“Challenging Current Notions of “Highly Qualified Teachers”

Through Work in a Teachers’ Inquiry Group

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“What about loving practices?” asked Stephen Gordon, a 33-year veteran of the Boston Public Schools one day when we were discussing the question of effective classroom practices. Steve, who participated in an inquiry group of teachers with which I worked from 1999 – 2000, was exasperated with the current focus on “best practices” in educational discourse, as if such practices are “best” in every case and for all students. All of us – the eight teachers in the group and I – were uncomfortable with the notion of “best practices,” although we hadn’t quite pinpointed what it was about the term that bothered us. Was it the static view of reality it denotes? Was it how it seems to define teaching as a “bag of tricks” that could solve the complex problems of schools? Was it the overly prescriptive nature of the idea behind “best practices”? It was probably all of these, but it was not until Steve asked his question that we were reminded that “best practices,” no matter how effective, are not the answer to the problems plaguing schools. After all, schools are not simply sites where particular strategies are enacted. They are, above all, places where relationships are created, relationships that can be tremendously significant in either positive or negative ways for young people.

In this article, I describe the work of the “What Keeps Teachers Going?” inquiry group as a way to challenge current notions of what it means to be a “highly qualified
teacher.” In the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), a “highly qualified teacher” is defined as one who has full state certification, or a passing score on a state exam. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), “highly qualified teachers” are those with superior verbal ability and content matter knowledge who have the ability to use instructional strategies that draw on “scientifically based research,” and who are adept at the “best practices” alluded to above. This definition has been severely criticized by a number of educational researchers for, among other things, being a thinly veiled political agenda that includes dismantling schools and colleges of education (Cochran-Smith, 2002; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002). Moreover, according to Marilyn Cochran-Smith (forthcoming), the widely touted need for “highly qualified teachers” is based on faulty assumptions including the following:

- Teacher preparation is college education; quality teaching is a college-educated person with verbal ability transmitting knowledge; pupil learning is received information and demonstrating it on a standardized test; and a good educational system is a set of structural arrangements that make the former effective and cost-efficient (Cochran-Smith, forthcoming).

In this article I argue that, although these things may be important, they do not by themselves define what it means to be an excellent and qualified teacher.
What Brings Teachers to – and Keeps Them in – The Profession?

The question of what brings people to teaching and keeps them there bears asking because of the precarious situation of public education today. More than ever before, teachers face difficult circumstances in public schools, including growing standardization and bureaucratization, and pressures to “teach to the test” (McNeil, 2000). Many of the schools that our nation’s most vulnerable children attend, especially those in economically strapped urban areas, are dilapidated and segregated (NCES, 2000c; Orfield, 2001). In addition to attending schools with crumbling infrastructures and little financial and moral support, poor children also face myriad challenges brought on by structural and social inequality, and many experience the effects of poverty, racism, and hopelessness on a daily basis (Books, 1998).

Moreover, many teachers who work in urban schools have had scant experience in the profession. Especially disturbing is the fact that poor students of color are at the bottom of the ladder for receiving services from the most qualified teachers (David & Shields, 2001). One large-scale study of high schools, for example, found that teachers assigned to low-track classes are often poorly prepared in the subject matter, and new to teaching (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Further, many of the teachers who work in urban schools know little about the lives and experiences of their students, and they struggle to teach them (Irvine, 2003; McIntyre, 1997; Olsen, 1997). It is clear, then, that dramatic inequalities exist in students’ access to an excellent, high quality education. These inequalities are frequently based on race and social class differences.
All children have every right to expect more from a public school system that for many generations has proudly proclaimed itself to be “the great equalizer.” But for many students today, this is a hollow promise. The increasing standardization of schools in the United States is at least partly to blame. In fact, evidence is mounting that the testing frenzy – a direct result of the call for “high standards” - is actually limiting the kinds of pedagogical approaches teachers use, as well as constricting the curriculum, especially in classrooms serving low-income and minority students (Dudley-Marling & Murphy, 2001; McNeil, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). As a result, high-stakes testing, rather than increasing student learning, is escalating dropout rates and leading to less engagement with schooling (Amrein & Berliner, 2002).

