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REVERENTIAL LANGUAGE IN AMERICAN EDUCATION: WHY WE STARTED
CALLING TEACHERS “HEROES” AND HOW LANGUAGE IS AT THE ROOT OF
BROKEN SCHOOL SYSTEMS

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By

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Since the development of large-scale free public education in the nineteenth century, aspects of the education system in the United States have changed drastically. Pedagogy, media, feminism, racism, teacher's unions, data, funding, and state/federal accountability structures, have all altered experiences in education spaces over time, perceptions of the system as it exists today, and predictions for its future. Large, well-funded organizations, both for-profit and nonprofit, are investing time and money in examining the efficacy and equity of our current education systems with a critical eye.

Even with progressive change, there still exist deep systemic issues within our system of education that are perpetuated through the language used, both within and outside of education spaces, to describe educators. This language, normalized in education spaces, often feels positive or complimentary at first glance, but words such as “calling”, “sacrifice”, “passion”, “angel”, “hero”, and “national treasure” go beyond the scope of appropriate commendatory language found in a typical workplace in the United States. While it may seem counterintuitive on the surface, this language idolizing teachers are some of the greatest inhibitors of positive systemic change in education. These words, evoking saintly or godlike images, many with origins in mythology, folklore, and most deeply, Christianity, were brought into education spaces intentionally during the Victorian Age. The deliberate usage of this language to describe teachers, specifically female teachers, was calculated, and deeply problematic in its intention in assimilating new immigrants and people of color in the United States. Its effect on educators and their students over the next two-hundred years paints a complicated picture. This language, which will be referred to as *reverential language* throughout this text, perpetuates unrealistic images and expectations of educators and education. As a result, systemic

challenges of professions in education are misplaced by those within and outside of education spaces as problems with the educators themselves.

Reverential language complicates the relationship between person and profession. Through this lexicon, educators feel a deep personal responsibility to their profession and often tie their identity to their profession: *“if I am viewed as a national treasure and this is my passion and my calling, I must give my entire self to being an educator”*. This expectation does not come just from the educator themselves, but also from the community surrounding them. The age-old joke about teachers “living at school” is revealing; there are generations of teachers and community members who view teaching as an identity, a career without an end, much like becoming a nun or a priest and joining the order.

Reverential language within education sets the expectation of complete sacrifice; that every child must be reached regardless of the cost to the self. When education stops being a profession and becomes a “calling”, any error is both a failure of personal character and a failure of another human life. Mistakes and failures are often unavoidable with any profession, but working within a deeply flawed system, failures are inevitable. Reverential language anchors challenges of the profession that have changed very little in the last two hundred years, perpetuates toxic perceptions and expectations of educators, and is directly contributing to growing teacher burnout rates. Without widespread understanding of how and why this language grew within public education spaces in the United States and making a concerted effort to remove it from said spaces, students and teachers alike will continue to suffer.

Reverential language, embedded in teaching preservice programs, politics, media, schools, and non-profits has its origins in the feminization of teaching efforts from the 1830s. Religious imagery and rhetoric was used strategically to sell what was then a novel idea of a female teacher as the most cost-effective staffing solution for an expanding free public education system. The intention of this language in the 1830s was to distance teaching from a traditional profession, allowing women to possess their own professional space in a way that felt palatable to middle and upper class society at the time. Reverential language, mythic and divine, distances the public perception of teachers, as well as teachers' expectations of themselves, from the reality of the job, setting teachers up for failure and setting the public up for a witch hunt. If teachers who "succeed" are the "heroes" or "angels", then the ones who "fail" must be the "villains" or "evil". The extreme binary which develops from this language is angel/devil, hero/villain, savior/foe, friend/enemy.

The Christian roots of our public education system are rarely acknowledged in common classroom history, but are largely responsible for systems, trends, and values that we have come to see as norms in American public education - it is where the reverential language surrounding teachers originates. Christian rhetoric continues to inform public education practices. Christian voices, specifically white Christian voices, have long been the dominant voices in education. Christianity itself is not a problem, but a lack of consciousness around the Christian origins of American public education is a problem. This lack of consciousness cements Christian values and norms as acceptable public school norms because it is "the way it's always been". These practices are alienating diverse populations of students and families, keeping our education systems

overwhelmingly white and female, keeping teacher pay amongst the lowest pay for individuals with professional degrees (Allegretto and Mischel), keeping this divisive binary reverential language associated with worship and Christianity in the common education vernacular, and increasing rates of teacher burnout.

Every US Secretary of Education in the last 30 years has been quoted referring to teachers as “heroes”. Former US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated that an effective teacher could “walk on water”. In what often feels like the same breath, high-ranking politicians on both sides of the aisle have publicly referred to teachers as “lazy”, “greedy”, “angry”, “stupid”, “fools”, and “deserving of a punch to the face”. New York Times writer Dana Goldstein describes the evolution of the teaching profession as “a peculiar profession, one attacked and revered in equal measure”(5). As a result of the pervasiveness of this binary reverential language in the United States, teachers simultaneously hold the weight of their profession as their personal identity and attempt unrealistic and largely unattainable goals inside of their classrooms. Mistakes and failures are a natural, arguably critical, part of learning and growth. Instilling a fear of failure through the prospect of villainization leaves little room for authentic personal or professional development.

As it stands, teachers are leaving the profession in record numbers or moving from school to school, disrupting vital supportive relationships for students across the country. A massive teacher shortage is causing states to grant emergency certifications to individuals who are largely unqualified, further impacting children’s academic achievement and social/emotional health. Acknowledging the problematic nature of the existing rhetoric, images, and stereotypes surrounding teachers has the potential to

disrupt the current teacher exodus from the profession, diversify the world of education, and create positive systemic changes within our education system, for students, families, and educators.

