

# A LIFE OF TEACHING: REFLECTIONS FROM TEACHERS IN AN INQUIRY GROUP

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*This paper is presented in three voices and is coded as such through the use of color.*

"What keeps teachers going in spite of everything?" This question has been at the center of my work for the past three years. Whenever I ask it, teachers are immediately drawn to it because they instinctively understand what I mean by "in spite of everything." In my work, I have been particularly intrigued with why talented teachers who work with students of racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse backgrounds remain committed to teaching. After all, so many of the students they teach have become "throw-away children," young people who have been largely abandoned by schools and society. Veteran teachers especially have experienced the "in spite of everything" part for many years, and they might well ask themselves why they go in day after day to a job with few monetary rewards, little respect for their professionalism, and other difficult conditions. But they stay at it. These are the teachers who fascinate me, and who I wanted to study. These teachers demonstrate an incredible resilience and dedication - in spite of everything. Why?

This is a timely question for many reasons. For one, as we all know, the dropout rate of new teachers is extraordinarily high. Moreover, some of the most talented teachers are wooed away by private schools or by public schools in suburban areas that are much better financed than urban schools. Yet our urban schools are in dire need of excellent teachers, and we need to find ways to attract and keep these teachers in the schools that need them most. Our students in urban schools deserve no less, but they frequently are taught by the most inexperienced and least well-prepared teachers. Although these new teachers may bring with them a wealth of good intentions and great reserves of enthusiasm, they often are lost when it comes to how best to teach the students in their charge. Thus, the question of what we can learn from excellent teachers who stay the course becomes even more significant.

In what follows, Karen Gelzinis, Sonie Felix and I will provide some answers to this question. Before we do, however, I want to set the stage for the work we did, and explain why we did it and how. Then we'll explore some of the lessons we uncovered in our work together, and Sonie and Karen will share some of their perspectives. We'll also share the thoughts of a number of other teachers who participated in the project.

## **Setting the Context**

Although many new teachers enter the profession each year with great zeal and idealism, these quickly evaporate for many of them. Teacher retention is a troubling problem, one that has been with us for a long time, and it is getting worse. When I began teaching in 1966 in a junior high school in Ocean Hill-Brownville in Brooklyn, the principal told us at our first staff meeting that each year there was a 50% turnover rate at this school. Granted, this is not the case in every urban school, but unfortunately it is not that unusual. In 1963, one study reported that the annual net loss of teachers was 8% (Stinnett, 1970). Recent data confirm the continuing high rate of teacher turnover: more teachers leave during the first three years of teaching than at any time afterward, and the rate has been increasing (NCES, 2000; Boser, 2000). Even more disturbing is the fact that one in five new teachers will leave the profession within the first three years (Henke, Chen, & Geis, 2000). The situation is much worse in urban schools: nearly half of all new teachers in urban public schools quit within five years (Haberman, 1995). Not all of these teachers leave forever, of course; eventually some return to teaching. But the scope of these numbers is staggering because it points to a major problem in the profession. Moreover, projections are that by 2009 about 2 million new teachers will be needed for our public schools (Hussar, 1999).

It is a truism that teachers today need to contend with more problems than ever. This is so especially in economically strapped urban areas, where both students and teachers may experience schools as harsh places that would be unrecognizable to those who taught just twenty or thirty years ago, or even to those

who teach in more privileged settings. Public urban schools have become places where guards and metal detectors keep the peace, where bathrooms are unusable; where the dropout rate among some populations are worse than ever; where there is an "anything goes" mentality that allows young men to publicly insult young women; where racial and other kinds of epithets fly freely; and where students are more segregated by race and social class than ever before. Even the dream that many fought for during the civil rights movement of integrated, harmonious schools where all students might get an equal chance to learn is far from realized: a recent report on resegregation concluded that U.S. public schools are more segregated now than at any time in the past three decades, especially isolating African American and Latino youths by race, ethnicity, and social class (Orfield & Yun, 1999). Many of the youngsters who attend urban schools also may experience conditions that make learning a challenge, conditions including tough family situations, poor health and nutrition, and other social ills brought on by poverty and hopelessness. Add to this the continuing racism - both individual and institutional - in our society and schools, and we can understand how both students and teachers are demoralized by schools. It is little wonder that teachers leave and students drop out.

Another vexing problem is that most teachers have had little preparation in their teacher education programs to help them teach in urban schools. Most teachers are White, middle-class, and monolingual English-speakers, and many have had little or no experience with or training about the various differences - cultural, racial/ethnic, linguistic, and social - that their students represent. Consequently, many teachers who work in urban public schools know little about their students, and only some openly admit needing help to learn more (Olsen, 1991; Howard, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Many stumble and make mistakes; some leave and end up blaming the children or their families.

Yet children in urban areas have a right to expect a lot more from public schools. Although public education has often proclaimed itself to be "the great equalizer," this has certainly not been the case for many students in the past; it is even further from reality today. Urban public schools today are more different from suburban schools in terms of funding and other resources than at any other time in the past, as so graphically revealed by Jonathan Kozol (1991) over a decade ago. In addition, the growing standardization - most clearly visible through ubiquitous high-stakes testing throughout the country - has become the major means by which schools articulate the belief that "all students can learn" (McNeil, 2000; Miner & Swope, 2000). In the meantime, the curriculum, pedagogy, disciplinary policies, counseling practices, lack of diversity among teaching and administrative personnel, and other institutional arrangements, go largely unexamined.

In spite of all these problems, I still believe that public schools are the best hope for realizing our shared ideals of education in a democratic society. But democracy is not at the reach of all Americans, especially those who live in poverty and who differ from the majority in race, ethnicity, language, and social class. More than ever, we cannot afford to abandon the public schools that serve these youngsters. If we do, there will be grim results both for the children who attend public schools and for our society. That is, if schools can no longer serve the children who most need an excellent and high quality public education, how can we claim that education is the best way to alleviate poverty and despair? And what does it mean for our democracy if our public schools fail?

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

In the spring of 1999, I undertook a project to investigate what I began calling my "burning question," that is, "What keeps teachers going - in spite of everything?" This question led me to explore the possibility of engaging in dialogue with veteran teachers in urban schools. Other than my burning question, I didn't have specific research tools or interview questions when I began this project; I just wanted to talk with teachers, to have conversations with them about this and other important questions that might be on their minds. I decided to initiate an Inquiry Group. I began by asking Ceronne Daly, the Coordinator of High School Restructuring for the Boston Public Schools, to assist me in setting up the Inquiry Group. With Ceronne's guidance and support, we recruited a small group of high school teachers who were reflective, concerned about the essential question I had posed, willing to engage in conversation about it, and highly respected by peers and supervisors as excellent teachers of diverse student populations. At the time, I was a Senior Fellow in Urban Education with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. Because of my AISR Fellowship, I had funds to pay for books, snacks, an all-day retreat and

substitute teachers for that day, and a small stipend at the end of our year together. In addition, the Boston Public Schools provided an Inquiry Group grant - also facilitated through the efforts of Ceronne Daly - and we used those funds for another modest stipend for each teacher.

