

# **Solidarity, courage and heart: what teacher educators can learn from a new generation of teachers**

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What does it take to become effective teachers of students of culturally, ethnically, linguistically, and racially diverse backgrounds? Based on research with teachers over the past several years, this paper discusses what it means to teach students of diverse backgrounds with heart, courage and conviction, and the implications of their practice for professional development. A review of relevant literature finds that some of the widely acknowledged qualities of effective teachers include a solid general education background; a deep knowledge of subject matter; familiarity with numerous pedagogical approaches; strong communication skills; and effective organizational skills. Although these qualities are essential for good teaching, the purpose in this paper is to suggest that they are insufficient because they fail to take into account the sociopolitical context of education as well as the tremendous diversity of language, social class, ethnicity and race, among other differences, that are a fact of life in many school systems around the world. An additional set of qualities is proposed that are also essential for teaching in the postmodern industrialized and interdependent world. These have to do with attitudes, sensibilities and values. The author describes what she has found to be some of the qualities of teachers who make a positive difference in the lives of students, particularly students who have been marginalized by their school experiences. These qualities include a sense of mission; solidarity with, and empathy for, their students; the courage to challenge mainstream knowledge and conventional wisdom; improvisation; and a passion for social justice. The paper ends with implications for intercultural education and teacher education.

## **Introduction**

Teacher education is at a crossroads today. This fact is widely acknowledged by people around the world, including both the proponents and the foes of teacher education. It is also generally accepted that research on what works, where and for whom is needed in order to improve both teacher education and classroom practice, especially as these pertain to teaching students from diverse backgrounds. In spite of

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general agreement, however, there are contrasting views on how to prepare new and practicing teachers for the profession. For example, the role of empirical research in teacher education is hotly contested, especially in this era of controversy over what ‘scientific research’ means. Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Ken Zeichner, editors of the comprehensive 2005 report, *Studying Teacher Education: The Report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education*, describe the complexity of investigating questions about teacher education:

The panel took as a working assumption that questions like these cannot be settled simply by assembling good evidence. To be sure, questions can be shaped, reformulated, or understood more profoundly on the basis of evidence; but evidence must always be interpreted, and interpretations are often made in highly politicized contexts. The values and beliefs of the interpreter influence the purposes for which evidence is used ... The panel assumed from the outset that teacher preparation policies and practices cannot be decided solely on the basis of empirical evidence divorced from values. (Cochran-Smith and Ken Zeichner, 2005, pp. 2–3)

In this paper, I want to take up the challenge of how to prepare teachers for diverse classrooms by exploring some essential questions for teacher preparation in our current sociopolitical global context. These questions, in keeping with the theme of the conference at which this paper was presented as a talk, include:

- How can schools of education prepare teachers and future teachers for classrooms that are diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, nationality, social class, language and other differences?
- What kinds of dispositions and abilities do teachers need to teach in today’s diverse schools, and how can they develop these?
- What does it mean to teach with solidarity, courage and heart, and what can we do to change current practices in teacher education programs to reflect these ideals?
- And most importantly, why should these questions matter to *all* of us—teacher educators, teachers, students and the public at large—not only in our own nations but around the world?

I want to suggest that, in the end, the answers to these questions say a great deal about who we are, what we value and believe in, and how we educate our young people. I also believe that the questions I pose here take on greater urgency than ever because of the sociopolitical context in which teachers and students teach and learn every day. Although most of my examples are based on the US context and on my research within that context, much of what I have to say is similar to other contexts around the world, because globalization is making our world smaller and more connected than ever. As a result, whether we are in a large urban school in Boston, Massachusetts, a *colegio* in Cádiz, Spain, a rural school outside Beijing, a sprawling high-rise community on the outskirts of Paris, or in numerous other places around the world, we face many of the same challenges and problems brought on by immigration and global economic issues. As I discuss particular components of this sociopolitical context, I hope you will consider how these components may also be evident in your particular contexts, and how they may differ.

The sociopolitical context in the US to which I refer includes the rapid turnover of new teachers. In the US, about 20% of new teachers leave during the first three years of teaching, and the rate is increasing (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999; Boser, 2000). This situation has the greatest impact on students who are the most vulnerable because nearly half of all new teachers in urban public schools leave within five years. To complicate matters further, a 40% turnover of new teachers is expected within this decade, the highest rate since at least 1990 (Haycock, 1998).

