



THE WOODROW WILSON  
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# What Made Me the Teacher I Am Today?

*A Reflection by Selected  
Leonore Annenberg-  
Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellows*

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**Note:** Where students are referenced by name in the following essays, their names have been changed to protect their privacy.

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## Introduction

In fall 2014, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation invited 18 of its Leonore Annenberg-Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellows, all now launched in their careers as teachers, to reflect on the things that had made them the teachers they were.

Some of these Fellows had been teaching for only a few months since completing their graduate programs. Others had been teaching for several years since their year in a graduate teacher preparation program. All were products of the Leonore Annenberg Teaching Fellowship program, funded by the Annenberg Foundation and administered by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. All of these Fellows could look back on experiences since joining a school's teaching team, as well as their time as graduate students in teacher education programs; many of them had also found inspiration and guidance as undergraduates and throughout a lifetime that had led them to see teaching as the best possible career for them.

After they had submitted their initial papers, staff at the Foundation edited them, asked further questions, and then met with a group of the Fellows to reflect on the themes that everyone saw in their own and each other's papers. In the end, the papers became reflections on a series of key relationships that allow a teacher to develop the stability to build a career and feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

**Key relationships allow a teacher to develop the stability to build a career and feel a sense of satisfaction.**

Teaching is often described as a lonely activity. A popular image is that of the lone teacher, spending a full day with young children or adolescents, and having very little adult contact—far less than adults in any other profession. Yet of course the connections with young people are in themselves important, sometimes life-changing relationships for teachers as well as students. And increasingly the best schools are finding ways to break down the traditional isolation of teachers as some of these reflections will attest. Teachers meet to plan, teachers have mentors and coaches who help with their skill, teachers have colleagues with whom they can reflect, and teachers are part of larger communities of adults and children. And teachers build their classroom activities based on a lifetime of interactions with parents, teachers, mentors, peers, and students.

As the Woodrow Wilson team read the papers by these 18 outstanding young teachers, we found ourselves increasingly seeing them as a series of reports on key relationships:

- Relationships with students;
- Relationships with mentors during and after a university teacher preparation program;
- Relationships with peers.

But also relationships that start earlier and last longer:

- Relationships with our own parents, teachers, and families;
- Relationships with a larger community; and, finally,
- Relationships with a discipline—the subjects that teachers find compelling.

In this compendium of excerpts, these Teaching Fellows explore the diverse relationships that make them the teachers they are today. We hope that these stories will be of interest to many other teachers and teacher educators. For teachers, we hope that these reflections will inspire them to cultivate similar relationships. For school administrators, teacher educators, and for policy leaders, we hope that they will lead to policies and preparation programs that support and nurture these kinds of relationships so that teachers, and their students, will thrive.

## I. Relationships with Students

*Of course, all teachers spend most of their professional lives in relationship with students. It is the very nature of the work of teaching. But as the stories in this section illustrate, some teachers do much more with the relationship. These teachers talk about learning from students, being shaped in their professional lives by the experiences and concerns of students which, taken together, are far broader than any one person can experience. They ponder becoming—as Kirstin Milks says—“co-adventurers” with the young people with whom they share the classroom.*

**“My students and I are co-adventurers” in learning.**

**Kirstin Milks**

Because I am a science teacher and trained as a scientist before this part of my career, I tend to see the world through a very analytic lens. However, my biggest motivation is knowing that I am helping my students grow into themselves in an environment that values them as whole people. I love seeing students develop their intellectual practices that will carry them into successful adulthood, no matter how they will spend their time.

Five years ago, the weekend after being awarded my Ph.D. in biochemistry, I enrolled in my university's teacher preparation program and have never looked back. As an educator, I've learned the most by bringing authentic scientific practices into the classroom and collaborating with students to further all our learning.

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I wasn't the kid taking apart the toaster when I was little, and despite my science scholarship, I wasn't excited by my early college coursework. My first chemistry professor, Paul Weiss, changed that with his focus on current research, not just the textbook. We learned about chromosomes by studying beautiful micrographs and met the professor whose team had produced the images. We gave posters on biological applications of elements—a novel way to learn descriptive chemistry.



*Kirstin Milks with a student. Courtesy Bloomington Herald-Times/Haley Ward.*

But it was the kinesin lecture that really hooked me. We watched cartoon kinesin walk along cartoon microtubules in a cartoon cell, delivering molecules to where they needed to be; we discussed the experiments that led to the model; and we used those experiments and results to follow the current argument about what interactions were believed to be at work. I remember literally sitting on the edge of my seat in the lecture hall. Here was science really doing something, uncovering a story piece by piece, and it lit a fire in me.

I spent the next decade working in laboratories, first in microbial photosynthesis and then in cell division. I enjoyed the intellectual challenges, but I wanted to work with a much wider variety of people, and I wanted more frequent evidence that my work mattered. The classroom seemed to be an ideal fit: I had loved working with young people in volunteer experiences and had even taken an education course during grad school.

The Stanford Teacher Education Program was eye-opening. I found myself again on the edge of my chair as I realized just how much creative work goes into this profession. In particular, I was blown away by the creative and useful models that teachers used to engage their students with abstract concepts. Simple activities like breaking toothpicks in an enzyme simulation or making marshmallow dragons to simulate meiosis, fertilization, and inheritance showed me the power of making science relatable.

The importance of relatable, *real* science became all the more apparent to me during my student teaching placement, where my cooperating teacher focused on rote memorization to maximize student success on state assessments. I am lucky that outside mentors helped me see how to slip scientific thinking in between the guided notes, lucky that I observed other teachers in the building using the same curricular materials to make their classrooms intellectually alive.

I remember in particular one classroom moment that made my mentor beam in the back of the room: My students had never seen a discrepant event until I showed them the light-eyed kid of dark-eyed parents, and they got louder and louder as they enthusiastically discussed what had happened and why. I still consider that day a turning point. Though it was a hard year, participating in a “culture of memorization” galvanized me into helping students develop authentic scientific practices in my own teaching. I knew then that I wanted my classroom to be a place where students experience discovery firsthand.

In my early classroom assignments—first an open-enrollment high school biotechnology course, now AP Biology—I have loved feeling like I was helping students develop skills as well as knowledge, and I still make sure that much of my students’ work involves hands-on simulation and experimentation. My AP Biology students were even featured in the local newspaper when they helped a local academic lab characterize a mutated plant strain.

**My students and I  
have different things  
to learn, but we are in  
the work together to  
learn from each other.**

Thanks to support and mentoring from the Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowship and the Knowles Science Teaching Foundation—where I am now a Senior Fellow—I have also explored ways not just to train my students as technicians, but to teach them how to do the actual intellectual work of science. Students benefit by doing the kinds of thinking that professional scientists do, even if they’re not asking thoroughly novel questions or wearing lab coats or using fancy equipment. For example, figuring out what data to select as evidence to draw a conclusion is a skill I took for granted while I was in the lab. I’ve learned quite a few ways to build this skill into lessons on analysis—having students move cards around, draw lines, write into graphic organizers, and more.

I’ve come to realize that my learning process in the classroom actually feels a whole lot like the science I practiced at the bench: engineering experimental procedures, collecting and analyzing data, and formulating questions about next steps. It turns out that my scientific worldview can really improve learning outcomes for my students.

The single most important thing in my teaching life, however, is approaching the classroom as a place where my students and I are co-adventurers. In college, Paul Weiss made our freshman chemistry class come alive. The examples he gave and the work he had us do were nearly always real and immediately applicable to our world.

I know now that the hard work Paul did to engage and challenge us, to connect us to the bigger world of science, was evidence of a fundamental belief that now guides me, too. Like Paul, I make it clear that we

are all colleagues in my classroom. My students and I have different things to learn, but we are in the work together to learn from each other. Whether I am working with students in the lab, planning revision and retesting opportunities, or considering how to engage students and help them see how their learning extends to the world outside the classroom, I'm always thinking about my students and their experiences, trying to figure out how to get data to improve my performance as a teacher. This perspective, that of teacher as learner with and *from* students, is what keeps me so invested in our work and makes being a classroom teacher the most satisfying intellectual pursuit I've ever known.

**"What transforms someone from being a good teacher to being a great teacher is the passion to make connections with students, to constantly evaluate and adjust their practice to do what is in the students' best interest."**

**Catherine Ann Haney**

I am a Spanish teacher in my fourth year of secondary education and have spent the past few years in a large school district. During my time in this school district, I taught various levels of Spanish, was named department chair, was asked to be a part of the Spanish curriculum leadership team for the county, and was even honored by being named New Teacher of the Year for the district in my first year of teaching. None of this is what makes me the teacher I am today.

What makes me the teacher I am is knowing that it isn't about a standard of learning, or even my subject. It's not about the parents, the county, or the administration. It's the students and the relationships you build with them that inspire them that make teaching such an important job.

What transforms someone from being a good teacher to being a great teacher is the passion to make connections with students, to constantly evaluate and adjust their practice to do what is in the students' best interest, and to take each experience, good or bad, and to make the best of it. While I've only had a handful of years of experience, I know that who I am as a teacher is always evolving because I want to build these relationships to find the best way to reach each one of my students. Knowing that I have been able to impact someone, in ways I both know and do not know, is one of the most important responsibilities of my job and what gives purpose to my teaching.

An experience that made me realize just how crucial these relationships are happened during my first year of teaching. It was a Spanish literature class for native Spanish-speaking students. It was a challenging course to tackle because I was tasked with teaching literature to students who in many cases were

**It's the students and the relationships you build with them... that make teaching such an important job.**

proficient at speaking and comprehending spoken Spanish but lacked the literacy skills required for the course. After encountering in the first week or school that many of the students in my class were not nearly as prepared as I had hoped, trying to figure out how to achieve the objectives in front of me seemed impossible. At this point, I knew I was going to have to change plans and backtrack to start with the building blocks, gaining the students' trust, in order to get anywhere.

Lauren was one of the girls in this class who was regularly in and out of In-School Restriction and, for almost the entirety of the year, on hall restriction. This meant she couldn't leave a classroom unless the teacher called for the School Resource officer to escort her through the halls. Like many students who struggle academically, it was easier and "cooler" for her to act out than it was for her to try and fail. This meant she resisted my efforts reaching out



to her and her classmates. One day, upon beginning class, Lauren announced that she needed to use the bathroom. Because of her aforementioned hall restriction, I said I would have to call for the prescribed hall escort before she could leave. Of course, this was not what she wanted to hear, so she stood up, got in my face, and called me a "f\_\_ing bitch". At this moment, the content training from teacher prep didn't matter. It didn't matter what my objective for this class period was or what the data that administration wanted me to collect showed. What mattered was the palpable tension in the room. All eyes were on me and I found myself in the middle of the nightmare that teachers dream the night before the first day of school. In that moment, my heart pounded as my brain tried to catch up with what had just happened trying to figure out how to react. I asked her, as calmly as possible, to step outside to talk while I gave the rest of the class their next instruction. Rationally, I knew that Lauren reacted this way because it was easier for her to shut down and shut me out. Emotionally, it was hard to hear someone say those words to me and remain calm.

Thank goodness a professor in my teacher prep program prepared us with role-play for situations similar to this. The role-play that once seemed silly forced us teacher candidates to figure out how we might respond in a situation like this. Because of this, I was able to almost automatically react to Lauren's outburst and I was thankful because it would have been hard to rationally process such an emotionally charged atmosphere without this training. After Lauren and I stepped out into the hallway, I told her as calmly and patiently as I could that I knew she was an intelligent student. I reminded her that I believed in her and her abilities. I also reminded her I wasn't going to go anywhere (like the multiple teachers this particular class cycled through the previous year)

and that she had to abide by the rules and guidelines we had established for the class. She looked surprised but didn't respond. After her visit to the office and subsequent days in In-School Restriction, she returned to class. Despite my nerves upon her return, I greeted her with the same smile that I did the first day of school. I continued to treat her just as I did every other student, despite my doubts of whether I was reaching her or not. I went to some of her cheerleading competitions and nominated her to participate in a poetry competition. I asked her



often about her brother and tried to learn as much about her as I could despite her occasional resistance to me. She never became a star academic student for me, but she didn't have any more outbursts, and she finished the year with a "C" instead of an "F". It wasn't until two years later, at the end of her senior year, that she wrote me an apology letter for that day and brought it, along with her college acceptance letter, to show me. She thanked me for never giving up on her.