Research Methodology:

This paper examines how reverential language is inhibiting progressive efforts in modern public education through an interpretivist epistemological approach. The first observations to initiate my research process came from observations of colleagues and media that characterized the education profession. Language and interpretations of language surrounding the education profession are explored and research is grounded in patterns of historical events, but meanings of language can change significantly over time and require contextual analysis of societal norms and social constructions of a given time period. For example, the prevalence of Christian rhetoric in secular political and journalistic spaces in the early to mid-19th century is necessary context for understanding a historical impetus for its use in secular education spaces. The social significance of women teaching professionally, changes in definitions and expectations of career professionalism (for women across professions and for teachers of both genders), and population demographic shifts over time are all required to build a framework that both clarifies the initial purpose behind funding a free public education system and highlights existing flaws.

The Feminization and Christianization of Free Public Education in the United States:

Teaching has long been considered a feminized profession, with women holding 80% of teaching positions by the end of the 19th century across New England (Preston). This statistic has changed little in nearly 150 years with women making up 76% of the United States teaching force (NCES). Prior to the 1820s, teaching positions were held exclusively by men. The admittance of women into the teaching profession was hotly contested and widely debated, but was eventually made palatable by the efforts of Catharine Beecher. Beecher used her social platform to slowly rebrand the idea of an educator, from hardened academic to a new image of “virtuous nurturer” and the “republican motherhood”, later developing into the “Motherteacher”. This rebranding, the success of which was reliant on paternalism, xenophobia, and Christian ideals, was the beginning of pervasive rhetoric and action that still lives deeply in our current education system.

The daughter of a notable minister, Catharine Beecher had a prominent platform in her community through her father. Part of a generation that rebuffed traditional Calvinist beliefs of predestination, Catharine disagreed with her father’s religious interpretations, but was still deeply influenced by him, and quite religious herself. She, “like him, saw herself as a missionary” for her cause in “educat[ing] young children and their parents to lead Christian lives”, believing that “by living an upright, unselfish life one made the conditions for one’s salvation”(Burstyn 393). Beecher saw an opportunity

for women to simultaneously improve their standing in life and give selflessly through formal academic education and professionalized teacher training.

The 1830s saw the development of the Common School, the precursor to public schools in the United States. Common Schools were meant to be free to all through district-based tax funding, public, and without religious affiliation. Prior to Common Schools, formal education was tuition-based, often expensive and, as a result, open to a very limited number of people who could afford it. Formal academic education institutions, teaching subjects recognized in a 21st century classroom, such as mathematics, sciences, language, history, or philosophy, prior to the Common Schools, were not open to women. Before the development of Common Schools, women's schooling focused solely on the domestic arts: cooking, cleaning, sewing, etiquette, music, and fine arts. In certain circumstances, women may have received a more formal academic education in private settings, through tutors or governesses, but these instances were expensive and rare.

During an era where elite and middle class women relied on strategic marriage arrangements to determine their state in life, instruction in formal academic subjects was thought by many to be unachievable by women. Beecher was at the forefront of a fairly radical and progressive social shift. Many Puritans, like Beecher, were disillusioned with the tenets of Calvinism, and supported the social shift of the new generation from rigid Calvinist principles of predestination to the idea that any person, man or woman, was capable of improving himself or herself, and determining his or her own destiny. This social shift, still rooted in Christian ideals, was crucial to the success of Beecher's eventual push for a female teacher workforce.

Those who believed in a woman's capability but disagreed with her education in academic subjects often felt that education for women was a waste of time or money, as women were not entering into paid professions. Many felt academic education could intimidate a potential husband, decreasing a woman's marriageability. Beecher not only believed in the academic aptitude of women, but saw increased education for middle class and elite women with professional teacher training as a way for many women to independently earn a living and, potentially, possess more choice in their timeline and partner in marriage. The professionalization piece was important to Beecher, as she "believ[ed] passionately that women would achieve equal status only when they had professionalized their work"(Burstyn 386). However, middle class and elite women voluntarily working outside of the home, teaching both girls and boys, was a radical idea that needed to be sold strategically to men, who possessed the most social and political capital.

Beecher, a devout Christian in-step with her time, tied the benefits of a woman's academic education and teacher training to godliness. For Beecher, tying these two ideas together was not just a convenient way to convince men that a woman's place in education was proper. Beecher believed that harmony within a civilization came through the idea of "distinctive divisions of responsibility"(Beecher 7) and she was adamant that the domestic sphere, where women already held power and influence, was a natural, transferable space to a classroom of children.

As conversations started to develop around a free public education system in the United States, Beecher found an opportunity to insert women into the equation. Beecher asserted that the goal of public education of children should be to create "good American

citizens”, assimilated through Calvinist Christian values of “submission, self-denial, and self-sacrifice”(Villanueva Gardner, 2). As such, women were the natural choice as educators, though they themselves would need an academic education. A woman would use her education to “regulate her own mind and be useful to others” because it is a woman’s “hand that first stamps impressions on the immortal spirit, that must remain forever...woman, whatever are her relations in life, is...the guardian of the nursery, the companion of childhood, and the constant model of imitation”(Beecher).

Beecher’s language around a woman’s role as a teacher evokes images of a virginal Mother Mary, an image further accentuated by the fact that women, once acquiring the privilege of professional teacher education, were only allowed to work as they remained unmarried, and were not allowed to date during the term of their contracts. Beecher’s language was, at once, nationalistic, patriotic, and Christian. She developed and solidified the idea of teaching as a “spiritual calling” for young women across the United States.