Another vexing problem facing schools is that while the number of students of color in U.S. classrooms has increased dramatically, the number of teachers of color has not kept pace. In 1972, just 22 percent of students in public schools were considered “minority;” by 1998, it was 37 percent (NCES, 2000b). The teaching force, on the other hand, is about 87% White. There is little indication that this is changing, or hope that it will become more diverse in the near future (Henke, Choy, Chen, Geis, & Alt, 1997). The growing gap is problematic not just for reasons of equity, but also because there is mounting evidence that a higher number of teachers of color in a school, particularly Black and Hispanic teachers, can promote the achievement of all students (Meier, Wrinkle, & Polinard, 1999; Dee, 2000; Clewell, Puma, & McKay, 2001). For instance, a study that examined the 350 largest culturally diverse school districts in Texas found a positive relationship between the number of teachers of color and the achievement of students of color. But what surprised the researchers most was that the achievement of
Anglo students rose even higher (Meier, Wrinkle, & Polinard, 1999). The results of this study challenge not only the simplistic notion that teachers of color are important only as “role models” for students of color, but also suggest that teachers of diverse backgrounds bring many strengths to their teaching, strengths that benefit all students (Irvine, 2003).

Teaching is hard work, and even some of the most enthusiastic and idealistic teachers lose heart when confronted with the problems of public schools. The result is a high turnover of teachers, especially in urban schools. A look at recent statistics confirms that about twenty percent of new teachers leave during the first three years of teaching, and the rate has generally increased in the recent past (Boser, 2000; NCES, 2000a). Even more alarming, the schools most affected by teacher dropout are those that could most benefit from stability in the teaching force: researchers have found that nearly half of all new teachers in urban public schools quit within five years (Haycock, 1998b). Although almost half of those who leave may eventually return to teaching, the scope of these numbers is staggering. Things are not expected to improve in the near future: projections are that by 2009, some 2 million new teachers will be needed in U.S. public schools (Hussar, 1999). With the predicted looming teacher shortage, recruiting and retaining excellent teachers who are excited about and committed to teaching students in urban schools is more urgent than ever.

That good teaching can overcome difficult handicaps such as poverty or other social ills is by now well known. Linda Darling-Hammond and Beverly Falk (1997), reviewing dozens of studies on retention in the late 1990s, suggested that until schools address the enormous inequalities in students’ access to qualified teachers, other changes would have little effect on student achievement. In fact, there is growing research that
good teachers make the single greatest difference in promoting or deterring student achievement. In its 1996 report, the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (1996), for instance, found that “what teachers know and do is one of the most important influences on what students learn.” Also, Judith Langer (2002), in a multi-state evaluation of numerous classrooms found that achievement in reading, writing and English among middle and high school students was related more to the skills their teachers possess than to the socioeconomic and other characteristics of the students. That is, students in some schools demonstrated higher literacy achievement levels than their demographically comparable counterparts. Kati Haycock (1998a) of the Education Trust has gone so far as to suggest that if we made sure that poor children and children of color had teachers of the same quality as other children, half of the achievement gap would disappear.

Haycock’s optimism may be overstated but it makes sense when we consider testimonies from students about teachers who changed their lives. In the words of Nel Noddings, “… the single greatest complaint of students in schools is ‘they don’t care’…” (Noddings, 1992, 2). Moreover, a study of students who had dropped out of school found that the one factor that they said might have prevented them from dropping out was an adult in the school who knew them well and cared for them (Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996). If this is the case, what should we know about effective, caring, committed, and persevering teachers, and how can we use this knowledge to support all teachers, thereby supporting the students who most need them? This is the question that brought me to my work in an inquiry group with Boston Public School teachers.
The Inquiry group

