, web, and audio artifacts produced by seven former k-12 teachers (and one former college professor) who taught in conventional formal institutions of education and later left to staff or found self-directed learning centers (SDLCs). All of the figures in this study were at one time teachers at conventional formal learning institutions; seven had experience as teachers in public k-12 (and two - Morrison and Hammon - in private) schools; the eighth (Daniel Greenberg) was a college professor at an accredited university. All of the figures in this study went from teaching in conventional schools to seeking out and founding or gaining positions in SDLCs, by which I mean learning centers that differ from conventional schools in allowing students to do and learn what they would like in the absence of formal curricular requirements or grading/evaluation systems.

The material analyzed consists of book chapters, articles, blog posts, and (researcher-transcribed) podcast appearances where these teachers specifically recall their journey from teaching at, but becoming disillusioned in, conventional schools to discovering and coming to work in SDLCs. I coded relevant passages from these sources into the following themes: the subject’s experience with school prior to teaching, what motivated the subject to become a teacher, what factors the subject reports leading to their disillusionment with teaching, how the subject reports coping with and processing this disillusionment, and what led to their discovery of self-directed learning and SDLCs. Similarities and differences between the subjects reports on these themes were then analyzed.

Below is a list of subjects and sources I used to analyze the reported experience of each.

- Kristan Accles Morrison: former middle school teacher (5 years) who went on to intern at the Albany Free School

  Free School Teaching (Morrison, 2007) [book]

- Kenneth Danford: former middle school teacher (6 years) who went on to co-found and work in the North Star Learning Center for Teens and the LIberated Learners Network

  Learning is Natural, Schooling is Optional (Danford, 2019) [book]

- Matthew Gioia: former middle school teacher (2 years) who became a staff member at the Hudson Valley Sudbury School

  "From Middle School Teacher to Sudbury School Staff Member" (Currie-Knight & Riley, 2019) [podcast guest appearance]

- Daniel Greenberg: former college physics professor (2 years) who went on to co-found and work in the Sudbury Valley School

  Outline of a New Philosophy (D. Greenberg, 1996) [book]

  "Sudbury School: Daniel Greenberg" (Robertson, 2019) [podcast guest appearance]

  Vanguards of a New World: Sudbury Valley School Staff at the Half-Century Mark (H. Greenberg & Sadofsky, 2018) [book]

- Joel Hammon: former middle- and high- school teacher (11 years) who went on to create the Princeton Learning Cooperative

  Teacher Liberation Handbook (Hammon, 2016) [book]

"Joel Hammon on Quitting Teaching" (Boles, 2019b) [podcast guest appearance]

- Grace Llewellyn: former middle school teacher (2 years) who went on to write the *Teenage Liberation Handbook* and found the Not-So Back to School Camp

  Guerilla Learning (Llewellyn & Silver, 2001) [book]

  Teenage Liberation Handbook (Llewellyn, 1998) [book]

- Bruce Smith - former high school teacher (3 years) who went on to work at two Sudbury schools

  "Dream Jobs and Nightmares" (Smith, 2015) [blog post]

  Interview with Bruce Smith on the Sudbury Model of Education (Stevens, 2009) [blog post]

- Cassidy Younghans - former middle school teacher (3 years) who went on to found and work at the Epic Life Academy

  "My Self-Directed (Adult) Journey into Self-Directed Education" (Younghans, 2018) [online magazine article]

  "Cassidy Younghans on Building a Career in Self-Directed Education as a Twenty-Something" (Boles, 2019a)

Results: Entry Into Teaching in Conventional Schools

Research questions: *How did these people experience school positively and/or negatively before becoming teachers? Were there any signs in their early student experience that might have predisposed them toward self-directed learning?*

Of the eight subjects in this study, five reported quite positive experiences with their k-12 schooling. Two (Gioia and Lewellyn) reported not enjoying school despite enjoying academics. One (Smith) did not mention his prior school experience.