Beecher deftly combined divine images with an illusion of urgency. Conversations among politicians questioned how to go about educating individuals out West on the frontier. Beecher preyed on growing xenophobia, warning through a widely circulated essay, *An Essay on the Education of Female Teachers*, that “thousands of degraded foreigners and their ignorant families, are pouring into this nation at every avenue”(Beecher) and that “the country was about to be submerged in ignorance and vice [as] millions of children were growing up in the West without any means of instruction”(Burstyn 394). Beecher sold the radical idea of a well-educated woman at the

helm of a classroom as the antidote; moral educators capable of quelling a potential “violent rising of the underclass” (D. Goldstein, 20). This was in reference to the French Revolution just thirty years prior and still strong in the memories of many men in positions of political power. In the nineteenth century, “training in behavior...had a more important place in American education than the development of intellectual power”(Katz 679). Beecher touted women going West to educate young pioneer children as a “patriotic duty” to “educate the masses for democracy”.

Demand for female education also eventually came through a burgeoning middle class who saw the benefit of educating their daughters, “both for distinction and to provide them with the tools for self-sufficiency in an uncertain economy”(Turpin 135). Beecher’s intention was for the teaching profession to be one of “wealth, influence, and honor”(Turpin 140) for women, but a free public education system was expensive and would be taxpayer funded. Politicians were ultimately sold by Beecher herself on a female teaching force because women would be cheap to employ (Beecher).

At the very beginning of the nineteenth century, just before Beecher’s rise to prominence, missionary educators going West with the purpose of teaching Native Americans had gained visibility through the Civilization Act of 1819. Native Americans were deemed “uncivilized”, “primitive”, “heathens”, “filthy” and “pagans” due to their beliefs around pluralism, sexual openness, sharing wealth, lack of corporal punishment in children, and women’s placement in positions of political power (Spring 11-12). Core values of Protestantism in the early nineteenth century were that “time devoted to work kept the mind from wandering down the path of evil,...strict discipline [of children] indicated a high level of civilization”, as did accumulation of property to pass down

wealth through the nuclear patriarchal family (Spring). The Civilization Act “conceptualiz[ed] Indians as children” and, as “civilizing” was interpreted to include “conversion to Christianity”, the United States would use schools and white missionary educators to “culturally transform Native Americans in one generation”(Spring 23). The Civilization Act’s use of school as a means of control through deculturalization and reeducation paved the way for Catharine Beecher’s vision of organized, wide-spread Common Schools movement, based in Protestant values and with women at the helm.

All of this seems contradictory to the First Amendment of the US Constitution, “congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of a religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”, as well as the Establishment Clause, prohibiting the government from making any law “respecting an establishment of religion”. Thomas Jefferson had himself interpreted the Establishment Clause in an 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association to mean a “wall of separation between church and state”. However, Protestantism was so deeply entrenched in the social fabric of the dominant American society, that efforts like the Civilization Act, grounded in Protestant religious ideology, passed without public objection. Many educators at the time would “begin the public school day with a prayer and a reading from a Protestant Bible”(Spring 25). While religious freedom and diversity in twenty-first century public schools are prevalent and the Supreme Court of the United States has ruled repeatedly that religious favoritism in public schools is impermissible, religious diversity in the early nineteenth century was viewed largely as a threat to social order.

The dominance of Protestantism on our country’s early public school systems, let alone its lingering effects, is rarely addressed in traditional school classrooms. When

students are learning about early American history, it is implied that once freedom of religion was constitutionally established, there was true religious freedom for every person in every public space, and every public service or entity was created with a non-denominational lens. The heavily Protestant language, expectations, and traditions of our public school systems, administrators, teachers, curriculum, and language both in and around the classroom is still prevalent today, and its origins and context are not widely known or discussed.

Saving, Assimilating, Civilizing: the genesis of the United States missionary teacher

The Board of National Popular Education began in Ohio in 1847 with the intention of “advanc[ing] popular Christian education in our country”(Morton 132). Much like the Civilizations Act, the board associated “democracy” and “patriotism” with “Christian duty” and “godliness”. This association was a concerted effort, but also an intersection that felt expected and part of the natural order to the dominant voices in society at the time: white, male, and Protestant. Through the efforts of the board, young, single, Christian women, many from well-to-do New England families, were trained as teachers to teach in struggling or impoverished communities in the rural West, communities described as “on the verge of civilization”(Morton 134).

Women’s stories of their decision to join in the efforts of the Board are depicted as brave, dutiful, and sacrificial. The stories, most often depicted through Christian publications at the time, such as *The Evangelist*, later made their way into public, state-funded historical societies and children’s public school textbooks, but without

acknowledgement of religious affiliations or context. While separation of church and state exist in modern public schools, public schools began with clear Christian rhetoric and intent to impart Christian values, specifically rooted in overwhelmingly white and Western European Protestantism, on all citizens, regardless of religious affiliation or denomination. These historical stories, read without a complete understanding of the religious context, solidify Christian expectations and values as synonymous with American expectations and values in what is supposed to be a non-denominational school setting.

Catharine Beecher, instrumental in the development of the Board, was in charge of the teacher training for the women who would venture west. Young women would receive an abbreviated training, several weeks immediately prior to their assignment, in teaching fundamentals: a brief overview of academic subject matter with additional training in domestic economy, health of children, punctuality, truth and honesty, diet, how to avoid sectarian jealousy, how to deal with party politics, and how to meet petty gossip (Morton). Women describe friends and relatives pleading with them to change their minds, warning them of physical dangers, but women were taught to believe that their duty to their pupils outweighed their personal health, safety, and financial security; they were to be “motivated by ‘energy, discretion, and self-denying benevolence’”(D. Goldstein). One woman describes her reason for going as “a calling”(D. Goldstein), another saying that “the thrilling story of [Missionary women’s] lives awoke [in her] a missionary spirit” and that she was “more needed [at her Western teaching post] than at any other spot on earth”(Morton 134). At one point in a teacher’s story, a school in a

Western settlement is described as a “hovel”, constructed of dirt, with a few loose boards and pegs as seating. The teacher’s response is described: “A less determined person might have turned back when confronted with the hopeless appearance of the schoolroom, but New England fortitude triumphed, and the courageous school-teacher made her preparations to open classes”(Morton 137).