From 1999-2000, I collaborated with a small group of teachers in the Boston Public Schools to consider the question “What keeps teachers going – in spite of everything?” I did not begin the project with specific questionnaires, surveys, or interview questions, nor did I want to test any particular hypothesis. I simply wanted to engage in conversation with teachers about big and important issues, beginning with my own burning question of what sustains excellent teachers in urban schools. I decided that a good way to do so would be to initiate an inquiry group. I approached Ceronne Daly, then Coordinator of High School Restructuring for the Boston Public Schools, and I shared with her my idea of forming a yearlong relationship with a group of veteran teachers. With her guidance, we recruited high school teachers who were reflective, concerned about the essential question I had posed, willing to engage in conversation about it, and highly respected by peers and supervisors as excellent teachers of students of diverse backgrounds. Because of a fellowship I had received from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, I had funds to pay for books, snacks, an all-day retreat and substitute teachers to take over the classrooms of the inquiry group teachers on that day, and a small stipend at the end of our year together. The Boston Public Schools provided an inquiry group grant, and we used those funds also for a modest stipend for each teacher.

Initially, about twelve teachers indicated an interest in working in the group, and eight remained with the project for its duration. Besides Ceronne Daly and Judith Ullman, a teacher educator from a small nearby college, the others who took part were
Judith Baker, Claudia Bell, Sonie Felix, Karen Gelzinis, Stephen Gordon, Ambrizeth Lima, and Junia Yearwood (all agreed to have their real names used). They teach math, English, health, African American Studies, and two teach in bilingual classrooms (Spanish and Cape Verdean Crioulo). Their own backgrounds are quite diverse (African American, Cape Verdean, Haitian, and White). These teachers have a passion for teaching and for their subject area and they unabashedly love their students and hold high expectations of them.

Collectively, the teachers have many years of experience among them (most had been teaching for over 25 years). They have received numerous awards (five have been named Boston Teacher of the Year, something I learned two years after completing our work), and they are active in professional organizations, and in writing and reading groups. They also serve as mentors to new teachers and they take part in other community activities. They are known to be movers and shakers, willing to speak up and take a stand. That is, they “rock the boat” when it needs rocking. Most important, this is a group of tremendously respected high school teachers who have persevered for many years, and they have a reputation of success with students of diverse backgrounds. In a word, these are the kinds of teachers who could best answer the question of what keeps teachers going.

During the year the inquiry group met, I drove out to Boston once a month and there, at one of the high schools where the teachers work, we would meet for several hours to talk, write, and reflect. We met throughout the 1999-2000 school year, culminating with an all-day retreat in May 2000. The group wrote together, or separately at home, based on questions I asked them to consider. We talked about the books we read
together and we discussed the challenges teachers faced daily in their classrooms, and they sometimes shared their students’ work. We occasionally emailed one another and several of the teachers sent me long letters over the course of the year. It was not until January that we agreed that, besides considering my question, each member of the group would come up with his or her own persistent dilemma or problem. They also agreed to present their thinking on these questions at subsequent meetings.

Our work in the inquiry group was informed by several principles. One is that inquiry is a crucial element of teachers’ work. We built on the work of Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1993; 1999), and others whose scholarship has stressed the essential role of teachers as researchers and the transformative role it can have on their intellectual development and practice (Clanindin et al, 1993; Freedman et al, 1999). In spite of the growing number of mandates at local, state, and federal levels that seem to be based on the simplistic notion that teachers are little more than technicians who “fix” students with prescribed treatments and pre-packaged programs, our view is that teachers are above all transformative intellectuals, a point made powerfully by Henry Giroux (1988).

Our work was also informed by the ideas of Paulo Freire (1970, 1998), particularly his insistence that education is most effective when it is based on dialogue and respect. Having great hope in the process of dialogue, I knew that it would bring us not to some fairyland conclusions about “best practices” or in other such rigid directions, but to ideas that might change how we – all of us – teach. Also, because issues of difference and discrimination came up in many of our conversations, and because the schools where the inquiry group teachers work are home to students of many different
backgrounds (African American, Cape Verdean, Haitian, Puerto Rican, Dominican, African, and European American, among others), multicultural, anti-racist, and culturally responsive pedagogy also were important to our work because unless teachers understand, respect, and honor their students’ identities, they cannot hope to become their teachers in any meaningful way. (Banks & Banks, 2001; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Finally, because much of the discourse surrounding educational renewal and reform has focused on blaming students and teachers, we felt it was necessary to place the work of teachers and schools in a broader sociopolitical reality. In this sense, researchers such as Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (1998), by rejecting simple answers to complex questions and respecting teachers’ capacities to teach well if given the resources and support, provide a more compassionate view of educational reform.

