Teachers’ Experiences in a Critical Inquiry Group: a conversation in three voices

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ABSTRACT  In the present article, you will read three different voices and their perspectives on the “What Keeps Teachers Going in Spite of Everything?” project that took place in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. Sonia Nieto, a university researcher who initiated the project, provides the introduction and explanations for what evolved. Stephen Gordon and Junia Yearwood, two high school teachers in the Boston Public Schools, contribute their own reflections about the project. A different font represents each voice.

Even under the best of circumstances, teaching is hard work—and most teachers do not work under the best of circumstances. The enthusiasm and idealism that bring them to teaching dissipate quickly for many. This is not a new problem. In the United States, the literature is replete with examples of high teacher turnover: as early as 1963, one study reported that the annual net loss of teachers through what they called in the study “teacher dropout” was 8% (Stinnett, 1970). A look at more recent statistics confirms the continuing high rate of teacher turnover: more teachers leave during the first 3 years of teaching than at any time afterward, and the rate has generally increased in the recent past (Boser, 2000; National Center for Education Statistics, 2000, p. 82). Even more alarming, nearly one-half of all new teachers in urban public schools quit within 5 years (Haberman, 1995). Although some eventually make their way back to teaching, the scope of these numbers is staggering and it indicates a major problem in the profession. And things are not expected to improve in the near future: projections are that by 2009 some two million new teachers will be needed in US public schools (Hussar, 1999). This and other problems have resulted in greater attention than ever being paid to public education.
Yet it is difficult to reconcile the national rhetoric that education is the nation’s major priority with the conditions under which many teachers work. Teachers’ salaries, for example, are conspicuously low compared with those of other professions. In reality, however, the prospect of lucrative salaries or posh working conditions is not what initially attracts teachers to the profession, nor is it what keeps them there: it is, according to one study, “the opportunity to teach well and to know it matters” (Johnson, 1990, p. 34).

The question of what brings people to teaching and keeps them there is the basis for the present article. More than ever before, teachers need to contend with mounting decay and deterioration of all kinds in schools. Especially in economically strapped urban areas, the schools that our nation’s most vulnerable children attend are often dilapidated, segregated, and increasingly staffed by inexperienced teachers who know little about their students (Kozol, 1991; McIntyre, 1997; Orfield & Yun, 1999). Many of these children also know too well the meaning of disrupted families, homelessness, violence, poor health and nutrition, and other social ills brought on by poverty and hopelessness (Books, 1998). The continuing racism faced by children of color in the United States is implicated in these circumstances as well. These conditions take their toll not only on children and their families, but also on the staying power of those who teach them. As one might expect, the result is alienation and marginalization among both the youths and their teachers.

Poor 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 standardization—is 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).

Yet, even under difficult conditions—one might well say especially under these conditions—public schools are the best hope for realizing the utopian vision of a democratic society. For the past two centuries, US public schools have been expected to be the crucible for democracy. But democracy has not been realized, or experienced on an equal basis, by all Americans. We are especially troubled about the future of poor children. After all, if schools can no longer serve the children who most need an excellent and high-quality public education, how can we claim that education is the best way to alleviate poverty and despair? And what does it mean for democracy if our public schools fail?

The current situation brings up troubling questions: How can we reconcile the rhetoric about public education in the United States with current mean-spirited national policies and practices? What will it take to keep good teachers in our public schools, particularly in the urban schools that the majority of our students of linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse backgrounds attend? These are the issues that brought us to the project that is the subject of the present article.

In the spring of 1999, I (Sonia) undertook a project to investigate what I began calling my “burning question”; that is, What keeps teachers going—in spite of
everything? This question led me to explore the possibility of engaging in dialog with veteran teachers in urban schools. I did not begin the project with specific research tools such as 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 questions, beginning with my own burning question. I decided that a good way to do so would be to initiate an Inquiry Group.

