In an October, 2000 article in the *Phi Delta Kappan* that is an apt opener for this talk on “hard times” for education, Bobby Ann Starnes wrote,

“It is difficult for me to write these words. I’m not an alarmist or a reactionary. I don’t believe our society is doomed by single-parent families, and I don’t think Pokémon will be the ruin of all we hold dear. I don’t panic when change comes slowly -- that’s just the way it comes -- and I don’t see doom lurking around every corner.

No, I’m an optimist. I actually believe that one person can make a difference. I believe that, given the opportunity, teachers and learners will choose to do well. So,” she continues further on, “under normal circumstances, I talk, write about, and promote what I am for rather than dwell on or criticize what I am against. Perhaps I’m swayed in this direction by Dewey’s admonition that those who form their principles or define their purposes ‘in reaction against others... [are] unwittingly controlled by them.’”
Not wanting to be controlled by reactionary interests, I too tend to focus on
the good being done in educational research and in classrooms. But my
naturally hopeful nature sometimes must pause to reflect on what is
happening in education today, and I’ve come to the reluctant conclusion that
these are hard times.

In my talk this afternoon, I’ll first briefly describe what I mean by “hard
times” and some of the dilemmas of doing educational research in this
context. I’ll then explore what researchers - especially those new to the
profession - can do to challenge the underlying assumptions about education
today, and to do creditable, honorable, and even audacious educational
research despite these hard times.

The Hard Times

Let me begin by making it clear that, although we’re living through difficult
times, they’re not difficult for all schools, or for all researchers.

Let me describe two different scenarios -- each extreme, although not
unusual -- to make my point.
I recently visited a generously endowed independent school in an urban area, just minutes away from one of the most devastated urban neighborhoods in the country.

This particular school is in a neighborhood that, although just minutes away from that neighborhood, seems like a world away: it’s a community of mansions and manicured lawns, and the school is located on a hill on an expansive and beautiful campus.

In fact, it’s not unlike a small liberal arts college (with almost the same price tag): there’s a small teacher-student ratio; incredible resources to support student learning; and teachers who’ve been educated at Ivy League colleges with excellent general education preparation and, once they arrive at the door of their school, receive ongoing and consistent mentoring, professional development opportunities, and other exceptional resources and support for their continued learning.

What do these surroundings tell students about who they are and what they deserve?

In contrast, any researcher who’s recently stepped foot in a typical urban public school knows what I mean by “hard times”:

Compare the first scenario to the situation faced by students in a struggling under-resourced public urban school
(this is also the case in many poor rural, and even in some suburban schools): here I saw an environment characterized by a crumbling infrastructure (no doors on bathroom stalls in the girls’ bathroom; no toilet paper; not enough books for students to share); many teachers unprepared for their subject matter and for the kinds of students they teach (i.e., teachers who are unfamiliar with their students’ backgrounds and cultures; who are unable to speak their students’ native languages; who have little experience in working with families from social class and cultural backgrounds different from their own) and with little support for their continuing professional development (including punitive and imposed one-shot workshops; few opportunities for participating in collaborative study groups or other continuing education arrangements); and (with some notable exceptions) a climate of hopelessness (closed classroom doors, low expectations for what students might be capable of, or what families believe and value); and overworked and underprepared staff members in areas such as special education and counseling; and few of the special subjects (art, music, physical education) that here are considered frills but in other more generously endowed schools are seen as basics.

What do these surroundings tell students about who they are and what they deserve?
The two scenarios I’ve briefly described demonstrate extraordinary differences. Yet these stark differences are more evident every day in our society and schools. How can we think these contexts don’t make a difference?