Stories continue of women validating their nominal salaries and poor working conditions by reaffirming their own judiciousness and frugality. One story romanticizes a dilapidated classroom by upholding the teacher who “had the pupils drag in branches...to cover the drafty holes...thus mak[ing] the room more attractive, as well as somewhat more comfortable”(Morton 138). Another story exalts the teacher for protecting her children during a fight between Native American tribes, reportedly convincing the Native Americans to leave by telling them that “children’s hearts were not strong like ours!”(Bishop). A proposal of marriage from a Native American man to a local white teacher is depicted as humorous, benighted, desperate, and inconceivable. Many stories depicted women who tied their Christian duty to their “Americanism”, and upheld Westward expansion in the heyday of Andrew Jackson and Manifest Destiny. One story ends by immortalizing a pioneer teacher: “a hundred years after she opened her school in the little settlement of St. Paul, she remains a symbol of the westward spread of culture and of the role of education in the lives of Minnesota’s pioneers”(Morton 141).

These stories are written depicting heroism, sacrifice, and duty above all else, with white women as martyrs. These stories and this rhetoric is so embedded in our consciousness, that stories like this have been printed in countless history textbooks in the United States, distributed to millions of children, taught as a part of a “Westward

expansion” unit that is still a part of the vast majority of US states’ required social studies curriculum for late elementary-age children. The women who participated in the Board’s initiative were, undoubtedly, brave. Many moved across the country to a completely unknown situation, prepared to never see their families and friends again, prepared to live a life of hardship, often in extreme climate conditions, knowing they could die. However, the stories told are one-dimensional. At a pivotal time when children are developing their identities, stories of white women going out into the unknown to “save” children of families deemed “poor”, “ignorant”, “savage”, “pagan”, and “foreign”(Beecher) are written without complication or complexity, without acknowledgement of othering, and taught to twenty-first century learners as aspirational. There is no mention of politicism, racism, Christian rhetoric, xenophobia, women being blocked from holding any other professional working positions, being forced to quit their teaching positions upon marriage, or barely surviving off of their pay.

The Modern Missionary Teacher and the Hero Teacher Narrative:

Author Dana Goldstein points out the similarities between the BNPE’s program and the highly popular Teach For America (TFA) model present today. With its recruitment of young elite college graduates, with no requirement of an education background, a very small stipend, and only a two year commitment, TFA has been compared with missionary work. The criticisms are generally that elite college graduates are using a profession as a temporary personal development experience, at the expense of

low-income childrens' education. While a teacher's rate of effectiveness (effectiveness measured in student test score growth, increased attendance rates, and decreased number disciplinary infractions) increases most dramatically over the first four years of a teacher's time in the classroom, teachers are at their least effective point in their career prior to year four (Poldosky). Students in the highest poverty schools are 50% more likely to have a teacher with less than 4 years experience when compared to students in the lowest poverty schools (Poldosky), resulting in students with statistically the highest academic needs and highest rates of trauma most likely to have the most ineffective teachers.

TFA only requires its students to stay for two years in the classroom. About 40% of TFA students do not renew their contracts after two years and, of those who stay on, less than 25% make it past 4 years (Donaldson & Johnson). Of those who do stay on, about 85% transfer out of their original placement school after 4 years (Cohen) eliminating the potential for the positive effects on students seen after 4 years in TFA placement schools. TFA has faced broad criticism since its inception. Arguably, the criticisms are not unwarranted; those choosing to participate in TFA with the expectation that it will be a temporary, low-paid, "mission-like" experience are not just harming student outcomes, they're reinforcing antiquated norms in the education profession that are hindering career teachers.

Just as Beecher recruited women from elite backgrounds, TFA recruits from elite schools, thus creating exclusivity that causes its participants to compete for the role of greatest "victim-hero", further reinforcing the "hero" or reverential language binary. Wendy Kopp, creator of TFA, describes the organization as "created by and for young

idealists” and the TFA corps members themselves echo this assessment, “frequently describ[ing] themselves and their peers as idealistic, noting specifically their identity as a group of empathetic, high-achieving, dedicated individuals”(Matsui). Matsui, a former corps member herself, describes the “hero narrative” as “an active expression of idealism in TFA”.

The “hero teacher” narrative and the reverential language associated with it are not unique to TFA; it’s pervasive throughout many teacher pre-service programs. A teacher pre-service program at the University of Texas at Austin, widely considered one of the country’s top schools for education majors, was constructed around the idea of the “hero’s journey” by Dr. L. Goldstein, an associate professor and director of early childhood teacher education at University of Texas at Austin. Goldstein describes her “hero’s journey”-themed pre-service program as the following:

"The hero is called to awaken and to begin her journey...then she proceeds to a threshold where she leaves behind her previous life...period of initiation where she meets unfamiliar forces, some of which threaten her and some of which offer magical aid. Successful negotiation of these trials leads our hero to personal transformation, growth, and illumination. The hero then returns to the world to share what she has learned"(Goldstein 9-10).