Since at the time I was a Fellow in Urban Education of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, I went to Boston, a school district that had received a substantial grant from the Annenberg Challenge. I approached Ceronne Daly, a colleague and the Coordinator of High School Restructuring for the Boston Public Schools, and I shared with her my idea of forming a year-long relationship with a group of teachers. With Ceronne’s 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 diverse student populations. Because of my Annenberg Institute for School Reform Fellowship, 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 12 teachers indicated an interest in working with me, and eight remained with the project for its duration. These eight teachers have a passion for teaching and for their subject area, and they unabashedly love their students and hold high expectations of them. Most had been teaching for more than 20 years; two had been in the system for fewer than 10 years. They teach a variety of subjects: algebra, English, African-American History, and two are bilingual teachers in Cape Verdean Crioulo and Spanish. The teachers in the group were Judith Baker, Claudia Bell, Sonie Felix, Karen Gelzinis, and Ambrizeth Lima, and Stephen Gordon and Junia Yearwood, my co-authors in the present article. (For more information on the Inquiry Group, see Nieto (in press)).

In what follows, Junia and Steve explain what brought them to this Inquiry Group.\(^2\)

**Junia Yearwood**

Ambivalence was my first reaction when I was informed about Professor Nieto’s question and my possible involvement in the group. On one hand was my recent negative experience with a similar teacher inquiry group, and on the other hand was the intrigue of the question: “What keeps good or veteran teachers going?” I knew what kept me entering the classroom year after year, but I was curious about what kept other teachers’ passion alive.

I finally made the decision to participate in the project after our first meeting at which Professor Nieto clearly explained her intended focus. She affirmed her interest in documenting our unrevised responses to her ques-
tions and, furthermore, she encouraged each of us to investigate our own question.

That was the hook for me. I was already working on a burning question that surfaced in my school’s inquiry group facilitated by Steve Gordon, my colleague who is a co-author of this piece. This was the perfect opportunity for me to continue this inquiry with the assistance of this knowledgeable and supportive group of teachers and Professor Nieto. I am happy and honored to have been a participant.

Stephen Gordon

I became a member of this inquiry group, with Sonia and Junia and my colleagues, because of fate. But since character is often considered fate, I will say that I spent this year in this inquiry group because of who I am and who I have been.

At the time the group was conceived and formed, I was on a 1-year leave from teaching English at my Boston high school. I was creating my short-lived pilot program working with teachers from three Boston high schools who were given time and encouragement to inquire into their practice.

I am lucky to be an offspring of teacher inquiry, having been part of the 1991–1993 National Writing Project’s Urban Sites Writing Network—which included several wonderful Philadelphians, some of whom I have not seen in years. And when I was asked to work with Sonia Nieto on this project, I felt the positive feeling I never get when I hear of the system’s mandates for teachers and students. Having been part of Boston’s Urban Sites and having been renewed and sustained and taught and supported and cared for by these driven and inquiry-driven friends, who no longer met regularly, I needed conversations about students, injustice and pedagogy. And since I knew Sonia’s work, I was certain I would be having these conversations, an opportunity once again to express my hopes and angers—and feel less isolated in my work.

What I did not know and am now deeply thankful for was that Sonia would expect me not only to speak my mind, but to write it also, a chance for me to “heave my heart into my mouth”—as Cordelia would not do. And that is why fate has been good to me, and I am here with Junia, Sonia and you today.

Describing the “What Keeps Teachers Going?” Inquiry Group

Creating an Inquiry Group is much like creating any relationship (a marriage, a family, a classroom community): it takes time, patience, tolerance, love, and no small measure of commitment to the process. It means being willing to be exposed, to become frustrated, to disagree, to marvel, and to learn.

During the year the Inquiry Group met, I drove out to Boston once a month and there, at one of the high schools where one or more of the teachers worked, we would meet for two hours (which often turned out to be three). 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 (we started with my latest
book at the time, *The Light in Their Eyes* (Nieto, 1999); we also read “I Won’t Learn From You” and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment by Herb Kohl (1994), and *Teachers as Cultural Workers: letters to those who dare teach*, a posthumous book by Paulo Freire (1998). We discussed the challenges teachers faced in daily classroom life and the teachers sometimes shared their students’ work. The discussions at our meetings were audiotaped and transcribed, giving us a rich source of data.