This experience reinforced for me that teaching is about caring about the students. Lauren helped make clear to me that this was why I had chosen this career. It was not because I wanted to teach Spanish, even though I love teaching Spanish. I chose teaching because of the relationships with my students and the difference I could make in their lives. Thinking about Lauren reminds me that choosing to do the best you possibly can and proving to the students that you always are there for them by forming positive relationships with them is what matters. These relationships are what make me the teacher I am and they are what will continue to push me to forever change, adapt, and do my best to improve my craft to be the best teacher I can be so that my students can be the best they can be.

**"My students bring with them a set of life and classroom experiences that make them who they are."**

**Tara Perea-Palomares**

In the fall of 2014, I started my third year of teaching in my hometown, Albuquerque, New Mexico. In truth, my teaching life began some 18 years earlier when I was in elementary school. I had a teaching corner in my family's living room equipped with a whiteboard, seating charts, and student work. My extremely tolerant



*Tara Perea-Palomares takes some extra time with her students. Courtesy Elliot Madriss.*

parents would take test after test that I would meticulously grade and record in my gradebook.

While my passion for education and teaching remains robust, I am a very different teacher than I had imagined then. At the age of eight, I lectured to make-believe students sitting quietly in rows as I taught them to add and subtract. In my classroom today, my students sit together in groups—talking to each other, questioning each other, and working with one another to build and solidify their understanding of math. I am no longer at the front of the classroom as I was when I was eight years old. Today, I move from group to group, challenging and coaching students to push their thinking and connect concepts through their own

understanding. among the most important pieces of my practice. My students bring with them a set of life and classroom experiences that make them who they are. My classroom works because of the trust and respect we have for one another—between the students themselves and between the students and teacher. These relationships motivate me to be a better teacher each day.

I first began to understand the importance of relationships in the art of teaching—and of their continuing refinement—when I participated in City Year, an AmeriCorps program, following my sophomore year of college. I was placed in an elementary school in east San Jose, California and was assigned to work primarily with sixth-grade students as a tutor and afterschool coach.

During my first few months in the school, I quickly realized the significance of my relationship with my students and its impact on their learning and individual growth. One student in our afterschool program, Analaura, was extremely shy and struggled academically. However, because she was not a discipline problem, she was often overlooked in the classroom. In addition, Spanish was Analaura's first language and the only language spoken in her home; this made the transition to her English-speaking classroom difficult.

When I worked with Analaura on math, I immediately recognized her insecurity with basic arithmetic. Because she was uncomfortable asking for help, I made it a point to check in with her daily after school—not only about her homework, but also just to chat. I learned more and more about Analaura, and she and her friends would often come find me on the playground during lunch.

One afternoon, Analaura's mom came to pick her up from our afterschool program. I was surprised to see her, because Analaura usually walked home. Her mother said that she had come specifically to thank me for my work with Analaura. For the first time Analaura was excited to attend school, motivated to finish her homework, and determined to get good grades! She said that Analaura had felt like she would never succeed in math because she had frequently heard that only boys did well in math—but not anymore. Analaura could see the confidence I had in her abilities. She knew how much I cared about her success as a student,



and she changed her outlook on school. I had helped create a learning environment for Analaura in which she could thrive.

Looking back on my experiences with Analaura, I learned so much. I learned the key role of relationships in the artistry of teaching. Although relationships are a major piece of the artistry of teaching, it is not the only significant piece. When we think of a teacher, we think of someone helping students learn academic content. Analaura and I not only had a positive relationship, but the constant check-ins with her math skills and the one-on-one work I did with her during the school day allowed her to gain mathematical confidence and positively change the way she thought about herself as a math student.

During those first few months of AmeriCorps, I also learned that my passion for math and my commitment to building student relationships had to be joined with pedagogical knowledge. About two weeks into the school year, one of the teachers asked me to teach a review lesson on dividing fractions.

When I had first learned to divide fractions, I had memorized the rule: "Flip and multiply"—so I decided on a fun lesson that allowed the students to practice this skill. But when I presented the rule to them and sent them off in groups to practice, every group was paralyzed: "Why do we flip and multiply? That makes no sense!" I suddenly said to myself, *They're right! Why do you flip and multiply? I have no idea!* I had been successful as a math student because I could memorize rules and apply them in various situations, but I never truly understood why these rules made sense. It was in this moment that I realized that in order to be a good teacher, my relationships with my students had to extend both to seeing the problems in the way that they saw them, and also to helping them see the problems differently. Forming relationships with them needed to include an understanding of how they learned best. As I continue my teaching career, finding this balance in my teaching practice helps me continually develop my own teaching as an art.

**Forming relationships with students needed to include an understanding of how they learned best.**

## **2. Relationships with Mentors During and After University Teacher Preparation**

*Our colleague at the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, Audra Watson, is fond of saying, "Mentoring does not start after university preparation; it starts the day a candidate enters a university teacher preparation program." We have found lots of evidence for that belief. Mentors, be they university-based or school-based, and whether they begin their work while an aspiring teacher is in graduate school or in their first job, do incredibly important work in supporting, shaping, and sometimes redirecting novice teachers.*

**"My teacher education program was invaluable in helping me grow into the teacher I am today."  
Jeremy Cress**

I would not be the teacher I am today without the yearlong teacher education program I completed at the University of Pennsylvania. While I could have chosen a route to teaching that would have put me in the classroom before obtaining my master's degree, I decided this would not be the best option for me. When I started my career as a teacher I wanted to know I was the most prepared and qualified teacher that I could be. My teacher education program gave me the knowledge, resources, and experiences necessary to be a successful first-year teacher.

The graduate classes required by the program emphasized pedagogy above all else. I started my teacher education program less than two months after receiving my bachelor's degree, also from the University of Pennsylvania. As an undergraduate I was involved in several organizations that shared a common mission of educating our peers on education-related policies and practices. While we tried our best, there was always a degree of naivety on our part. Using this as the baseline for my knowledge of education, I am amazed by how much I learned throughout the teacher education program. We didn't just focus on specific methods of delivery, or general theories, but a blend of the two so that we were learning not only practices of successful teachers, but why these practices were successful. Eventually we learned to critically evaluate our own practices. This was a vital skill to learn because I am able to continue to evaluate my practices, and assess my strengths and weaknesses, in order to make sure I am constantly improving and building upon what I learned in the teacher education program.

Enrolling in a teacher education program, instead of starting my career as a teacher first and then obtaining my master's degree after, meant I had a cohort of other soon-to-be teachers to learn with as we persevered through a very rigorous and demanding year. Many of the friendships I made will last a lifetime and the network created through the teacher education program has played a critical role in my development as a teacher. Being part of a teacher education program meant I saw my peers multiple times a week for our coursework. These meetings provided a time to swap stories and ideas with one another. I found that just hearing the experiences of my peers was as much a learning experience as the time actively

**The year of student teaching gave me a chance to try out different methods... and set myself free from the preconceived notions I had about teaching.**

analyzing each other's lessons as part of our courses. Stories would often turn into informal question-and-answer or trouble-shooting sessions, which were helpful to everyone involved. Most of the students in my program were placed at a school for student teaching with at least one other student in the program. This was extremely beneficial because it meant there was someone within the school who had common knowledge of what we were learning in our courses. We often used our free periods to observe one other and to provide feedback based on what we were learning in our master's classes.

The teacher education program provided numerous opportunities to engage with individuals from the local education community, oftentimes through guest speakers invited to our classes. These individuals were connected to various education-related causes and programs in addition to many local schools. They provided exposure to many great resources for both beginning and established teachers, and many of the visitors who made multiple visits became our associates and friends as well. As a first year teacher, it is great to know I already have contacts spread throughout the school district, which I can use as resources and support as I navigate my first year of fully independent teaching.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of my teacher education program was the in-the-classroom experience it provided. Unlike students in many teacher preparation programs, which consist of a half-year of student teaching or sometimes even less, I started student teaching on the first day teachers reported to work, and I remained at the same school throughout the duration of the program. The time spent under the mentorship of an experienced classroom teacher was instrumental in making me a confident leader in the classroom. Having a mentor to share a classroom with meant I had someone who could instruct me, guide me, advocate for me, and support me whenever I needed it. Since my mentor teacher was almost always in the classroom while I was teaching, she was able to provide feedback at the end of every class. I used this feedback to plan for the next day's lesson, and made a special point to work on improving one or more

things for which I received critical feedback. Over the course of the year, my skills as a teacher continuously evolved because, as I improved in one area, I discovered several new areas in which I wanted to further develop my practice.

The year of student teaching also provided the opportunity to experiment. Before becoming a teacher, I had a particular image of what teaching looked like, which was based on my own education experience. I knew what types of teachers I liked, what types I didn't, what type of class I thought I had positive learning experiences in, and what types of classes I did not enjoy. When I began student teaching I had a set of ideas for how I wanted to run my classroom. What I didn't realize was that this was based on my own experience, and just because it worked for me didn't necessarily mean it would be the best for my students. The year of student teaching gave me a chance to try out different methods, many of which I learned in my education classes and from my classroom mentor. This was an opportunity to set myself free from the preconceived notions I had about teaching and decide what actually worked best for me and for my students. Without this opportunity, I could have foreseen myself falling into the trap many teachers fall into, which would be to have the same daily routine regardless of its success, simply because that is what feels the most comfortable. Student teaching gave me the chance to try things outside my comfort zone. This has not only made me feel more at ease with various teaching practices, but it has also given me the confidence to continue experimenting in my own classroom as well.

My teacher education program was invaluable in helping me grow into the teacher I am today. As I begin my career as an educator, I know the courses I took provided the important balance of theory and practice to teach my students in a way I am certain will be effective. The network I developed gave me friends and colleagues I can turn to for new ideas and approaches for the classroom. The experience of student teaching gave me the chance to find out who I am as a teacher, and the confidence to try new things in the classroom. Ben Franklin said, "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I may remember. Involve me and I learn." My teacher education program directly involved me in my own education and gave me the tools to lead a successful classroom. It was an opportunity I am very grateful for and would certainly recommend to other aspiring educators.

**"I think of the people who put me on this path and shaped the teacher I am today."**

**Mia King Mlekarov**

This September marks my fifth year as a high school social studies teacher. In allowing myself to feel a sense of accomplishment about my teaching, I think of the people who put me on this path and shaped the teacher I am today. From my master's program mentor, Karen Clark, a longtime urban public schoolteacher, I learned that good teaching is inquiry-based and needs flexibility and openness. From another mentor, Penn Urban Studies Program Co-Director Elaine Simon, I learned that good teaching is political and takes democratic engagement. From the parents and community members I worked alongside at West Philadelphia High School—Jennifer, Joy, Carla, and Shirley—I learned that good teaching



*Mia King Mlekarov leads students in an online activity at Highline Big Picture School in Burien, WA.*

requires humility and respect for the community in which it is situated. My experiences with all of these people continue to shape the teacher I am today.

In learning and teaching with Karen Clark during my time at Penn Graduate School of Education, I realized that her excitement and engagement in each class meeting stemmed from her willingness to experiment, reflect, and refine. Teaching in a working-class community on the western edge of Philadelphia, Dr. Clark had struggled to meet the learning needs of this high-energy student or that English language learner. Hearing her stories alongside my day-to-day experiences as a student teacher at West Philadelphia High School, I developed the core conviction that “fair” does not always mean the same thing for every student.

I also came to realize, thanks to Dr. Clark, that a teacher must be able to admit that a lesson or unit is not working, and to change it without ego. Educating the wide range of students we encounter as teachers takes a willingness to be flexible and open to change, not only in the moment of teaching but also in the planning of curriculum from week to semester to year. If ever my ego creeps in, telling me that I should keep pursuing curriculum that is not working for students because “I spent so much time making it,” Dr. Clark’s voice echoes in my ears: “Let go! Put the students first and adjust!”

My first year of teaching was a tough one. Not only did all Philadelphia schools face a hiring freeze, but my own school went through four principals and more than its share of serious disciplinary incidents. At times the chaos felt overwhelming and depressing. I was lucky to have a friend and mentor in Dr. Elaine Simon, whose engagement as a teacher, partner, and advocate at my school long preceded my own.