Goldstein's impetus for reconstructing her pre-service teacher education course around the idea of the "hero's journey" was to "combat negativism"(L. Goldstein 9) and students feeling "disillusioned by the contrast between their idealized images [of teaching]", the kind perpetuated by widespread movies, stories, media, “and the realities of the profession”(L. Goldstein 7). Goldstein acknowledges different challenges of teaching, "expectations, role clarification, conformity, time, evaluation, assignments, peer discussions, feedback"(L. Goldstein 7), but Goldstein’s approach ends up echoing

Catharine Beecher's missionary-style teacher education with its elevation of the individual who sacrifices, who pushes through all trials and tribulations.

The metaphor of the "hero's journey" applied to teaching indicates that there is an end which will be reached, and that end will be significant, transformational, and clear to the teacher. Individualist language implies that one's profession as a teacher is a solo "journey", as opposed to a collaborative experience, with "success" measured by a teacher's own ability to navigate the system of education. Use of the words "successful negotiation" reinforces the current education system as a system that may be flawed, but is still workable through one's own efforts. Instead of being seen as "job training", labeling the beginning of a teaching profession as an "initiation period" pressurizes the experience. "Initiation" again implies that there is a "truth" or an "answer". You will either "make it" or you won't. In a hero's journey, failure, then, becomes the sole responsibility of the individual, rather than an opportunity for collective action to fix a flawed system. As a result, Goldstein misses an opportunity to model authentic conversations about the work that needs to be done within education systems in the United States, origins of students' idealized images of teaching, and the constant collaboration, openness, and vulnerability needed to make change in education spaces.

Goldstein paints cooperating teachers, those who oversee student teachers in a classroom setting, as "a presence who guards the passage" to students' knowledge and success, "complex characters with motivations and behaviors that are often unclear and unstable"(Goldstein 10). In being characterized, cooperating teachers are reduced to gatekeepers with set agendas to puzzle through, instead of humans, life-long learners, at times flawed in their own practice. This characterization separates the student teacher

from the teacher, reducing opportunities for authentic conversation about the joys, challenges, and realities of the profession.

Goldstein's implementation of this "hero's journey" pre-service program begs the question of why a hero's journey metaphor is needed in the first place; the implication being that students would drop out of the pre-service program upon discovering that teaching is not as rosy a profession as students had previously thought it to be. But expecting a change in one's attitude and outlook to shift student outcomes is not a sustainable long-term solution. Despite Goldstein's acknowledgement of the hero's journey as an isolating experience and quoting Kathleen Noble's feminist reinterpretation of a hero in order to avoid stereotypical representations of a hero, there is still reverential language used that is pressurized and expectant, "calling" being one example, that links a profession with an identity and failure within a job with failure of self. When a young woman in Goldstein's study, Amber, posits that she "like[s] thinking of [her]self as a hero on a journey. It gives meaning, purpose, and humor to [her] life"(Goldstein 15), we might be tempted to see this as someone dedicated wholeheartedly to a "calling". Instead, this is a dangerous connection of a deeply flawed system to a person's sense of self. If Amber chooses another profession in the future, she is positioned to see herself as a failure rather than someone who is making a different career choice.

The challenges referenced by Goldstein continue beyond the student teaching experience into the full-time teacher's classroom. The use of the "hero's journey" metaphor implies that these challenges can be solved or overcome. As these challenges are not aspects of the teaching profession that go away, the use of metaphors and myths to, "create educational contexts and opportunities that support and sustain our students as

they navigate these difficult times [student teaching]"(Goldstein 7) is engaging students in a dangerous form of short-term self-preservation. The implied reason for perpetuating these narratives is out of fear of losing individuals who would want to become teachers. The result of continued acts of short-term self-preservation is eventual teacher burnout. Teachers are leaving anyway.

Elementary education theorist, Bill Ayers, describes the trope of the “hero teacher” as one who, “must win [students] over to a better life, all while doing battle with his idiot colleagues, the dull-witted administration, and the dangerously backward parents. He is a solitary hero. The Saint-teacher’s task is urgent because he must figure out who can be saved before it’s too late...the bad teachers have already given up on all kids. That’s their sin”(Ayers 201-202). The hero teacher protagonist works tirelessly against all odds, sacrifices their personal comforts, for an outcome that is greater than themselves. Matsui describes these stories as “over-simplified, incomplete, or exaggerated...untrue in how they misstate challenges, what resources a person needs, and what a person can accomplish through the prescribed method”(Matsui). Hero narratives, whether published by Beecher, *The Evangelist*, public newspapers, modern textbooks, school districts, non-profits, TFA, or private for-profit education companies, all possess the same common threads of idealistic story-telling, often through an accelerated timeline. Movies such as “Stand and Deliver”, “Freedom Writers”, “Won’t back Down”, “The Hobart Shakespeareans”, “Blackboard Jungle”, and “To Sir with Love” perpetuate the general public’s expectation of the teacher as “the hero”. These movies, “collectively...shape cultural consciousness around what it means to be a teacher and how to address educational inequity”(Matsui). These stories uphold systems that are

ineffectual and inequitable at best, and ineffectual and racist at worst. TFA and other in-service programs are in a position of validating the media's interpretations of what a teacher “should be”, perpetuating reverential language in education spaces, and the harmful binary of “hero/villain”.

The “hero teacher” narrative masks the need for systemic change within our schools; it allows structural oppression, institutional racism, and historic inequity to be obscured solely as teacher ineffectiveness. The singular nature of idealistic hero narratives “reinforce[s] a narrative that is detached from reality and history...limit[ing] the relevance and effectiveness of idealists’ efforts to address structural inequity”(Matsui). Individuals in positions of power wind up diagnosing the wrong problems. The continued publication and wide acceptance of these narratives sets an expectation that the responsibility of public education rests entirely on individual teachers. Aspiring teachers are set up to internalize failures, an inevitable part of any developing career, as personal ineffectiveness rather than opportunities for growth. The public response to a system that places the greatest emphasis on the effectiveness of individual teacher performance is punitive individual teacher accountability; *this piece isn't working, so let's remove this piece*. Even in education spaces where it is widely accepted that “the system needs to be improved”, the messaging to teachers is often simultaneously, “you’re not working hard enough for the kids”.