Retaining Good Teachers

The inquiry group conversations and reflections yielded several themes that challenge the current discourse about “highly qualified teachers” and that may prove helpful to teachers, teacher educators, policymakers, and the general public. Based on the data we accumulated (transcripts of meetings, writings, and field notes), we found seven interrelated themes that described the major reasons that this group of excellent urban teachers remains in teaching (each is described in depth in the book that was the result of our collaboration; see Nieto, 2003). These were:

- Autobiography
- Love
• Hope and possibility
• Anger and desperation
• Intellectual work
• Democratic practice
• The ability to shape the future

Needless to say, what holds true for this small group of teachers may not be the case for others in different circumstances. Nevertheless, as we’ve shared our findings with audiences around the country, we have found that teachers in many different situations share similar experiences. Whether they teach in small schools or large, elementary or secondary, urban or rural, our findings have resonated with them. In what follows, I briefly describe each of the themes that surfaced, along with an example or two from the spoken or written words of the teachers.

Autobiography

Teachers’ identities are deeply implicated in their teaching, and hence in their perseverance. By “identities” I mean not only their ethnic, racial, gender, social class, and linguistic backgrounds – although these are, of course, fundamental aspects of identity – but also their social and political identities. I have come to believe that being aware of and valuing one’s autobiography must be at the heart of teaching because knowing themselves helps teachers know their students. In recent years, autobiography has become an ever more popular way to understand teaching (Bruner, 1994; Cohen & Scheer, 1997; Connelly & Clanindin, 1999; Witherall & Noddings, 1991). It provides a way for teachers to ponder such questions as: What brought me to teaching? How do I see myself in the work I do? What are my blind spots?
When the inquiry group first starting meeting, I suggested they write their “teaching autobiographies.” That is, I wanted the teachers to reflect on how their backgrounds or experiences had influenced them to decide on a career of teaching, and to remain in the profession. By thinking about their motivation for entering the profession in the first place, rather than a self-indulgent exercise, I saw this as a way for teachers to connect more effectively with their students.

Junia Yearwood, who teaches English, wrote a piece that exemplifies what I mean by the impact of autobiography on teaching. As a young child in Barbados, she learned the value of education early on. As a result, she could not divorce her heritage and experiences from the reasons she is a teacher. The following is a very brief excerpt of what she wrote:

The value of education and the importance of being able to read and write became clear and urgent when I became fully aware of the history of my ancestors. The story of the enslavement of Africans and the horrors they were forced to endure repulsed and angered me, but the aspect of slavery that most intrigued me was the systematic denial of literacy to my ancestors. As a child of ten or so, I reasoned that if reading and writing were not extremely important, then there would be no need to withhold those skills from the supposed ‘savage and inferior’ African. I concluded that teaching was the most important profession on earth and that the teacher was the Moses of people of African descent… This revelation made my destiny clear. I had to be a Teacher.
It also became clear that several of the teachers in the inquiry group had been, or were still, involved in movements for social justice. These included movements outside education (civil rights, anti-apartheid) as well as inside education (bilingual education, multicultural education, desegregation). Throughout the year, they spoke and wrote eloquently about their belief in social justice, and their work in teaching as a reflection of that belief.

Love

It seems almost old-fashioned today to speak about teaching and love in the same breath. Nevertheless, teaching is about love because it involves trust and respect and because at its best, it depends on close and special relationships between students and teachers. It is, in a word, a vocation based on love. But rather than a maudlin emotion, love is a blend of confidence, faith, and admiration for students, and an appreciation for the strengths they bring with them. In this sense, love is visible through teachers’ daily work.