We occasionally e-mailed one another, and several of the teachers sent me long letters over the course of the year. The group’s agenda for the year evolved slowly. By January, we agreed that, besides considering my question, each member of the group would come up with his/her own persistent dilemma or problem, focusing on obstacles to learning for their students, and that they would present their thinking on these questions at one of our meetings.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

Our work in the Inquiry Group was informed by several theories. One is that inquiry is a crucial element of teachers’ work. We build 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, Davies, Hogan & Kennard, 1993; Freedman et al., 1999; Witherall & Noddings, 1991). 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 no 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). According to Giroux, teachers as intellectuals “need to reconsider and, possibly, transform the fundamental nature of the conditions under which they work”. He goes on to explain:

> More specifically, in order to function as intellectuals, teachers must create the ideology and structural conditions necessary for them to write, research, and work with each other in producing curricula and sharing power ... As intellectuals, they will combine reflection and action in the interest of empowering students with the skills and knowledge needed to address injustices and to be critical actors committed to developing a world free of oppression and exploitation. (Giroux, 1988, p. xxxiv)

All of these aspects of teachers as transformative intellectuals were evident in the work of the Inquiry Group teachers.

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 dialog and respect. As the university researcher in this work, I tried to be both a learner and a teacher; I tried to listen when listening was called for, and to speak when it seemed warranted. This was not always easy. I did not agree with everything that was said, and at times I became frustrated that we were not progressing as I thought we should. I am certain that the others at times felt the same way. But I also had great
hope in the process because I believe that teachers’ intellectual capacities need to be trusted. I also believe in the process of dialog, and I knew that it would bring us not to some fairyland conclusions about “best practices” or in other such rigid directions, but to some satisfying ideas that might change how we—all of us—teach.

Because so many of the schools where the Inquiry Group teachers work are home to students of color (African-American, Cape Verdean, Haitian, Puerto Rican, Dominican, and African, among others), multicultural and anti-racist education, and culturally responsive pedagogy also became important for us (Gay, 2000; Howard, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999). Issues of difference and discrimination came up in many of our conversations. Teachers often expressed the view that, unless they understood, respected, and honored their students’ identities, they could never hope to become their teachers in any meaningful way.

Finally, we have become concerned that much of the discourse surrounding educational renewal and reform has focused on implementing particular strategies and programs rather than on the broader sociopolitical realities surrounding the work of schools. Researchers such as Linda Darling-Hammond (1997), and Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (1998) provide a different view of educational reform. In their work on school improvement, these researchers reject simple answers to complex questions, and they honor teachers’ capacities to teach and do it well if given the resources and support.

With that, we turn to some of what we discovered in our work. I want to stress that I alone listened to the tapes and came up with various themes; any shortcomings in the analysis are strictly mine. But in the year and a half that I worked on the manuscript, the participants had several opportunities to contribute their reflections or to disagree with any of the findings as I characterized them, and they did not.

Themes

It is necessary to acknowledge from the outset that there is no single answer to my question, nor did I expect there to be. But I believe that teachers’ perceptions about their work can help re-define the profession, especially in these times of standardization and “Big Brother’ prescriptive. A number of themes became apparent in helping sustain the Inquiry Group teachers’ energy and commitment. These included “autobiography”, “love”, “hope and possibility”, “anger and desperation”, and “intellectual work” (for detailed descriptions of each of these themes and others, see Nieto (in press)). In the present article, we focus on a few examples of three of the themes. The first we consider is “Teaching as Autobiography”, followed by “Teaching as Intellectual Work” and “Teaching as Love”.