**Thanks to her I realized that a teacher must be able to admit that a lesson or unit is not working, and change it.**

Through my friendship with Dr. Simon and our participation in district- and community-based reform efforts at the school, I learned that teachers must engage politically if they are to remain hopeful for positive change in education. The temptation to become jaded, especially in a district with many challenges, is very real. Watching Dr. Simon continue to engage was a true inspiration: She had been part of experimental schools in West Philly as far back as the early

1970s and had seen many merry-go-round reform efforts come and go. Through her, I learned that one can either give up and let others seize control, or become part of a change process. Teachers and their community allies cannot always control change, but they can push things in the right direction. From that first year, I committed to make engagement a part of my teaching: attending community and district meetings, participating in union activities, voting and talking to friends and relatives about the issues. No matter the teaching context, a school and its classrooms are influenced greatly by political decisions. Teachers need to be aware of and, to the extent possible, take part in the dialogue around those decisions.

I have also learned that parents and community members are essential to dialogue about teaching and school change. My early experiences with a powerful group of women from West Philadelphia brought this reality into sharp relief. As a teacher representative to the School Advisory Council (SAC), I met parents Jennifer Funderburg, Joy Herbert, and Carla Jackson, along with lifelong community resident and business leader Shirley Randleman. What I learned working alongside these women indelibly changed the way I perceived my work. While I joined the SAC with the outrage and eagerness of a naïve young teacher, these women had a much deeper connection to the school and the neighborhood. After all, most of them had grown up in the area, and it was their children attending the school. For them the SAC process had an impact that, despite my sincerity, it would never have for me.

With each confusing new development or frustrating turn of events, we persevered on the SAC and planned together, keeping the school community's best interests in sight as our ultimate goal. My strategic alliances and friendships with Jennifer, Joy, Carla, and Shirley humbled me. They taught me that ultimately a school belongs to families and community members as much as it belongs to teachers and administrators—a fact I always remember as I continue to work alongside parents.



Statistically, half of the teachers that entered this profession with me five years ago will leave by the end of this school year. I can say with confidence that I will not be among them. Of course, teaching is my livelihood, but it is so much more than that. Teaching is a part of my identity. I just spent three months out of the classroom on parental leave to care for my newborn son—well-deserved and well-spent time at home getting to know my new little one. Still, when I came back to the classroom, something in me clicked: I felt like myself again!

Being a teacher brings out the best in me. By letting me exercise my conscience and values every day, it helps me be a better citizen, a better friend, and a better mom. I can imagine no other profession that will fulfill me as much, and I cannot wait to see what the future brings.

**"My coach... provided feedback  
and topics of reflection along the way."  
Camille Porreca**

I received my teacher training through the University of Virginia, where I was involved in a program called "My Teaching Partner." My Teaching Partner is a coaching program that reviews classroom practices through cycles of videos, reflections, and consultations. I sent videos of lessons to my coach, Sasha Rehm, and we discussed and reflected on my lessons. My coach would offer me advice and ideas to consider in order to develop my practice during my first three years of teaching.

One of the greatest lessons that I have learned from this process is that my teaching is always a work in progress. This philosophy helps me remain open-minded and willing to learn from the lessons and situations that do not go as planned. I stay flexible, constantly looking for new ideas and ways to improve. The various places and situations that I have experienced presented challenges that gave me the opportunity to reflect on different aspects of my practice in order to meet the variety of needs of my students. Assessing and adapting have become routine. I value the flexible teachers that I have worked with and the students that have taught me lessons about life and teaching. I am motivated by trying to figure out the best way for my students to appreciate and understand mathematical concepts in order to become lifelong problem solvers.

My different experiences also shaped my instructional strategies. As a novice teacher in Philadelphia and Virginia, I had grand ideas of discovery learning and group work. I realized early, however, that I did not have the structure in my class to make this format a reality. In time, I came to understand that my students, who had very little experience with discovery learning, needed clear expectations in order to do



the kind of discovery exercises that I thought would be most productive for their learning in a math class. While teaching in Virginia, one of my colleagues, Samantha Martin, provided advice for how to differentiate instruction using group work. Her advice led me to group students strategically based on assessments, and to target interventions based on their needs. My group methods improved further when I moved to California and was fortunate to have training sessions with Jo Boaler, a math education professor at Stanford. She introduced me to ideas such as Complex Instruction and Participation Quizzes to help students work more effectively in teams. Currently, most of my instruction is based on group work and I vary strategies based on the activities and the students' needs.

My Teaching Partner helped me adapt and learn from my different experiences. My coach, Sasha Rehm, provided feedback and topics of reflection along the way. I sent her videos of my most challenging classes and she replied with prompts for me to reflect on how to improve my practice. Rehm was vital to me, as a novice teacher, in helping brainstorm interventions and providing reflection questions to help me manage my classroom. For example, during my second year of teaching, my coach asked, "As you watch this first clip [of the video], choose three students and describe their behavior. How could you have addressed it differently?" As I wrote the reflection and described their behavior, I realized they were quieter during the second clip because I thanked everyone who was doing what they were supposed to be doing, and they really like to be recognized positively. Watching and analyzing the videos of my class taught me how positive reinforcement can modify student behavior. In my next lessons, I focused on positively reinforcing desired behaviors and the students' behavior improved as a result.

My coach also helped me structure my classroom to make group work successful. One of my biggest challenges was getting students to talk to each other about math. During my third year of teaching, my coach asked me to "reflect on how you monitor student progress on this cooperative learning assignment." In my written reflection, I responded,

As I went around [to the different groups], I tried to redirect their questions to each other and asked them to talk about the problem with each other. In this particular clip, I asked the students for their answer and tried to redirect them to talk to each other about their conclusion. It didn't work. I could have asked them a more specific question about the task and stayed with their group longer to ensure that they actually got back on task.

Following this reflection, my coach and I discussed how to make clear expectations so that the students would know exactly what I wanted to hear in their groups. For example, I wrote specific scripts for how to talk about math and created an accountability system that showed the students that it was important to



communicate in their group and to use proper academic discourse. My coach also suggested other accountability systems to encourage students to participate in whole class discussion. The My Teaching Partner program helped me get into a pattern of constant reflection and revision.

I continue to evolve as an educator. Meeting new students and helping them develop into creative problem solvers motivates me to perfect my teaching practice. Each unit, I try new ideas and reflect on the results. I strive to be sensitive to my students' needs and flexible to meet different challenges. Every day I build on my past experience and adapt my practice to best educate and inspire my students.

### 3. Relationships with Peers

*The best teachers never stop learning, and one of the best sources of new ideas for any teacher is a colleague. The best schools have become learning communities where all members of the teaching team help each other grow and develop ever-stronger professional expertise. But as the reports of our Fellows note, it does not take a whole school commitment for a good teacher to find a professional partner—someone who can “speak the same language” and create the kinds of “collaborative communities” these teachers report.*

**“Because James and I speak the same language and have enough time to think together, a remarkable thinking space opens up.”**  
Katie Waddle

As with any learning, improving at teaching requires thinking about what you are currently doing, then formulating new plans and changes. For me, the key to improvement has been collaboration. Collaborating allows me to see and focus on my strengths, gives me a thinking space, and helps me to not feel alone.

Sometimes non-teachers are surprised to hear that teaching can be a lonely job, considering that during the day you are rarely in a room with fewer than 25 people. Yet almost all the teachers I have talked to agree that being the only adult in the room can be an isolating experience. The gulf between what you, the teacher, are thinking about and what the students are thinking about is wide and deep.

My first year of teaching, I was the only Algebra 1 teacher at my school. Because my school had no staff room, and teachers did not eat lunch together, sometimes I got home at 7:00 pm not having spoken to another adult the entire day. I struggled with day-to-day planning. As I look back at that year’s lesson plans, I can tell I needed someone to think with. My lesson plans often stretched to two or three pages as I sought to work out my ideas.

That first year I found it nearly impossible to see any good that I was doing. I regularly broke down crying with mentors. Late that fall, a mentor observed that when I smiled, students seemed to behave better. This would not have occurred to me; when I expressed disappointment and anger, I was alienating students who didn’t want to work for someone who was constantly unhappy. Getting this feedback gave me a taste of what it would be like to collaborate—to get an outside perspective that could help me see myself more clearly.

After my first year, I sought out a new position in a school where I would be able to collaborate. The administration in my new school openly encourages and supports collaboration. Teachers are involved in hiring. There is a staff room/lunch room where teachers can gather and seek support. Teachers who are collaborating on a course get a common prep period, and I was given a room adjacent to my collaborative partner. Even these relatively small resources are far from the norm in the schools my friends work in.

In my new school, I was excited to have found a planning partner immediately, but I quickly started to feel the limits of our collaboration. Our teacher preparation had differed in fundamental ways; we had learned different pedagogical and theoretical approaches. When planning, we never seemed to have enough time to talk through our differences and come to a common solution. Still feeling professionally alone, I sought different opportunities to collaborate. For a different class I was teaching alone at my school, I cultivated a partnership with a teacher I had met in a professional development group, whose

background was like mine. We met at a coffee shop every Thursday and discussed lessons—a taste of a true collaborative relationship.



The ultimate in collaboration, I decided, would be to work with a teacher at my school, who had similar training and was willing to put in the time to collaborate meaningfully. When a math position opened up at my school, I went to the principal and asked to be involved in hiring. I helped choose James, who was less experienced but was enthusiastic about collaborating, and whose background mirrored mine. Then I set about creating ground for a good relationship: I had us formulate norms together, including a commitment to use all the same materials in our classes. This norm helped create a reason to really work together.

With James I no longer feel alone, and can keep my practice in perspective. We plan together every prep period and after school. When a lesson goes badly, I duck across the hall to see if the same thing happened to James. We can strategize about how to clarify directions, or shrug and agree to allow the same thing to happen in periods 3, 5, and 6, keeping everyone on the same page for the next day. I no longer despair about my teaching; with a shared point of reference, I know that I am doing some things well, and have some things to work on.

Because James and I speak the same language and have enough time to think together, a remarkable thinking space opens up. With similar approaches, we can skip over surface-level talk and look at the smallest details of a lesson. Far from my first-year practice of randomly recycling other people's materials. I rarely get the feeling of thinking in circles; when I do, it feels productive, because I know that someone is listening and will be able to offer support when I get back to the beginning.

We still struggle a bit to see our own strengths. Since we teach all the same periods, we can't observe each other's classes. I do try to point out James's strengths as I see them. He is much more organized than I am, and has revolutionized the way we keep records of our lesson plans and materials, using Google Docs and Google Drive to communicate more effectively while planning. Perhaps most importantly, we can check each other if we are becoming too negative, asking each other to reflect on what went well, rather than what didn't work.

At the beginning of this year James and I recommitted to the principles that keep us invested in the relationship. I have also taken on the responsibility of developing a student teacher this year, creating another kind of partnership. Recently, when we were debriefing a lesson, my student teacher said she had noticed me doing a lot of things to build positivity in the class. It is immensely gratifying when an outside eye confirms your progress. I hope likewise to help her know her own strengths as she goes into her first year of teaching. I will be encouraging her to consider the opportunities for collaboration as she interviews with schools in the spring.

**"Collaborative communities are crucial to professional work."**

**Katrina Stern**

I am in my third year as a biology teacher at Del Mar High School in San Jose, California. Over the past two years, one major focus of my work has been developing a biology curriculum that is organized around big ideas and emphasizes the connections between different biology concepts. In striving to promote students' overall understanding of how living systems work, I enjoy exploring new ways to sequence concepts in the curriculum and reflecting on the effectiveness of these sequencing decisions. When making decisions about how to teach a particular concept, I always consider how to frame that concept in a way that will help students to access the overarching themes of biology.

I make it a priority to support students in developing the kinds of analytical and communication skills that are central to scientific work. As often as possible, I push students to explain how they think something works, make predictions, and monitor ways in which their thinking is changing. I teach students to support scientific claims with evidence and reasoning, and I enjoy collaborating with other teachers to develop strategies for helping students to analyze, discuss, and write about data.