These contexts illustrate what I mean by “hard times:”

- times that are increasingly characterized by talk about public education that is mean-spirited and antagonistic, a discourse described by Mike Rose as “despairing and dismissive,” that is “shutting down our civic imagination”
- times where the most common buzzwords are borrowed quite shamelessly from the business world: “accountability,” the school as a “market,” students and families as “consumers” and teachers as “producers,” and teacher tests as the answer to “quality control”
- these are times in which we see public schools replaced by other arrangements that once again largely benefit those who have the most, and disadvantage further those who have the least; where the public schools are no longer the one place where children of all races and social classes could expect to be educated (however imperfectly but at least with a shared vision that public schools had the responsibility to educate them all);
the researcher Bill Tate has noticed that we’re at a time when anything with the word “public” (public schools, public housing, public spaces) is suspect and where “privatization” is seen as the answer; where greater attention is being given to vouchers, tuition tax credits, “choice,” and charter schools, and high-stakes tests are seen as the final arbiter of excellence;

these are times in which less attention than ever is being given to the primary goals of education as expanding the human spirit and creating a better world, and more attention being given to education for particular jobs, and for advancing limited self-interest and promoting consumerism

they are also times in which learning is described less as a joyful and thrilling endeavor, and more as rubrics, benchmarks, and “best practices”

As a result, these are challenging times for

those who view public education as the last and best hope of fulfilling our stated ideals of a truly democratic society

and those who view education as what my colleague Steve Gordon -- who I’ll introduce to you in a moment -- has called “doing educational justice” especially for young people who’ve been largely abandoned by our public schools
Bucking the Hard Times: Making Spaces for Doing Creditable, Honorable, and Audacious Educational Research

What can educational researchers do?

1. **Understand that research, like teaching itself, is always political:**

Research, because it’s done by human beings, is profoundly variable, imperfect, and full of the biases of the humans who do the research.

Research is *never* innocent.

Educational research is therefore embedded in social and political contexts rather than neutral.

Paulo Freire’s quintessential questions about education are worthwhile to remember here: *Who benefits? Who loses?*

In spite of our necessary attempts at fairness (and we *must always* attempt this), the *results* of research may benefit some at the expense of others. This isn’t always the case. For example, research has demonstrated that:

1. making class sizes smaller for students who start school without the same skills as others - will also tend to make the schooling experience more rewarding and more enjoyable for *all* students;

2. de-tracking schools can benefit most (not necessarily *all*) students, not just those in the bottom tracks; and
3. promoting two-way bilingual education can benefit more than just language minority students

But it’s equally clear that sometimes particular people will benefit over others, and we need to realize that this will be the case. For ex., sometimes two-way bilingual education is simply not an option (i.e., where a less popular language or language variety is involved). In these cases, we need to think about who will benefit if we recommend initiating a program of French as a second language in an elementary school - even if the majority of students who speak Haitian Creole are not being well served. This is where issues of social justice must take center stage.

2. Think deeply about the implications of your research for the populations you’re concerned about

That is, be careful about the questions you ask: you may just get answers that you didn’t bargain for.

Educational research often points to specific policy directions. Some of this is out of our control, but we can at least be prepared for it by approaching and articulating our research questions with a critical lens.
Rather than asking, for instance, whether *Success for All* is a better program than another reading program, it might be more worthwhile to ask why we need pre-packaged reading programs in the first place, or how we can approach professional development so that it results in teachers themselves asking these kinds of questions.

Because promoting a specific approach - such as collaborative learning, or bilingual education, or culturally responsive pedagogy - may be taken up as the latest panacea for all sorts of educational problems. This has happened with bilingual education -- and it has resulted in severe criticism when bilingual education didn’t turn out to be the cure.

3. **Make educational research meaningful for actual schools by creating collaborative relationships with teachers, other researchers, and in school settings**

The *kind* of research you do (qualitative, quantitative -- these aren’t even debated to a great extent anymore) -- that is the *how* -- isn’t as important as *why* you do research, and *what* you hope to learn.

Sometimes, research is done for all the reasons we know and understand: tenure and promotion considerations, merit pay, and other rewards in the academy.
There are real pressures to do research for these reasons, and they’re understandable. But if that’s our primary impetus, we’ve got it all backwards.