Teaching as Autobiography

The more I read and listened to the transcripts and read what the teachers had written, the more I became convinced that teachers’ autobiographies are deeply implicated in their teaching, and in their perseverance. A number of years ago, I began to experiment with what I called “teaching autobiographies”. I ask teachers to
write about how their backgrounds or experiences influence them to decide on a career of teaching. I want to make it clear that I am not talking about self-indulgent exercises in brooding and bellyaching. Instead, I use this strategy so that teachers, while focusing on themselves, learn to focus more directly on their students. This means that developing a teaching autobiography is not simply an undertaking for knowing their own lives more profoundly, although of course it may be that too. It is also a way for teachers to think about how, through a clearer understanding of their lives, they can become more effective with their students. To accomplish these ends, I ask teachers to reach beyond the romantic and surface reasons that people say they become teachers (“I love children” being a typical example). I ask them to think critically about their own lives, about what they thought they would get out of teaching, and about the motivations for their choices. When done thoughtfully and honestly, these teaching autobiographies can become not only a revelation, but also a source of inspiration and strength for teachers.

I decided to use this approach with the teachers in the Inquiry Group right after our first meeting, both as a way to start building trust among ourselves and as a way to develop some common understandings of teaching. The teaching autobiographies that Junia and Steve wrote exemplified what I believe brings many teachers into the profession: their own social identities, and their ideological beliefs.

My Journey

I was born on the Caribbean Island of Trinidad and was raised and nurtured by my paternal grandmother and aunts on the island of Barbados. My environment instilled in me a strong identity as a woman and as a person of African descent. 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 10 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. Teachers imparted knowledge and exposed young minds to old and new ideas that were the keys to unlocking the enslaved mind and forging the way out of the wilderness of ignorance and subjugation into positions of equality and leadership.

This revelation made my destiny clear. I had to be a Teacher.

My resolve to someday become a teacher was strengthened by my experiences with teachers who had significant and lasting positive effects on my personal and academic growth. I gradually came to realize that the teachers whose classes I was eager to get to and in whose classes I excelled were the ones who treated and nurtured me as an individual, a special person. They pushed, challenged, and cajoled me to study and perform to my full ability.
They believed in me; they identified not only my weaknesses, but also my strengths and talents. They encouraged me to think, question, and enter the “conversation” on an equal intellectual footing. They respected my thoughts and opinions, and they showed me that they cared. In addition, and just as important, they looked like me. They all shared my ancestry, my culture, and my history. They were my role models.

Upon graduating from high school, I taught for about 3 years at Washington High School. I came to the United States in 1971 and enrolled at Boston State College (which since has merged with UMass Boston) in 1973, and majored in English. I was hired by the Boston Public Schools in 1978, where I remain until the present.

My passion for teaching, my sense of urgency, and my commitment to my students have heightened and are constantly refueled by the daily reminders of the “savage”, cruel realities that Jonathan Kozol (1991) has written about, and the inequalities of educational opportunities and preparation of students of color; the relentless specter of discrimination and racism; the inertia and lack of vision of large segments of the African-American community, political leaders, and parents; the lack of motivation and clear sense of purpose of many of my students; the disrespect and low expectations of students by a significant number of my colleagues; and the unpreparedness of my graduating students to meet the challenges of a demanding and competitive world.

The “light in their eyes”, that moment when students are fully engaged and excited about learning, that Sonia Nieto (1999) has written about energizes, revitalizes, and keeps me focused. I share my students’ successes, their challenges, their hopes and their dreams. My commitment and passion for learning and teaching wax and wane, sparkle and flicker but stubbornly keep burning like an eternal flame, a flame that I hope burns bright and helps guide my students on their academic and personal journey through life. In the words of Robert Frost, “I am not a teacher; I am an awakener”. (Junia Yearwood)

I Teach Who I Am

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, what has encouraged and hurt me, and the idealistic quests involving myself, other people and American society. My identity as a teacher was formed through parents, family, friends, successes and failures. What I decide is true and necessary for my students and me, in both the anxiety-filled nights and clear daylight, comes from my no-longer-negotiable identity, character and philosophy.