Effects of the “Hero Teacher” Narrative on Schools:

The hero teacher narrative, prevalent in both teacher pre-service programs and schools, is detrimental to the system as a whole, whether the teacher “succeeds” or “fails”. For teachers who internalize reverential language and the hero teacher narrative and are successful, continuing to work in schools, possibly in positions of leadership overseeing other teachers, a “sink or swim” mentality can persist - “I did this, so why can’t you?”. If teachers feel that there is a "success" to be reached and they are struggling to attain it, they are less likely to open up their own classroom spaces. Opening up can be viewed as opening up to criticism and potential failure rather than growth and opportunity.

The expectations communicated through reverential language and hero narratives, of a teacher’s sole responsibility for closing achievement gaps and changing the trajectory of a child’s life, for better or for worse, creates a pressurized responsibility to be an effective teacher immediately and at all times. TFA’s Chief Knowledge Officer, Steven Farr, asserts that,

“highly effective teachers first seek root causes [for student academic failures] in their own actions. Because they see themselves as ultimately responsible for what happens in their classroom, they begin with the assumption that their actions and inactions are the source of student learning and lack of learning” (Farr 185).

What happens in a classroom, especially with children who have experienced or are experiencing high levels of trauma in their home lives, can be unpredictable.

Academic learning sometimes needs to be paused to address social emotional needs with patience, empathy, and additional systems to build trust and security in the classroom, with the understanding that academic learning cannot take place effectively if a child

does not feel safe or secure. That is not to say that teachers do not bear responsibility for the systems and structures implemented in their classrooms, they do. These systems and structures, however, do not always work the first time and systems that do work initially, may not work indefinitely, needing to be reworked again and again. If the implicit messaging to young teachers is that they are both capable of and expected to control children's social/emotional needs and academic needs at all times within their classroom, with the cost of error falling solely on them and causing irreparable harm to the children they serve, then there is no room for trial, error, and reworking. With a public call to arms to hold teachers accountable through the last three US presidencies, there is a palpable fear that if social pressure is taken off of teachers, they will become complacent and lazy, or they'll become disillusioned by the flaws in the education system that are beyond their control and quit. But if failures in the classroom are internalized as shameful rather than opportunities for growth based on our current rhetoric in schools and inservice programs, we're setting new teachers up for burnout anyway.

TFA corps members (CM) spoke about their own expectations on entering the program as "being a kind of savior to students and then having these expectations affirmed through TFA's messaging and structure...CMs internalized TFA's message that they needed to be in control in all situations,"(Matsui). When this obscured view becomes a singular and narrow focus, teachers, especially new teachers, become desperate for an illusion of perfection in order to avoid the shame associated with failures. When the public perception of a "perfect classroom" derives from a long-standing puritanical system, vestiges of the Calvinist Protestant norms developed through Beecher's first missionary schools, that associates "quietness", "politeness", and

“obedience” with “learning”, teachers move away from their progressive classroom management pedagogy and begin implementing classroom discipline structures that prioritize compliance and police students’ bodies.

How Historical Expectations of Women are Inhibiting our Modern Education

System and the Diverse Students Within it:

Beecher intended to elevate women with the widespread training and professionalization of female teachers, but she was clear that her intention was to elevate women *within their own sphere*; defining a distinctly female space without “outstepping the prescribed boundaries of feminine modesty” (Beecher), or, crossing into male spaces. Beecher’s entire education philosophy was reliant on society’s existing belief that there were distinct differences between men and women. The intangible qualities that both she and greater society at the time believed were innate in women, and not men, were qualities that were deemed important, but lacked exclusivity: care, nurture, sentimentality, generosity, and patience - qualities that required inner work, but not a breadth of academic knowledge or an elite education. Women were not necessarily expected to have high levels of education in order to become a teacher, and higher levels of education were most often overlooked for teachers teaching the country’s most vulnerable populations: poor urban, rural, Native American and black communities. Many female teachers entering into the profession were barely out of school themselves,

some younger teachers were only fourteen or fifteen years old. A woman's piousness and ability to nurture outweighed her subject matter expertise.

Our country has changed its expectations of teacher education, requiring at least a four year college degree in order to obtain teacher state licensure, but teachers are now expected to teach rigorous academic subject matter in addition to the same 19th century standards set by Beecher. Beecher's 19th century standards that were thought to be distinctly women's strengths, are still widely associated with women's work: to develop obedient and compliant children, to teach values and manners, to model and explicitly teach student to student and student to teacher communication expectations, and to instate order and control.

At first glance, one might assert that most of these standards no longer exist in a school setting. These standards are very much still in existence, cloaked in new rhetoric; "obedience" and "compliance" becomes "respect", teaching "values" and "manners" becomes "character education" and "citizenship", still stemming from white Christian values and taught by predominantly white-Anglo staff, "order and control" becomes "structure" and "classroom management". These skills are disproportionately emphasized in black and brown majority schools. They are often the bedrock of charter networks, also serving mostly black and brown students. Communication and social problem-solving are deeply important, but methods of communication and social problem-solving also vary greatly between classes and cultures, with communication looking very different across genders within specific cultures. It is time to re-evaluate both why and how these skills are being taught in schools, and if they are truly being taught productively, consciously, conscientiously, and effectively. If the skills being taught are not reflective of the

populations of students being educated, the skills will not resonate, they may even counteract cultural norms students learn within their own communities. Teachers who do not recognize this disconnection may become frustrated when their lessons are not resonating with their students. Teachers who do recognize this disconnection may find themselves caught between their administration's or state's standards, what they are expected to teach, and what they believe is best for their students to be learning.