It is my belief that the primary purpose of research is to improve the human condition. In terms of educational research, this means improving schooling for larger numbers of students, and particularly for those who’ve been poorly served by the schools.

This is why I believe that research that grows out of collaboration with others -- with our colleagues in the academy, with doctoral candidates, with teachers in schools -- is essential if we want to make a difference in actual schools.

On the other hand, there are few rewards in the academy for those who work in schools, or who do long-term research, or who work with others in and out of schools.

Given our teaching, advising, committee work, and other professional responsibilities, it’s easy to lose sight of this. I’m as guilty as anyone else, so I need to keep reminding myself to get into schools, to work with teachers, and to listen to them.

Let me end with an example of research I did with teachers over the period of a year.
This research emerges from a year-long inquiry group I engaged in with 8 high school teachers in the Boston Public Schools. It’s based on an essay I co-authored with Stephen Gordon, who’s currently a literacy specialist and professional developer working with other teachers at the Snowden International High School in Boston.

(Steve couldn’t be here today, but was happy that I’d be sharing his words with you at this meeting. I’ve edited the essay so I don’t have to speak of myself in the third person).
What are the truths that teachers believe about what they do, and how are these truths evident in their practice? What does it mean to teach with integrity, especially among culturally and linguistically diverse students in impoverished urban schools? And what inspires the most devoted teachers to continue in spite of the challenges they face on a daily basis? In the essay that follows, we attempt to answer these questions by focusing on a collaboration in which we were involved along with a number of other teachers from the Boston Public Schools. It was an experience that helped us put into words what it means to teach with integrity and hope, particularly in urban public schools today. It also helped us to understand that teaching can be thought of as “doing educational justice,” particularly when it
is done in the kinds of schools that have largely been abandoned by the public.

The questions with which we began this essay have become especially compelling for both of us, although for slightly different reasons. Sonia has been working with prospective and practicing teachers for over twenty years, and she finds this work more significant yet more challenging than ever before, especially given the public’s diminishing support for education. Steve, after working for more than 30 years in the Boston Public Schools, is as devoted as he has ever been to his students and to the profession of teaching, but ever more impatient with the bureaucratic and unthinking nature of schools. For both of us, conditions both in and out of school have made our work more difficult... But in spite of these challenges, some teachers remain hopeful and unswerving in their commitment to teach urban youths.
One of the primary motivations for us to consider the question of what keeps teachers in the profession is the escalating attrition among new teachers. We know from experience that the enthusiasm and idealism that bring many novices into the profession can quickly dissipate. A look at recent statistics confirms the high rate of teacher turnover: more teachers leave during the first three years of teaching than at any time afterward, and the rate has generally increased in the recent past. From 1987-1989, for example, nearly 12 percent of teachers with less than a year’s experience left the classroom, while from 1993-1995, the rate had risen to 22 percent. Those who left teaching after three years represented almost nine percent of the teaching force from 1987-1989, but over 12 percent from 1993-1995. More recently, about 20% of those who started teaching in 1993 had left the field by 1997 (NCES, 2000). Even more revealing is the fact that, over the span of four decades from the 1960s to the 1990s, when
teachers were asked whether they would be willing to teach again, the percentage of those answering in the affirmative decreased: in 1961, over three-quarters of teachers answered that they would ‘certainly’ or ‘probably’ be willing to return, and only about 11 percent said they would ‘probably’ or ‘certainly’ not return. By 1996, only 62 percent of teachers said they would continue, with 20 percent stating that they would not (Boser, 2000). Given this situation, we wanted to know what it is that keeps some teachers dedicated and enthusiastic in spite of the many challenges they face.