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 a part of my identity in this reverence for equality, knowledge and language. But I also distrusted the certitude of his rational explanations that 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. (Stephen Gordon)

Teaching as Intellectual Work

Another theme that was evident from the beginning of our work together was that teaching is, above all, intellectual work. Steve read something at one of our meetings that exemplified this aspect of teaching, and it took our breath away. Here was an experienced, confident—and by the judgment of all who knew and had worked with him—an exceptionally talented teacher. Steve’s anguished thoughts were as touching as they were startling to us. What did his writing say about teaching, and about the impossibility of ever feeling that one is doing enough? This was “What shall I do on Monday morning” writ large. It was, we saw, not simply a question of technique, but one of values, beliefs, faith, even of love. “What shall I do on Monday morning”, in the way that Steve discussed it, became, “Am I worthy?”, “Do I know enough to teach?”, “Am I doing a good job?”. It was about theorizing and doing the intellectual work of teaching. Steve’s piece begins with an epigraph based on The Tell-Tale Heart by Edgar Allan Poe, revised to reflect the world of teaching.

Obsessed by Mindful Teaching

“True!—angry, very, very dreadfully angry I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad. The thirty years of teaching had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—nor dulled them. Above all was the sense of injustice and anomie acute … How, then, am I mad? Hearken! And observe how relentlessly I try to tell you my story.”

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 1 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 and 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 that 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 that 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? (Stephen Gordon)

Teaching as Love

Paulo Freire (1970) believed that teaching is, above all, about love: love of learning, of students, of the process of being fully human. Yet today it seems almost old-fashioned to speak about teaching and love in the same breath. Nevertheless, it became evident in the Inquiry Group from the very beginning that love was a major reason for the teachers’ resilience. I still remember one day shortly after we had started meeting as an Inquiry Group that Junia Yearwood came into the library where we were meeting, plopped down in a chair, clearly exhausted from a long and probably frustrating day, and said simply, “They keep me going”. And we all knew what she meant.

Teaching is about love because it involves trust and respect, and because at its best teaching depends upon close and special relationships between students and teachers. It is, in a word, a vocation based on love. Rather than a sentimental feeling, however, we should think of love as it is visible through teachers’ daily work. According to Steve Gordon, preceding everything else in teaching is “the core belief in students” and “a fundamental belief in the lives and minds of students”. Sonie Felix, another of the teachers in the group, said her students’ words were “constantly swimming around my head”. Anita Preer, a teacher who took part in a group interview that Junia had set up in her school, summed it up best when she talked about teaching as a “very, very dignified life”. She went on to say that some student teachers had complained to her that they no longer had a life. Her response to them?: “You know something? This is a life! You come in, you grow, you learn, it’s never the same, it’s always different. You heal, you help, you love. What’s wrong with that? Is that a life or is that a life?”. Love, then, is not a maudlin emotion; it is a blend of confidence, faith, and admiration for students, and appreciation for the strengths they bring with them. It is some of these same qualities that make for effective teaching.

In one of the books we read in the Inquiry Group, “I Won’t Learn From You” and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment, Kohl invites his readers to reflect on the images they have about teaching by asking the following question: “What images and metaphors come to mind when teachers think about the original inspiration they felt and their desires to spend their lives working with young people?” (1994, p. 76). Based on this question, I asked the teachers to come up with their own metaphors for teaching. It was not until almost the end of our year together, after we had read Paulo Freire’s (1998) letters to teachers and I asked the teachers to write “A Letter
A conversation in three voices

Dear New Teacher,

I am a passionate gardener. In the spring and summer, I parade around my yard tending and enjoying my peonies, roses, and daffodils. From September to June, I roam around my classroom and the corridors of my school making sure that Tiffany, José, and Rasheed grow, mature, and bloom to their full potential as students and as citizens. I am a year-round gardener.

One important discovery I’ve made from many years of cultivating flowers and minds is that they all respond best to hands that tend them with faith, hope, and love. Without these three, my seedlings wilt; my flowers droop; my students languish; and I, the gardener, fail.