Morrison's account of her k-12 schooling is the most enthusiastic. She writes:

> I was a student, and I was good at it. I generally did what I was asked, showed interest, put in a good amount of effort, and was rewarded by excellent grades and mostly positive regard from my teachers, peers, and family for my success. I felt good when I was in school— praised, validated, made much of, and so on. My success in school defined me— I was "smart" and a "good student" and I reveled in that identity. (Morrison, 2007, p. 2)

Daniel Greenberg also reports that he "had no problem with the regular public school system. I grew up in it, in Philadelphia and New York. It never was a challenge for me" (Robertson, 2019, t. 5:57), and that he "was right on track to be your regular good student who didn't really feel he was on a treadmill or in a grind" (Robertson, 2019, t. 6:14). Similarly, Bruce Smith reports that he was the "public school dream student: I was good at verbal and math skills and I did not question authority" (Stevens, 2009).

Ken Danford's report indicates that while he did well in school, that didn't translate into a particularly positive experience. While he "attended public school with joy and success" and "took mostly Advanced Placement courses in high school, and graduated with honors and a high class-rank," (Danford, 2019, p. 24) his report depicts a certain ambivalence. "I had a handful of good classes, I suppose, but none that altered my interests or life course. I didn't complain too

much about school or the workload. I didn’t imagine having options, so school was something to manage and master. I was able to do so without much stress, and I generally felt satisfied with my life at the time” (Danford, 2019, p. 25).

The two who report generally negative feelings about school tell similar stories of enjoying academics but disliking the process of formal education. Llewellyn writes that “in public grade school, junior high, and high school, and then at the renowned private liberal arts college I attended, I warred with myself. I was bright and creative, loved to read and write, inherited from my family a strong belief in the importance of education. And so I thought that I should love school. But I didn’t” (Llewellyn & Silver, 2001, p. 8). Matthew Gioia tells a similar story: “when I was a kid, I really liked academics. But I didn't like what was going on in school. And I had all these problems with... I wanted to read - I was really into literature, and I wanted to read literature and write about it and talk about it all day and I had no time for anything else. So, I had problems with... skipping classes and getting bad grades. But what I wanted to be doing was that (Currie-Knight & Riley, 2019, t. 12:59).

Consistent with research on the idealistic reasons teachers go into the field, seven of eight respondents reported going into teaching because they wanted to help children in becoming educated and get them excited about academics. (Matthew Gioia didn’t comment on why he went into teaching.) Hammon describes being motivated by concerns about social justice and equity, and describes his lofty aspirations thus: “I imagined a scene from Dead Poets Society. I was going to be the bearer of the torch of knowledge, leading my charges up the mountain of enlightenment to the pinnacle of truth and justice. My students would be just as enthusiastic for this quest as I was: “Yes, captain my captain! Show us the way!” (Hammon, 2016, p. 24).

Younghans describes becoming a teacher as borne of a desire to help young people: "[I] just always wanted to be a teacher. [I] loved working with kids since I was young. I find a lot of identity and a lot of purpose through being around young people and... helping them explore the world in any way that they want to" (Boles, 2019a, t. 1:21).

Were there any elements of these teacher's stories about their own schooling that might have inclined them toward self-directed learning? We can speculate that having liked academic pursuits but not necessarily schooling might have inclined Llewellyn and Gioia toward self-directed learning, as their reported school-age academic interests were self-directed. Llewellyn, however, reports going into teaching because she wanted to become, in a certain way, the teacher for others that she never had. 'At the time [in k-12] it didn't occur to me to imagine that something could be different for me; I unconsciously imagined myself a victim of my circumstances. It did, however, occur to me to imagine other classes and teachers that were livelier, and I set out to "make it so," by becoming a teacher myself'(Llewellyn & Silver, 2001, p. 8).