Of the twelve teachers who had indicated an interest in participating in the Inquiry Group, eight remained with the project for its duration. Most of them attended all of our meetings, and they were active participants throughout the year. They are a phenomenal group of educators: they have a passion for teaching and for their subject area; many have won awards and other recognition for their exemplary teaching; moreover, they are unapologetic about loving their students and holding them to rigorous standards. Most have been teaching for more than 20 years although two had been in the system for fewer than 10 years. They teach a variety of subjects: algebra, English, African American History, and two are bilingual teachers in Cape Verdean Crioulo and Spanish. The teachers in the group were Stephen Gordon, Junia Yearwood, Ambrizeth Lima, Judith Baker, Claudia Bell, and Sonie Felix and Karen Gelzinis, my co-presenters today.

When I began working with the group, I had made it clear that I could meet with them for only a year (it was a long drive to Boston, and I knew I wouldn't have the support from the Annenberg Fellowship the following year). We met throughout the 1999-2000 school year, concluding our year with an all-day retreat in May. We met for two hours at a time (at least, that was our intention, although we frequently stayed for an hour more) at one of the high schools where one or more of the teachers worked. We wrote together, or separately, and from time to time I asked them to consider particular questions. We talked at length about the books we read together (we started with my latest book at the time, *The Light in Their Eyes*; we also read *I Won't Learn From You' and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment* by Herb Kohl, and *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*, a posthumous book by Paulo Freire published in 1998). Some of the teachers shared their students' work; at other times, they presented the results of their own research questions, what we called "burning questions," determined after about three months of meeting. We audiotaped and transcribed our meetings, and this gave me a rich source of data from which to draw when I began putting together the book that is a result of our work (*What Keeps Teachers Going In Spite Of Everything?* to be published by Teachers College Press later this year). Finally, we sometimes emailed one another, and on one occasion I interviewed a group of teachers at Karen Gelzinis and Junia Yearwood's school. The transcripts of the emails and interview also became part of the data.

First, Karen and Sonie explain what brought them to the Inquiry Group.

*Karen Gelzinis*

Each year, as our local PBS station conducts its fundraising drive, it rebroadcasts Bill Moyers' interviews with the late Joseph Campbell in the series, *The Power of Myth*. At one point, Moyers asks Campbell if he ever has this sense, when he's following his "bliss, ... of being helped by hidden hands." Campbell replies:

All the time. It is miraculous ...if you do follow your bliss you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life you ought to be living is the one you are living. When you can see that, you begin to meet people who are in the field of your bliss, and they open the doors to you. I say, follow your bliss and don't be afraid, and doors will open where you didn't know they were going to be.

My involvement with inquiry groups during the past five years has been about taking those steps to go through doors that have presented themselves to me, when, with all the pressures to go to workshops on new standards, new practices, new practices, and on and on.... I didn't really have time to go through another door... and yet, the people who were inviting me in were so appealing in what they had to offer, I really had no choice, but to go.

Several years ago, a colleague, Junia Yearwood, who was also involved in Sonia's project, had had it with all the imposed professional development and decided to start a reading/inquiry group at school. The group would read such books as *Other People's Children* (Lisa Delpit), *Literacy with an Attitude* (Patrick Finn) and *Inside City Schools* (Freedman, Simons, Kalnin, Casareno, and the M-Class Teams, of which Junia had been a part, foreword by Sonia Nieto). There are certain people in school buildings that one

does not say "no" to Junia is one of them. "We are going to do this for US," she said, "and we'll have food and good conversations, and we'll talk about what we do in our classrooms with our students... and perhaps we'll even write about it." Well, we did a great deal of talking, but we never wrote as much as Junia would have liked.

After that, I encountered other "doors." Steve Gordon, another teacher involved in Sonia's project, was assigned to several high schools to encourage teachers to investigate their own burning questions. Junia, who had known Steve from the Boston Writing Project, encouraged her reading group to get involved ... and I did. Steve visited my class and I told him what I saw, and he acted as another pair of eyes so that I could explore my questions with someone who was actually looking at the same students with whom I was working. And it was wonderful; again, time-consuming, but wonderful.

The following summer, at Steve and Junia's urging, I enrolled in a Boston Writing Project course, which involved using "writing to learn." During that summer, I found that I was learning as much about myself, as teacher, as I was about using writing in my classroom.

Then, in June, 1999 (yes, June, when one is trying to get the kids through those last few weeks, you're preparing them for exams, you're dismantling and packing up your entire classroom because the school is being used for summer school), I received a letter from Ceronne Daly, who was in charge of the district's high school restructuring efforts, inviting me to a meeting to hear about an inquiry group to be started in the coming Fall and which was going to be led by Sonia Nieto, a professor at UMass Amherst. Several other teachers from my school had also been invited which led to the usual: "Are you going to go?" "I have so much to do, but if you're going..." So on June 22, I walked into another opened door. Inside I saw a number of teachers with whom I had had various contacts through my 20 plus years in the Boston Public Schools. Surely, there were invisible hands at work.

Sonia was introduced to us. The essential question was introduced to us: What political, philosophical, cultural, and academic theories inform and sustain teachers' beliefs and practices? Quite a question for a late afternoon in late June. But the more Sonia spoke, the more we learned that she was really interested in us - in teachers - and what kept us going so that we could do the work that needed to be done in our classrooms. Wow! Someone wanted to listen to what we had to say.

And so I walked through another door. And here I am with Sonie, my former student, colleague, and inquiry group member, and with Sonia, the most recent set of invisible hands.

*Sonie Felix*

Three years ago I got the opportunity to join an inquiry group. My first impression of the idea was "oh no, not another group about how horrible our students are." I was in my fifth year of teaching and I had seen and participated in my share of teacher groups where the topics focused on student bashing and the hopelessness that seemed to infest our system. It seemed as if these feelings were contagious and were quickly spreading throughout the Boston Public Schools. Although I knew that these feelings were valid, I refused to succumb to the hopelessness and to the idea that our students could not succeed. I wanted to fight back. I wanted to be active. After all, I was a product of the system and knew firsthand how it felt to have teachers who didn't believe in you.