The context also includes dramatically changing demographics in both society in general and in classrooms in particular. Whether we live in small hamlets or large urban centers, whether we are from Europe, the Americas, Asia, or Africa, our world is changing. What were once fairly homogeneous populations are now characterized by a tremendous diversity of race, ethnicity and language, among other differences. In some cases, such as the US, diversity has always been a fact of life—although it has not always been accepted or adequately dealt with. In other nations, the demographic changes have proven to be cataclysmic, challenging the sense of nationhood and community that once seemed fairly straightforward and secure. In all these contexts, children living in poverty, children of backgrounds that differ from the majority, and those who speak native languages other than the common language are now becoming the majority in urban centers and urbanized suburbs, and even in rural areas.

In the US, we also have what is generally referred to as an ‘achievement gap’ between White students and students of color, between middle-class and poor children, and between native English-speaking children and those who speak languages other than English as their native languages. This so-called ‘achievement gap’ refers to the fact that Latino, African American and Native American, as well as some Asian American, students achieve substantially less than their White, English-speaking peers.

Yet I want to suggest that the so-called ‘achievement gap’ could just as legitimately be called the resource gap, because the gap is often a result of widely varying resources provided to students based on where they live and who they are. According to a recent report from the US-based organization Education Trust (2005),

we organize our systems of public education in ways that make things worse. One way we do this is by simply spending less in schools serving high concentrations of low-income and minority children than we do on schools serving more affluent and White children. (p. 1)

They found, for instance, that across the US, \$907 less is spent per student in the highest-poverty districts than in the most affluent districts. Yet we persist in calling attention to the so-called ‘achievement gap’, ‘once again laying the blame squarely on the children rather than on the system that creates the gap in the first place.

A growing standardization, bureaucratization and privatization in education are also part of the international sociopolitical context. In the US, this has meant, among other things, a growing pressures to ‘teach to the test’, influenced by the No Child Left Behind federal legislation that is, in fact, leaving many children behind,

particularly those that this legislation was supposed to help. For example, evidence is mounting that the testing frenzy, which is a direct result of the call for 'high standards', is limiting the kinds of pedagogical approaches that teachers use, as well as constricting the curriculum, especially in classrooms serving the most educationally disadvantaged students. Recent research has found that high-stakes testing, rather than increasing student learning, is actually raising dropout rates and leading to less engagement with schooling: Amrein and Berliner (2002) reported findings from research in 18 states that student learning was unchanged or actually went down when high-stakes testing policies were instituted.

Another component of the sociopolitical context includes the physical and emotional condition of public schools, especially those in deteriorating and devastated communities. In the US, many of the schools that the most vulnerable children attend, especially those in economically strapped urban and rural areas, are rundown and abandoned, and they receive little financial and moral support. A recent article in a US weekly newspaper dedicated to education issues presented disturbing statistics about the physical condition of schools: one in four US schools is overcrowded and 3.5 million children attend public schools that are in very poor or even non-operative condition, this in the richest country in the world. The author concluded:

Even as policymakers seek to improve equity and close gaps in educational outcomes, disparities in facilities send disadvantaged students a visible and unmistakable message that we care less about their education than that of their more affluent peers. (Mead, 2005).

Paradoxically, as schools in our various nations become more diverse, they are also becoming more racially, ethnically and economically segregated, and this too is part of the sociopolitical context of education. As Orfield (2001) has exhaustively documented in the US, poor students attend schools that are today more segregated than at any time since the historic 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that was supposed to lead to desegregated schools. In contrast, however, today poor children of all backgrounds, but particularly poor Latino and African American children and children for whom English is a second language, go to the most segregated and least well-resourced schools. Moreover, today Latino (Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban and other Latin American) students are the most segregated of all students in terms of both ethnicity and social class.

The final piece of the sociopolitical context I shall mention is the long-standing and growing structural and social inequality throughout the world that results in related negative effects of poverty, joblessness, poor access to health care, and the attendant racism and hopelessness experienced by many people on a daily basis. In the US, Anyon (2005), Berliner (2005) and Rothstein (2004) have all argued that macroeconomic policies that have severe consequences for those living in poverty—that is, policies that regulate such things as the minimum wage, job availability, tax rates, health care and affordable housing, among others—are chiefly responsible for creating school failure, because educational policies by themselves cannot transcend these larger policies. While Rothstein, Anyon and Berliner do not deny the importance and

necessity of school reform, they make it clear that what schools can accomplish will be limited if these larger macroeconomic policies do not change.

In summary, then, it is clear that dramatic inequalities exist in the access that students around the globe have to an excellent, high quality education, inequalities that are lamentably too frequently based on race, social class, language, and other differences.

