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What Keeps Teachers Going?

Anger, hope, and love are among the reasons that a group of urban teachers have stayed in teaching—despite everything.

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As a Puerto Rican child from a working-class family, I attended poor schools in Brooklyn, New York, where a small but significant number of teachers helped propel my sister and me—who were the first in our family to graduate from high school—to attend college and become teachers.

As a teacher educator and former classroom teacher, I have become increasingly concerned about the tenuous situation of the most vulnerable students in U.S. public schools—students who attend urban schools with crumbling infrastructures, few resources, and a highly mobile staff. For these students—primarily African American and Latino, but also poor students of all backgrounds—the teachers who believe in and push them, who refuse to accept anything less than the best from them, often make the single greatest difference between a life of hope and one of despair. In many cases, these are veteran teachers who have dedicated their professional careers—and, in many cases, their personal lives—to young people in urban schools.

Unfortunately, many of the most highly qualified and gifted teachers do not teach in the schools where their skills are most sorely needed. Poor students of color are at the bottom of the ladder for receiving services from the most-qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Moreover, even though most teachers enter the profession for noble reasons and with great enthusiasm, many of those in urban schools know little about their students and find it hard to reach them. Thus, despite their good intentions, many teachers who work with students of racial and cultural backgrounds different from their own have limited experience in teaching them and become frustrated and angry at the conditions in which they must work. Nearly half of all new teachers in urban public schools quit within five years (Haycock, 1998). The teacher dropout rate is certainly not new, but 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.

Why Do They Stay?

What keeps teachers going—in spite of everything? In 1999–2000, I collaborated with a small group of seven urban teachers in the Boston Public Schools to consider this important
question.† Our inquiry group comprised highly respected high school teachers who had a reputation for success with students of diverse backgrounds. They teach math, English, health, and African American studies in both monolingual English and bilingual settings. Their own backgrounds are quite diverse—African American, Cape Verdean, Haitian, Irish American, and Jewish, among others. Collectively, they have many years of experience; most have been teaching for more than 25 years. They have received numerous awards—five have been named Boston Teacher of the Year—and they are active in professional organizations, writing and reading groups, and other professional activities. They are also known to be movers and shakers, willing to speak up and take a stand.

Besides addressing this question during our meetings, we also read a number of books together and wrote narratives, letters, and e-mails to one another. The teachers spoke movingly about the joys, frustrations, and rewards of teaching. Our conversations were not easy, nor did they come close to solving the problems of urban schools. But the process helped articulate some reasons that these teachers have stayed in teaching, and transcripts of our meetings, writings, and field notes revealed several interrelated themes (Nieto, 2003).

This group of excellent urban teachers might seem to be the exception to the rule. As we have shared our thoughts with educators around the United States, however, we have found that teachers in many different situations—in schools small or large, elementary or secondary, urban or rural—have stayed in teaching for many of the same reasons.

**Autobiography**

Teachers' identities are deeply implicated in their teaching, and hence in their perseverance. Their identities are defined not only by ethnicity, race, gender, social class, and language background, although these of course are significant. What became clear was that most of these teachers have been 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).

As a young child in Barbados, English teacher Junia Yearwood learned the value of education early on. She could not divorce her heritage and experiences from the reasons she came to school every day to teach:

> 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. This revelation made my destiny clear. I had to be a teacher.
Love
It seems old-fashioned to speak of teaching as love, yet teachers in the inquiry group often used this word to describe how they feel about their students and the subject matter that they teach. Teacher Stephen Gordon observed that preceding everything else in teaching is "a fundamental belief in the lives and minds of students." Love, then, is not simply a sentimental conferring of emotion. Rather, it is a combination of trust, confidence, and faith in students and a deep admiration for their strengths.

These teachers demonstrate love through high expectations and rigorous demands on students and by keeping up with their subject matter through professional activities. Claudia Bell, a bilingual teacher of Latino students, provides an example. For the first time in her career, she found that most of the students in her health class were failing. With the help of other colleagues in the inquiry group, she developed a questionnaire to try to figure out why. She discovered that the interview process brought the students and her closer together. She explained,

I always thought I had a really close relationship with them. But somehow, through this process, they opened up to me in ways that I didn't expect.

Within weeks, her students were doing their homework much more consistently, and their schoolwork in general improved. Claudia didn't see this as a miracle cure for low achievement. In fact, it initially bothered her that they were doing these things to please her rather than for themselves. But it also became clear to us that developing a closer relationship with the students had paid off. By the end of the year, many of the students were passing her course.

These teachers also believe in affirming their students' identities. Ambrizeth Lima, who came to the United States from the Cape Verde Islands when she was a child, points out that students should not have to "discard themselves" to be accepted. She encouraged her students, all of whom were from Cape Verde, to hold on to their language and to feel pride in their culture. More than most, she knows that students' identities do not disappear simply because schools refuse to acknowledge them. Teachers' caring promotes an essential sense of belonging for students whose backgrounds differ from the mainstream.

Hope and Possibility
Hope is the essence of teaching, and these teachers demonstrate hope in many ways. They have hope and faith in their students, in their own abilities as teachers, in trusted colleagues and new teachers, in the promise of public education, and in the profession of teaching.

One day, Judith Baker discussed the boys in her classes, mostly African American and Latino, who she knew were capable of doing well in school but were failing. "I'm very, very worried about the boys," she said. But rather than blame the situation on their laziness or lack of intelligence, she said with the greatest confidence, "I'm sure that these guys can do far better than they are, absolutely, positively." And she did everything to see that they would.