When I plant my seeds, I believe without a doubt that they will grow. I have no evidence that these particular seeds will grow, but I am firm in my belief that they will. Without that strong conviction, my efforts would be tenuous at best. I know that they will grow because they are seeds and under the right conditions—soil, water, and sun—seeds grow. My students grow also. I believe that all students have the ability to grow, to learn under the right conditions. I know that they will rise to my expectations just as my clematis vine sprouts and climbs to whatever height I set my trellis or as Mike Rose so succinctly affirms in his book Lives on the Boundary, “Students will float to whatever bar you set” [18].

My faith in my students is an extension of the confidence I have in myself as a person and educator. Maintaining my sense of self and the confidence I have in my skills is a continuous and never-ending process. I work at it.

I garden because I love plants and flowers. I love to watch them grow, spread, and fill in the brown patches of my yard with vibrant greens and rainbows of vivid colors. My love for plants is expressed in diverse and active ways:

- I love them enough to water and fertilize
- I love them enough to trim and prune
- I love them enough to divide, separate, and transplant
- I love them enough to leave alone and wait
- I love them enough not to overwater or overfeed.

I garden in my classroom with the same love and care as I do in my yard. I say “I love you” to my students in many different ways:

- I love them enough to praise and encourage
- I love them enough to reprimand and discipline
- I love them enough to allow time to grow and develop
- I love them enough to keep myself intellectually alive
• I love them enough to give the same respect that I demand
• I love them enough to be unbiased and fair-minded
• I love them enough to expect the best
• I love them enough to demand the best.

*I am not a perfect gardener.* In spite of all my faith, hope, and love, many of my plants do not thrive and flourish. My method of gardening, my lack of skills, and the environment that I create are a few of the possible reasons that some of my charges fail to respond. However, I keep cultivating. I am aware of my limitations, but my faith is unshaken. I hope that at some point another gardener will succeed in bringing Rasheed, Tiffany, or José to life just as I’ve been known to breathe the breath of life back into the near-to-death spider plants and Boston Ferns that one of my colleagues keeps sending to my classroom.

I mourn when I lose a plant. I mourn because it was such a waste—a waste of potential, a waste of beauty, a waste of life. My grief, however, is tempered with a sense of reality. What is real is that some of my plants arrive broken, damaged beyond repair by some former gardener whose inflicted injury I could not mend and whose brand of gardening I try hard not to duplicate.

*Dear New Teacher, welcome to my garden. Are you ready?*

**Junia Yearwood**

### Reflections on Inquiry Group Conversations

I wish we could say that Inquiry Group discussions resulted in a breakthrough in understanding teacher resilience, but they did not. In fact, our conversations often raised more questions than they answered. Our dialogs were inspiring, thought-provoking, and disquieting, and they were a reminder that there are no quick and easy fixes for teacher burnout or for the massive problems facing urban public schools today. Our time together also reinforced the fact that what keeps some teachers going is not what keeps all teachers going. Teachers are as individual and diverse as the students they teach, and the reasons for the resilience of the best and most committed among them are varied. Nevertheless, in our year together, we identified several conditions that can indeed make a difference in retaining excellent teachers, conditions that can also help other teachers become more engaged in the profession. But these conditions are neither pre-packaged solutions, nor simplistic strategies or practices.

We did, however, reach one specific conclusion about what keeps teachers going that can best be stated as follows: no amount of decontextualized “best practices” will keep teachers engaged or committed. The current discourse in educational reform focuses on developing “best practices” as the antidote to both teacher burnout and student underachievement. But our work departs in an essential way from this stance. We have come to the conclusion that it is only when teachers are treated as entire human beings, as professionals and intellectuals who care deeply about their students and their craft, that veteran teachers will be enticed to remain and new teachers will be attracted to the profession. We hope that our work will
illustrate that, rather than a focus on dehumanized “best practices”, we need to focus on students and those who best teach them.

Our work suggests a “counter-narrative” to the prevailing wisdom about teachers. In this work, our lens is focused on experienced teachers who are especially effective with students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. These are among the students who are most marginalized in our public schools. To improve the situation for them, we first need to imagine how their lives might be otherwise, and this leads us inevitably to the immensely vital role that teachers can have. But the notion that “fixing” teachers or “filling” them with new and innovative ideas—although it has become the fashionable solution to underprepared teachers and failing students—is not the answer. 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.