### **The role of good teaching**

In spite of the dismal picture I have sketched, we know that good teaching can help to alleviate—although it certainly cannot completely overcome—the situation in which many children attend school. There is growing research, for instance, that good teachers make the single greatest difference in promoting or deterring student achievement. In the US: for example, the landmark 1996 report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996) found that 'what teachers know and do is one of the most important influences on what students learn'. One widely cited study found that students who are assigned to several highly effective teachers in a row have significantly greater gains in achievement than those assigned to less effective teachers, and that the influence of each teacher has effects that spill over into later years (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Consequently, in a review of dozens of studies in the late 1990s, researchers Linda Darling-Hammond and Beverly Falk (1997) suggested that, until schools address the enormous inequalities in students' access to qualified teachers, other reforms would have little effect on student achievement.

Because of the potential they have for changing the course of students' lives, good teachers who care about students and make a difference in their lives should be viewed as national treasures. But in this difficult time for public education around the world, they're often thought of in demeaning ways that question their professionalism, stifle their creativity and dampen their joy. Yet it is only by understanding the motivations of teachers that we can hope to understand what sustains them and, in the process, attempt to accomplish the as yet unrealized goals of equality and justice through public education. This is the context that led me to the project that I shall focus on in the remainder of this article.

### **The 'Why We Teach' project**

In 2004, I undertook a project that I called 'Why We Teach'. My goal was to ask a group of teachers in the US who are caring, committed and passionate about their work to write essays about why they teach. I especially wanted to engage those who teach students of diverse backgrounds because it occurred to me that their thoughts would be beneficial for teacher educators struggling with the question of how best to prepare teachers for diverse classrooms. I offer their insights and my analysis of their writing, in the hope that they may be helpful for those in countries other than the US as they think about transforming teacher preparation for diversity.

The result of the 'Why We Teach' project is a book (Nieto, 2005) that includes reflections by 21 teachers who work in US public elementary, middle and high schools. Some of the teachers are new to teaching, others have been in the profession for a decade or more, and still others are veteran teachers with more than 30 years' experience. Most teach students of diverse ethnic, racial, linguistic and social class backgrounds, and their own backgrounds are also diverse in terms of ethnicity, race, social class backgrounds, sexual orientation and other differences. I have known and worked with some of them for many years; others I had not met face to face until after I contacted them to write their essays. Friends and colleagues recommended some of them to me as teachers who would have interesting stories to tell. I read about one of them in a local newspaper; I met another one by chance at a meeting. While I was not looking for 'stars', that is, well-known and award-winning teachers (although some turned out to be both), my major criterion was that all of them share a passion for teaching, whether it was acknowledged publicly or not. But having worked with thousands of teachers in many schools in the US over the years, I am convinced that teachers such as these can be found in all schools throughout the world. These are teachers who care about students, who love what they do, and who would choose to do it over again. Some are also frustrated, angry, and concerned about the state of public education today and, in this way also, they reflect the sentiments of many teachers not only in the US, but in many other countries as well.

### **A word of caution**

In education, we have the tendency to jump on the bandwagon of the latest 'quick fix.' As a result, new ideas, especially those that come attractively packaged, are spoon-fed to teachers and administrators through articles, programs, kits, checklists, university courses or in-service workshops as if they were the answer we had all been waiting for. Some of these ideas may have merit; they often do. But quick fixes never work. I should especially hate to see the ideas I suggest in my paper turn up on a list of 'dispositions of excellent teachers', as if a checklist could determine what it means to be an excellent, caring and committed teacher. The values I propose, such as having solidarity with students or thinking of teaching as a mission, do not lend themselves to facile measurement.

In addition, given the current conservative political climate in the US and elsewhere that I described at the beginning of this paper, we also need to be mindful of the fact that ideas that seem 'soft' and 'unscientific' are likely to be attacked as romantic and unrealistic. In a recent newspaper editorial titled 'Schools of Reeducation?' (Hess, 2006), for instance, Frederick Hess, the Director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a decidedly right-wing think tank, wrote about what he considers a troubling tendency among schools of education in the US to 'regulate the dispositions and beliefs of those who would teach in our nation's classrooms' (p. B07) Hess has a point if he is suggesting that it is impossible to capture something as dynamic and intangible as teaching in a pre-packaged program or sterile list.

However, such criticisms, posed as objective arguments, are frequently used to hide what is fundamentally a political argument against anything that smells of liberal or progressive ideas. Hence, cloaking himself in the garb of political neutrality, Hess argues, ‘screening on “dispositions” serves primarily to cloak academia’s biases in the garb of professional necessity’ (p. B 07).

I begin with the recognition that no set of teacher qualities is comprehensive enough or true for all teachers in all contexts and all time. But if we were to look for teachers with the characteristics and dispositions I shall be describing in this paper, I know we shall have come a long way in fulfilling the promises of public education for all students. In spite of the misgivings I have about describing these qualities, I believe a discussion of the common dispositions shared by the teachers in the ‘Why We Teach’ project can benefit others. Before describing them, I begin with some of the widely acknowledged qualities of effective teachers gleaned from the research.