When I joined "The Light in Their Eyes" inquiry group, I had finally found a place where I could address the deadly demons of teaching. The group was composed of veteran teachers who were at different stages in their journey and who were as passionate and dedicated to the struggle as I was. It was like entering a place of the unknown with colleagues who traveled the road before and who had come out of the journey with more passion and commitment to inspire students. To my amazement, the discussions were infused with passion and a motivation to bring about change. We addressed issues that somehow were put on the "back burner" because of the testing frenzy that took over the Boston Public Schools. The group members were adamant about making sure that the meetings were productive to our professional growth and honest about the issues we faced as professionals. The group became a support system (the AA of teaching) where we could go and discuss/research our questions about teaching and learning.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

Our work in the Inquiry Group was informed by several theories. One such theory, derived from the work of such scholars as Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1993; 1999) and others who have worked with teachers in such groups (Clanindin *et al*, 1993; Freedman *et al*, 1999; Witherall & Noddings, 1991) is that inquiry needs to be a vital part of teachers' work. The scholarship of these authors has emphasized the capability, and indeed the responsibility, that teachers have as researchers. It has also described the transformative role research and inquiry in general can have on teachers' intellectual development and practice. In spite of the dizzying number of mandates teachers need to contend with - mandates that seem to be based on the notion that teachers are simply technicians who need to apply prescribed treatments and pre-packaged programs to their students - our shared view is that teachers are above all intellectual workers, a point articulated most forcefully by Henry Giroux over a decade ago (1988).

One of the books we read, as I mentioned previously, was Paulo Freire's *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters To Those Who Dare Teach* (1998). I selected this book and suggested it to the teachers because I thought the teachers would find Freire's (1970, 1998) ideas compelling. For example, I thought his idea of contrasting what he called "banking" education - where knowledge is simply "deposited" in learners' minds - and "liberating" education - where knowledge is arrived at through dialogue and negotiation - would be a powerful way both to understand and to challenge current calls for standardization and compliance. Although we didn't read his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) as a group, these ideas certainly were evident in our discussions. In his newest book containing letters to teachers, Freire is firm in his conviction that education is most effective when it is based on dialogue and respect. This is true not only in elementary and secondary classrooms, but in all learning.

Through our work, we also realized that teachers are often treated as if their knowledge is of little consequence. University researchers share the blame for perpetuating this perception: we go into classrooms and schools, do research on children and teachers, and then report our findings with scant recognition of teachers and little appreciation for the research they do every day in their classrooms. As the university researcher in this work, I was very aware of this legacy and I consciously tried to offset it. I worked hard to be both a learner and a teacher; I tried to listen when listening was called for, and to speak when it seemed warranted. This wasn't always easy. Sometimes, for example, the teachers wanted me to take control, to set the agenda, or to tell them what to do. I resisted this because I thought our learning would be most meaningful if it was co-constructed. I didn't agree with everything that was said, and at times I became frustrated that we weren't progressing as I thought we should. I'm certain the others at times felt the same way. But I also had great hope in the process because I believe that teachers' intellectual capacities need to be trusted. I also believe in the process of dialogue, because as frustrating as it can be, I knew that ultimately it could lead to ideas that might change our teaching practices.

An understanding of multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy also became important for us because most of the Inquiry Group teachers work in very diverse schools populated by African American, Cape Verdean, Haitian, Puerto Rican, Dominican, African, and European American students, among others. Issues of difference and discrimination came up in many of our conversations, and teachers often expressed the view that unless they understood, respected, and honored their students' identities, they could never hope to become their teachers in any meaningful way. As a result, the work of scholars in these fields also informed our discussions (Banks & Banks, 2001; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999).

Finally, our work is influenced by research on school improvement that refuses to accept simple answers to complex questions, and that honors teachers' capacities to teach and do it well if given the resources and support. Here, the work of Linda Darling-Hammond (1997), and that of Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (1998), among others, comes to mind.

## Themes

To analyze the data we generated through our audiotaped meetings as well as through the teachers' writings, I used a thematic approach (Spradley, 1980). To determine the major findings of the research, I listened to the tapes and developed themes that came up frequently in our talk and writing. I want to make it clear, however, that I alone am responsible for selecting the themes. Therefore, any shortcomings in this analysis are strictly mine. Nevertheless, I believe I captured the essence of our work through the

themes I selected because the participants have since reviewed them and agreed with my conclusions. Also, on our last day together as a group (the retreat in May 2000), I presented the themes. The teachers were fascinated with what the transcripts had revealed and, although some have since made minor revisions to their particular writing pieces, nobody has disagreed with the findings. I also want to stress that what keeps some teachers going is not what keeps others going. I knew there would be no single or simple answer to my question, and there wasn't. But there were a series of answers that I think can help us reframe the conversation about teacher preparation and professional development.

After listening to the audiotapes many times, and after reading over teachers' words and my own, I came up with the following characteristics of teaching that seem to keep teachers in the Inquiry Group (and I believe they are true for many other teachers) going in spite of everything. They are:

- Teaching as evolution;
- Teaching as autobiography;
- Teaching as love
- Teaching as hope and possibility
- Teaching as anger and desperation
- Teaching as intellectual work
- Teaching as democratic practice, and
- Teaching as shaping the future.

Some of these themes may seem contradictory, and perhaps they are. But they provide powerful testimony to the different forces that keep teachers in the profession. In this paper, we review three of these themes. The first is: Teaching as Hope and Possibility.

### **Hope and Possibility**

Hope is at the very essence of teaching. In all my years of working with teachers, I have found that hope is perhaps the one quality that all good teachers share. Whether they teach in pre-school or college, whether they teach math or art, good teachers have an abiding faith in the promise of education. This was also true of the teachers in the Inquiry Group: in spite of anger and impatience (we'll turn to these later) or the level of frustration and exhaustion that they experienced, most remained in teaching, many for over twenty years, because of hope. Hope is manifested in many ways: hope in the promise of public education and in their students; faith in their own abilities as teachers; confidence in trusted colleagues and new teachers.

During the group interview I had with about six teachers at the school where Karen works, one of the veteran teachers, Darryl, explained that a major reason he remained in teaching had to do with having hope in the promise of public school education. He said,

I was public schooled. I grew up in public schools. My aunts and uncles are all teachers and principals and professors at colleges. I come out of a family where we believe in public schooling, especially coming out of the sixties. My family is from the south. We moved to the north, migrated to the north and public school is what we had. Public school can work. That's what got me started. That's what keeps me going, the belief that public schools can work. Cities can work. America can work.