The "What Keeps Teachers Going?" Inquiry Group

In the spring of 1999, I initiated what was to become a year-long project with a number of secondary school teachers in the Boston Public Schools. The project, which I dubbed the "What Keeps Teachers Going in Spite of Everything?" Inquiry Group, developed from my growing concern
with the obvious crisis in urban schools, a crisis characterized by disintegrating support for urban schools, and by the increasing numbers of disengaged students and hopeless teachers. Steve, whose daily existence is lived in such schools, understood this reality more than most. But we also know that, in spite of this pessimistic reality, some teachers refuse to give up, sustaining a fierce belief in their students and in the work they do. What makes the difference?

I decided that the best way to find out was to listen and talk with teachers as they struggled with hard questions related to teaching in urban schools today. I wanted to hear from superior teachers who continue to teach in spite of the numerous individual, institutional, and societal obstacles that get in the way of their work, and to try to figure out why and how they do it. My research design was simple and straightforward: I just wanted to talk with teachers. Ceronne Daly, who at the time was the Coordinator of High School
Restructuring for the Boston Public Schools, helped recruit a small group of high school teachers who were willing to engage in conversation about the question I had posed, i.e., "What keeps teachers going in spite of everything?" Eight teachers remained with the project for its duration.

Steve Gordon was one of these. He, along with all of those who took part in the group, are highly respected teachers; they’re passionate about teaching, and they think of themselves as intellectuals and professionals. They love their students and hold high expectations of them. Most are veteran teachers, and they teach a variety of subjects, including algebra, English, African American History, and language arts in Cape Verdean Crioulo or Spanish. Many had participated in other study groups; they also belonged to professional organizations, and regularly attended local, regional, and national professional conferences. Steve Gordon was the veteran member of the group.
The Inquiry Group met monthly throughout the 1999-2000 school year. We participated together in a number of activities, including writing in response to specific assignments related to our work. We also talked about the books we read together and about the challenges of daily classroom life, and we occasionally emailed one another. In addition to my question, each of the teachers also brought their own question to the group, and they reflected on these questions and they did research in their own classrooms or contexts.

Our meetings were what Steve described at an early gathering as "adult conversations about unasked questions." In an email he sent to me before one of the meetings, he wrote the following about what he wanted to get from taking part in the Inquiry Group: "I look forward to our group as a way to understand and appease my 30+ years of teaching, late mid-life needs. I have no proposed agenda for the group. Adult conversations, being
tolerably uncertain and challenged, enjoying the conversation and thinking, developing solidarity with colleagues, finding the language for personal and BPS [Boston Public School] realities: these sound good to me."

Lessons from the Inquiry Group Teachers

Collaborations between teachers and professors are often based on unequal and unrealistic expectations. Many times, professors are expected to hold most of the theoretical knowledge and teachers are expected to be experts in terms of practical knowledge. We have come to understand, however, that in the best cases, teachers’ practice is based on theorizing about actual classroom experiences and professors’ theoretical knowledge is based on work in real settings. Through our collaboration in the Inquiry Group, we have become convinced that teachers and university professors
have a great deal to teach and learn from one another.

In what follows, we briefly discuss some of the things we learned from participating in the Inquiry Group. We concentrate especially on the significance of teachers’ autobiographies, their belief and hope in students, and their view of teaching as intellectual work and as “doing educational justice.” To do so, we focus on some of Steve’s reflections and writings.

Teachers’ Autobiographies. bell hooks (1994) describes the classroom as “a location of possibility” (p. 207), and this sentiment cogently captures the fact that it is in their classrooms that teachers enact their most deeply-held values. Teachers do not, indeed they cannot, leave their values at the door when they enter their classrooms. As much as they might want to hide or avoid them, their values and beliefs slip in the door with them. In the words of David Hansen
(1997), "Teachers' character and dispositions eventually surface in their work with students" (p. 167). Ambrizeth Lima, another member of the Inquiry Group, was equally direct in contesting the viewpoint that teaching is a neutral activity. As she explained it at one of our meetings, "Even in our indifference, we take a position." If this is true, then the best that teachers can do is confront candidly these values to understand how they help or hinder their work with students. Thus, participating in the Inquiry Group confirmed for us what we had already suspected: that teachers' beliefs are deeply embedded in their classroom practices.