A review of the research (García, 1999; Haberman, 1988; Gordon, 1999; Irvine, 2003; Knapp *et al.*, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lucas *et al.*, 1990; Rose, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) reveals that effective teachers share:

- a solid general education background
- a deep knowledge of their subject matter
- familiarity with numerous pedagogical approaches
- strong communication skills, and
- effective organizational skills.

We can all agree that these skills are absolutely essential in good teaching. But I want to propose an additional set of qualities, dispositions, values and sensibilities based on my analysis of the ‘Why We Teach’ teachers’ essays that can expand this list of skills. The qualities I am proposing are:

- a sense of mission
- solidarity with, and empathy for, their students
- the courage to challenge mainstream knowledge
- improvisation, and
- a passion for social justice.

I shall describe each of these by providing examples from the teachers’ essays.

### *A sense of mission*

In every case, the teachers wrote about their sense of mission as a major reason for teaching. It is this sense of mission, this ‘elusive something’ that brought Bob Amses to teaching after he had been a filmmaker for 17 years. Using humor to capture both the joys and the financial hardships of teaching, Bob wrote: ‘With teaching, I’d found that elusive *something* that challenged me intellectually, philosophically, emotionally, physically, and as I’d find out too late, financially!’

Although the teachers describe their work as a *mission*, they shy away from seeing teaching as *missionary* work. They see themselves as serving the common good, but

they do not describe themselves as saviors, and they lack the self-righteousness that inevitably dooms good intentions. Nina Tepper, a 25-year veteran teacher, wrote

I teach for the youth and the future. No more do I believe as I did when I first entered the teaching profession that I can “change the world” or the public schools for that matter ... What I do believe is that, as a teacher, I can affect the future, one child at a time.

The Massachusetts Teacher of the Year in 2004, Melinda Pellerin-Duck wrote ‘I teach because I see extraordinary possibilities in students.’

Nevertheless, having a sense of mission does not mean that teachers are completely selfless: they realize that they too benefit from teaching because they know they make a difference—for some children, a life-saving difference—and they feel good about that.

Kerri Warfield, a middle school art teacher, described teachers as ‘life-touchers’, and she writes, ‘In what other job can we help improve the future, share our knowledge, and learn every day?’ Another young teacher, Yahaira Marquez, echoes these sentiments:

As a teacher I’m able to help others better themselves, share one of the subjects I’m passionate about, interact with and learn more about others, establish different kinds of relationships, and learn more about myself while making myself stronger. All that with one job and at the age of 23!

Having a sense of mission also means that teachers believe in public education. Jennifer Welborn, a middle school science teacher writes

I teach in public school because I still believe in public education. I believe that the purpose of public school, whether it delivers or not, is to give a quality education to all kids who come through the doors. I want to be part of that lofty mission ... I may be naïve, but I believe that what I do day in and day out *does* makes a difference. Teachers *do* change lives forever.

For 32 years, Mary Ginley was a kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grade teacher, first in Holyoke and later in Longmeadow, Massachusetts, the former a poor town with a crumbling infrastructure and a school population that is 75% Puerto Rican, and the latter a wealthy suburb that is overwhelmingly White. For the past four years, she has been a 5th grade teacher, first in Longmeadow and currently in Tampa, where she teaches in a working-class community. When she taught in Holyoke, she had a student named Steven [the children’s names are pseudonyms] who was hard to forget. She describes how Steven wrote her a letter telling her how she had saved his life. Here is the letter he wrote to her several years ago, almost ten years after he was in her first-grade classroom, and her response to it:

Dear Mrs. Ginley,

I don’t know if you remember me. I was in your kindergarten and first grade class at the Early Childhood Center in Holyoke. I don’t remember a lot about kindergarten but I remember I was scared and you were nice to me.

Recently, I was accepted to a specialized high school in Tampa and my mom and I were celebrating. Remember my mom? She’s a recovered alcoholic and she wasn’t in

good shape back then. Anyway, my mom told me that I owed everything to you, that you were the one who got me headed in the right direction. So she told me I should try to find you and thank you and I did find you and want to thank you for all you did.

I am enclosing a picture of me in my kindergarten class. I put an arrow in case you didn't recognize me. I'm sending you one of me at the eighth grade dance we had a few weeks ago too.

I hope you are well. Thank you very much for all you did.