Juan Figueroa, a younger teacher, echoed Darryl's thoughts but with a slight difference: for Juan, what was most motivating was seeing students who had graduated and gone on to college and who returned to visit. Although he had only been teaching for a few years, he had already had this experience:

[What keeps me going is] seeing students that we've had here graduate, go onto college, and know and stay in contact with them and you know what they're doing and where they're going... I was lucky enough to teach, for a couple of years, a class of seniors. This is the first year where they'll be actually seniors, graduating from college. Knowing that they're going to be graduating this year, and that two of them are going to be teachers: that is definitely, like, incredible! It's incredible that they will be coming back to a profession that I love and that they'll be doing the same thing.

Anita Preer, another of the teachers I interviewed that day, is an experienced and highly respected teacher and the advisor for the school newspaper. It had been a particularly difficult year for her emotionally. Anita said it was new teachers who gave her a thread of hope to cling to. I asked her what advice she'd give to a student teacher in her school. This was her response:

I think I'd say 'Thank you for coming in.' Every day, 'Thank you! Thank you! Thank you for coming into the Boston Public Schools! You really could be doing other things and make so much more money and have much better [working] conditions.' But one thing I said when Chris [her student teacher] was talking about how all the student teachers, once they come in here, they're like, 'I don't have a life anymore! I don't have a life!' And I said, 'You know something? This is a life! You come in, you grow, you learn, it's never the same, it's always different. You heal, you help, you love. What's wrong with that? Is that a life or is that a life?'

And, of course, there are the children: at the end of the conversation, Junia Yearwood said, "I get so much energy from my kids, I really do. I think we all draw from our kids."

Some teachers have an enduring faith in public education because their schooling gave them the opportunity to escape from a life of poverty and desperation. Sonie Felix is one of those. Sonie came to the United States from Haiti as a young child of six. At 26, she was the youngest teacher in the Inquiry Group. In response to my request for her "teaching autobiography," Sonie wrote not only her personal story, but also a moving declaration of her faith in the power of education.

*Sonie Felix: Education was my way out*

I was born on July 18, 1974 in the beautiful island of Haiti. I moved to Boston in the early eighties and have lived here ever since. When I first arrived in the United States, I felt as if I had entered a different planet. Everything around me was strange and enormous. The people reminded me of animals, with their funny talk and robot-like walk, and the buildings stood like soldiers in the street.

It was my first time ever being away from my mother and my family. I felt alone and confused. I was much too young to understand why my parents had sent me away. I often wondered if I had done something wrong to deserve this, or maybe they just didn't love me anymore. All I knew is that I missed my family terribly and I didn't have any friends.

It wasn't until years later that I realized why my parents sent me away. They wanted a better life for me than the one they had to offer in Haiti. And the only way for me to obtain that lifestyle was through a good education. Although I did not agree with my parents' decision to send me away, as I reflect on my life today, I can truly say that they have given me a precious gift that I will always treasure. They provided me with the opportunity to get a good education. As years passed and I continued to work hard in school, it finally dawned on me how valuable an education really is.

It wasn't easy at first. There was the language issue. In order for me to do well in school, I had to learn how to speak English and communicate with my peers. Once I mastered that, there was the identity problem: Should I give up my culture and conform to the ways and the lifestyle of the United States? or should I take pride in my heritage and alienate myself from my peers and become an outcast? I tried hard to camouflage my true feelings and disguise the war that was taking place inside of me by acting out in class and getting negative attention. But luckily for me, many of my teachers saw through the act and were able to guide me in the right direction. With my teachers' guidance, I was able to resolve many of the conflicts and at the same time excel in school. They taught me the valuable lessons that I hold dear to me to this day. They taught me that it was okay to be me and that education was my way out.

Education has been like a recurring theme in my life. The more I tried to escape it, the more it became a part of me. As I made my way through college, I began to fall in love with learning. The more I read, the freer I became. It was as if a sense of liberation swept over me and showed me the endless possibilities that were waiting for me. Through reading, I was able to free up my mind and my spirit. I read books by authors who, like myself, struggled to make it in America. They wrote about their hardships, and how education helped them to overcome the obstacles that stood in their way. I read about the slaves who were denied an education, and how they longed for a chance to be educated, some even risking their

lives to attain it. Then I thought about my parents in my country and how they too saw the importance of learning and then it became clear to me what my purpose here on earth was. I knew right then and there what I wanted to do with my life: I wanted to teach.

Teaching to me involves more than just disseminating information to students and passing tests. It involves love, commitment, dedication, and patience. In order to teach, teachers must have faith in their students and believe in them. It cannot be just another job where you punch in at 7:00 and leave at 2:00. It is not easy being a teacher, but I believe that one has to be passionate about teaching and learning in order to teach our children.

In all of the chaos and confusion that has taken place in this system, I sometimes feel that my students and I are placed in a dark, dismal hole with a speck of light to guide us. As a teacher, it is my job to show the students that light, as dim as it may be, and let them know that bigger and better things are waiting for them on the other side. To give up now would be ludicrous. I know that my students need me now more than ever, and I need them too. All they need is a fair chance and someone to believe in them the same way my teachers believed in me. The best way that I can thank my teachers for the difference they have made in my life is by continuing the wonderful job they started. They instilled in me a love for learning and I, in turn, plan to share that with my students.

### **Anger and Desperation**

Teachers are angry at many things: the injustices their students have to endure; the seeming arbitrariness of "the system"; school policies that are made by people far removed from the daily realities of classroom life; and being treated as if they were children. I was surprised by the depth of anger of the teachers in the Inquiry Group. Certainly they weren't *all* angry, and they weren't *always* angry, and they weren't *uniformly* angry, but there was some level of anger evident in most of them. At one meeting, Junia Yearwood explained, "Anger is one of the motivating factors in keeping you going, keeping that passion alive. So, it may be a negative emotion, but for most of us, it is anger at the injustice... Anger is what fuels you."

I suppose I was surprised because if these teachers - all unquestionably outstanding, devoted, and skilled - are angry, how do less effective and committed teachers feel? Ambrizeth Lima, who had recently decided to return to graduate school for a doctoral degree, clearly had mixed feelings about leaving. While she was excited about her upcoming graduate studies, she also hated leaving "my kids." But she was angry about what happens to teachers with hope and dedication and passion. During a discussion about Herb Kohl's book, *'I Won't Learn From You' and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment* (1994), Ambrizeth said that reading it had made her realize she had been "maladjusted" the entire time she had been teaching! She went on to say that she appreciated Kohl for finding an elegant way to describe what she had been feeling all along. For her, she said, anger meant "crying, yelling at people, you know, just gnashing my teeth... And I'm still mad at people and I won't talk to them."