These skills, even when taught in a culturally conscious way, often receive little, if any, protected time throughout the school day. Most often, teachers are expected to teach these skills, powerful lessons, in small moments and, even if they do receive protected time throughout the day to teach, teachers receive little social/psychological training on how to teach these skills, leaving an overwhelmingly white majority of teachers to use their own norms and experiences for guidance. While the modern education field is open to both men and women, education is still a highly feminized profession, with women comprising 76% of public school teachers overall, and 89% of teachers at the elementary school level. As of 2018, 79.3% of teachers in the US are white (NCES). Nineteenth century white puritanical Protestant Christian values are still driving our expectations of both students and teachers within schools today. Our teaching force, overwhelmingly female, are still expected to nurture and provide care that goes well beyond academic classroom material. These "soft skills" on which teachers are spending this additional time are, statistically, more than likely, not culturally aligned with the demographic of students they teach. On top of that, the additional time spent does not equate with additional pay, and reverential language reinforces the idea that women should not ask for it.

“Nationwide, the estimated average public-school teacher’s salary is now \$58,950, according to the National Center for Education Statistics—a respectable income in many locales, but actual wages vary widely by state, and often do not track with costs of living. When compared to professions with similar education levels, teacher pay tends to pale. In 2016, for instance, the average teacher’s starting salary was \$38,617—20% lower than that of other professions requiring a college degree.” (Reilly)

Despite advances in women’s career opportunities over the last century, when compared with men, women have disproportionately given up time, money, or personal pleasure for the care of children, cooking, cleaning, household duties, and, increasingly with the Boomer generation, parental care. This inequality is nothing new.

Documentation of individuals publicly contesting low teacher salaries in the United States have been in existence for over two-hundred years:

“In the mid-1800s, California superintendent of public instruction John Swett lamented that the work of teachers was not ‘as well-paid as the brain labor of the lawyer, the physician, the clergyman, the editor...They ought not to be expected to break mental bread to the children of others and feed their own with stones,” (Reilly).

Pay inequality for teachers, when compared with other professions requiring similar levels of education, has been and continues to be normalized because women have historically been expected to nurture, to take on more, to take less pay, to do things “out of the goodness of their hearts”. The reverential rhetoric around teaching solidifies this expectation that “heroes should sacrifice anything”, cementing sexist historical patterns and making the profession increasingly undesirable to both men and women.

The COVID-19 pandemic has added a new layer to the effects of reverential language with bitter clashes between political officials in major cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, and San Francisco and cities’ teachers’ unions. Teachers

have been criticized by Senator Mitch McConnell for a “lack of willpower”. Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot threatened to lock teachers out of their remote learning classrooms and withhold pay if they did not return in person, “I understand the stress that we have all felt during this pandemic, but we cannot lose sight of our ultimate goal, which is to keep our children safe and nurtured and engaged,”(Lori Lightfoot for NYTimes). Much like the role of a teacher in the case of a school intruder, the expectations for teachers that come out of a culture of reverential language are clear: teachers should sacrifice their lives for their students. Period. When there is push-back from teachers, villainization ensues. Throughout articles, the role of the teacher is consistently separated from that of the parent or the community member, when teachers are often parents and members of the communities in which they teach. In the case of Chicago, which has a city residency requirement for all of its public employees, *all* public school teachers are also community members. The enmeshment of the person with the identity of “teacher” does not leave room for nuance and negotiation that comes with a typical job, let alone the idea that teachers are individuals with families and responsibilities outside of the classroom. Reverential language has skewed public perception and expectation of teachers to a precarious tipping point. A survey of US educators by the Horace Mann Corporation at the end of 2020 found that job satisfaction has decreased for 60% of teachers and 27% were considering leaving the profession altogether.

General Conclusions and Suggested Next Steps:

In order to upend the systems and structures, reverential language, and the expectations created by dominant white Christian voices, there must be acknowledgement of where a school's diversity lies, along with intentional efforts to increase teacher diversity. Schools citing strong racial and ethnic diversity amongst their staff do not necessarily have non-white staff in positions of power. Overwhelmingly, education positions that are filled by non-white individuals are peripherally disciplinary (security guards who typically do not have a hand in school-wide restorative practices or creating the school's larger student culture development plan), or operations positions that are student and community-facing, but do not necessarily have influence over school or community development (administrative assistants, office managers, cafeteria workers, maintenance staff). Schools need more diverse teacher and administration representation to overturn implicit biases and norms on a ground level in the classroom and at a higher whole-school policy level.

In turn, this means that the process of how individuals are able to become teachers has to change. Until teacher pay increases and teacher time is protected, we will not see many people of color, already underrepresented in 4 year college environments, choosing teaching as a profession - the financial investment is not worth it. In Catharine Beecher's time, female teachers were young and undereducated. In many ways within this country, expectations of teachers have swung in the opposite direction, with the expectation of 4-6 years, at least, of college-level education in order to become a classroom teacher. However, if the systems that Beecher helped put into place are to be disrupted, teaching has to be a more accessible career to low-income and first generation college students, well-represented in junior college spaces, but underrepresented in 4-year universities.

Teaching should require post-secondary education in order to receive candidates who are proficient in the subject matter they plan to teach, but so much of teaching is a craft and, as such, can and should also follow the model of an apprenticeship.