Your former student,  
Steven Jackson

Mary continues:

I looked at the pictures, at the frightened little boy in the front row (with an arrow pointing to him in case I really forgot him) and at the young man dressed up for the eighth grade formal. Oh, Steven, I thought, how on earth could you ever think I'd forget you?

Steven arrived one day in mid-October. I was teaching twenty-something kindergarten kids in Holyoke in a tiny classroom on the second floor of a renovated junior college. Steven had a rough start that day. While his mom was filling out the paperwork and chatting with the principal, Steve escaped and ran out the front door. He hid behind the bushes and only came out when our secretary coaxed him out with the promise of a cherry lollipop. So, it was a tear-streaked, sticky fingered little kid that appeared at my door around 9:30 that morning with the principal and his mom.

I knelt down to talk to him (he spit at me) and then looked at my principal with a question in my eyes. 'Why me?' I wanted to say but couldn't because Steven's mom was right there. 'I have the most kids already. It's someone else's turn.' Instead, I smiled at his mom, asked if she'd like to stay for a few minutes and coaxed Steven onto the rug to listen to the story. Slowly, very slowly, Steven unwrapped himself and moved to the rug. When the story and singing were over and we were moving to centers, I told his mom it was probably time for her to leave. She hesitated, kissed Steven good-bye and headed for the door.

'No!', he shrieked and started after her. I blocked the door and sent her on his way. He kicked me and threw his lollipop in my hair, screaming and sobbing and wailing. I scooped him and rocked him for the next hour, watching the other five year olds from the rocking chair in the front of the room and silently cursing my principal who later told me the reason she put Steven in my room was that he needed me.

Steven had a rough year. He flew into a rage without warning, turning into a miniature tornado, throwing blocks and ripping papers off the wall as he catapulted around the room. He'd sit and sulk if he didn't get his way, describe in minute detail what AA meetings were like and why his mom went to them, refuse to join the circle, refuse to write his name, refuse to share a toy. The only time he seemed calm was when I was rocking him or he was off in a corner with a picture book. He taught himself to read that year but he never learned how to make a friend.

I kept those kids for a second year. I remember when I was discussing this with my principal. She knew how Steven wore me out. She knew that I walked in the room every day saying 'Dear God, help me love Steven a little more today.'

'I could move him to another class' she offered. 'You can't. He needs the stability more than anyone does and I can't let him think I don't want him.' So first grade rolled around and Steven arrived the first day, grinning and glad to be back.

Steven still had his days that year but he had mellowed and as he began to feel safe, at school and even at home, we saw a very different little boy. Toward the end of that year, he and his mom moved and I never heard from him again ... Until now.

Foolish child, to think I wouldn't remember him.

I suppose the reason I still teach, after thirty-five years, is because there are some Stevens every year who might need me. Most likely, they won't write me letters (a few do) and they may not even remember me, but I need to be there for them. School is supposed to be the great equalizer. That may be the American dream but I have never been in a school (other than the one I was in when I had Steven) where there was an active policy to make sure that every child had equal access to quality education, where every child was made to feel welcome, respected, valued, safe. From the minute a child walks through the school doors in kindergarten, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and the smart get smarter too. It seems schools say that everyone is valued, but when you look closely, you'll find it isn't so.

### *Solidarity with, and empathy for, students*

Another quality that the 'Why We Teach' teachers share is solidarity with, and empathy for, their students. By now, it is a taken-for-granted truth that relationships are at the heart of teaching (Noddings, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999). While it is problematic to place the entire responsibility for student achievement on teachers—as if issues of inequality, structural barriers due to racism and other biases, lack of resources, poor infrastructure, unfair bureaucratic policies, and so on, did not matter—it is nevertheless important to point out that caring relationships *can* make a difference in spite of these conditions.

Solidarity with and empathy for students are not simply sentimental emotions. For teachers who think deeply about their work, solidarity and empathy mean having genuine respect for their students' identities—including their language and culture—as well as high expectations and great admiration for them. Elementary school teacher Elaine Stinson writes about solidarity and empathy by describing the necessity of close relationships: 'I've found that meaningful learning happens through meaningful interaction, whether it's with peers, teachers, music, authors, or poets, or though nature.' Sandra Jenoure, a science teacher for over 30 years in Harlem, New York City, describes how teachers must avoid paying attention to negative discourse that targets those students who most need empathy and solidarity: 'I know it's easy to sit back and listen to the gossip in schools. "These kids can't learn", is what you hear. The truth is they can and do. We have to see and believe.'