I don't want readers to confuse anger with complaining, because it wasn't complaining that I heard from these teachers. They weren't making excuses or looking for an easy out. No, these teachers were not whiners; they were advocates for social justice. Inquiry Group members didn't want to be confused with teachers who complain but don't work. On the contrary: they were critical of teachers who hand out nothing but ditto sheets as the extent of their daily lesson plan; who sit in the Faculty Lounge and complain about their students' laziness and lack of intelligence; who gripe about families that don't care; who romanticize about how much better things were in some mythical "before." But the teachers in the Inquiry Group knew their students as persons, in all their vulnerability, talent, and strength, not just in terms of the skills they lacked. They had faith in their students and believed they were intelligent and capable. They also believed in their own abilities as teachers. In all the time I spent with them, I never heard them start a sentence about their students with the disparaging and generalized "they."

The very nature of the school system is sometimes baffling, leaving teachers bewildered and at a loss as to how to fight. Sometimes they feel as if they might suffocate under the weight of all the rules and regulations. Sonie Felix said at one of our meetings, "School is like a jail. I feel like breaking out."

*Anger*



Anger at the arbitrary nature of "the system" is in Karen Gelzinis's story. For an early meeting of the Inquiry Group, I had asked teachers to write down their "burning question," that is, the issue they wanted to focus on for the duration of our Inquiry Group so that these questions could become part of our agenda. Karen, however, was concerned that we might lose sight of the original question that had brought us together in the first place, the What keeps teachers going question. Here's the response she sent me:

*Karen Gelzinis: On home-made protractors and the will to fight*

The initial question raised by Sonia, "What keeps teachers going in spite of everything?" is the question that drew me to the group and keeps gnawing at my soul.

At our first meeting in June, I saw all these faces around the table, people with whom I had shared chunks of time in my life: a new teacher who taught across the hall from me; a teacher who was in a master's degree program with me (we were trained to be generic specialists; the BPS/federal government even picked up the major cost of the courses we attended during summers, and several school years. This was no "put-in-your-time, pick-up-your-degree" program; we had to produce/defend a master's thesis. I have the bound copy to show for this time, as well as the increased pay. But the system never used us as generic specialists. What keeps us believing, putting in the time?); the aunt of a former student; my student/now teacher with whom I spent her first year in high school, as well as her first year as a teacher [Sonia Felix]; colleagues with whom (for the first time since 1973), I've had ongoing conversations about this process called learning/teaching, who I credit/blame for arousing within me the question: "What am I doing here?" Are we so dedicated, or are we so sick, to keep at it in a system that says one thing, but almost never backs it, the kids, or us up?

Before Christmas, I picked up the Sizemore's book, *The Students Are Watching*. I have not opened it. I can't get beyond the title; it stays in my mind. I know they are watching: They are watching and seeing... everything: they see the computer strips and no computers, and now each morning, the kids who come in early see us cleaning off the desks, cleaning off the broken pieces of ceiling tiles, the mouse droppings which fell the night before as the electricians install the new wiring for the new Internet hook-ups for the new computers which we don't have. They see these electricians coming in as they are working after school with the protractors and centimeter rulers I've xeroxed on transparency film, along with the xeroxed graph paper. They laugh when I give out the protractors and rulers, and they tell me that I'm a trip. When I check their binders at the end of each term, I see those cheap, "home made" protractors and rulers with holes punched in them, right in the front of the binders, and I want to cry. And each year, sophomores, juniors, and seniors will come back and tell me that they still use their protractor, or they ask if I have another one.

In a writing group, the question was posed, "What do we do for us, to keep our batteries charged, so that we can do our best for our students?" A teacher wrote that this is a major problem and that she'll often take a shower when what she really needs is a nice, long bubble bath, because she doesn't have time. Everyone in the group knew exactly what she was talking about. So what (or who) keeps us on this crazy treadmill? The kids who are watching...

Last week, in an article on restructuring, another book was mentioned and now that title, too, keeps going through my head: *What's Worth Fighting For Out There?* All discussions about restructuring should start with this question. I don't fight; I'm too busy making protractors. I don't fight; I don't want to have to leave my kids, my school. I don't fight... and I'm getting angrier at those who don't see that schedules and other superficial changes don't restructure schools (really); it's the relationships that transform. I don't fight... and the students are watching.

What is so reinforcing that it keeps this seemingly irrational behavior going? I can teach something with a pencil and a piece of paper (and sometimes a plastic ruler or sometimes with just a good example) and a kid will get it, and they tell me that they understood something that they never understood before. And I don't fight, because *this* is what it's all about. But the system doesn't change, while it is ever-changing, "ever-restructuring," ever ignoring the relationships. What's worth fighting for in my school? The students are watching.

Teachers' anger and frustration in such situations is palpable. Talking and laughing about it that day as

they did during our conversation can provide some relief. But when anger crosses over to desperation, it is not easy to move forward.

### *Desperation*

What's worth fighting for, the question that Karen Gelzinis spoke to here, comes up often in teachers' conversations. Their first answer is invariably the same: it is students, especially those who have been deserted by other teachers, by the schools they attend, or by society. These are the students who have least benefited from education. For some teachers, such as Karen Gelzinis, the most difficult students are especially worth fighting for. Karen appreciated what she called the "insurrectionists" among her students because, although she herself had never been rebellious as a child, she relished the rebel spirit in her students: "I don't know about anybody else, but I was always quiet [in school], like 'Yes, Sister,' 'No, Sister.' And so when I started teaching, I loved those kids who said, 'No, I'm not going to do this,' because I was never brave enough to say it. So I always love those kids."

One of those kids was Sonie Felix. Sonie had been a student of Karen's in high school, about 10 years earlier. She was a challenging student, and she was a source of both exasperation and joy for Karen. During her years in high school, Sonie was just as likely to excel in school as to end up in detention for some infraction or other. But in spite of all her visits to detention, and to Karen's great delight and excitement, Sonie became a teacher. As we saw, Sonie wrote eloquently about the promise of public education. In September when she had written that "education was my way out," she had seemed unstoppable, a young teacher blazing with energy and hope. That day, she had said, "To give up now would be ludicrous." But by April, she was thinking of quitting.

The initial question Sonie had said she wanted to explore as her "burning question" had to do with her students' lives outside of school. She had thought about interviewing them to find out how school could connect more effectively with their home and community lives. But she came into our April meeting with something else on her mind. She said, "Now I'm at a point where it's not about *them* anymore but about *teaching*, period." She then read something she had written the night before that obviously had been on her mind for some time. There was scattered initial nervous laughter when she read the title of her piece, but the room soon became still when everyone realized Sonie was not kidding around; she was very serious. This is what she read to us:

### *Sonie Felix : Considering retirement at 26*

Having taught in the Boston Public School System for five years now, I am debating over whether or not I want to continue this line of work. I have been pondering over this question for years and it seems as though the deeper I get into the field of education, the more I learn about the injustices that teachers are put through. It's as if the system is sucking the life out of you and then asking you to focus on children and teach them. It's almost as if the system is forcing you to quit.