Another day, I met with a group of teachers with whom Junia had asked me to speak about what sustained them in teaching. They volunteered that what kept them engaged, in spite of
the frustration and heartache that they sometimes experienced, were student teachers who contributed new ideas; colleagues to whom they could turn for support; new teachers who came into the profession with lots of enthusiasm; and students who had graduated and come back to visit. Juan Figueroa, a relatively new teacher, gave an example. He said,

I was lucky enough to teach a class of seniors. This is the first year when they'll be graduating from college. Knowing that they're going to be graduating this year, and that two of them are going to be teachers, is incredible. They will be entering a profession that I love, and they'll be doing the same thing.

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. But I came to realize that anger is the other side of hope, and given the conditions in which they work, 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 society; baffled at school policies made by people far removed from the daily realities of classroom life; and 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. Judith Baker explained, "I would exclude all 'social work' remedies. This is typical talk that teachers always do that leads nowhere." Judith was referring to the vain search for remedies to poverty and other social ills brought on by inequality. 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 spilled over into desperation. Sonie Felix, the youngest member of the group, came in one day seriously considering leaving the profession. Although she enjoyed teaching and loved her students, she felt that she did not receive support or the opportunity to grow as an individual. She asked plaintively, "But what happens when that job is your life and calling? What do you do then?" The anger and resentment Sonie felt is not uncommon. Nevertheless, I am happy to report that Sonie is still teaching three years later—primarily because of the support of colleagues and her continuing participation in the intellectual life of teaching.

Intellectual Work
Engaging with trusted colleagues in what Stephen Gordon called "adult conversations about unasked questions" is one way in which teachers do intellectual work. When we first started meeting as an inquiry group, I could see the impatience in Sonie's eyes. She wanted us to do something, not just talk. By our last meeting, Sonie had developed not only a desire, but also a need to talk. She said,

I think that these conversations are important in terms of continuing with teaching.
That's how and why people tend to leave, because these conversations don't happen.

In addition to participating in the inquiry group, these teachers also took part in individual and
collaborative curriculum development, wrote journals, conducted research in their classrooms, attended conferences, were active members in professional organizations, and mentored new colleagues. They also presented workshops for colleagues and visited other schools. In short, these teachers are constantly updating their craft and their knowledge.

Democratic Practice
Students in urban public schools face many problems, but discussions of these problems often place sole responsibility on the children and their families, as if the problems had sprung full-blown from them alone. Rather than the children lacking will or being of unsound moral character, however, it is the schools that often lack the will and the resources to teach these children. Any teacher who works in an urban school system can testify to this fact. A commitment to social justice—the ideals of democracy, fair play, and equality—figures prominently among the reasons why these teachers chose this profession.

I asked the teachers in the inquiry group to write a letter to an imaginary new teacher. What would a new teacher need to know? In his letter, Stephen Gordon expressed the profound desire to engage in democratic practice:

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.

The Ability to Shape the Future
Teachers' words and actions are of greater consequence than those of almost any other profession. Karen Gelzinis, who had been Sonie Felix's algebra teacher 14 years before, reflected on the power of teaching:

We change lives forever. Of course, we all know it. But how often do we really think about it? Does it get lost in the piles of paper that we correct? In the scores/grades that we write down? . . . I thought about the teachers I had had, who saw something in "the disadvantaged kids" from the city and gave us the hope that we could do whatever we wanted, and we could do it without giving up who we were. We didn't have to move to the suburbs to be successful.

We [teachers] need different words to speak about what we do. Standards. Rubrics. Benchmarks. Ninth grader. Important words, yes. But these words do not tell the complete stories of our kids. So, despite everything in our way, why do some of us end up staying? Is it because our lives continue to be changed forever, for the better, by our students? What would my life be without Sonie, without Jeramie? . . . It is an addictive thing, teaching.

The Promise
The promise of public education is a seductive hope. Precisely because of the grim conditions in
schools and society, a vigorous commitment to high-quality public education is more necessary than ever. In the past two decades, however, schools have undergone a period of constant reform and restructuring, and the talk surrounding public education has become mean-spirited and antagonistic, giving greater attention to vouchers, "choice," charter schools, and winner-take-all high-stakes tests as the only viable solutions to the crisis in public education. The result is a near wholesale abandonment of the public schools, especially those that serve poor children.

To keep good teachers, we must find ways to achieve the unfulfilled promise of public education. We must rethink teacher education so that it focuses on preparing teachers to work with enthusiasm, competence, and caring among the students in our urban schools. We must prepare teachers—not for missionary work, but for public service. We must rethink professional development—not as a way to fill teachers' heads with new and innovative ideas that may come and go, but rather as an approach that builds on teachers' professionalism and encourages their intellectual activity. Paradoxically, current reforms that focus only on accountability—including standardized testing, teacher testing, and other such policies—may be driving out some of the teachers who are effective with the students who most need committed and caring teachers.

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 underfinanced 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.

Endnote

† Ceronne Daly, then head of High School Restructuring for the Boston Public Schools, helped organize the group. Members of the inquiry group who met throughout the year were Judith Baker, Claudia Bell, Sonie Felix, Karen Gelzinis, Stephen Gordon, Ambrizeth Lima, and Junia Yearwood.

References


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