In some teacher prep programs, teachers-to-be do not see the inside of a classroom until their final semester when they complete their student teaching. Student teaching, without appropriate time, scaffolding, and oversight, can be a stressful, isolating, and intimidating experience. In order to ensure the best outcomes for students, teachers in training, teacher prep programs, and schools, teachers in training should have time to hone their craft at a more deliberate pace.

Teacher prep should be two years of full-time college, with an associate's degree in the desired subject matter. Following an associate's degree should come 1-2 years of paid on the job training, not in a teacher's own classroom, but in a mentor teacher's classroom, in conjunction with night school weekly or twice weekly for more applied practice in education history and pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, and diverse learner support (special education and gifted education), English language learner support, and restorative practices in the classroom. In many programs, student teachers are discouraged, even barred from taking additional classes in the evenings because the pace of student teaching, from observation to full classroom takeover, is so rigorous. A slower, more deliberate pace not only allows for more intentional implementation of learned practice, but existing staff members who take on a student teacher have the opportunity to hone their skills as trainers and managers, adding to their own education, skill-set, and resume. Student teachers are then able to build their confidence and learn

applicable skills in a safe environment, where risk-taking, trial and error, and growth are allowed to develop authentically.

Allowing new teachers a space where they can gather weekly or twice weekly with classmates and share knowledge and experiences provides support and validation during a strenuous time. Additionally, teachers would have the opportunity to apply what they learn or share with their classmates directly to the schools where they teach. Schools hosting teachers benefit from an influx of new energy and information, higher-quality teaching candidates who have had the opportunity to face challenges and problem-solve with proper support, as well as a potential pipeline for full-time hire. If the teacher is hired into the school where they apprenticed, they have standing relationships with staff, students, and parents, allowing for easier integration, more open communication, more trust from students, staff, and parents, and an increased likelihood that the teacher will stay.

With only two years of college to pay for, two years that could be completed in a community college setting, teaching will, once again, become an accessible middle class profession to a more diverse population of people. In the model proposed, if a teacher chooses to drop out during the student teaching process, they are not leaving behind a classroom of their own and are still coming away with an associate's degree that's subject-specific, allowing them to pivot to a different career if they choose. This lowers the risk for individuals interested in becoming a teacher, creating an additional influx of potential candidates in a market with an increasing teacher shortage, and adding another level of assurance that anyone who goes through teacher training wants to be a teacher

and is not just realizing after investing in four years of university tuition that this is not the path for them.

Teacher pay has to change. The goal should be to work toward getting teachers to a pay rate comparable to other careers requiring professional degrees and to factor in cost of living in each teacher's respective city and state. Teachers deserve the right to pay down student loans, pay for childcare, housing, and basic comforts like dishwashers or air conditioning. There is a stigma around teachers asking for higher pay. Part of the stigma surrounding teachers asking for higher pay for their work comes from reverential language. Teachers are hesitant to ask for higher pay, fearing shaming responses of "we don't do this work for the money" or "teaching comes from the heart" from administration or even fellow teachers. Being perceived as "greedy" as a result of asking for a higher salary has ripple effects within a school and teachers may fear retribution: an assignment to a less desirable position within the school or being pushed out of their position altogether. There is also strong public backlash that comes from teachers asking for higher pay that highlights the toxic effects of reverential language in the public lexicon. Teachers themselves, despite their own financial hardships or discontent, have justified their own salaries using this language, saying things such as "purpose drives us", "this is my calling", "I'm pursuing my passion", and "I don't regret [my choice to become a teacher] because it's not about the money". There has to be a shift in the discourse: teachers can want to earn more money for the time they invest in their jobs and also love their students and reap emotional benefits from their work. Individuals in positions of power to make change, such as community members and politicians, have publicly justified teacher salaries using reverential language.

Despite low pay, teachers are expected to further their education throughout the course of their career. A certain amount of professional development hours, coming in the form of additional college credits, seminars, conventions, webinars, etc. are required for teachers to retain their teaching license. All of these require payment. It is a common misconception that schools pay for all teacher professional development. Many schools, in order to reduce costs, try to do their professional development in-house. They are unable to cover the costs of pricier professional developments that might have the latest information or strategies for approaching a particular topic. Professional developments ultimately benefit the students. The longer low pay for teachers, both personally and for professional development, is justified, the more a divide is prolonged between wealthier and poorer school districts, cutting students and teachers off from the latest content information and teaching practices, and perpetuating inequities between wealthier and poorer students. Pay teachers accordingly for more training and years of school, and the teaching force will model pursuit of education for students while increasing their own desired knowledge.

Parameters around teacher time must be set. If a goal is to preserve teachers, protected teacher time must be normalized. When reverential language enters into a job, it blurs lines of time and energy given to that job. If the expectation is that teachers will do “whatever it takes”, then the response is for teachers to push themselves to a point of burnout, or receive backlash, social or financial, because protections around time is not a set norm. Protections around time must be reinforced by administration and modeled by administration as much as possible. Setting healthy professional boundaries should not be seen as a negative or selfish action, it should be seen as protective and preventive action.

A History of Education course that delves into American Education's Christian and feminized past should be a part of every college Education major's curriculum. Ideally, a History of Education course that takes a critical look at the current education structures in the United States would be embedded in the US high school history curriculum. Considering history is not a part of the Common Core State Standards and most states have significant flexibility in their history curriculum, this is feasible. In order to truly change policy, student trajectory, and culture inside of schools, there has to be a broad awareness of how our current systems came to be. If there's no awareness around how current education systems developed in the United States, there is no internalization of which portions of these existing systems are problematic and why they cannot be allowed to continue; there must be an impetus for change.