Cassidy Younghans began her education in a Montessori school, and she credits the experience with making her sensitive to the powers of self-directed learning. She transitioned into a conventional public school at fourth grade and reports having then "felt a lot of shock there with the different way that kids treated each other and also the way that adults related to young people" (Boles, 2019a, 3:30). She reports that when she later became dissatisfied with her teaching practice, she began looking into self-directed learning spaces "because of my Montessori background" (Boles, 2019a, 15:10). Younghans also indicates that while she did well in school, she knew and empathized with "some other kids who seemed not to know how to play

the game, or who didn't want to play the game at all. For them, struggle in school was a daily occurrence" (Younghans, 2018). Similarly to Llewellyn, Younghans reports being motivated to become a teacher in part because she wanted to make school better for those who weren't as adept at school as she was.

We can speculate that Daniel Greenberg may have become sensitive to the differences between schooling and the ability to learn by his wife Hanna and her miserable experience in school. He had met Hanna before he became a college physics professor and unlike his own experience, knew that Hanna had not done well in school despite going on to earn a PhD. "She squeaked through her high school diploma. But her passion was biology, and ultimately she got her PhD in biochemistry…. So you can see that when she had the passion, she was able to overcome every obstacle and when she didn't, nothing could get her to do it" (Robertson, 2019, p. 10:09).

Demoralization with Conventional School Teaching

Research questions: *How did these figures reportedly become disillusioned with conventional school teaching? What aspects of their job and school environment do they report leading to demoralization? How did they process and understand this disillusionment?*

All eight of the figures in this study paint clear pictures of demoralization that fit Santoro's depiction of demoralization rather than burnout (Santoro, 2018). Seven of eight subjects reported going into teaching for idealistic reasons (with Gioia not reporting on his motives), and all eight report becoming increasingly uneasy about the requirements of their jobs, as well as cognizant that learning and schooling were often quite different things.

What were the sources of these teachers' demoralization? Seven of eight (with the exception of Daniel Greenberg) reported that one source of their demoralization with conventional school teaching was a growing discomfort with the authoritarian role they felt they had to play to function in their role. Morrison, for instance, recounts enforcing a "strict straightline policy" when having students walk from the cafeteria to class:

> they walked quickly and quietly in a straight line along the right-hand wall toward the cafeteria…The class was fairly compliant with my requests and I often got a strange thrill of satisfaction as administrators or other teachers passed us on our procession toward the cafeteria. I experienced a sense of power and prestige connected to how well my students walked to lunch, of all things! (Morrison, 2007, pp. 6–7)

Morrison reports that the more compliant the students were, however, the more reservations she had both about whether such constraints on student freedom were necessary as well as the morality of her role in enforcing those constraints.

In a similar vein, Gioia reports that it was only when, in his second year of teaching, he was able to gain his students compliance that he felt deep unease about the morality of his role.

> Even though people were following my - I'd even say because once people started following my lead and following my direction - that made me feel really uneasy, and I... wasn't sure why that was. And the principal was patting me on the back and saying good job, but I didn't feel good, and I didn't like exercising this power, which I had cultivated to get these kids to do stuff, and to refrain from doing things they wanted. (Currie-Knight & Riley, 2019, t. 7:31)

Bruce Smith reports feeling like his authoritarian role pitted him and his students as adversaries: “Indeed, the worst part of this experience—the worst part of conventional education in general—was/is the way it sets teachers and students (and parents and administrators) against each other, poisoning their perceptions of each other” (Smith, 2015).

It is worth mentioning how this contrasts with other qualitative reports of teachers who left the field entirely and reported concerns about classroom authority. Reports suggest that teachers quite often see the problem with authority as a problem of their not having, or being able to gain enough, authority. One qualitative analysis of why teachers leave quotes one of its subjects - a teacher who left the field - as saying: “Students wouldn't listen to me; I couldn't control the class but I didn't think things would get out of hand this much to make me leave ... I needed to establish myself more” (Buchanan et al., 2013, p. 121). A similar study quotes a former teacher as saying: “Teachers have to show the students whose [sic.] boss!” (Tarver, 2018, p. 76). These and similar quotes suggest that the source of these teachers disillusionment was that they felt they hadn’t been able to gain enough power and authority over students. By contrast, the reports of Morrison, Gioia, and Smith above illustrate that these three experienced an almost opposite problem: the more authority they were able to gain over students, the more uncomfortable they felt with the morality of that role.