Seth Peterson is a young teacher of English in a public high school in Boston. He shows his solidarity with students by trusting them. He writes:

I begin to see returns on my trust when a student marked absent appears in the doorway at 10:23 with a sheepish grin. In her hand, she carries a note from the hospital where she spent the night. She hands me the note and says, 'I didn't want to miss my

group's presentation.' Sometimes trust means listening with extreme bias and positive partiality, as in the case of Jolene, who let my voice pull her off another girl, breaking up a fierce, crowded hallway fight: 'Hey, it's me ... Mr. P. Look at me. It's just me. Let's take a walk.'

I feel trusted, and therefore validated, when, after two years of silence, Raoul writes me from prison asking for a character witness. He is still confident I will write about his charisma and concern for others, qualities we both know he possesses regardless of one bad decision made in anger one ill-fated night. When Ashanti whines rhetorically, 'Mister, how come I feel so guilty when I don't do the homework for this class?' I know some level of trust, some connection between what we do and what she could become has been formed. Some days, these signposts of trust, these affirmations are nowhere to be found. Those days are filled with deafening silences between bells, heavy eyelids, and endless train rides home, but they dissolve into others that hold another chance to earn trust and actually teach.

### *The courage to question mainstream knowledge*

Why do teachers need to question mainstream knowledge and conventional wisdom? Greene (2001) has addressed this question by writing, 'The curriculum has to leave so many questions open so that children will explore and wonder and not believe there is a final answer, because they can only be devastated when they find out there isn't.'

According to Elaine Stinson, to question conventional wisdom means 'to teach outside the lines'. The challenge for teachers is to develop the courage to confront, and to teach their students to confront, what Foucault (2002) calls the 'regimes of truth', that is, the kind of discourses promoted by each society as truth, and produced, transmitted and kept in place by systems of power such as universities, the military and the media. The result of these 'regimes of truth' is that perspectives and realities different from those that are officially sanctioned tend to remain invisible. This means that, as teacher educators, we need to create learning environments for pre-service teachers in which they can develop more nuanced understandings of complex issues, in order to learn to confront and learn from different perspectives.

A good example comes from Mary Cowhey, a first and second grade teacher who has made it her job to learn as much as she can, and from as many different perspectives as she can, in order to be a more effective teacher to her students. One day a few years ago, I ran into Mary and her family at Old Deerfield, a reconstructed colonial town in Western Massachusetts. She had been on a tour, and she was particularly interested in the Native American experience and how it is depicted in the museum. After fielding many of her questions, the guide said to her, 'You sure ask a lot of questions!', and she said, 'I have to! I'm a first-grade teacher.' The point, as Mary knows, is not simply knowing how to ask questions, but more importantly, knowing how to read answers and keep questioning them.

In her essay, Beth Wohlleb Adel, a middle school social studies teacher currently on leave to raise her two small children, wrote about the day that one of her students saw her at the movies with her partner, another woman. The student who saw her assumed it was Beth's boyfriend, so Beth had no recourse but to tell him that it was

her girlfriend. She never intended to ‘come out’ to her students in this way, but she could not lie to them. In the long run, it turned out to be a positive outcome because the incident forced her to be honest with her students and herself. Both her teaching and her relationships with her students benefited as a result. She writes, ‘I teach because it requires that I become my most courageous self, and I am constantly inspired by students who learn the power of being whole people along with me.’

Jennifer Welborn, a middle school science teacher, provides a vivid example of questioning mainstream knowledge and conventional wisdom. It was the book *The Mismeasure of Man* by Stephen Jay Gould (1981) that helped change how she looked at science. The book became the impetus for a unit on scientific racism and the social construction of race that she has taught every year for the past 10 years. Jennifer wrote the following in her essay:

I want my students to realize that science is not the objective pursuit of knowledge that it is professed to be. I want them to understand that data may support a hypothesis that is not valid to begin with. I want them to know that correlation does not imply causality. I want them to know there are hidden variables that may affect an experiment. I want them to know about researcher bias. I want them to know all this so that when they read in the newspaper that ‘minority SAT scores are down’, they know that these data must be due to social, economic, and political inequities in our society. They are not due to genetic inferiority.

Jennifer also wrote that she wants her students to ‘learn to be skeptics’, to ‘differentiate between good science, bad science, and pseudoscience’. She wants students to think about the advantages and disadvantages that race automatically confers to individuals and groups because according to Jennifer, ‘it is through this knowledge and dialogue that students can understand the complexity of racism in our country’.

### *Improvisation*

For educator, artist and performer Theresa Jenoure (2000), jazz improvisation is a system of composing but beyond music, according to Jenoure, it is ‘a way of thinking and behaving’. In teaching, she sees jazz improvisation as a metaphor for creativity within structure. Improvisation means being prepared for uncertainty, both the joy and the frustration of it. This requires a great deal of elasticity.