How teachers' values make their way into their classroom practice became clearer to us as we continued to meet. For example, one of the first activities that participants in the Inquiry Group engaged in was writing their "teaching autobiographies." In these narratives, the teachers described how and why they came to teaching as a
career. Several of them addressed their sociocultural and sociopolitical realities as the fundamental reason they became teachers. That is, their own identities were often the guiding forces in steering them toward teaching. For some, it was their growing realization as young adults that literacy and education had been systematically withheld from their people and from other culturally and politically dominated communities; for others, it was political work in anti-racism or anti-Apartheid work, or in community organizing that focused on educational issues such as the desegregation of the Boston Public Schools in the early 1970s. In the case of Stephen Gordon, his own background provided a clue as to why he chose teaching, and why he thought of it as “doing educational justice.” The following is a segment from his autobiographical essay.

*I Teach Who I Am: Steve Gordon*
I teach who I am. What I value and believe arises from my personal background and experience: whom I have loved and who has loved me and why, what has encouraged and hurt me, and the necessary and quixotic quests involving myself, other people and American society...

My background helps explain my teaching. My father was a socialist union organizer, and in his household I learned about social and economic injustice and a dream for equality. He had grown up in his father's orthodox Jewish home in the Ukraine, learning from his father the will to knowledge and the precision of language and reason, ultimately using that will and reason to supplant his father's orthodoxy with socialist ideology, which was equally certain about explaining the world. I grew up in my father's Manhattan apartment, finding part of my identity in this reverence for equality, knowledge and language. But I also distrusted the certitude of his rational explanations which could become apologies for
inhumane power. I rebelled at his certainty but never questioned its motivating dream of knowledge and justice. I rejected his absolute reason but accepted the magic of language. This explains to me why I chose and continue my work as an English teacher in an urban high school.

Because the Inquiry Group teachers understood the significance of identity in their own lives, they worked hard at affirming their students' identities. They rejected the notion that culture, race, or language are responsible for school failure. Instead, they believed that affirming students' identities could support their learning. Rather than exclude students' social and cultural identities from the curriculum and instruction, the Inquiry Group teachers used many opportunities to encourage students to explore their backgrounds and communities. This was evident in the curriculum they developed, the books they used, and the other activities in which they engaged with students. At
the same time, the teachers recognized that it was both necessary and positive for students to grow beyond their own limited experiences, and their curricula also focused on ways to get students to engage with realities different from their own. Consequently, rap could exist alongside Shakespeare.

**A Belief in and Love for Students.** Another deeply held value shared by all the teachers in the group was what Steve called "a fundamental belief in the lives and minds of students." Throughout the year, it became clear to us that, primary among all the other reasons they gave for remaining in teaching, this was the one response everyone agreed on. What did this mean in terms of the practice of the Inquiry Group teachers? For one, it meant that they refused to accept excuses for students' lack of effort or achievement. They stubbornly insisted that their students were capable and smart, in spite of the labels the students may have inherited
after years in the school system. These teachers also knew that personal connections with their students were crucial to learning, and they worked hard at building relationships with them.

The teachers' belief in and love for students was expressed in many other ways as well. For example, teachers brought to our group some of the difficult problems they were facing in their classrooms.

Steve Gordon also struggled with these questions, and one day he brought a particularly engrossing example of uncertainty, dread, and indecision to the group. It was the "what shall I do on Monday morning" conundrum writ large, and after he read it, we were all astonished that a gifted and highly valued veteran teacher could still feel this way. Here is a short segment of what he wrote:

*My story begins Sunday afternoon, February 28, at vacation’s end. I have just finished* Fist Stick
Knife Gun, Chapters 17-25. With the exception of Chapters 22 and 24, the chapters are about what Geoffrey Canada did to help the kids of Harlem.