I use a non-traditional grading system in which each score reflects a student's mastery of a particular concept or skill rather than a percentage of points obtained, and I am committed to improving the effectiveness of this system in my classroom. I have worked closely with many other teachers to critically examine the strengths and limitations of such a grading system, and I am currently focusing on exploring ways to more effectively support students in taking ownership of their progress and mastery in my class.

When I began teaching three years ago, I had just graduated from Iowa State University with a bachelor's degree in biology and enrolled in the Stanford Teacher Education Program. During the program's first week, we discussed how, in some of our nation's most highly regarded professions, the professionals themselves hold and generate knowledge. For example, much medical knowledge is generated by doctors who write papers based on their clinical work, share their work at conferences, and collaborate with one another to keep improving their practice. Although effectiveness is urgent when practicing medicine, as it is in teaching, ongoing professional learning and personal growth are also valued.

This conversation was very important in shaping me as a teacher. Effective teaching is not something people are born knowing how to do, nor something that even the most passionate new teacher can learn quickly. It cannot be learned purely from a book or from watching someone else. While good teachers must be knowledgeable, caring, and committed to excellence every day for students' sake, I have found it is even more important for teachers to acknowledge the inevitability of mistakes and embrace opportunities to learn and improve.

**Like medicine, teaching is complex intellectual work that requires not only subject knowledge but also understanding of psychology, motivation, and human interactions.**

Like medicine, teaching is complex intellectual work that requires not only knowledge of the subject and how to teach it, but also a thorough understanding of psychology, motivation, and human interactions. Teachers must constantly reflect on all these things and continue to learn from their own classrooms and from other teachers. They must also be willing to share knowledge within the education community and beyond. In this way, teaching is certainly the work of professionals.

My life as a teacher has been most profoundly influenced through opportunities to engage in the kinds of practices and relationships that define professional work, both as a Leonore Annenberg—Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellow at Stanford and through the Knowles Science Teaching Fellowship, which encourages its fellows to work together to critically examine the work that they are doing in their own classrooms. One of the most significant things I have learned is how to approach dilemmas in a way that seeks to understand rather than immediately fix.

I have been to professional development seminars where “best practices” are shared and where the presenters inevitably say something like, “Today you will learn strategies that you can use tomorrow!” This kind of professional development is simplistic and limited. There is rarely a straightforward distinction between what works and what doesn’t, and even if I learn about a strategy I want to try, I still will modify it to fit with my personal style and my teaching context. The most useful learning opportunities for me as a new teacher, instead, have been working with other teachers to examine the things I do every day and consider how to improve them.

Classroom data come in many forms—student work, teaching videos, lesson plans, curriculum documents, even seating charts—and it can take several pairs of critical eyes examining these artifacts to shed light on the most troubling problems of practice. When I sit down with colleagues to discuss these kinds of classroom artifacts, we ask ourselves such questions as, “What do we notice in this video? What questions

**When teachers use their time to discuss problems of practice and curriculum, meetings become powerful learning opportunities.**

does this data spark? How can this student work help illuminate possible next steps?” Framing these kinds of questions can lead to very powerful professional learning. Classrooms are extremely complex systems, and working with other educators in an effort to better understand their various elements has given me more resources than any “best practices” seminar I have ever attended.

Collaborative communities are crucial to professional work, and I have benefited from a variety of professional relationships. For example, I have been fortunate to work with excellent mentors who ask probing questions that help uncover perspectives and patterns not immediately apparent to me. In my first two years of teaching, a veteran science teacher mentored me. We analyzed student work by classifying work samples according to proficiency and then selecting focal students to examine more closely. She pushed me to look for patterns in the students’ strengths and needs within the class. Once I identified particular areas of need common to many students, she would ask me, “Why do you think that was difficult for them? What do you think you can do next to support them?” This would often lead us into discussions about important topics such as academic vocabulary, assessment strategies, and common student misconceptions in biology. I still think frequently about our discussions when I collaborate with colleagues to design assessments and examine student work.

Friends from Stanford and Knowles Fellowship have also been some of my best colleagues. Together we can discuss problems of practice as intellectual work, not a sign of weakness, and through mutual understanding, we learn and grow together. Being able to collaborate when we are all at a similar place in our careers has invigorated and sustained me through the challenging early years of teaching.



Much of what I have learned through these professional relationships has shaped my collaboration with colleagues at my school. In a large comprehensive high school, it can be easy for teachers to become isolated in their own classrooms and limit their interactions to sharing activities or aligning plans superficially. When teachers agree instead to use their time for discussing problems of practice and critically examining curriculum, collaborative meetings become powerful learning opportunities. I strive to bring this lens to my work with other teachers at my school because I believe that collaborative professional relationships are the most valuable way that I can increase my knowledge of teaching. It is important to me to continue to have such relationships for many years to come, even as my professional communities shift.



In order to do truly professional work, teachers must be willing to look at their own practice openly and objectively, and commit to examining their work collaboratively with colleagues. It can be difficult to approach teaching this way because it is extremely personal, emotional work. Developing a professional teacher's disposition and collaborative skills takes time and requires trusting relationships that allow for risks and mistakes. Mentors and insightful peers give me invaluable support to engage professionally as a teacher. They have helped me become the teacher that I am today, and I feel confident that their influence will continue to shape my professional identity throughout my career.

#### **4. Relationships with Our Own Parents, Teachers, and Family**

*Teacher preparation begins long before an aspiring teacher enters a teacher preparation program. In his classic study Schoolteacher, sociologist Dan Lortie wrote, "Teaching is unusual in that those who decide to enter it have had exceptional opportunity to observe members of the occupation at work." While Lortie is describing the ways young students observe teachers, young people also see parents and other family members as teachers and learn from them. All of these experiences shape the ideas of those who later become teachers themselves.*

**"I know where I'm headed, thanks to Edna J. Berry, my grandmother, and to Gretchen Parks, a high school counselor."  
Kristen Jackson**

Like all new teachers, I'm still defining and refining my teaching practice. I'm grateful, however, to have a blueprint that has continued to influence me as I work to become an effective and valued educator. I know where I'm headed, thanks to Edna J. Berry, my grandmother, and to Gretchen Parks, a high school counselor. Both taught me resilience in the face of adversity. Their stories have been etched into the spine of my teaching practice, and I always keep their lessons at the heart of my classroom.

When I was 13 and in the 8th grade, my grandmother had a stroke. Following months in the hospital, rehabilitation, and physical therapy, she moved in with my single mother, my brother, and me. It was a

large task, but we were up to the challenge of caring for the matriarch of our family, whom I affectionately called "Meema," the most selfless, giving, caring person I'd ever met.

Meema's rehab was difficult; the stroke affected her memory and many motor functions. But I never saw her give up. She taught me resilience by facing the toughest situations with passion and grit. Every day we'd do small activities to increase her motor skills. She didn't give up, and even in her altered state, she was teaching me academics and life lessons. Scrabble was her favorite game, and she always beat me, even after the stroke. Although I wasn't the best competition, she was always up for a game. Her vocab never wavered, and I was never able to beat her, but she let me keep playing because that's what you do—you keep playing.

Her lessons in resilience became even more important when my mother, who wanted more for me out of my education and who had also learned toughness from Meema, forced me to apply to the International Academy, home of the only International Baccalaureate program in Michigan at the time. I hated the idea. I wanted to go to public school like all my friends, not this magnet school for nerds. My first day was miserable; I was dressed differently, I talked differently, and I cried in the counselor's office because I couldn't go into the higher math class. I'd always been in the top math class in middle school, but my high school had students smarter, more competitive, and better prepared than I was.



*"Empowering students with persistence and resilience":  
Kristen Jackson with her students in Philadelphia.*

Every day I'd come home from this strange school with some complaint of struggles inside and outside the classroom: teachers who didn't try to understand me, and students who judged how I talked and the way I thought. But my grandmother had been a teacher for over 40 years in the Detroit Public Schools. She taught elementary regular and special education, and also worked with Wayne State University to observe and mentor student teachers and future educators. Meema had a way of making me feel special, a talent that made her a phenomenal educator. Even through her debilitating illness, she reminded me that I was made of the strongest material possible, so nothing could break me if I didn't permit it to. This is how she taught her students; regardless of their circumstances, they were *all* special to her. She showed me the type of educator I hope to be one day: one who doesn't give up on herself or her students, regardless of the task. Strength, to her, was not found in numbers, but in not giving up. Today I'm striving to be the teacher that believes in her students, in hopes that they'll find in me what I found in her. I don't measure them on their memory skills, but on how hard they work to improve, and each day I try to impart to my students the resilience I learned from my grandmother.

And at school, I found an ally in my counselor, Ms. Gretchen Parks. Ms. Parks was a special kind of counselor. She didn't make me talk about school, she let me talk about life. From arguments with friends to not being accepted into the Spanish Honor Society because my behavior was less than stellar, she was there. She took the time to understand me and make me feel normal in a world convinced I was anything but. As one of five black students in a graduating class of about 150, I was more than a minority, and I was often an outcast. I tried my best, but couldn't pigeonhole my identity into any one community. And because I attended a magnet school, the friends who lived near me attended the local high school and

thus saw me as an outsider. Ms. Parks allowed me to feel normal, and encouraged me to embrace my struggle and differences, for they were what made me unique.

Being an outcast, however, has had its benefits. Ms. Parks encouraged me to fight through the tension and to be resilient, and this is a lesson I'm constantly teaching my students. They come from an underresourced background and often feel all the odds are against them. It is my charge not to just teach them, but to motivate them to persevere. I wouldn't have a clue how to do this without being able to consult the blueprint outlined by Meema and Ms. Parks.

Everyone's reason for teaching is different. What unites us, however, is a shared passion for influencing young people to achieve as we have achieved. My circumstances could have been different. I narrowly escaped a bleak future, thanks to a mother who knew how to make public schools work for her children. But that wasn't enough; my background never looked like those of my classmates, and I often felt alone and inadequate. Yet along my journey, I've had many mentors who wouldn't let me quit, who haven't ceased to believe in my potential.

This is why I want to teach. My students need to know how to be resilient in the face of adversity and how to persevere when the odds are stacked higher than they can see. These individuals inspired a sense of persistence and resilience in me while facing terrible odds, which enabled me to empower my students with the same lessons. I was blessed to receive two phenomenal blueprints for good teaching, and the preparation I received from these influential women have continued to shape the goals I strive toward in my classroom each day.

**"My success was supposed to prove that all students of color could do well if they tried hard enough and wanted it badly enough—a claim that hid real educational disparities."**

**Kayla Vinson**

I could be the poster child for America's public schools—and yet nothing propels me forward as an educator more than my belief that the theory of schools as a bastion of American meritocracy is a dangerous myth. My most lasting impression of the education system is that it knowingly and persistently does not work for innumerable people. I teach to help ensure that urban youth, often marginalized by and disengaged from society, experience an education that enables them to become subjects, rather than objects, of this world.

My journey to who I am in the classroom is best explained through three stories that focused my attention on the structural experience of education for students.

### *Story #1*

My earliest experience of education was in Montessori school, which emphasizes exploration, freedom, and respect for a child's natural development. My teacher, Millie, made a profound impression on me. She was unapologetically demanding, yet intimately connected to our needs. She knew whose "Leave me alone!" really meant "stay" and whose really meant "I need some time alone." Years later, when I was having a difficult time with middle school art, my mom took me back to Millie for help. She matched her level of instruction, the tone of her voice, and her physical placement near me to make me feel safe and competent, and to motivate me to push through an assignment that had felt impossible on my own.

## Story #2

I grew up in an all-Black neighborhood, where public schools did not have a good reputation. In third grade, I qualified for the high-achievers magnet program across town. By high school, the magnet program was the top rung of a heavily tracked comprehensive high school. Academic tracks bled into social and extracurricular activities, such that people with divergent experiences rarely engaged meaningfully with each other. This reality was palpable; although the magnet program was disproportionately White and middle class, the school's catchment zone was largely African American and low-income. Walking down the hallways, one could guess the academic rigor of the classes. The more Black students there were, the lower the track of the class. The more White and Asian students, the higher the track.