In the same way, excellent teachers use improvisation to see beyond frameworks, rubrics, models and templates, all of which increasingly characterize education today. In fact, according to veteran teacher Judith Baker, many schools are in ‘template heaven’, viewing templates as the end rather than the means to effective instruction. In contrast, education is never static. For Ayla Gavins, an elementary school teacher when she wrote her essay, and now a resource teacher, teaching means ‘being on a moving train’ because ‘on any given day, teachers make hundreds, even thousands of decisions to keep a balance of fairness and equity’. She continues, ‘I am a part of something—globally, nationally, and locally. That is an empowering thought and it gives me a choice of contexts where I can make changes.’ Not all teachers view their profession in this way; being fearful of change, some

continue to do the same thing year after year. Nina Tepper, who has taught in urban schools for over 25 years, writes that when she first started teaching, she was astonished to hear another teacher boast about being on *exactly the same page* as the previous year in her plan book!

Melinda Pellerin-Duck speaks of teaching as the ‘colors and strands of teaching’, comparing teaching to a kente cloth, a treasured cultural symbol for her and her family. Improvisation also means taking advantage of the moment, even putting aside the planned lesson for the time being. As these teachers demonstrate, using improvisation means learning to go beyond the template, or even to *question* the template.

### *A passion for social justice*

For the ‘Why We Teach’ teachers, social justice is very much a part of why they teach. As Mary Ginley, who has taught children who live in extreme poverty as well as very privileged children, writes, ‘If I just teach them how to survive in this inequitable society, how to get along, I am doing them a tremendous disservice.’ Ambrizeth Lima, a Cape Verdean teacher of primarily Cape Verdean students, says this: ‘Teaching is always about power. That is why it must also be about social justice ... I teach because I believe that young people have rights, including the right to their identities and their languages.’ Therefore, she asks: ‘Is it morally right for me, as a teacher, to witness injustice toward students and remain quiet?’

Melinda Pellerin-Duck, a high school teacher in Springfield, Massachusetts, an urban school district, described a community action project in which her students took a leadership role:

While teaching at Duggan Middle School in Springfield, students enrolled in my Law Related Education class became actively involved in a campaign to re-open our local public library branches. Budget cuts had prompted the city to close the libraries in some neighborhoods, and my students believed this would deny them a powerful learning tool while denying the community a central gathering place and resource. Working with a voluntary social activist organization, my students and I campaigned before, during, and after school as well as on weekends to share our message about the importance of neighborhood libraries to community leaders. Students produced a multimedia display on the role libraries play in their lives. They learned civil rights strategies for non-violent confrontation and participated in demonstrations, speaking at rallies and labor meetings. They wrote to the mayor and city council, and addressed parent groups and the Superintendent. Our commitment to this effort, and the students’ hard work, have resulted in a new library system and longer branch hours. Even more importantly, this collaboration has forged life-long relationships and a sense of activism in my students.

A veteran high school teacher of English and Social Studies at an urban vocational high school, Bill Dunn teaches mostly students who live in poverty, including a large percentage of Puerto Rican students. Bill writes about the unfairness of the MCAS, the high-stakes test in Massachusetts, and the unrecognized rich resources his students have, including their bilingualism and biculturalism. He calls his essay, ‘Confessions of an Underperforming Teacher’, and he begins it this way:

The stresses which students and teachers encounter in schools today should evoke compassion and admiration from the public; unfortunately, quite the opposite occurs, and this troubles me ... Test results are released and inner-city students and their teachers are ridiculed in bold headlines. My favorite label is ‘underperforming.’ I sincerely couldn’t have come up with a word with nastier connotations to attach to schools and the human beings who inhabit them.

Bill ends his compelling essay in this way:

So why do I teach? I teach because someone has to tell my students that they are not the ones who are dumb. They need to know that only the blissfully ignorant and profoundly evil make up tests to prove that they and people like them are smart. I teach because my students need to know that poverty does not equal stupidity, and that surviving a bleak, dismal childhood makes you strong and tough and beautiful in ways that only survivors of similar environments can appreciate and understand. I teach because my students need to know that in their struggle to acquire a second language, they participate in one of the most difficult of human feats. My students also need to know that four days of reading in a second language under ‘high-stakes’ testing conditions would shut down even Einstein’s brain. I teach because my students need to know that right and wrong are relative to one’s culture, and that even these definitions become laughable over time. I teach because the people who make up these tests don’t know these things, or worse, they do.

Bill Dunn’s sentiments describe a policy climate that is characterized by a profound disrespect for poor students, students of color, and students for whom English is a second language, and for the teachers who work with them.