Let me first start off by saying that I enjoy teaching and I believe it is my calling. I also love my students. But the system does not provide me with the support or the opportunity to grow as an individual. Everything is always rushed. This didn't happen overnight, just up in my head. It was a slow agonizing process. It's like an infected sore that spreads through the body and eventually reaches the brain and forces you to become sick of everything. It's easy to say that if you reach that point in any job, then just quit. But what happens when that job is your life and calling? What do you do then? In the book "*I Won't Learn From You*" and *Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment*, Kohl states that 'Teachers in particular have an obligation to work to sustain hope and resist giving up on young people.' I believe that the obligation does not rest in the hands of teachers solely, but there are numerous people who play a role in shaping students' learning.

Does quitting mean that you have to give up on young people? Is there a way to build communities and climates within a corrupt system that supports and encourages teachers to continue their important work? Is it possible to create other options besides quitting?

Needless to say, we were all shaken by Sonie's words. We didn't know how to react: here was a young person who was clearly destined to be a teacher, and yet she was so beaten by the system. We each

thought deeply about this contradiction, but we didn't have much time to process it. We had only one meeting left, our retreat. Before we get to that, however, below is an excerpt of a long letter that Karen wrote to me in August at the end of summer school that year.

*Karen Gelzinis: A letter*

Dear Sonia,

Summer school ended yesterday. For me and for many of my students, it was the first time that we had ever had to go to summer school. (This is what I hate about putting things down on paper... I see a little word like "had" and my mind starts going again. *I* did not have to go, I made the choice. And yet, I didn't really have a choice because these were *my* kids. This year, a special transition summer school was put together for kids in "transition" years - having to do with state testing, blah, blah, blah... If you taught this summer school program, you could have the kids that you taught during the year. If I didn't teach them, who would they have had? Teachers were even hired from other school systems for this program, you didn't even have to be a teacher of the subject that you taught during the summer. But I'm sure they/downtown/program directors tried to get math teachers for math and the other subjects, but I know that this didn't always happen, and I know that in many cases this was Ok, because kids had teachers who wanted to teach, and these teachers made sure that they informed themselves/understood the subject matter. And again, I could go on and on about teachers vs. teachers of subject matter...).

You can see why I don't like to write. I've also been living with the fact that I haven't sent you anything. But believe me, it (IT) has not been out of my mind. Our retreat at the mansion was a special day.

That night, I had all kinds of thoughts, and even some answers, I felt, running through my head. This was it. I *knew* that I would put it all down during the coming weekend and get it off to you. But, again, the more I thought, the more I thought. It was like last summer, when I took a 'writing across the curriculum' course. Such angst! I was in the same place: not sleeping, thoughts, thoughts, thoughts. We were nearing the end of the year in school, and I was busy. No, busy does not describe what the end of the year is like, when you feel that you can get kids to tie it all together, complete everything which in your heart you know is impossible to complete, because one idea, one understanding of a concept always leads to another. And I was going to write and tell you all this tomorrow... tomorrow... tomorrow... And now it is August 11th.

I do want you to know, however, how important the whole year has been to me (and as I finished those last couple of words, I want you to know that the tears started again. Perhaps this is why I don't like to write.)

I could never understand when people with whom I taught, and people who I knew were good teachers, would say that they couldn't see themselves doing this for another 10, 15 years. Until a few years ago, I always felt that I could easily be one of those women who would be 70 years old and still appearing each September. But I sensed a change in myself in the past few years, and I knew it wasn't because of the kids (and again I feel the tears, but you have to know that I still cry whenever I watch *The Wizard of Oz*, and Dorothy asks, "Toto, too?" and the good witch replies, "Toto too"). No, it was definitely not the kids. Could they drive me crazy? Yes. But it wasn't the kids. Had something changed in me? I really didn't think so, because my happiest times were when I was in my classroom with my kids. It's all the other STUFF: the constant talk of change - for 27 years...

And I could go off in a hundred different directions right now... I could go into my telephone call to Sonie during April vacation, after our inquiry group meeting when she broke down, and told us that she didn't think that she could go on teaching. My heart just broke, not because of what she said, but because they're the feelings that I'm also having at times. She's a new teacher, too young to be feeling this way. But I know that there were many days when I felt like this when I first started (yes, even though I already said that I had always seen myself as teaching at 70!). I think of all the new, good teachers who must leave because nothing happens, or no one reminds them of something that will make them keep going... And I start to think of one of our meetings and I think that I said it aloud: This (teaching) shouldn't have to be so hard. And I think that Sonie shortly thereafter started to describe what a wonderful time she was having with her classes, and I remember thinking/worrying. Because I know that it's only when you have that much joy that you can also experience that much pain/hurt/burden from the same source. Did it

happen like that?

When I called Sonie, she told me she was not going back to the inquiry group. She explained that she keeps going to the meetings, half expecting that at some point the (older) teachers in the group were going to open up and finally reveal their *secret*. Surely Steve, Junia, and Judith must all know the same secret. Is this what I was looking for. Did Sonia Nieto know the secret to the *light in their eyes*? Whose eyes was she really talking about: the kids, or *our eyes*? And as I wrote that, I started thinking about one of our early meetings when Judith said something about including more of the kids' voices in our meetings. I remember really being against that. I wanted this for *me*, for *us/the* teachers. Because if I didn't have *this* - this time to really think about what it is that keeps me going, I might not be there for the kids.

Like Sonie, I too was looking for the secret, I guess. I don't really remember what I said to Sonie on the phone when she brought up this idea of the *secret*. It was such a pure statement on her part, and at first I kind of thought "if only it were so simple." And I knew that she knew that it wasn't... and I'm starting to go dizzy myself just writing this. But it stayed with me. I know that I didn't tell Sonie that she had to stay in teaching because I know she's a wonderful teacher, the kids need her, etc, etc. At one point in time, I would have told her all of these things. Are these the things that I've always told myself????

I know that I didn't tell her these things because I surprised myself by not doing just that. I know Sonie has other talents that she has thought about exploring, and I think that I told her that she needed to do what *she* needed to do. When I got off the phone I was torn, saddened, again, angry at a system that makes it so hard (the bags full of work that needs to be checked: *that* never is done), often so impossible to do a good job...