From the beginning of our work in the inquiry group, it became evident that love was a major reason for the teachers’ resilience. One way the teachers in the inquiry group demonstrate love is by affirming their students’ identities. Ambrizeth Lima, a teacher in the group who had come from the Cape Verde Islands when she was a child, said that students should not have to “discard themselves” in order to be accepted. Working with primarily Cape Verdean students, she encouraged them to hold onto their language and to feel pride in their culture. More than most, she realized that students’ identities do not
disappear simply because schools refuse to face them. Ambrizeth knew, from her own experience as both a teacher and student, that teachers’ caring is essential in promoting a sense of belonging for students whose race, culture, and language differ from the mainstream.

Hope and possibility

Hope is at the very essence of teaching, and it was evident in many ways in the work of these teachers. They had hope in the promise of public education and in their students; faith in their abilities as teachers; and confidence in trusted colleagues and new teachers. They also had hope in the profession of teaching. For example, it was obvious in our conversations that one of the great pillars of faith that keep teachers in the profession was the very idea of public education. Most of us who’ve been educated in public schools in the United States, regardless of whether our experience was entirely positive or not, have an image of public schools as holding a noble purpose, a civic aim on behalf of the public good beyond individual advancement. This vision explains our abiding faith and belief we have in the public schools.

That our public schools ever performed this admirable role for all citizens is questionable. In spite of John Dewey’s (1916) idealistic assertion that “It is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them” (pp. 119-120), schools have regrettably too often served to uphold privilege. In a provocative book on the history of public schools in the United States, Michael Katz (1975) demonstrated that from the very beginning they were “universal, tax-supported, free, compulsory, bureaucratically arranged, class-biased, and
racist” (p. 106). According to Katz, these seemingly contradictory features were interrelated and they derived from the historic purpose of public schools: to train different segments of society for particular roles in life. Even if we do not accept the more deterministic aspect of Katz’s thesis, there can be little argument that the outcome of public schooling has been unequal and unjust for certain segments of U.S. society (Spring, 2001). Teachers cannot ignore this disturbing history. Indeed, thoughtful and critical teachers have to reconcile values that at times seem irreconcilable: an unshakeable belief that public education can lead to the opportunity for more choices and a better life with, at the same time, a healthy skepticism that challenges a simplistic correlation of education with progress.

Another way that teachers demonstrate hope is through an unshakable belief in the abilities of their students. At one of our meetings, Judith Baker, a teacher in the inquiry group, brought what she called a “tough problem” for us to think about: she described how some of the African American and Latino boys in her classes, who were more than capable of doing well in school, were failing. “I’m very, very worried about the boys,” she said, and she wanted us to help her think about how to confront this problem. Rather than blame the situation on the students’ laziness or lack of aptitude, she said with the greatest confidence, “I’m sure that these guys can do far better than they are, absolutely, positively.” This kind of conviction is one way that hope is manifested. It is also what keeps teachers looking for ways to reach their students.
Anger and desperation

One of the big surprises to emerge from my work with the inquiry group was the level of anger expressed by these excellent teachers. I want to make it clear, however, that they were not angry with their students. In all the time I spent with them, I never heard them make a disparaging remark that began with the generalized “these kids…” The inquiry group members did not want to be confused with teachers who sit in the Faculty Lounge and complain about their students’ laziness and lack of intelligence; who gripe about families that don’t care; who romanticize about how much better things were in some mythical “before.”

I came to realize that anger is the other side of hope, and given the conditions in urban public schools today, their hope is constantly tested. The teachers were angry at the injustices their students have to endure, including racism and poverty; they were impatient with the arbitrariness of “the system”; they were baffled at school policies made by people far removed from the daily realities of classroom life; they were indignant at being treated as if they were children. But no matter how angry they were, they never expressed their frustration in mean-spirited comments about their students or their students’ families. Judith Baker explained, “I would exclude all ‘social work’ remedies. This is typical talk that teachers always do that leads nowhere.” Nor did the teachers let their anger interfere with teaching. Junia Yearwood explained that her classroom was her haven. Once she entered the classroom, she said, “What I try to keep focused on is my kids, the students.”