My life in the school combined different worlds. My friends were mostly Black, but I took the most challenging classes, where I was almost always the only Black student. Gaining access to these classes required my mother's intervention. She once overheard White parents in the counseling office complain that one of the counselors was "always telling them [Black students] about opportunities meant for our [White] kids." In math and science classes, I mostly worked alone because my classmates lacked confidence in my abilities. Traditionally, seniors at my high school tape college acceptance letters to their lockers to celebrate. The schools to which I was accepted shocked many of my classmates, who "couldn't believe *she* got in"—mindblowing when the comments came from students who had taken classes *with me* for four years. Noticeably, these negative comments never came from my Black classmates.

I teach to help ensure that urban youth experience an education that enables them to become subjects, rather than objects, of this world.

What perplexed me even more was my school's narrative about my success. While I felt a lack of support from many teachers at my school, I became a public example that all students of color could succeed if only they worked hard and took advantage of opportunities. The school's multiple tracks were justified as sorting students based on ability and motivation. In reality, moving up the tracks was nearly impossible because students received a drastically different education in different tracks. Unlike most students in my classes, I actually *knew* the other Black students, who were supposedly unmotivated, lacked work ethic, and were not as capable.

I knew better. I recognized the disparity between the education my White and Asian peers and I received and that offered to my peers of color. I was acutely aware that these experiences would shape the remainder of our lives, and I knew there was much more to the disparity than pure merit.

## Story #3

In college I had a field experience to observe at two elementary schools—one part of an acclaimed "no excuses" charter network, the other a private school where many university professors send their children. Calling the differences stark is an understatement. At the former, obedience and conformity were top priorities, with students' every moment closely regulated. At the latter, creativity, individuality, and critical thinking were the reigning forces. It would be unfathomable to argue that these two sets of children, close in age and growing up in the same city, were being prepared for similar adult lives.

Lani Guinier argues that, while we should ask three questions to understand problems, we often stop at the first question, "Who are winners and the losers?" Some move on to the second, "Who made the rules and

why?" As an educator, I am most interested in the third question and its implications: *"What myths have the winners used to convince the losers to keep playing the game?"*

Now I understand what made me so uncomfortable in my own high school. I was part of the myth. There was a desire to weave my story into the fabric of American meritocracy, to advance the notion that, through schools, we end up where we belong. My success was supposed to prove that all students of color could do well if they tried hard enough and wanted it badly enough—a claim that hid real educational disparities. This myth ignores the role of structural realities in shaping children's lives.

### *Synthesizing My Experiences*

As a Yale graduate, I recognize that my story is one of triumph. But contrary to our national myths, mine is a triumph not *because of*, but rather *despite*. Social activist Peter Joseph argues that "you cannot separate any outcome from the system by which it is oriented." As an educator, I challenge myself to move beyond the myths and create an equitable classroom that is highly demanding, highly supportive, and highly connected to my students' lives.

Many teachers teach to help or empower or change. *I teach to disrupt*. To disrupt a system that claims to sort students based on ability while actually sorting along race and class lines. To disrupt a system that uses successful students of color as faulty evidence that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed. Together my students and I co-create their identities, their sense of themselves, and their understanding of their place in society. Because I believe wholly in my students' own power, I teach to disrupt school cultures that suggest that students need to be anything less than their whole selves.

### **"Going into the freshman year of high school**

**I was pretty good at patching together quotes that had a ring to them. To my surprise my teacher said:**

**'That's great, but I was wondering what you thought of the poem?'"**

**Mihajlo Spasojevic**

I grew up in Yugoslavia and came through a school system in which students were little more than passive recipients of a prescribed bank of knowledge, a system in which ideas were willingly accepted and never questioned. What this meant when it comes to literature, for example, was that we would spend time reading a particular piece of writing only to move right on to reading what some eminent scholar or literary critic said about the same piece. Our subsequent "discussions" were merely a retelling of the ideas of others: we "liked" Joyce because, well, Harold Bloom liked him. Our job was not to think, but to read and memorize what others had *thought* for us.

Going into the freshman year of high school I was well versed in the expectations that the system had for us. I was pretty good at patching together quotes that had a ring to them, so when my literature teacher asked me what I thought of a poem by a famous Serbian modernist, I was instantly able to cite from a classic essay on that poet, thinking to myself that I was making a "killer" first impression. To my surprise



*Kayla Vinson works with a student.*



my teacher said: "That's great, but I was wondering what *you* thought of the poem?" For a while there I did not know what to say. Thinking was not part of the game, certainly not *our* thinking.

I was not the only one in my class who was confused, scared almost. It was not just that the expectations that we were so accustomed to had suddenly changed. We were given freedom, intellectual freedom that we did not know what to do with. At first we used this freedom to say all kinds of critical, sometimes even nasty things about the classics that we read. It was fun for a while to say that Flaubert was "boring as hell", or that Becket's *Godot* did not make any sense, and our teacher encouraged us to share *our own* ideas, whatever they were, as long as we could back them up with textual evidence. Suddenly what we thought mattered. *We* were responsible for our own learning. It did not take long before we became truly engaged in deconstructing not only the readings but also the essays and studies written about those same works, slowly reaching what a true purpose of education and learning is—making meaning(s) out of disparate ideas and facts. We were *thinking*, raising our voices in heated debates over who Becket's *Godot* really was and what he meant for Becket, for Ireland, and for our poor, ragged country that was quickly disintegrating while the generation of our parents aimlessly waited for some sort of Messiah, some *Godot* of their own.

It is funny how, once you are set on this journey with your intellectual freedom in tow, it is (almost) impossible to go back. We started applying the same critical thinking skills in other classes as well, even though the rest of our teachers were content to stay within the expectations that the system had for us. We took our critical thinking skills outside the school as well, deconstructing and exposing the intentions of the government-controlled media that were slowly but surely setting the stage for the brutal wars that followed. When people started taking to the streets demanding freedom, peace, and change, we were there as well and so was our teacher.

These experiences with my high school teacher taught me two fundamental things about teaching that make me the educator that I am today.

The first one is based on the concept of shifting the cognitive load onto the students. Teachers often depict their work as being "the guardians of knowledge," willing to share some of it with their students, assigning themselves a slightly oversized role in the process. In reality, we are little more than stagehands in the background of an amazing spectacle of learning that takes place in our classrooms. No matter how well we teach, our teaching is no match for how well our students can learn. Just as my high school literature teacher made us active participants in our own learning, I always try to put my students in the driver's seat of their own education.

Here is one example of what that looks like. To make up for the fact that most of my fourth and fifth graders never had arts, I set aside some time every day to show them art works from Breughel to Banksy. I merely set the stage by projecting an image, posing a question or two and providing some language support. It is incredible to listen to them make connections between Edward Hopper's "Morning Sun" and Rene Magritte's "Golconda" ("Maybe the woman in that other painting is behind one of those windows," one student said of Magritte's work), or debate freedom versus safety while talking about Banksy's "One Nation Under CCTV" (by chance in the midst of the debate over the NSA's surveillance program). All the while we were rocking the Common Core because the students were drawing inferences and making conclusions using evidence from the artwork, and we discussed things like the artist's purpose and perspective, skills that we then practiced in our reading and in our writing.

My high school literature teacher also taught me that education and knowledge can set one free, but this freedom comes with a price tag in the form of an everlasting sense of hurt. My high school years coincided with the dissolution of my home country Yugoslavia. Various “leaders” started calling people to join under different historic banners, to reignite the “epic” battle that our ancestors had started centuries ago for reasons that no one could clearly explain any more. In the midst of all that I remember the day when we discussed Joyce’s *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*—more specifically, the moment when the main character Stephen Dedalus talks about Ireland, his homeland, as an old sow eating its farrow, and his need to break away from his family, his church, his country. Our teacher asked her questions and the discussion suddenly became about us: Serbia too was an old sow and we were its farrow. That *was* my life, there and then. I realized that my parents would never learn who James Joyce was, that from that moment on it would be just me. I saw that for me to ever have any chance at life I would have to break away from everything I knew up to that moment, that I would have to walk straight ahead, like Orpheus, and never look back.

No matter how well  
we teach, our  
teaching is no match  
for how well our  
students can learn.

Many years later I found myself standing in front of my class in Seattle talking to my students about Eve Bunting’s book *Riding the Tiger* when a sense of dread overwhelmed me, hitting me like that 16-ton cartoon weight. Right there, I thought, someone in this class might be having a moment, just as I had all those years back—a moment in which his or her life was going to be set on a certain path. I was not ready for that kind of responsibility. No teacher preparation program can prepare you for that.

As the class did a “turn and talk,” it occurred to me that there is a struggle taking place in communities across the country, a struggle in which the students are asked daily to make some of the same difficult choices. As teachers we have to ensure that our classrooms are safe havens in which our students are protected from the pressures they already face elsewhere, that our classrooms are places where our students can freely engage the world on their own terms, even as the world struggles to come to terms with itself.

## 5. Relationships with a Larger Community

*Schools exist within larger communities. Whatever the arrangements by which students are assigned to a particular school or classroom, the students also come from somewhere and have lives outside of school—with parents, extended families, friends, and informal organizations, be they sports-oriented, faith-based, or less savory (to the adult world). Some of the most effective teachers are not only aware of but also build connections with these informal communities. They get to know parents. They meet their students at sports events. They join in local community organizations. They honor the complex fabric of student’s lives.*

“Ms. Cuffman, do you *walk* to school?...”  
My desire to be immersed in the community  
that surrounds my school comes from my belief  
that schools are valuable community centers  
and that they work best when treated as such.”  
Lydia Cuffman

It happens every year. Usually around the first month or so of school, a student will come into class and ask:

“Ms. Cuffman, do you *walk* to school?”

Invariably, they ask with an incredulous look, having seen me on the sidewalk. They can't quite believe that a real live adult, presumably in possession of a drivers' license, would willingly walk anywhere.

I do have a driver's license and a car. I walk to school because I live four blocks away, having made the intentional choice at the start of my teaching career to be a full-fledged member of my school's community. My desire to be immersed in the community that surrounds my school comes from my belief that schools are valuable community centers and that they work best when treated as such.

I grew up in a school and community like that, and saw how valuable it could be. In Oak Ridge, Tennessee, there was only one public high school. It carried the name of our town, but we always simply referred to it as "the High School." Everybody knew what you meant. The High School was much more than a place where students learned. Located in the center of town, it featured most of the town's main gathering spaces, with its basketball gym, football field, and auditorium. Even the parking lot was the site



*Lydia Cuffman teaches social studies in Redwood City, CA.*

of a regular Saturday morning rummage sale. When I attended freshman orientation, I was nervous, but the school's familiarity calmed me. I had been there many times, performing in choir and dance productions or rolling my eyes at the injustice of being dragged to a sporting event by my parents.

If the building and facilities were community treasures, so were the teachers, many of whom had taught at the High School for most of their careers. They had reputations—for instance, you looked forward to finding out if you could hack it in Mrs. Albert's famously tough but fair calculus class—but they were also part of the community. One of my best friends went to church with our physics teacher. When my English teacher's husband died, our class made a donation in his honor to one of his favorite charities. My Spanish teacher invited our whole class to her home for a home-cooked South American feast. When my health teacher burned down half his garage trying to deep-fry a Thanksgiving turkey (losing his eyebrows in the process), we could easily go survey the damage, because he lived within walking distance of the school. My teachers were also clearly human beings, and the close community we shared allowed me to see that.

All of this interconnectedness helped me feel safe. When I missed a month of school due to illness and seemed on the verge of failing eleventh grade, I knew which counselor could best help me get caught up. She knew which students to recruit to study with me because she knew both who was good at chemistry and who I knew from school and community activities. Knowing the school community and the local community inside-out helped her support me.

These experiences inspired some of my greatest goals for teaching. I teach high school history in Redwood City, California at Sequoia High School. Approximately 25 percent of our school population is undocumented, and over half qualify for free or reduced lunch. We are a school that, statistically, should be failing, and we aren't. As I enter my fourth year of teaching, I am immensely proud of the school where I work. I attribute our success to strong leadership, dedicated and highly-qualified staff, district and local-level monetary support, and a local community that is involved in and supportive of the students and school. While I am tasked with helping 180 students improve their writing and critical thinking skills each

year, I also think I am bound to involve myself in my town, because I know that a community that extends beyond the school walls is a community that helps students.