Another source of demoralization mentioned by every subject of this study was student disinterest (which was sometimes described hand in hand with their discomfort exercising control in order to motivate students). This was particularly an issue for Hammon and Greenberg, both of whom had reported going into teaching largely because they were excited to share subjects they loved (history and physics respectively) with students. Above, Hammon

describes having imagined a Dead Poets Society scenario where he inspires students to see the beauty of knowledge:

> 'Instead what I mostly got were uninterested stares and questions like "Is this going to be on the test?" or "Why do we have to read this much?" and even "How big can the margins be on this paper?" Certainly there were some kids who really got what I was trying to do, loved the class, and were moved by the experience, but certainly not the majority.' (Hammon, 2016, p. 25)

Greenberg, who had similar aspirations as a teacher, explained a similar process of disillusionment: "you can imagine the idealistic young teacher who is full of passion for what he's doing and thinks that he can convey that passion to others and light a flame in them too for this beautiful thing that he's doing. And what happened to me, that is when disillusionment came, and it came rapidly" (Robertson, 2019, p. 6:51). Bruce Smith recalls feeling that "I was forcing my students to do things they really didn't want to do, and they were very good at letting me know just what they thought of this" (Smith, 2015, para. 6).

How did these subjects process and make sense of their disillusionment? Did they blame themselves or their students? It isn't uncommon for teachers to blame students by attributing the source of off-task or disengaged behavior in students to the students' own trais (Nemer, Sutherland, Chow, & Kunemund, 2019). However, only one of the eight of the figures in this study - Kenneth Danford - reported anything like such attributions toward his students, asking himself, '"What's wrong with these kids, that they come here just to disrupt or distract?" I'd lament. "Can't they just be quiet and play along?"' (Danford, 2019, p. 32).

More common, though, was internalizing the blame, explaining the reality of teaching falling short of the ideal by taking the failure personally. Just after Danford’s above attribution, he writes that he began shifting the blame inward: “I owned the failure. It was my fault that these kids... weren’t inspired and engaged. I needed to be more creative, and more responsive. I just had to try harder” (Danford, 2019, p. 32). Even at the end of her fifth and final year of teaching, Morrison reports that she “was also still stuck in thinking that perhaps there was something wrong with me— somehow I wasn’t doing something right, and if I could just figure it out, then all would be well. I was approaching problems on an individual blame level mainly because no other approach presented itself” (Morrison, 2007, p. 14). Indeed, all eight of this study’s subjects voiced (some more intensely than others) feelings of self-blame over not being able to teach and manage their classroom the way to which they aspired.

By various routes, each of the eight figures also reports coming to believe, over time, that their struggles in teaching were not their or their students’ fault, but reflected a problem with the school system and its constraints. Hammon, for instance, recalls towards the end of his eleven-year teaching career being in meetings discussing a particular student’s behaviors: ‘if it is not going well for a kid, you know, the first place to look for the problem is always with the kid. It's not like the way we have things set up is the problem. And so, those meetings were an attempt to figure out what's wrong with this kid. And I'm just sitting there thinking "Well, maybe, you know, it's everything else”’ (Boles, 2019b, t. 8:40). How did these various teachers come to see, like Hammon did, the problems they saw in schools as systemic?