What do I want my students to do? As I think this, fear comes over me. What is its cause? What is it about teaching these ninth graders that generates such uncertainty and dread? Why do I feel that it is so hard, that coming up with what is worthwhile is so hard, that being with them for one hour is so hard. What causes this anxiety? Yes, it is a challenge. Yes, I believe in doing it. In fact, it is my chosen profession, my decision to do this with students or teachers. But why is it so hard, so indefinite so fraught with anxiety as I try to decide what to do, thinking that Tashia or Crystal or Thomas or ... will not approve of my decisions, my work. I think of June and Gail and Denise, my colleagues, as if I am supposed to be able to do something which will affirm I am a good teacher, appreciated by my students because I have come up with something that will empower them, that
facilitates their learning, that gives them choice to learn... All of this confuses me. I no longer can be a teacher who blindly decides what is best for my students... I am trapped by my own psyche and soul that strives to do the right thing yet not wanting to work so alone, so hard and so emotionally in order to do the right thing.

I want some certainty, some peace, a feeling which I cannot have. Do I just live through the anxiety of being a responsible adult who will have to fight for what he believes in, who will have to demand that students do x, y and z, even as I search for the ways to involve them, engage them, on their own so that the class is theirs, so that literacy grows out of activities that are valued by them and consonant with my deepest values and beliefs?

Teaching as Intellectual Work, and as “Doing Educational Justice.” Throughout our meetings, it became clear that this particular group of teachers
thought of teaching both as intellectual work and in terms of social justice. For them, teaching was not simply mastering technical skills, or “tricks of the trade.” That is, while they conceived of learning as ongoing and necessary in order to improve their craft, they also thought of it as a strike against the injustices faced by so many youngsters in schools that do not live up to the promise of educational equality. This idea was most powerfully expressed one day as we were discussing the profession’s growing obsession with “best practices.” Steve Gordon responded, “Rather than ‘best practices,’” he suggested, “we should have ‘loving practices.’” This admonition was one that we referred to throughout the remainder of our meetings.

Having read and studied Paulo Freire’s (1998) letters to “those who dare teach,” I asked the Inquiry Group teachers to in turn write a letter they would give to a new teacher. Steve took this assignment as a way to think about his own
commitment to the profession, and to reflect on the
terrible dilemmas that the decision to become a
teacher represents. He shared his ideas about what
it means to “do educational justice” with students
in urban schools. This is, in part, what he wrote:

Letter to a New Teacher

Dear colleague,

You have made your decision. Against the advice
of relatives and friends who counseled you against
this career path, you have decided to teach.
Reasons beyond starting salary and perceived
prestige have called you to become a teacher, fully
aware of how little gratitude and respect teachers
receive in our free enterprise society that values
wealth over justice.

You have concluded that being an adult
responsible for the education of children is your
calling. Why is that? What do you hope to give and
receive as a teacher? When you see yourself in a
classroom working with other people's children, what do you see yourself doing and saying that is so necessary to you — and them? Why do you want to teach? Why this school? Why these particular children? I suggest you write the answers to these questions now; examine and discuss them with those who care about your happiness. I hope that your answers motivate and sustain you in your day-to-day struggle to make a difference in the lives of your students. I hope the answers give you the courage and self-knowledge to endure and succeed — and to find allies in your work.

I welcome you into my chosen profession. Beginning on your first day of teaching and perhaps never leaving, anxiety and self-doubt may be your constant shadow. They have been for me. I have felt isolated and ineffective, even abandoned by colleagues and administrators. I see and feel the realities of my students, their wants and needs, and I think I have failed them, that I have not done the right thing, or enough. And I have become
angry, ascribing my students’ failure to racial and economic injustice.

I have learned to accept, even welcome, this dread, guilt and anger. These emotions I believe have kept me honest, a spur to understanding what I must do and a shield against facile, mindless so-called solutions that repeatedly surface in a culture that refuses to recognize complexity and confront injustice. Rather than give you advice, let me share with you how I have attempted to sustain my commitment to my students, colleagues and students after thirty years of teaching high school in Boston.