My students will not have the same experiences that I did. The San Francisco Bay Area is, by nature, in a state of flux. People move around a lot, and my students do not attend a school where all of the teachers have been around for decades. Many of them haven't known since kindergarten which high school they would attend. Yet, even if there is more transition at our school, I think my students can still benefit from community-focused teachers.

My first commitment to the community where my students live is living there myself. I see my students at restaurants and at the movies. I attend their arts performances, and even occasionally make it to a sporting event. I perform with a local theater group that uses our school's stage. I march in the annual Fourth of July Parade, waving at all my students as I see them in the crowd. When my school raises a bond issue to pay for renovations, I walk to the firehouse in my neighborhood to vote on issues that affect me and my students.

Many of my colleagues say they couldn't handle living among their students, and I agree it's probably not for everyone. It is a little embarrassing to be standing in Best Buy, about to try a video game demo that involves frenetically punching the air, only to realize that a small audience of former students stands ready to capture your exploits on their cell phones. There are some drawbacks to having limited anonymity.

But the benefits are so worth it. When I tell a student on Monday how nice it was to say hi to them at the movies on Friday, I am showing that I like them and that they are seen. I am also showing that their community knows them and might notice if they began making bad choices. When I see how excited and surprised my students are to spot me at their football game, I know that they are experiencing the support and safety that comes from knowing adults care about them. When I bring my husband to a fundraising dinner orchestrated by some of my undocumented students, I show them that people are interested in what they are doing and that I am proud of their hard work. I don't work all of the time, but I am a teacher all the time, even while standing in line at the grocery store, and I learned the value of that from my own teachers in the community I grew up in.

**"I learned that being a community teacher meant shedding the notion that I, an outsider, was coming in to provide community service."  
Andrew J. Schiera**

When teachers become what Peter C. Murrell calls a "community teacher," they embody the contradictions and tensions of the schools and communities they work in, often spanning racial, cultural, and socioeconomic differences. As a social studies teacher for three years at University City High School (UCHS) in Philadelphia, I came to understand my role as both insider and outsider, involved in common work to improve our school and our community.

The University of Pennsylvania and UCHS were two blocks from each other, but were demographically miles apart. Like many other Penn undergraduates, I was initially in the "Penn Bubble," which both seals in students and safely seals out West Philadelphia residents. By my second year, though, I had found the Netter Center for Community Partnerships, which connects Penn professors and students to West Philadelphia schools. Unaware of the area's history of eminent domain, gentrification, and uneasy distrust, and of the way I was positioning myself, I began my effort to "provide" community service.

One opportunity came junior year, when I learned of a Teaching American Studies community service class at UCHS. While I had volunteered in two local schools before, I hadn't really imagined whether I might become a teacher. Excited to explore that path, I enrolled in the course.



*AJ Schiera speaks to the final graduating class at UCHS.*

I thought I was coming in to mentor students, but soon found myself being mentored by Mr. Logue and two dozen students in A.P. U.S. History and A.P. U.S. Government. Amir Potts, UCHS's student government president, was in both courses. He began to look up to me for support in his courses and in college applications, and I came to look up to him for the energy and leadership he brought to the school. I remember his taking me on a tour of the whole high school, explaining what it was like to be a student there—the first time I had been invited to see anything but one hallway and the main office. As we walked around, I started to imagine myself there more permanently—and as the year went on, I found

myself spending more and more free time at UCHS. Increasingly, I felt I had a place in the school community beyond showing up twice a week to fulfill my course's requirement. I was transitioning from being an outsider to being an insider, a member of the school community.

Surveying career options my senior year, I realized it was important to me to stay in the community where I had built relationships with staff and students and had begun to imagine myself as a teacher. I had already come to see my teaching identity as rooted in West Philadelphia. So I entered the Penn GSE teacher education program and soon gained a whole new perspective.

Penn GSE taught me about the critical personal work I would need to do. I was not simply becoming a member of UCHS's school community. I was also entering a space fraught with the tension of an elite Ivy League institution having displaced thousands of African Americans to build its Science Center and this very school. Only with sustained community organizing did UCHS come to be a school that served African American families from the neighborhood rather than be part of the Penn bubble. With the support of instructors and mentors, I learned that being a community teacher meant shedding the notion that I, an outsider, was coming in to provide community service. It also meant acknowledging that, as a White middle-class suburban-raised, Ivy-educated teacher, I came with a different identity, different role, and different set of privileges from those of my students and their parents. Uneasily, unevenly, I came to understand I did have a unique place in my school community—one that required me to understand what it offered, and what its limitations were.

In my three years working at UCHS, I sought to play the role that I could play in my school community. The opportunity to help develop Leaders of Change, a summer internship curriculum for UCHS students that focused on problem-based service learning, taught me even more about the school's neighborhood assets. I learned both from the students themselves and from activists at the local community business development center. I saw the students becoming leaders of change, working with community-police relationships, food access, neighborhood beautification, and community stakeholder roundtables. By the



time the summer was over, I felt I had not only become a member of this community, but had a particular stake in school and neighborhood transformation.

With this new motivation, I sought to bring experiences and resources from the community into the social studies classroom. Students in my introductory U.S. history unit learned about historical thinking skills by analyzing old school yearbooks; my A.P. Government students explored the federal bureaucracy's role in forcibly removing residents from the Black Bottom neighborhood to make way for Penn's development. At the same time, I partnered more closely with the Netter Center and Penn GSE, working with undergraduates and student teachers. I felt the power of spanning boundaries to create new connections for our school community, foster critical inquiry, and provide new perspectives.

Sadly, though faculty, the community, and many partners worked tirelessly to improve, UCHS had long struggled to meet citywide requirements for student test scores, and the district began to consider closing the school. As students spoke to the Philadelphia School Reform Commission how such a step would amount to splitting apart a family, I realized how powerful it was to be not just a teacher, but a member of this family. I also learned how powerful the students' voice was; they could speak about the school and the community in ways that I never could. In March 2013, despite coordinated efforts by students, teachers, and community stakeholders, the Commission closed the school by a margin of one vote.

Now, as a doctoral candidate preparing to teach teachers, I strive to find ways to embed the work of teacher education deeply in schools and communities. I hope to share my story about the power of being part of a community, a family, joined in the mission of self-development, academic achievement, and societal advancement. I also hope to help undergraduates and aspiring teachers think critically about how their backgrounds position them differently within their schools. The lessons I learned at UCHS have shaped me as the community teacher and teacher educator I am today.

## 6. Relationships with a Discipline

*In his book The Passionate Teacher, Robert Fried describes the best teachers as passionate people adding, "You can be passionate about your field of knowledge: in love with the poetry of Emily Dickinson or the prose of Marcus Garvey, dazzled by the spiral of DNA or the swirl of van Gogh's cypresses, intrigued by the origins of the Milky Way or the demise of the Soviet empire..." In our look at what made these Fellows the teachers they are, passion for a field of knowledge was the answer that some of them gave—a passion that fueled their day-to-day work and changed the lives of students who were caught up in the same love of learning.*

**"I realized that being a good math teacher does *not* mean explaining clearly, making kids like me, or making math fun. Rather, it means giving students the opportunity to solve problems by themselves from start to finish, to struggle and persevere, and to learn from each other's particular strengths."**  
Brittany Leknes

My whole learning career has been founded on the philosophy that students learn best by talking, debating, and reaching mutual understanding in groups. At my progressive public high school in southern New Hampshire, we sat in groups, engaged in discussions, and completed interdisciplinary projects. My

teachers coached me to work *with* other students, instead of working secretly and individually. Now, as a teacher committed to group learning, I am discovering that the method does not work seamlessly right away in all classrooms, and my daily struggles center on how to make collaborative learning successful for all of my students.

As a University of Pennsylvania undergraduate, I worked in West Philadelphia schools, where the differences from my hometown schools were dismaying. The buildings were decaying, with peeling paint and foul smells. Students sat in rows as teachers read a scripted curriculum that only included math and reading, and eliminated history, science, and recess. The physical and educational inequities of these schools solidified my interest in teaching.

During college summers, I taught math in New Hampshire with a nationwide summer program designed to push academically motivated, low-income middle school students on their pathway to college. This program focused on direct instruction and structure as the best strategies for teaching low-income students. Students copied down notes that I set up on the board as I lectured, and then "thought by themselves" on problems identical to the one that I had just completed. This caused me intense inner turmoil. It was mind-numbing math, sophisticated brainwashing. I needed a change.

**Becoming a successful teacher of group work is a process.... The unexpected will always happen.**

Fortunately, the Stanford Teacher Education Program (STEP), where I did graduate work, pulled me back towards collaborative classrooms. At STEP, I realized that being a good math teacher does *not* mean explaining clearly, making kids like me, or making math fun. Rather, it means giving students the opportunity to solve problems by themselves from start to finish, to struggle and persevere, and to learn from each other's particular strengths as visual thinkers, pattern finders, formula appliers, diagram drawers, and facilitators. One of my cooperating teachers at STEP showed me a successful model of student discourse and investigation-based learning; students listened to each other's ideas and give useful feedback, such as "I really liked how you used color to show your thinking, but I have a question about your calculations."

With this background, I began my first year of teaching ready to change the lives of impressionable middle school math learners by forming groups and feeding them challenging problems. I was in for a big surprise. At the beginning of the year, some classes could not handle the responsibility of working in groups. I tried to give students engaging problems to make them think, but I could not keep their focus long enough even to explain directions. I was asking students to do something they had never been asked to do before: work and think together. Working in groups is difficult, especially for self-conscious or unsure students; it involves feeling vulnerable, asking for help, and offering help to peers. I had to step back and reflect on what my students needed *right then*.

It took experienced colleagues and mentors to show me how to make this model work. My Woodrow Wilson mentor came in to observe a whole painful class. She sat me down, and we discussed all the actions that I had to change. I cried. And then I changed. I increased the structure in my classroom and stopped doing group work, but promised myself I would bring it back when they could handle it. Slowly, things got better. By November, I returned to group problems. By June, my students consistently helped each other.

While group work became more manageable for my classes, I'm still learning how to make it work better. In particular, I've noticed a divide in the way students interact in groups. Some take to it. For example, in

my first year of teaching, I had a quirky, motivated seventh-grade student named Christina. For Christina, I provided a collaborative environment in which she could develop her own mathematical understandings and defend her thinking. Christina tackled every challenge I offered, and enthusiastically explained concepts to classmates, letting others share their thinking.

For other students, the group model has not worked smoothly. Another student from my first year, Alejandra, was a strong-willed and intelligent eighth-grader who struggled with family issues, alcohol and gangs, and fiery anger. I wondered how learning eighth-grade math was relevant to Alejandra, as she seemed preoccupied with staying in school. I wanted to scream when she challenged, and she tested my creativity when I planned lessons that might capture her interest. And she supplied me with moments of pure happiness when she succeeded.

There are inequities here: I spent more time wondering how to help Alejandra, yet I was a much better teacher for Christina, the student who needed me less. I was reminded of a lesson from STEP: There are complex status issues in every classroom, stemming not only from each student's socioeconomic class, race, or language, but also from basic middle-school social perceptions—who is “smart,” who is worth listening to, who is socially isolated, and who is adored.



*Brittany Leknes goes over classroom guidelines.*

In teaching group work, it is my responsibility to find opportunities to elevate each student's status, so that their peers hear them, and to build up their sense of self-worth. I look for those moments as I circle the room. I watched Alejandra closely for moments of mathematical strength that I could highlight, helping bring her into our classroom community. With Christina, it was the opposite: I searched for ways to help her affirm other students' good ideas and contributions.

Becoming a successful teacher of group work is a dynamic process. Since this approach relies on the thoughts and experiences of each batch of students, I will never truly master it. The unexpected will always happen. I will have dozens of years of setting up the norms that ensure that students can work together. I have hundreds more collaborative tasks to design. I have to find thousands more ways to raise my students' status within their groups. But I will keep working on teaching students to collaborate in math, because I have seen what students can do when they work together, and the results are compelling.