We end the present article with the words of Junia and Steve as they explain why the kind of work exemplified by our Inquiry Group is important to them and, by extension, to all teachers who must keep going in spite of everything.

Junia Yearwood

One major reason for my being a part of this particular group and the others with which I have been affiliated the last 10 years or so, is summed up in my strong belief that teachers’ voices need to be heard. After many years of experiencing mandated changes in curriculum, assessments, and pedagogy (none of which work, and none which had input from those who were expected to implement them—the teachers), I became convinced that teachers need to find ways of expressing their views, their observations, their experiences, and their beliefs in arenas where they were likely to be heard and taken seriously. I was and am tired still of hearing from experts in the field of education who are not actively involved in the classroom and who do not respect those of us who live there. Teacher inquiry groups and their publications are examples of arenas that give voice to those of us that have something to say about educating children, and that “something” needs to be heard.

I also believe that teachers need to stay intellectually alive. If we are to be taken seriously, if we are going to demand to be treated as the professionals that we are, then we need to act professionally. Acting professionally to me means actively keeping my profession alive—actively continuing to develop my literacy. Literacy is not static—it is ever evolving and developing. I would not choose my physicians, lawyers, dentists, or professors who stopped reading, publishing, attending seminars, or studying in their subject areas after receiving their latest degree. I expect no less from teachers. Teacher inquiry groups are, again, one means of staying current and intellectually “vibrant”.

Stephen Gordon

As teachers we make thousands of decisions. We are assigned to teach 30 or so students,
children who are, in Lisa Delpit’s words, “other people’s children”. What are we to do with, and for, our students, and why? We have to decide. Every moment in our classrooms we are feeling and thinking, we are talking and acting, our words and deeds deeply affecting those in front of us. We have power, the power granted by the state, but, more importantly, the power of intellect and the power of love. Parents expect us to do good for their sons and daughters: Parents who believe in education, mothers and fathers who remember the good of schools, who remember that their minds and hearts were once stirred by the best teachers in their lives. And yes, they also remember those who hurt, who insulted, teachers who denied them learning and opportunity. But they do not give up on schools, for they deeply value education, and every day we make decisions for them and their children.

We do have power in our classrooms. But what are we to do and why? How are we to discover what might be best for our students, their parents and ourselves? School systems are reluctant—or worse—do not trust us to determine our own instructional practices. They want to decide for us. They have their programs and mandates and assessments that they believe will best teach our students. School systems seem to believe that teachers lack the language, experience and depth to reflect on and improve their own pedagogy. I see a deficit model all the way down, with low expectations for both students and teachers. Those who determine policy do not seem to value the decisions we struggle with; or understand and acknowledge our need and desire to succeed as teachers for and with our students: to feel worthwhile, to make a difference, to be respected for our knowledge, experience and commitment. They seldom seek ways to nurture or encourage our self-determination so that we can create a professional culture through which we will learn from and support one another.

So we will have to create this culture by and for ourselves. Teacher-room talk, so rife with blame and resignation, will not create this professional culture. Through teacher inquiry—like Sonia’s group—we can have the essential conversations that can sustain and grow teaching—and do educational justice. Through our collaborative inquiries we will find the words and the voices to discover and affirm what we believe, know and do well. We will work with our diverse colleagues who will listen to our words of doubt and belief, fellow teachers with whom we can risk sharing our deepest fears and hopes, colleagues who will challenge us to make purposeful, mindful decisions in our classrooms. We will then be less isolated, confused and meek. Through teacher inquiry we will live the “examined life” with our colleagues, supported in the thousand instructional decisions we make on behalf of our students, their parents and our profession.

This is why this inquiry work is so important. (Stephen Gordon)

Notes
1. The present article has been adapted from a paper originally presented at the 23rd Annual Ethnography in Education Forum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, 2 March 2002.
2. To identify the speakers, Junia Yearwood’s comments appear in bold text while those of Stephen Gordon appear in italics.

References