Sometimes, however, anger could spill over into desperation. Sonie Felix, the youngest member of the group, had been teaching for only six years but she came in one
day and read “Considering Retirement at 26,” a piece she had written the night before. In
spite of the fact that she enjoyed teaching and loved her students, Sonie said she did not
receive support or the opportunity to grow as an individual. She ended by asking
plaintively, “But what happens when that job is your life and calling? What do you do
then?”

Intellectual work

Another theme that was evident from the beginning of our work together was that
teaching is intellectual work. One way that teachers do intellectual work is by engaging
with trusted colleagues in what one of the teaches, Stephen Gordon, called “adult
conversations about unasked questions.” But these adult conversations are not always
easy, nor do they lead to quick solutions.

Sonie Felix provides an example of the understandable impatience that teachers
may have with these conversations. When we first started meeting as an inquiry group, I
could see the exasperation in Sonie’s eyes. She was angry at the lack of support she had
received, and at the bureaucracy and increasing pressures teachers experience due to
testing and retention policies. The anger and resentment Sonie felt is not uncommon,
particularly among young teachers who receive little mentoring, or who have few
opportunities to engage in collaborative work and dialogue with other teachers. She felt
that talk would get us nowhere. By our last meeting, Sonie had developed not only a
desire, but also a need to talk. At the end of the meeting, she said, “I think if we omit
these conversations, that that’s how and why people tend to leave, because these
conversations don’t happen.” I am happy to report that more than three years later, Sonie
is still teaching. She has remained in teaching largely because of her continuing participation in the intellectual life of teaching and because of colleagues who have supported her.

Participation in the inquiry group was just one way in which Sonie and the other teachers engage in intellectual work. They also take part in curriculum development, both individual and collaborative, and they do research in their classrooms. They attend conferences and are active in professional organizations. They keep journals and engage in other kinds of writing as well. They also mentor new colleagues, present workshops for their colleagues, and visit other schools. They think of teaching as research: an exploration to expand the curriculum and their own teaching practices, an examination of new and interesting ways of presenting material, and a constant search to include students meaningfully in their own education. They refuse to become stale in motivation, methods, or subject matter. In a word, these teachers are constantly updating their craft and their knowledge.

Democratic practice

Teachers enter the profession for many reasons, but fame, money, or the promise of lavish working conditions are not on that list. Instead, for many of them, the urge to live a life of service committed to the ideals of democracy, fair play, and equality is strong for many. This was certainly true of the teachers who participated in the inquiry group.

Democratic practice was evident in the curriculum and pedagogy of the teachers in the inquiry group, and in the very way they conceptualized teaching. As one of our
group’s activities, I asked the teachers to write a letter to a new teacher. What would a new teacher need to know? Stephen Gordon expressed the profound desire to engage in democratic practice in the long letter he wrote, which ends in this way:

I am happy that I found a profession that combines my belief in social justice with my zeal for intellectual excellence. My career choice has meant much anxiety, anger and disappointment. But it has also produced profound joy. I have spent my work life committed to a just cause: the education of Boston high school students.

Welcome to our noble teaching profession and our enduring cause.

With hope and faith,

Stephen Gordon

The Ability to Shape the Future

It became clear during our meetings that building relationships is crucial for both student achievement and teacher retention. The impact that teachers can have on students’ lives makes it imperative that teachers choose their words and actions carefully because what teachers do and say can stay with their students for a lifetime.

Karen Gelzinis expressed it best when she said, “teachers change lives forever.” For our final meeting, Karen had picked up cards to give to Ceronne and me. The cards said simply “Teachers Change Lives Forever.” A couple of months later, Karen wrote me
a long letter, only a small part of which I include below, in which she reflected on this message:

WE CHANGE LIVES FOREVER. Driving home, thinking about the whole day, the verse on the front of the note card HIT me. WE CHANGE LIVES FOREVER. What power! I always knew teachers made a difference, a tremendous difference and I’ve always taken the responsibility very seriously, but to think about it using these words: TEACHERS CHANGE LIVES FOREVER and ever... and ever...lives... To really think about that, for a long time is frightening, that type of power, to use it day after day...

That power, however, is not unleashed simply through “best practices” or teaching decontextualized skills. Much more than this is needed to become an effective teacher.