Matthew Gioia mentions that it was only in his second year, after he had experienced success with the school’s desired classroom management climate, that “the tranquility allowed

for me the deeper problems - the structural issues, paradigmatic problems with conventional schooling - to start to emerge for me" (Currie-Knight & Riley, 2019, p. 6:58). Younghans noticed recognizing that "the kids who were the thriving kids in the academic environment were sometimes the ones who were suffering the most, struggling with internal pressure that came from this external idea that their value was measured by grades," which seemed to allow her to reflect on success in school often demanded unhealthy attitudes in students (Boles, 2019a, t. 8:34). Hammon began to differentiate learning from doing well in school by noticing the opposite: kids who loved learning but did poorly in school for a refusal (or inability) to submit to its rules. He recalls:

> The kid who was crazy smart but failing all of his classes (I think he had a 2 percent in my class) because he refused to do any of the work; meanwhile he was asking me if I had any books about anarchy and carried around a dictionary to look up the words he didn't know in Thoreau's "On Civil Disobedience...."The kid who loved computer programming and deep thinking but was failing his other social studies class because he didn't keep his binder organized the way the teacher wanted. (Hammon, 2016, p. 26)

Three of this study's subjects (Morrison, Greenberg, and Hammon) report, in similar ways, processing their difficult teaching experience almost as scientists, adjusting different variables to see if they produced a difference in outcome in order to locate the source(s) of the problem. All three reported that when nothing they did (or that their peers seemed to do) produced the desired effects (engaged classroom, eager students), realizing that the problem had less to do with the teacher and students than the system they existed within. Morrison describes it precisely this way:

> The answers I had sought were all about isolating variables— did I cause the problem? Was it the size of my classes? Was it the state mandates? Was it the students? I had personalized my dissatisfactions with education— believing that I or some other individual factor was the main source of my discomfort. I persisted in this belief and in my quest to find a personalized, individualized solution because I had never encountered any other way to approach teaching problems. None of the staff development programs or faculty meetings I attended or readings I did ever indicated that the problems I was encountering were in need of anything beyond individualized solutions. To my knowledge, no other way of conceptualizing the discomforts existed other than “You (individual teacher, individual school) are just not doing the right things.” (Morrison, 2007, pp. 14–15)

Hammon tried many pedagogical and classroom management strategies, changed schools twice, and experienced several changes in curriculum. Yet, he noticed that, through all of that, “the essential problems persisted, and I realized more and more that they were systemic. No amount of tinkering around the edges was going to solve the problem of school for many of the kids I worked with” (Hammon, 2016, p. 26).

Santoro (2018) argues that when teachers become demoralized, their decision to stay or leave the profession will often have to do with whether and to what degree they feel they can change or mitigate the sources of demoralization. For these eight people, their interpretation that the problems they were seeing were systemic in nature very likely placed the locus of control almost entirely out of their individual hands. Greenberg, for instance, reports leaving teaching “

with the complete dissatisfaction I had with the entire educational structure. It had to do with the feeling that the structure did not serve the purposes of learning…" (D. Greenberg, 1996, p. 118).

Leaving Conventional Teaching and Finding SDLC's

Research Questions: *How did these people discover the idea of self-directed learning? Did they discover these ideas before or after they left their teaching career? How did their discovery of these ideas influenced (if at all) their decision to leave conventional school teaching and help them process their conventional school teaching experience?*

All eight of the people in this study reported being exposed to the idea of self-directed learning through print and web literature. Six of eight discovered this literature before leaving their conventional school teaching careers, but during the time in which they were growing increasingly dissatisfied with that career. Of these, two (Gioia and Danford) were exposed to these ideas at the urging of colleagues. For Danford, his colleague Joshua Hornick (with whom he'd later go on to found North Star Learning Center for Teens) urged him to read Grace Llewellyn's book The *Teenage Liberation Handbook*. Danford reports that it was about one year after Hornick first mentioned the book that he read and was persuaded by it :

> I was flabbergasted to say the least. Until this point, I was still pretty sure that kids needed to come to school to find teachers like Joshua and myself, and many of our colleagues who would help them learn what they needed to know, in order to go to college and have a good life....

> Grace [Llewellyn] was challenging that perspective. In fact, she was exposing it. She was forcing me to reconsider some assumptions, and to contemplate the implications if these assumptions were changed. (Danford, 2019, p. 35)

Mathew Gioia reports going in search of ways to explain the doubts he was having about teaching in a conventional school only to be told about the Sudbury Valley school by the school librarian (who was also a second-year teacher having similar doubts). After reading several books written by Daniel Greenberg and Mimsy Sidofsky of the Sudbury Valley school, he decided not to return for his third year of teaching and to pursue a staff position at a Sudbury school (Currie-Knight & Riley, 2019).