When I got off the phone with Sonie, I remembered some quote that I had hanging on the bulletin board in the kitchen (one of the thousands of pieces that I've ripped out of newspapers, magazines, all little pieces of my own search for "the secret"? Is this why so many teachers are pack rats? Can't throw it away, it might be part of that secret, it might be the perfect answer to that question that some kid will ask me someday that will be the secret answer that will turn his/her mind onto something that will hold their interest forever). And of course, now I have to go digging through stuff to find the quote, because of course, I didn't put it back on the bulletin board.

"The secret of Life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to...and the most important thing is --- it must be something you cannot possibly do!" (Henry Moore)

God knows who Henry Moore is - was - but at the time, I felt, this is it, I'll give it to Sonie. It's about as good an answer to her quest (my quest?) for a secret as I can find. Now that I think about it, isn't this just what a young teacher would want to hear when thinking about how hard teaching is? Give your whole life to something that you can't possibly do. See you all later! Let me get out now.

I brought my little quote to our Inquiry Group retreat. *It was a perfect day. It was a perfect day.* I had to write it again, because it was. The weather was beautiful. The place was beautiful. We took pictures together.

I got there early. I had brought something about my burning question (for me, my burning question was still the question that got me into this group to begin with, Sonia's question: "What keeps [you] teachers going..."). On the way out of the house, I had grabbed a couple of little note cards (from a box of note cards I had picked up during April vacation, in order to write some "thank you's" to kids in school), thinking we could all sign them for Ceronne and Sonia. I was going to be prepared for this last meeting. I even sat and wrote, while waiting for everyone to arrive. Of course, I wrote about how guilty I felt being surrounded by the flowers, etc. etc. etc., while my kids were stuck back at school in a building with windows that don't open, etc., etc, on this perfect, May day.

Ceronne was next to arrive. She had to drop off the books for the group, and go on to a "walk through" of one of the high schools; she'd be back later. We spoke for a few moments about 'the place', of course, I told her about my guilt, and then she gave me the permission to enjoy this day, without thinking about the

kids in school. This was one of the gifts of the day: someone in the system (i.e., part of administration) said to a teacher: "Don't think about the kids, for today. Think about yourself..." Of course, by thinking about ourselves, our practice, we *are* thinking about the kids. The line is so fine.

Would Sonie come? She did. We hadn't spoken since the phone call during vacation. At one point, I had thought about calling her to ask her if she was going to attend.

I'm feeling overwhelmed again. There were so many things about that day: the simple but profound truths in Freire's book; so many of the secrets, the ones that we know in our hearts, not really secrets after all; all the fears that each of us shared; all from teachers who in front of their classes, I know, are confident teachers (would their students even/ever suspect how fearful we could be at times? And what's the source of that fear, that fear of not being able to do this thing that we do, when in our hearts, in our minds we know that we will, maybe?).

*WE CHANGE LIVES FOREVER.* Driving home, thinking about the whole day, the verse on the front of the note card HIT me. I bought them. I brought them to the meeting. I had looked at the verse: WE CHANGE LIVES FOREVER.

What power!

Of course, we all know it. But how often do we *really* think about it. Probably, subconsciously, more often than we admit. Does it get lost in the piles of paper that we correct? In the scores/grades that we write down? LIVES. [my students'] lives, Sonie's life. This has been another one of the group's gifts to me (lots of tears now...).

I knew when we were at the retreat that when I wrote, it would have to be about Sonie. I didn't know exactly what, but I asked her permission then.

When Sonie was my student in the ninth grade, I sent her to time-out more than any other student in my 27 years of teaching in the Boston Public Schools. Was she fresh? Not exactly. Disruptive? Not in the sense of how teachers usually think about disruptive students. Then why would I send her out? When I think back upon it, and I've talked to her about this, the only thing that I remember is that she would be acting "crazy" and I really don't remember how/what she did, I only remember that I could not allow her to stay in that room, and act however it was that she was acting, and allow other kids in her class to see and believe that this is who she was, because she was too bright... I remember that she used to stay after school, as part of a homework-type club that another teacher and I held... I can remember her "Hello, Miss". There was a spark to her. She was not one of those students to come in before school, to search you out to talk. Not one of those students who gave out the signals that they wanted you to dig deeper. At basketball games, she would chase my son around the gym, make him laugh; tease him, make him cry. She would always ask, "How's little Peter?" She still does, and she still gives me that little twinkle in her eye when she asks, as if we've gone back 13, 14, years.

When Sonie left the ninth grade cluster, she was not one of those students who came back all the time to talk, to let you know what was going on in her life, what her plans were. We'd see each other in the hall, and we always asked after each other. "How's little Peter?" One year (junior? senior?), she gave me a book that she had written/made for an English project: *Why Cats Hate Water*, bound and covered with a piece of flowered, red flannel. Looking at it now, it looks so simple. I've treasured it. Now, I'm thinking about what Sonie, the teacher, would think about it. Would it receive a passing grade, according to the rubrics? Would she pass, but fail? Did this project show what she would become?

I remember Sonie as a senior, when she and a group of friends put on an assembly program, reading from/acting out works from Black women writers. And I remember having tears in my eyes because they were so good.

After that, I would see Sonie at games, but not that many. She would drop into school sometimes, when she was in college, but not that often. We didn't write, we didn't call. I had been her ninth grade math teacher; she had been my student.

And then she was a teacher. *Sonie* became a teacher! (But she always must have been; I just hadn't noticed). Not only did *Sonie* become a teacher, but her first teaching assignment was with us, her ninth grade teachers. And she was wonderful! And we had talks about her as a student, and how we touched her life in ways that we never knew. We've cried over the passing of friends, who had also been our students; we've talked about parents who did the best that they could, both hers and mine: And I knew that we had made a difference in her life, just as my teachers had made a difference in my life...

I always knew teachers made a difference, a tremendous difference and I've always taken the responsibility very seriously, but to think about it using these words: TEACHERS CHANGE LIVES FOREVER and ever.... and ever...lives... To really think about *that*, for a long time is frightening, that type of power, to use it day after day...

In our Inquiry Group, by talking about our practice, we allowed the possibility of different words to enter into/shape the conversations among us, between us, and within our own minds, about what we do every day. This was the power of the group...

When I got home from the Inquiry Group meeting after *Sonie* read her autobiography, I collapsed in a chair and cried, and cried, and cried. I told my husband that that was it. I could stop teaching now and knew that I had done what I was supposed to do (such drama, Karen!). I had heard *Sonie's* story, and it was also my story. I thought about the teachers I had had, who saw something in "the disadvantaged kids" from the city, and gave us the hope that we could do whatever we wanted, and more importantly, we could do it without giving up who we were. We didn't have to move to the suburbs to be successful. (I laugh when I recall the neighborhood priest who one day referred to our high school as "St. Augustine's Academy for Girls, By the Sea": if you ever saw our school, this name was the farthest thing from truth. I only remember him saying it a couple of times but, to this day, when any of the girls from my class get together, we all remember it: a time when someone made us feel "special"). We need different words to speak about what we do. Standards. Rubrics. Benchmarks. Ninth-grader. Important words, yes. BUT... These words do not tell the complete stories of our kids; they do not tell the complete stories of what we do. WE CHANGE LIVES FOREVER.