### **Lessons from the ‘Why We Teach’ teachers**

There are many lessons to be learned from these teachers for professional development. One is that we need to go beyond current reforms that focus only on certification tests, on increasing teachers’ subject matter knowledge, or on giving them a few more ‘tricks of the trade’ for their classrooms. While some of these may be important and necessary, they are simply not enough.

Subject matter knowledge is important, of course, but if teachers do not learn how to question it, they end up reproducing conventional wisdom and encouraging students to do the same. Knowing pedagogy is also necessary, but if teachers do not develop meaningful relationships with their students of all backgrounds—no matter what their own backgrounds are—the students simply will not succeed. If teachers do not understand the life-and-death implications of the work they do, no amount of certification requirements or tricks of the trade will help.

Rather than rely on bureaucratic responses for complex problems, we should instead transform teacher education programs to be more responsive to our nations’ educational needs. We can, for instance, develop teacher education programs that encourage prospective teachers to learn more about the students they will teach and the contexts in which they live, and to respect their families and communities. We can provide experiences—through courses, field experiences and extracurricular activities—that will help prospective and practicing teachers learn to speak other

languages and learn about cultures other than their own. We can create a climate through innovative courses and assignments, for example, in which prospective and practicing teachers can become critical thinkers. We can help practicing and prospective teachers understand—through dialogue in courses and seminars, through interactions with excellent teachers, through critical readings, and through reflection in journals and essays—that teaching is more than a job but different from missionary work.

Change is also possible if we reform the climate in universities and schools of education. This is a tall order, but it is absolutely necessary if we are to make a difference. Here are some of the changes that universities and schools of education need to make:

- We need to provide course work both in arts and sciences *and* in pedagogy that expands students' minds and enriches their experiences.
- We must actively search for prospective teachers who have the enthusiasm and dispositions to teach students of diverse backgrounds in neglected areas, and who demonstrate excellence in actual teaching.
- We need to set up field placements that more closely match the schools in which most students will end up teaching. Many pre-service teachers, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, are woefully unprepared to teach students of diverse backgrounds in urban schools. Unless we make sure to place students for at least some of their field placement in urban schools with excellent teachers as their mentors, most pre-service teachers will continue to do their student teaching in suburban and majority White schools and will therefore have little experience in or knowledge of urban schools with a diverse student body.
- There is a dire need to hire a more diverse teacher education faculty. As Howard (1999), borrowing from the words of Malcolm X, writes in his book on White teachers and multiracial schools, 'you can't teach what you don't know', and that goes for teacher education faculty as well as for teachers. I am not suggesting that White faculty cannot teach courses in multicultural education or courses that focus on diversity; of course, they can, as long as they have the training, experience, and heart to do so. This also means that hiring faculty of color does not necessarily mean that they are trained, experienced or have the heart to teach courses in diversity, a mistake that many schools of education make. But the fact is that, when you have a more diverse teacher education faculty, you also have a diversity of experiences, viewpoints and expertise, and this enriches the climate for everybody.
- There is also a great need to recruit a more diverse student body. We need to think creatively about how to diversify the teaching pool, and this means looking beyond traditional criteria. Many schools of education have student bodies that are overwhelmingly White, even if they are located in urban centers. We need academically strong students as pre-service teachers, as well as students who have had different experiences that can improve both the learning experience for their peers, and educational outcomes for their future students. This means providing incentives such as scholarships to prospective students, developing relationships

with community-based groups as sources of prospective students, looking beyond the 18–22-year-old cohort, and finding other innovative ways to diversify the student body.

- Change is also possible at the societal level by advocating for teachers to be well paid for their work, and given the respect they deserve for doing one of the most difficult jobs there is. This means committing the nation's full economic and moral resources to the problem. It also means demonstrating a fierce determination to improving education for all students, and especially for those who are most poorly served. Above all, the 'Why We Teach' essays tell us that teaching is not just about reading, or math or art. It is also about *who* is heard, listened to and read about, *who* gets to count, and *who* can paint the picture. To use the current discourse of the Bush administration's 'No Child Left Behind' legislation, it is about who moves ahead and who gets left behind. Many of the policies and practices that are needed to turn things around require no additional resources. Others *do* require resources, not only at the school level, but also at the societal level. This means not only supporting equitable funding for all schools, but also working for affordable housing, decent jobs for everybody and a health system that restores dignity to all people.

In the US, we need to decide, as a nation, whether public education is worth the price. Surely there are implications of this work for Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America as well. The question to be addressed is this: is it worth the trouble to commit both moral and material resources to the task of providing all young people—especially those who have been left out—with the best teachers? Whether we are teachers, teacher educators, parents and guardians, or concerned citizens, our answer to this question may well determine the future of public education in our world.

### Note on Contributor

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