I have learned to acknowledge and express the anger that arises from the wide discrepancy between my goals for my students and their current achievement. I ascribe this disparity to the failure of our system to do educational justice for my students. I have seen students whose power and will to learn seem to have atrophied, students who do not possess the motivation and self-discipline
necessary to excel, students who seem conditioned to compliance or resistance. I interpret these student attitudes and behaviors as the result of low expectations, misguided pedagogy and spurious system-wide “solutions” – including the current standards and high-stakes testing movements. Nevertheless, I continue to hold my students personally responsible for their performance.

No matter how emotionally seductive and satisfying, I have consciously sought to avoid generalizations and accusations that might mitigate my disappointment at the expense of my students – their language, their parents, their race and culture. I acknowledge my frustration and do not repress my anger. By expressing my anger I am forced to examine my students’ learning needs and my teaching practices. By so doing, I am affirming hope and the willingness to take responsibility for my students’ success.

I try to express my hopes and disappointments to my students, telling them what I expect and want
from them. I believe that my expressed expectations will help teach them to take more responsibility for their own education, so that they will not merely comply or resist. I frequently ask them to evaluate the educational validity of what and how I am teaching. They must participate in their own education: a respectful fit between their individual cognitive and linguistic development and the school’s academic requirements must be found. I have not yet succeeded in creating such a classroom community that counteracts years of negative school culture, but I will continue trying. This has been hard for me because I do yet know how to engender sufficient student self-discipline and self-determination. Maybe you can help me. I have much more to learn.

To survive and grow, I had to find colleagues who share my angers, hopes, beliefs and assumptions about students and teaching. When I have discussed my teaching with these caring colleagues, I work to specify exactly what troubles me; I fight the fear
that having problems means I am doing something wrong. By example, I seek to help my colleagues to become more professionally vulnerable, to name the individual classroom realities that inhibit their success and threaten their self-image as competent professionals. I avoid solving colleagues’ problems by giving them advice; instead, through questioning, I work to find a way for them to reveal exactly what is troubling and why. Sharing difficult truths and emotions has been necessary for my personal and professional development. Fortunately, I have been a member of several teacher-research and inquiry groups that have supported this honesty, helping me to examine and improve my teaching.

But these truths and emotions have been necessary but not sufficient to endure. I have learned to turn what troubles me about my students and/or my classroom into a researchable question. This may be difficult at first, for I have had to cultivate an inquiry stance about my teaching
practice. I have learned to do research about my troubling questions, finding and reading what fellow teachers and researchers have discovered. For example, as an English teacher I joined the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association. I read their professional journals. I want to create an intellectual community in my school wherein teachers share and discuss articles and books. I have become a teacher because I believe in intellectual development. I must take care of my own.

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

Conclusion

It is our belief that both teacher education programs and school professional development efforts can benefit from the lessons that we learned from our involvement in the “What Keeps Teachers Going?” Inquiry Group: that teachers’ identities, beliefs, and values influence their work with students; that a commitment to and love for students is a paramount requirement for teaching; and that teaching is both intellectual activity and social justice work. Learning these lessons would mean changing the nature of teacher preparation from a focus on methods and materials to one on teacher reflection, dialogue, and indepth study of both the subject matter and the subjects — that is, the people -- they will teach.
To “do educational justice” is no simple matter. It means teaching with hope and integrity, moving beyond bureaucratic fixes to educational problems to considering why the educational problems exist in the first place. Most of all, it means having the highest respect for our profession, for the work we do, and for the students with whom we work.
* Teachers in the “What Keeps Teachers Going? Inquiry Group” were Judith Baker, Claudia Bell, Ceronne Daly, Sonie Felix, Karen Gelzinis, Stephen Gordon, Ambrizeth Lima, and Junia Yearwood.

References


