Why is it that few teachers in urban K–12 Christian education stay in this field for more than one or two years? As an educator in this setting since 1998, I have been puzzled and saddened by this question, especially as I have had a front row seat to the challenges of placing a new teacher before the same group of students almost every year. Recently, I had the opportunity to conduct a research study with a group of teachers who have persisted in urban K–12 Christian education for periods ranging from three to more than 30 years. Fourteen teachers from ACSI urban schools in four United States regions participated in this qualitative study. Surveys, interviews, and focus groups provided data, and research questions explored the participants’ experiences, motivations, goals, and supports. Data analysis indicated several factors as key contributors to persistence in the urban Christian school setting.

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One significant aspect of the participants’ experiences was the connection between God, themselves, and their students. The relationship forged within this God-Teacher-Student triad resided in a place of fulfillment, satisfaction, and joy that superseded and eclipsed not only other workplace relationships, but also every challenge participants described. When asked to share the essence of their experience as educators in an urban K–12 Christian school, no participant mentioned peers, parents, or administrators. Rather, participants described the God-Teacher-Student relationship, often with tears in their eyes. Their calling, gifting, and mission from God for their children were paramount, as seen in the following excerpts given in answer to the question, “If you were given a blank poster, how would you depict the essence of being a teacher in an urban K–12 Christian school?”

“All I’m seeing are just my kids’ smiles ... I love the joy. That community that develops in watching them all grow together and grow as little people.... It just feels like redemptive work is happening. You know, like things are being made a little more right than before.”

“How do you put in a picture ... the satisfaction of your job? I mean, like I say, where I am in the center of God’s will. I feel it every day.... The essence of being a teacher here, it’s being in God’s will, being satisfied.”

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Participant: “For me it would be a sea of faces with one or two people at the helm guiding and leading.”

Investigator: “The faces of?”

Participant: “Children—with wide eyes and open hearts.”

Investigator: “And the one or two? The ones that are guiding and leading? Who are those?”

Participant: “Me. And the one won’t be seen, but it would be Christ.”

“I’d put a kid in quicksand on one side, and a successful, strong, tall businessman on the other side. And we’d be in the middle, pulling him up, pushing him out.”

“What came to mind is that I had all the kids sitting in a semicircle.... I saw me sitting here, kids around me—and then behind me, I saw the Lord standing with His arms enveloped like this, around us....That would be the essence of my teaching.”

“I would probably draw an empty container and a vessel that’s filled with something. And I probably wouldn’t put any words on it, just to see if whoever would be looking at it could feel my heart, though not the artwork part, I’m not artistic, but if they could feel my heart for what God has called me to do. So that empty vessel and that full vessel representing my children and me, but also representing me as the empty vessel and God as the full vessel, pouring that into me.”

In the experiences of these teachers called to educational ministry, the God-Teacher-Student relationship appeared to strongly support persistence. This relationship as introduced here is only one of several persistence factors from the study’s significant findings. Nevertheless, it carries a particular implication for administrators in urban K–12 Christian education. Undergirding teachers through prayer, training, and dialogue as they develop and strengthen this core connection has the potential to enhance longevity, bringing the benefits of teachers who stay to the learning community.

This article is an excerpt from “Why Do They Stay? A Phenomenological Study on the Lived Experiences of Teachers Who Persist in Urban K–12 Christian Education” by Marie Teodori. Liberty University, 2015.