Two of eight figures in this study were exposed to literature about self-directed learning in graduate school programs. Morrison was exposed to "radical progressive" education writers in a graduate program she started toward the end of her teaching career. "I read authors including Henry Giroux, Maxine Greene, Paulo Freire, bell hooks, John Dewey, Ira Shor, Ivan Illich, Svi Shapiro, David Purpel, Nel Noddings, John Holt, and many, many others who all questioned the fundamental purpose of American schools," a position she herself had been intuiting prior to exposure to this literature (Morrison, 2007, p. 17). It was in this literature that she found reference to the Albany Free School, leading her to contact the school and work as an intern and conduct dissertation research there.

Smith similarly found out about SDLC's in graduate school, but only after he'd quit conventional school teaching. "I didn't get out because I'd found Sudbury schooling: actually, I caught only one passing reference to it during those years (though it was one [by] one of my former high-school students[])]" (Smith, 2015, para. 8). He reports that he didn't follow up on the

former student's recommendation, enrolling instead in a graduate program. "By the end of my first year in that program, I'd found my way into a group that would open the Chicago area's first Sudbury school," where he would become a staff member (Smith, 2015).

For the others, discovering literature about self-directed education came by individual efforts to make sense of their growing dissatisfaction with the conventional school experience. Grace Llewellyn, for instance, reports that "in the public schools where I'd subbed... I read voraciously, to make sense of the situation, and [self-directed learning and unschooling advocate] John Holt's books changed my world" (Llewellyn, 1998, p. 10). Younghans reports first finding several TEDTalks critical of conventional schooling.

> And then I kind of stumbled upon looking at and for alternatives to traditional school, and that is when I came across [former school teacher turned school critic] John Taylor Gatto and really got slapped in the face of like "oh, you think you are saving everybody" and it's like... a forced audience. So you think you are bestowing all of this knowledge to these kids, but often times, those kids, if they could choose, wouldn't be sitting in that classroom with you. So, really switches your thought process (Boles, 2019a, 13:16)

For Daniel Greenberg, his increasing dissatisfaction with conventional schooling was aided both by having a young child and watching how the child learned, as well as coming across A.S. Neill's book *Summerhilll* (1960), about the author's experience founding and working in a self-directed democratic school. Greenberg's wife Hanna reports that, after Daniel had quit his professorship, "Danny gave me A. S. Neill's book, *Summerhill*, and I read it and I said: We'll go,

that's what we're going to do" (H. Greenberg & Sadofsky, 2018, p. 24). It would influence the Greenbergs' subsequent decision to create the Sudbury Valley School.

For four of this study's subjects (Morrison, Gioia, Greenberg, Lllewellyn), finding this literature gave voice and affirmation to ideas they were already intuiting. For others (Younghans, Danford), this literature helped them shift their perspective and provide answers to the questions and doubts they were having regarding their experience teaching in conventional schools.

All eight figures in this study suggest that their exposure to literature and ideas about self-directed learning was vital in helping them articulate a different vision of learning than the one they had gone into their teaching careers with. In a study about the importance of teachers' vision to their career trajectories, Hammerness (2008) follows four teachers who changed schools in order to better align their work environments with their preexisting visions of what they wanted for their teaching experience. Yet, all eight of the figures in the present study reported (in different ways and to different degrees) that their normative visions of education changed over time, both because of their teaching experience and finding literature that exposed them to different and more self-directed visions of education. These teachers chose to seek out and work in SDLC's not because they came into teaching believing that learning happens best when students have significant freedom, but because their experience and exposure to literature on self-directed learning led them to revise their visions in that direction. This suggests an important role to play regarding the availability of such alternative educational literature, literature which helped these dissatisfied teachers articulate and embrace visions of education that spoke to their dissatisfactions.