Lessons From the Work of the Inquiry Group

Before I started the inquiry group with these teachers, I was fairly certain that I knew some of the reasons teachers enter and remain in the profession: the students, of course; a desire to be part of a meaningful and worthwhile endeavor; the possibility that their work might have an impact on the future. These things turned out to be true, but working with the teachers in the inquiry group also gave me a language with which to articulate some ideas about teaching that had until then been lying just under the surface of my consciousness: that joy and hope can be the other side of anger and desperation,
and that all these may be experienced by committed teachers at different points in their careers and even at different times of the same day; that intellectual work takes tremendous effort; and that teaching is first and foremost about relationships with students and colleagues.

By focusing on excellent teachers I do not mean to suggest that all the teachers in our schools are as talented and caring as the ones in the Inquiry group. There are many excellent teachers, just as there are some who should not be teaching. Most teachers, however, are decent and hard working; they enter the profession for the noblest of reasons. But despite their good intentions, many of those who work with culturally and linguistically diverse student populations and with children from working-class and poor families have limited experience in teaching them. These teachers can best learn from others who do this work well and with energy, and who remain committed to teaching and hopeful about the outcomes. The experiences and lives of excellent teachers can help all of us – teachers, teacher educators, parents, and citizens in general – rethink some of our assumptions about teaching in the most depressed schools and, in effect, about the future of public education. They also help challenge rigid notions of what makes for a “highly qualified teacher.”

The work of teachers in the inquiry group, for instance, suggests that creating communities of learning among teachers is necessary if they are to remain connected to their profession, their students, and one another. The truth of this statement was evident throughout the year the inquiry group met, but it was especially obvious during our final meeting. Several of the teachers in the group spoke of the difference it had made to them that they had colleagues to call on throughout the year. Although teaching remains a
lonely profession, the teachers no longer felt as if they were walking into their classrooms alone. The power of creating such communities of inquiry is one of the most valuable lessons we learned that year.

We rarely find words such as “love,” “hope,” “social justice,” or “anger” in the current educational discourse, yet these are some of the things that kept this group of “highly qualified” and excellent teachers going. In what follows, I consider some implications from our work on the future of public education.

Rethinking Professional Development

Rethinking professional development means changing how teachers are prepared for the profession in the first place, and changing the conditions in which they continue to learn throughout their careers. In other words, it means a major shift in the culture of teacher preparation. Schools and colleges of education have changed their practices in the past several decades to incorporate newer research and pedagogy as well as more relevant field placements, but they can do more.

For one, teacher preparation needs to shift from a focus on questions of “what” and “how” to also consider questions of “why.” That is, the emphasis of some teacher education programs on strategies and techniques does little to prepare teachers to understand that these are just a small part of teaching. True, it is necessary to know a variety of approaches and to experiment with them and feel confident in one’s ability to use them. But teaching is far more than specific procedures; it is a way of thinking about learning, and of one’s students, and of what will be most useful for them.
All teachers, whether new or veteran, also need to know more about the students they teach. Our public urban schools increasingly are home to students whose lives and experiences are vastly different from those of their teachers who are overwhelmingly White, middle-class, and monolingual English-speakers. As a result, most teachers know little, either from direct experience or education, about the diversity of their students. If this is the case, they may become frustrated and impatient, longing for an idealized past that never was when all children were easy to teach and looked like them. Unless we prepare new teachers with the kinds of experiences that equip them to go into diverse urban schools with both level-headedness and hope, the situation will remain the same.

Moreover, schools and colleges of education, as well as school districts and state departments of education (all of which are increasingly involved in teacher education), need to recruit a more diverse teaching population in the first place. The cultural congruency between teachers and students is no guarantee that students will learn better or more effectively, but having a teaching force that is more representative of our general population can certainly help.