**“Nothing pushes me harder than the quest for results... .. I’m talking about helping students overcome whatever is currently blocking their path to success.”**

**Michael Remchuk**

I'm currently going into my third year of teaching math at Walton Middle School in Charlottesville, Virginia. I run a fairly traditional classroom utilizing a lot of direct instruction. About half of each daily

80-minute math class is devoted to developing a resource base for students, including example problems, notes on basic mathematical theory, and analysis of past work. The rest of the time I spend working with kids more individually. Giving students individual attention within a class of 20 or 30 is hectic and exhausting, but I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

Nothing pushes me harder than the quest for results. I'm not talking about hitting the lofty goal of a 100 percent pass rate on state examinations, nor about morphing 50 kids who walk through the door claiming they "don't like math because they're bad at it" into a group of students who eagerly await new math homework. I'm talking about helping students overcome whatever is currently blocking their path to success. Every year I get the pleasure of inheriting a tremendously diverse group of young adults, each one walking into my room with a different past, a different goal, and most importantly, a different set of obstacles.

My first group of students is by far my most memorable. After working in a 6th grade class in the fall I was offered my first solo teaching experience with a group of 8th graders whose teacher left after the fall. They each carried a deeply-held (often negative) belief about math, education, and teachers. This educational belief system was an obstacle for many of my students, but particular for one student—let's call her Sandra. She was one of those students teachers hear about across grade-level lines, having what

**An end-of-year test  
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I strive for little  
successes every day.**

many educators kindly refer to as a strong personality. She was quick to push back when I walked in the door for my first day on the job. "Why are you here? Where's Ms. C?" *Oh great*, I said to myself. *Apparently I am the one that gets to tell them what happened.*

While many of the students were displeased with the change, Sandra was angrier than the rest. Her dis-satisfaction with me only grew over the first few weeks. It felt like 80 percent of her comments began with "Ms. C didn't make us..." Her resistance to homework, punctuality, and preparedness became more than just verbal, and her begrudging attitude evolved into active defiance. Sandra began crumpling assignments into a ball amid claims that she didn't have to listen "because high school was just six months away."

Not surprisingly, Sandra's behavior quickly brought her into the school's discipline system. No teacher wants students to work in fear of reprimand, but I had hopes that outward motivators could help spur inward focus. She was strongly advised to give me and math a chance, and this seemed to be the extrinsic push she needed. Her attention slowly shifted from figuring out the best way to defy directions to the actual lesson at hand. I could tell that she was on the path to success when she took her next test, on which she got a high C. I'd never seen a bigger smile on her face. In a world where C is considered average, she had reached a level completely new to her. It validated her work and gave her a reason to continue, as well as faith in my instruction, and more importantly, in herself.

It wasn't all rainbows and daisies from then on. That was fine with me—I know how difficult it can be to put your game face on every single day, especially in middle school. Then came the big day, the annual Virginia Standards of Learning Exam—perhaps the highest-stakes exam a middle school Virginian will take. To be perfectly honest, it's brutal. After a pep talk and candy bribe Sandra went into the test excited and ready to go. Ninety minutes later she walked out with a smile on her face. "I aced it," she told me, and I prayed that she was right.

She was not. It would have been easy to scoff at her below-basic score, but I tried to view the glass as half-full. Although Sandra's month of solid productivity wasn't enough to counter years of stagnation, she had

been able to taste small amounts of success. In our end-of-year conference I reminded her of her smile after passing her first math test. I showed her the graph of her progress on quizzes and tests, the squiggle slowly inching its way towards the B mark.

I can't claim to know exactly what Sandra was thinking as she left our little powwow smiling, but I like to think that she felt accomplished and confident, with high hopes for her next year. At the end of each year I ask my students to send a message to my future class. Sandra wrote, "Class can be really hard and sometimes is boring. The more you work it becomes easier."

While my success story with Sandra keeps me focused on what's important, my first failure taught me another lesson. I'm not saying that Jacob (not his real name) was a failure, or that he failed, but rather that I failed. I did the one thing a teacher can never do: I left it up to him to be the better person.

Before I started teaching I didn't spend a lot of time imagining the horrible things that kids sometimes say, so when Jacob threw some pretty rough profanity at me, I didn't know how to deal with it. Rather than shuffle the incident over to the discipline system, I engaged, creating a back-and-forth argument. I showed him that I cared about what he said, and he took it upon himself to exploit that "weakness" every day. The class progressed when Jacob wanted us to progress. He brought us to a grinding halt when it pleased him. So I used my only remaining option: I gave up. For the sake of progress I convinced administration to put Jacob in an electronic section for his math placement. We removed him from the room and spent the rest of the year trying to fix the damage the class had suffered. With Sandra I had learned how to insist on discipline, then build back toward success and a working relationship; with Jacob I learned how hard it is to build back when, instead of discipline, a teacher reacts from impulse.

I've also grown to learn that an end-of-year test can't measure a year's worth of student progress, at least not with respect to what matters. Sure, we can measure things like content fluency and logic, but we lose sight of the bigger picture. We lose the building of ethic, the increasing self-efficacy, the development of social relationships. Though difficult to measure, these are the little successes I strive towards each day.

**"I am the teacher I am today  
because I have been pushed to reconsider  
my own understanding of mathematics."  
Cary Robbins Hoste**

I am an early-career math teacher, more experienced than a "novice" yet hesitant to claim "veteran" status. In my few years in the classroom, I have realized that becoming a successful veteran teacher does not mean simply enduring the daily challenges of teaching math (nor does it entail knowing every answer to the difficult questions and dilemmas of classroom instruction). Rather, true veteran teachers know how to effectively observe, inquire about, and reflect on their practice, and they actively seek out the resources they need to refine their craft and support their students' success.

I taught Algebra 1 LEP (Limited English Proficiency) and Geometry at a large, comprehensive high school in Northern California, and I am beginning my fourth year at a bilingual middle school in Boulder, CO, where I have taught sixth-grade math, eighth-grade Pre-Algebra, and Algebra 1. In both of these school settings, I have been privileged to be a member of active and engaged communities of teachers and to receive ongoing support from university mentors and district staff members. My teaching practice is characterized by an emphasis on language instruction and on embracing multiple perspectives and strategies in mathematics. As a firm believer in the value of inclusive, heterogeneous classrooms, I strive to



create a safe learning environment in which all of my students can access and feel challenged by the mathematical concepts and ideas in our curriculum. My lessons often include whole-class discussions, collaborative work in small groups, or individual work at differentiated stations. My primary goal in crafting such interactions with math is for all students to recognize their individual strengths and become confident in their ability to master rich and rigorous mathematics. I never cease to be amazed by the beautiful diversity of my students' individual ideas and approaches to mathematics and by how much their questions, problem-solving strategies, and misconceptions enrich the learning in the classroom.

I am the teacher I am today because I have been pushed to reconsider my own understanding of mathematics. For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a teacher. I have always enjoyed the structure, precision, and satisfying logic of mathematics, and I believed that teaching middle or high school mathematics would mean making that world of mathematics available and desirable to all students. However, in one of my first graduate education classes at Stanford University, I realized that my understanding of what great teaching entails was incomplete. The instructors in the course challenged the students—all budding math teachers—to solve a simple fraction arithmetic problem:

$$\frac{1}{2} \div \frac{2}{3}$$

Nearly all of us inverted the divisor and multiplied  $1/2 \times 3/2$ , arriving at the correct answer:  $3/4$ . Then, they asked us *how* our algorithms worked and *why*  $3/4$  was the answer. For several minutes, the group—16 math and engineering majors from top universities across the nation—was stumped, and it was not until we started drawing pictures, sharing our ideas, and rethinking the *meaning* of division that we were able to collectively make sense of our solution.

When we first learn to divide, we consider division as a means of grouping. For example, when posed with the problem  $8 \div 2$ , students might take 8 marbles and split them into 2 groups, revealing the correct answer: 4. However, with the non-integer division problem that we were presented, I struggled to apply the same logic: *What does it mean to split  $1/2$  into  $2/3$  of a group?* Then, we experienced a collective “ah ha” moment when one of our fellow students suggested we try to think about division in a different manner.



*Cary Hoste with her students*

Instead of treating the divisor as the *number of groups*, she wondered aloud if we could consider it as the *size of the groups*. So, in the problem  $8 \div 2$ , one might ask how many groups of size 2 fit into 8. Likewise, we could ask how many  $2/3$ -size pieces fit into a  $1/2$ -size piece. With this shift in perspective, we could suddenly model the problem with pictures and demonstrate that it takes  $3/4$  of a  $2/3$ -size piece to make  $1/2$ .

Before experiences like these, I would have been skeptical if someone had told me that I, a student who savored the rigor and complexity of calculus, could be genuinely excited about simple fraction division. Yet, this moment in my graduate studies was the one of the first of many that allowed me to understand that teaching math would mean relearning math.

My mentors and colleagues have challenged me to always ask *why* something works, to take the perspective of so many students for whom mathematical concepts and logic seem foreign and unsatisfying. It only took one teacher-candidate to speak up for the rest of our cohort to adapt to a more productive perspective on fraction division. In my practice, I use experiences like these as a reminder to

craft lessons in which all students engage with mathematics, model their ideas, and debate their strategies and solutions in ways that feel safe, exciting, and rewarding. The more I perceive myself as an ongoing learner of mathematics, the better I am able to help my students adopt active roles as learners with creative ideas and valuable strengths to contribute.

Just as I was pushed to reconsider my understanding of math through collaborative inquiry in my graduate program, I strive for my students to engage with math and learn from each other's diverse perspectives and approaches to math. An inspiring phrase that I copied from a poster in the math office during my student teaching year and that I share with students as my "class motto" has been immensely helpful in guiding my practice: *Mistakes are expected, inspected, and respected*. In asking students to explore mathematics and explain their reasoning, mistakes and misconceptions are bound to appear, and instead of seeing errors as blemishes, I try to build a classroom community that can embrace mistakes and use them as helpful learning tools. Some student mistakes are more than simple slips of the tongue, and when addressed properly, they can lead to rich conversations and interesting discoveries about what students understand about math.

In one of my eighth-grade classes last year, we engaged in a discussion about how to use patterns to make predictions. We had been studying multiple representations of patterns for several weeks and were



examining this tricky pattern:

I posed the question to the class, "Could Figure 100 have 300 rods?" One eager student volunteered that Figure 100 would have 400 rods, not 300, since Figure 1 had 4 rods. His use of proportional reasoning was a common mistake that many students make as they learn to generalize linear trends, and it was a misconception I was hoping would emerge in our discussion. Instead of correcting the student, I asked the class if anyone agreed with him, or if anyone disagreed but understood his reasoning. Many hands went up and multiple students paraphrased the first student's thinking and then attempted to explain how their ideas differed. The math debate was impressive, yet for me the most remarkable part of the discussion was that the student who voiced the misconception was labeled as "gifted" and several of the students who were respectfully challenging his assertion were in ESL and Special Education programs. By valuing and exploring mistakes, my students and I were able to create a classroom environment that was safe and inviting for all students to actively take part in the learning. The field of mathematics is not simply a set of facts and routines to be memorized; when my students grasp that their creativity, their instincts, and even their errors contribute to a more real and interesting world of math, their inhibitions disappear and they are able to interact and learn as true mathematical thinkers.

I am the teacher I am today because I continue to relearn mathematics alongside my students, using their ideas, instincts, and strengths to reconstruct the discipline as a creative pursuit in numeric reasoning and sensemaking. As I begin my fifth year in my own classroom, I am excited to continue learning from my students and my peers and to refine my craft for years to come.

## 7. Summing Up: Successful Teachers are the Products of a Lifelong Series of Relationships

*In all of the stories above, the teachers involved report multiple kinds of important relationships. While some stories start with the influence of today's students, others with the influence of mentors or peers, and others with the teacher's own love of the discipline, other relationships quickly come into the picture. Lydia Cuffman walks to school because she values her connections to community, but this quickly comes back to a focus on her students. Kirstin Milks begins with a focus on helping her students become co-adventurers in learning science, but this is possible because of her love of, and knowledge of her discipline. Successful teachers link what they learn from their own family, their own education, and their own peer support systems with their connections to a school, a community, a discipline, and to individual students.*

**"When I first thought about the factors that make me the teacher who I am today, names of people ran through my mind... mentors, peers, and kids. Each of these groups has contributed to the teacher who I am today in different ways."**

**Margaret Walton**

I teach pre-calculus and trigonometry. My goal is to teach students to build their math skills through logical reasoning based on prior knowledge. I do this by constantly questioning students about how they answer problems and why their answers are correct. I use proofs when possible to demonstrate that one can come to new conclusions based on previously known facts. I emphasize that, just like in an English or history class, solving a math problem means drawing a conclusion and providing logical evidence to support it. In the case of math, the evidence is the work one provides to find the answer to the problem. I am motivated each year to make this messaging more apparent and convincing to my students, and make changes to my class with that in mind.