It is also interesting to note that several figures in the present study inadvertently produced the very literature that would influence other figures. While Grace Llewelyn was primarily inspired by the works of John Holt, her work was mentioned as the inspiration for both Ken Danford (who received her book *Teenage Liberation Handbook* from colleague Joshua Hornick) and Joel Hammon (who reported reading the book in college and coming back to it at the end of his unsatisfactory teaching career). Daniel Greenberg was influenced by the writing of A.S. Neill but himself produced literature about the Sudbury Valley School that would go on to inspire both Mattew Gioia and Bruce Smith, who both went on to teach at different schools that follow the Sudbury mode. Kenneth Danforth similarly produced literature on his North Star Learning Centers that would influence Joel Hammon.

Conclusion

While there is much research on how and why teachers become dissatisfied with their teaching experience and decide to leave or persevere, this study highlights a yet unexplored middle space: teachers who shifted not between positions in conventional schools, but who shifted into roles in highly non-traditional SDLC learning spaces. While the story of each figure in this study is unique, there is arguably a similar narrative arc. All but two reported doing well in school or liking their school experience, and the remaining two reported having interests in academics despite not enjoying school. All but one reported going into teaching for highly idealistic reasons. All eight reported becoming disaffected by their teaching experience in various ways, often having to do with the discomfort they felt with the authoritarian role they had to play and a recognition that learning and schooling could be separable. All eight at some

point felt self-blame at not being able to be the teacher they envisioned being, but went on to believe that their dissatisfaction could be best explained by systemic factors to do with the constraints of compulsory formal schooling. All eight were aided in this realization by finding literature (referred by colleagues or coming across it in graduate school or by their own research), and this realization is what led them to seek out positions at SDLCs.

During their experience teaching at conventional schools, these eight figures all clearly had demoralization experiences as described by Santoro (2011, 2018). Yet, they chose a path very different from those surveyed in literature on teacher attrition and retention. They did not persevere and remain in their positions, nor leave the field of education entirely, nor shift into other positions within the formal k-12 system. Rather, these eight dealt with their demoralization experience by locating its source not with their own, their students', or their schools,' failings, but with the failings of the education system they were working within. Yet, this framing of the problem did not convince them simply to leave the field of education behind but, with help from literature on self-directed learning, imagine and seek out spaces where learning could take place along much more self-directed lines.

As teacher attrition and dissatisfaction remains a pressing issue, it is my hope that this study highlights a hitherto unexplored way that a set of dissatisfied teachers have dealt with their dissatisfaction that go beyond the binary choice of leaving or remaining in the field of education. In an ironically self-directed way, these teachers were able to reimagine what learning could look like and found or find their way to SDLC spaces that fit these reimagined visions of learning.

References

Boles, B. (Executive Producer). (2019a). Cassidy Younghans on building a career in self-directed education as a Twenty-Something (Audio Podcast). In *Off-Trail Learning*. https://soundcloud.com/blakebo/cassidy-younghans-on-building-a-career-in-self-directed-education-as-a-twenty-something.

Boles, B. (Executive Producer). (2019b). Joel Hammon on quitting teaching. (Audio Podcast). In *Off-Trail Learning*. https://soundcloud.com/blakebo/joel-hammon-on-quitting-teaching.

Borman, G. D., & Dowling, N. M. (2008). Teacher attrition and retention: A meta-analytic and narrative review of the research. *Review of Educational Research*, *78*(3), 367–409. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308321455

Buchanan, J., Prescott, A., Schuck, S., Aubusson, P., Burke, P., & Louviere, J. (2013). Teacher retention and attrition: Views of early career teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, *38*(3). https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2013v38n3.9

Cochran-Smith, M. (2004). Stayers, leavers, lovers, and dreamers: Insights about teacher retention. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *55*(5), 387–392. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487104270188

Currie-Knight, K., & Riley, G. (Executive Producers). (2019). From middle school teacher to Sudbury School staff member (w/ Matthew Gioia) (Audio Podcast). In *Learning by Living*. https://www.spreaker.com/user/11724251/lbl-matt-gioia.