Excellent teachers don’t develop full-blown at graduation; nor are they just “born teachers.” Instead, teachers are always in the process of “becoming.” Given the dynamics of their work, they need to continually rediscover who they are and what they stand for through their dialogue and collaboration with peers, through ongoing and consistent study, and through deep reflection about their craft. They also need to understand the nature of their work and its life-and-death potential in the lives of their students. They need to understand that teaching is neither missionary work (although it may be a mission), nor just another job.
Another essential – although increasingly scarce – condition necessary for teacher learning is time. In my work with teachers, this is the one issue on which almost all agree: there simply is not enough time in the day to do all that they need to do. Aside from the typical obligations to plan curriculum and grade papers, more and more teachers are understanding the need to collaborate with peers, engage in intellectual inquiry, and keep abreast of the latest research and trends. But most schools do little to help these things happen. In most, professional development is defined as bringing in experts to do a workshop. Sometimes school districts send teachers to attend a conference, but this is not very common. Paying for them to do so is even more unlikely. Also rare are opportunities for teachers to plan together, or to participate in reading or inquiry groups. If the culture of teacher preparation is to change, one way to begin is to advance the model of teacher-as-intellectual. This means providing time and support for teachers to meet and work together.

Developing New National Priorities for Teaching

It is by now a truism that the profession of teaching, although enormously significant in the lives of so many people, is terribly undervalued, undercompensated, and underrespected. We see signs of this everywhere: teachers take second jobs as cashiers in convenience stores and they clean houses during their summer vacations; they spend hundreds and sometimes thousands of dollars a year on classroom materials; and they spend even more on their continuing education, usually with no compensation from their school districts. Yet the current policy climate at both state and national levels is permeated by a profound disrespect for teachers, especially teachers in urban schools, and
for the children they teach. Most politicians, for instance, although they speak often about 
education, rarely step foot in schools. They tend to stress only accountability, and the 
tone they use to speak about teachers is sometimes disparaging and unforgiving. But no 
first-year signing bonus, no teacher test, and no high-stakes test can take the place of a 
true and enduring respect for teachers. In fact, these things often get in the way of 
retaining good teachers because they question the intelligence, ability, and commitment 
of teachers.

One thing we learned from the Inquiry group project that we are certain about is 
this: no amount of decontextualized “best practices” will keep teachers engaged or 
committed. Current reforms in education that focus on recruiting “highly qualified 
teachers” and on developing “best practices” as antidotes to both teacher burnout and 
student underachievement are unlikely to solve the problems plaguing the profession. It is 
only when teachers are treated as professionals and intellectuals who care deeply about 
their students and their craft that they will be enticed to remain in the profession, and that 
new teachers will be attracted to join. Our work illustrates that, rather than a focus on 
dehumanized “best practices,” we need to focus on students and those who best teach 
them.

Teachers need to be supported by teacher educators, administrators, school 
committees, politicians, and citizens who care about and support with words, deeds, and 
money the work of schools in our society. If we are really serious about expanding the 
opportunities for students in our urban public schools, rather than high-stakes tests, we 
should be focusing our efforts on high standards, high expectations, and high finance.
Conclusion

Given the current demoralizing climate in education in which both teachers and their students as positioned in disparaging ways, I have become convinced that we need to forge a more generous vision of public schools, and we need to do so now. Unless we take action on behalf of our public schools, particularly those that serve the most impoverished children in urban areas, we will continue to develop into a nation of haves and have-nots, and we will do so more rapidly and dramatically than ever.

The work of the inquiry group suggests a counter-narrative to the prevailing wisdom about teachers. The notion that “fixing” teachers or “filling” them with new and innovative ideas has become fashionable nowadays as the solution to the problem of underprepared teachers and failing students. In our work, we offer a different approach: building on teachers’ strengths, we advance an alternative vision of what is worth cherishing in public school education.

This is the challenge that lies ahead: if we are as concerned about education as we say we are, then we need to do more to change the conditions faced by teachers, especially those who work in under-financed and largely abandoned urban schools. We need to support those teachers who love their students, who find creative ways to teach them, and who do so under difficult circumstances. We need to celebrate teachers who are as excited about their own learning as they are about the learning of their students. And we need to champion those teachers who value their students’ families and find respectful ways to work with them. Above all, we need to expect all teachers to do these things. The children in our public schools deserve no less.
Notes