My in-class demeanor can be characterized as demonstrating enthusiasm for academics (my students would call this "nerdy,") accompanied by a self-deprecating sense of humor. I try to let my students see my personality as much as possible. I occasionally tie my obsession with Michigan State sports into my lessons, or tell anecdotes of my own high school and college experiences with the hope that this teaches my students the importance of academic habits, like grit or curiosity. My ultimate goal is to maintain an environment that is welcoming and safe, with students willing to ask questions and test ideas. I hope to make even the most reticent of students confident in their math ability and willing to share in class.

When I first thought about the factors that make me the teacher who I am today, names of people ran through my mind. I realized that these people fell into three distinct categories: mentors, peers, and kids. Each of these groups has contributed to the teacher who I am today in different ways.

Early in my teaching career I realized that I was going to make mistakes. My mentors taught me how to turn those mistakes into assets. Sasha Rehm, one such mentor, is my instructional coach through the Curry School's *My Teaching Partner* program. I send her videos of my classes; she watches and provides prompts to which I respond; and, finally, we have a conference call about the responses.

Sasha has taught me how to reflect on my instructional methods by pointing out areas of strength and weakness that I do not notice in the moment of the lesson. For example, at the beginning of my student teaching I struggled with transitions. In a prompt, Sasha wrote, "Transitions between activities need some work. As you prepare to 'switch gears,' ask yourself: What expectations do I have for my students (behavior, skills, roles, etc.)? How can I clearly communicate those expectations?" After reading these comments, I realized that I was not explicit and detailed about how I wanted students to move from one activity to another, and students were confused about what to do. We discussed the issue, and I made changes to tighten my transitions. I now take time to reflect on my daily lessons and think about how I can improve.

As I moved into my first year of teaching I gained another mentor, Gillian Conner. Gillian, a vice principal at KIPP DC: College Preparatory—the school where I still teach—taught me the value of trial, error and revision.

My sixth period in my first year of teaching was a challenge. The class atmosphere was often negative, with students insulting each other for wrong answers or for asking questions. This made asking questions and expecting class participation difficult for me. During one of our meetings I told Gillian about a participation system that I had developed to give students points for positive contributions to class and to remove points for negative comments and interactions. Gillian encouraged me to test the idea—but the implementation was a disaster. My students did not take the system seriously and it was too complicated for me to track. Subsequent meetings with Gillian made me think about why students responded in a negative way and what I could do to change their behavior. I eventually developed a participation plan that works, based completely on positive reinforcement, student choice, and confidence-building. Though my initial plan was unsuccessful, it was an important step in building an effective procedure. Gillian taught me that it is important to take risks, then make changes based directly on student behavior and needs.



My most innovative teaching peer, Marissa Sens, is the coordinator in math special education for KIPP DC College Prep. Marissa uses her creativity to reach students who do not always learn math in traditional ways. From her I learned to differentiate.

When Marissa and I co-taught in my first year, we had a student with an individual education plan in math who struggled to take notes. Through our formal special education meetings Marissa and I devised a routine of printing out PowerPoint slides that corresponded to the notes. The student used the slides as a guide, became more engaged in class, took better notes, and passed. Marissa and I found this intervention so effective that we started using it with general education students when the material covered lent itself to using PowerPoint slides. Though Marissa and I no longer co-teach, we still bounce ideas off of one another, even informally, outside of work. Marissa started using my participation system, and I continue to get new ideas from her as well. An inventive teacher reaches more students, and I attribute my inventiveness to my fellow teachers.

Ultimately, I became a teacher because I wanted to contribute to students' success beyond the classroom. One student from my first year of teaching, Courtney, showed me how much I would come to value that contribution. Courtney was a senior who struggled with reading comprehension and writing. Despite being a good student with grit and focus, she was failing U.S. Government and English. She excelled at math, however, and came to my room after school because it was a place where she felt confident. She often asked me to help her with her English and government work. She struggled to write complex sentences and comprehend the advanced material read in 12th grade classes.

At first, it seemed Courtney might not overcome her obstacles, and I sometimes felt incompetent to help. However, she improved because of her tenacity. One of her most significant achievements was writing an eight-page research paper about her neighborhood as an end-of-the-year project. She spent hours poring over primary source materials, wrote and re-wrote, and finally produced a thoughtful paper that chronicled the neighborhood's evolution. Though she initially viewed the paper as an impossible task, she completed it and gained confidence because she had the support of school staff. Courtney graduated; now in her second year of nursing school, she is learning an important profession and will make a positive impact on those around her. Watching Courtney grow and overcome challenges gave me a new optimism about my students. It made me understand each student's potential, and how important it is to support their learning in any way possible. Courtney made me an optimistic teacher. I am confident that every student can achieve, and it is my responsibility to provide guidance as they navigate the path to that success.

Those who I highlighted here are only several of the many people who made me the thoughtful, risk-taking, resourceful, and hopeful teacher I am today. The list of names will grow as I continue to learn as a teacher. I am grateful for each person on the list, and I strive to make it onto their lists as well.

"I was hit with the fantastic idea—  
I could have the *students* set up the aquarium!  
Why waste the opportunity to nurture  
a vested interest...?"  
Amanda Webb

This year marks the beginning of my second year of teaching. With all of the first-year madness out of the way, I have launched into a few of my dream projects and lesson ideas for students this year. The big kahuna is the addition of an aquarium that the students will set up from scratch. They may make some mistakes. In fact, I hope they will, because that's how I learned to learn—to do something for yourself, to fail, and to try again—and helping students learn that habit of mind is now the motivating force behind my teaching practice.

**That's how I learned  
to learn—to do  
something for  
yourself, to fail, and  
to try again.**

This project, affectionately called FIC (Fish in the Classroom) was a brainstorm that hit me while I was researching aquarium maintenance this summer. I inherited a tank with the full gamut of accoutrements from a retiring colleague last year. All summer, I envisioned the "oooohs" and "ahhhhs" as my students entered my room and were welcomed by my stunning aquarium. But as I delved into "Aquariums for Dummies" over the summer, I was hit with the fantastic idea—I could have the *students* set up

the aquarium! Why waste the opportunity to nurture a vested interest in the nitrogen cycle? The common aquarium practice known as "cycling" establishes bacterial colonies that successively convert harmful ammonia excreted by aquarium inhabitants (mainly fish) into nitrite (still harmful), and then nitrate (less



harmful) which can be taken up by plants in a healthy tank. I dreamed I could develop lesson plans to allow students to perform water quality tests, track the nitrogen conversion cycle as it developed in the tank, and add plants. Finally, when they had worked together to create a stable mini-ecosystem, I could reward them with a tank full of beautiful fish.

I believe the FIC project is representative of my teaching style. Obviously, I was excited to get an aquarium set up for my students. I had one as a child, and experimented on many unfortunate aquatic victims while trying to develop a properly established cycling tank. I think back to my nine-year old self, and remember the days of tears shed over belly-up fish in cloudy water. I think of the books my parents brought me, and my discussions with the local pet storeowner who knew me by name. Eventually, I earned a crystal clear tank that mesmerized me with its various healthy inhabitants, busily making their aquatic living.

As I sit and consider why in the world I would embark on such an intense, delicate, and potentially very time-consuming endeavor with 140 teenagers, I remember the frustration and joy of my tank, and the incredible amount of valuable life experience that blossomed from the endeavor. My mother watched me fail, and calmly stood by me with her checkbook at the pet store while I tried again and again. She allowed me to try new things, even if there was a chance I'd fail. When I approached her and asked for a pet snake at age 11, she was reluctant. Eventually, she gave her approval in the form of, "you can have one if you can tell me how to take care of it." I researched my little tail off, fighting for computer time with my three siblings. When I presented my case, she nudged me up to the reptile store owner and said, "tell him what you know." She proudly stood off to the side while I explained basics of cold-blooded animal keeping, using words like "temperature gradient" and "regulation." I came home with a Royal Python named Norman.

In my school years, I was drawn to my science teachers. Looking back now, they reminded me of my mom's "try it out" parenting style. If I had a question, there was usually a definitive answer that could be found with some persistence and direction from the teacher. I loved it. Things could be, "figured out." I remember Mrs. Bolt, in 7th grade science, explaining how salt makes water boil faster, but salted water does not cook food more quickly. I raised my hand, and voiced my thoughts aloud: "so it boils faster, but not hotter?" The shocked look on her face, and enthusiastic "YES, EXACTLY" were so rewarding to me. We then did a simple experiment that demonstrated the concept of boiling point. It was incredibly validating, and I was engaged. I never got those feelings from English or Art.



*Top: Amanda Webb's students inspect trout eggs for fungus. Bottom: The FIC fish tank, hatching brook trout to return to Virginia streams.*

Fast forward to high school, and the famed Mr. Orlinsky boggled my mind regularly in AP Biology. He was a short, balding man who wore a lab coat and a bow-tie daily (even to dressy school events). He once gave our class a box of apparent primate skulls with the simple direction to, "organize them." We spent the better part of an hour organizing them into what we thought was a plausible evolutionary line while he sat nearby. When we finished, he approached, and asked poignantly, "Why does it have to be a straight line?" and moved our skulls into a branched cladogram showing related origin, but not direct linear evolution. We were stunned. Once again, we had been allowed to try, struggle, and fail, but from that day forward, I could explain the concepts of evolution without falling into the common misconceptions of linear evolution, or forward thought in natural selection (the idea that organisms want or need some characteristic, like legs, so they "grow" them).

Now, as I join the ranks of those who have chosen to pass their passion and knowledge down to our youth, one particular colleague has engulfed me with her quirky enthusiasm for teaching biology, and helped me to blossom into the teacher I am today. I visited my school before the start of my first year, and was instantly fascinated by my neighbor, Mrs. Coleman. This earthy woman, dressed as if she might take off on a hike at any moment, stood in a room full of various quirky inhabitants. While she introduced herself, she was simultaneously making sandwiches for students and handing out AP summer assignments. The students adored her. Julie Coleman pulled me right in, and I soon found myself studying over 30 Virginia native bird calls in preparation for a camping trip where Julie and I would take twenty students to a wildlife preserve for the weekend.

Mrs. Coleman has created a classroom culture in which students enjoy the interconnectedness of all of the fascinating things on this great earth. Her classroom is like a vortex, drawing in students from all backgrounds, and uniting them in one pursuit: the pure pleasure of learning about the outdoors. She sucked me in, too, and like magic, field trips, canoe trips, excursions and learning opportunities expanded exponentially for me and my students. Under Julie's wing, I have grown into a confident teacher who checked over the first aid kit and provisions in my hiking pack, took a deep breath, and led 20 students out into the wilderness. She trusted me to get out there, and provided the opportunity for me to try. Because I met this charismatic woman, every ounce of teaching talent I have is put to use.

It was my mom, who is really my very first teacher, who hooked me in to science as a child. After many more engaging science teachers and years of study, I myself became a teacher. Now, as I challenge students to experiment and grow in my very own classroom, it is none other than the humble teacher who inspires me to use all of the passion and encouragement I can muster. My journey to the classroom began with a teacher, and here I am, still inspired by a teacher.

*Created in 2007, the Leonore Annenberg-Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowship was designed to serve as the equivalent of a national "Rhodes Scholarship" for teaching. Working with Stanford University, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation provided \$30,000 stipends for exceptionally able candidates to complete a yearlong master's degree program. In exchange, the teacher candidates agreed to teach for three years in high-need secondary schools across the country. Ultimately, just over 100 WW-Annenberg Fellows were named.*

*The Leonore Annenberg Teaching Fellowship was funded through grants from the Annenberg Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York. It served as the basis for the Woodrow Wilson Foundation's successful Teaching Fellowship program, which now operates in five states (Georgia, Indiana, Michigan, New Jersey, and Ohio), working in partnership with 28 universities.*



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