Danford, K. (2019). *Learning is natural, school is optional: The North Star approach to offering teens a head start on life*. Golden Door Press.

Greenberg, D. (1996). *Outline of a new philosophy*. Sudbury Valley School Press.

Greenberg, H., & Sadofsky, M. (2018). *Vanguards of a new world: Sudbury Valley school's staff at the half-century mark*. Sudbury Valley School Press.

Hammerness, K. (2008). "If you don't know where you are going, any path will do": The role of teachers' visions in teachers' career paths. *The New Educator*, *4*(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/15476880701829184

Hammon, J. (2016). *Teacher liberation handbook: How to leave your school and create a place where young people can thrive*. Gretton Group.

Llewellyn, G. (1998). *Teenage liberation handbook: How to quit school and get a real life and education*. Lowry House Publishing.

Llewellyn, G., & Silver, A. (2001). *Guerilla learning: How to give your kids a real education with or without school*. Wiley and Sons.

Long, J. S., McKenzie-Robblee, S., Schaefer, L., Steeves, P., Wnuk, S., Pinnegar, E., & Clandinin, D. J. (2012). Literature review on induction and mentoring related to early career teacher attrition and retention. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, *20*(1), 7–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2012.645598

Macdonald, D. (1999). Teacher attrition: A review of literature. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *15*(8), 835–848. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(99)00031-1

Morrison, K. A. (2007). *Free school teaching: A journey into radical progressive education*. State University of New York Press.

Neill, A. S. (1960). *Summerhill: A radical approach to child rearing*. Hart Publishing.

Nemer, S. L., Sutherland, K. S., Chow, J. C., & Kunemund, R. L. (2019). A systematic literature review identifying dimensions of teacher attributions for challenging student

behavior. *Education and Treatment of Children*, *42*(4), 557–578. https://doi.org/10.1353/etc.2019.0026

Rinke, C. R. (2014). *Why Half of Teachers Leave the Classroom: Understanding Recruitment and Retention in Today's Schools*. Rowman and Littlefield Education.

Robertson, R. (n.d.). *Sudbury Valley school: Daniel Greenberg*. In *Honey, I'm Homeschooling the Kids*. Retrieved from https://imhomeschooling.com/sudbury-valley-school-daniel-greenberg/

Santoro, D. A. (2011). Good teaching in difficult times: Demoralization in the pursuit of good work. *American Journal of Education*, *118*(1), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1086/662010

Santoro, D. A. (2018). *Demoralized : why teachers leave the profession they love and how they can stay /*. Harvard University Press.

Smith, B. L. (2015, March 11). *Dream jobs and nightmares*. Write Learning. https://writelearning.wordpress.com/2015/03/11/dream-jobs-and-nightmares/

Stevens, T. (2009, May 26). *Interview with Bruce Smith on the Sudbury model of education*. A Better Education. https://abettereducation.blogspot.com/2009/05/interview-with-bruce-smith-on-sudbury.html

Tarver, K. S. (2018). *A Case Study on Why Teachers Leave the Teaching Profession During the First Few Years of Teaching* [Ed.D., Northcentral University]. https://search.proquest.com/docview/2122053216/abstract/F07C15C4081460APQ/1

Wright, K. B., Shields, S. M., Black, K., Banerjee, M., & Waxman, H. C. (2018). Teacher perceptions of influence, autonomy, and satisfaction in the early Race to the Top era. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *26*(0). https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.26.3449

Younghans, C. (2018). *My self-directed (adult) journey into self-directed education*. Tipping Points. https://www.self-directed.org/tp/my-self-directed-journey/

Kevin Currie-Knight is a Teaching Associate Professor in East Carolina University's College of Education, where he specializes in the philosophy, history, and political economy of US education. He is the author of the book *Education in the Marketplace: An Intellectual History of Pro-Market Libertarian Visions for Education in Twentieth-Century America.*