We are going to change lives forever, one way or another, for good or for bad. When we talked in the group about our anger, this is where it's coming from. When we talked about our frustrations, this is where it's coming from. When we talk about leaving the profession, this is where it's coming from: We change lives forever. Are we doing all that can be done? Smaller class sizes, access to the latest (forget latest - *any*) technology. Our school was wired for computers ten years ago. We never got computers, but this summer, it's being rewired for *faster* Internet access. Yet, still no computers in my classroom, no computer lab to meet the individual strengths/weaknesses of my kids who must go to summer school, because *they* can't meet the standards.

So, despite everything in our way, why do some of us end up staying? Is it because *our* lives continue to be changed forever, for the better, by our students? What would my life be without *Sonie*..? It's not a give and take; it's a cycle, just as learning isn't the first step, then the second. In most cases, it's learning, retracing, reworking. Is the light in their eyes a reflection of the light in *our* eyes, or is it just the opposite? It is an addictive thing, teaching. Once your life has been changed, you understand the power.

I saw *Sonie* before the end of the year, and I told her that I had looked up one of the teachers who had made a difference in my life, who had changed *my* life forever. She was now living in Birmingham, Alabama, and she was still teaching. And I told her about the past year in the Inquiry Group, and about *Sonie*, about being in this group with a teacher who had also been a student of mine. I told her what her being my teacher had meant for me. As we spoke, she would recall bits of conversations that we had when I was in the seventh grade. They weren't about science, which was what she taught, or about me as a student in her science class. She remembered things that I had told her about my baby sister, offbeat, personal things (like I remember about *Sonie's* bedroom set). I thanked her (just, as I thank *Sonie* for helping me to look for the secret).

### **Teaching as Collaborative Intellectual Work**

The third theme we'll address briefly is the need for collaborative intellectual work. I see inquiry groups as an antidote to the desperation that *Sonie* and *Karen* described so movingly. Collaborative intellectual

work is what we experienced in the Inquiry Group that year. In spite of the frustration, in spite of the late hour and the papers that needed correcting, in spite of the latest testing mandates: in spite of everything, these conversations were inspiring examples of what happens when teachers get together to puzzle out difficult problems, explore exciting ideas, or simply seek fellowship among their peers, as you can see when Sonie describes the impact that participating in the group had on her.

*Sonie*

Two years have passed and I am at a different place in my journey on the art of teaching. I have learned many things throughout my journey. First, I learned to be more patient and that "real" change doesn't happen right away. If change happens too quickly, it is usually just a band aide used to cover up the problem. Second, I learned about the importance of student voices and the need to be heard. Oftentimes students were the ones who helped me to answer the question of why I chose to be a teacher and what keeps me going. Finally, I have learned the importance of questions: questions about self-improvement as a teacher, questions about race and economic inequality, questions about students and their lives, and questions on how to equip students with the tools to even out the playing field. That's what keeps me going. Just as long as there are questions and a passion to actively search for answers is what keeps teachers going. As long as there is a wonder, there will be a motivation to keep going.

Sonie Felix is still teaching, and all of us are still learning from the work we did together in Boston on those late Thursday afternoons that year. Shortly after the meeting in April when Sonie announced she was thinking of leaving teaching, Karen called her and gave her the kind of advice and support that only another teacher who understands what it means to abandon one's "calling," as Sonie described it, can give. This solidarity is one of the by-products of developing communities of inquiry where teaching is discussed as serious intellectual and emotional work. But teachers often don't have the time or the energy to engage in these kinds of communities of inquiry. They also don't have the support from school systems that insist on mandated "professional development days" where teachers are expected to sit like passive recipients of knowledge, the epitome of what Paulo Freire (1970) meant when he described "banking education."

Inquiry Groups are a different way for teachers to learn. They are spaces where genuine collaboration can happen, and where teachers can be in charge of their own learning. But because they're co-created and very different from traditional professional development, some teachers may become impatient with the process, looking in vain for "the secret." When we first started meeting as an Inquiry Group, I could see the impatience in Sonie's eyes. She wasn't shy about expressing her frustration, either. She would ask what we were we going to do, and what would be our *product*. Were we just going to *talk*? Wasn't this a waste of time? By our last meeting, during the retreat we held in May, her words had changed considerably. Sonie had developed not only a desire, but also a *need* to talk. At the end of the meeting, she thanked all her colleagues for their help, and for participating in the Inquiry Group. She said,

I think that these conversations are important in terms of continuing with teaching. I think if we omit these conversations, that *that's* how and why people tend to leave, because these conversations don't happen. They're not common. So, it was really insightful and it gave me strength to look at what I was doing and to want to continue.

There was a brief silence and then I asked, "So, are you staying?" She immediately answered, to the applause and laughter of her colleagues, "Of course," adding, "I don't have a choice." Sonie decided to return the following year despite the problems she had so painfully articulated. She has been teaching for two years since that time, and she has begun to work with another group of teachers to keep her going... in spite of everything.

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Sonia Nieto is Professor of Education, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She has been a teacher for 35 years, teaching students at all levels from elementary grades through graduate school. Her research focuses on multicultural education, the education of Latinos, immigrants, and other culturally and linguistically diverse students, and Puerto Rican children's literature. Her books include *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* (3rd ed., 2000), *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities* (1999), and *Puerto Rican Students in U.S. Schools* (2000). She has also published numerous book chapters and articles in such journals as *Educational Forum*, *The Harvard Educational Review*, *Multicultural Education*, and *Theory into Practice*. She serves on several national advisory boards that focus on educational equity and social justice, including Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO) and Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR). She has received many awards for her advocacy and activism, including the 1989 *Human and Civil Rights Award* from the Massachusetts Teachers Association, the 1995 *Drylongso Award for Anti-Racist Activists* from Community Change in Boston, the 1996 *Teacher of the Year Award* from the Hispanic Educators of Massachusetts, and the 1997 *Multicultural Educator of the Year Award* from NAME, the National Association for Multicultural Education. She was an Annenberg Institute Senior Fellow (1998-2000) and she received an honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters from Lesley College in Cambridge, Massachusetts in May, 1999. In June, 2000, she was awarded a month-long residency at the Bellagio Center in Italy. She is married to Angel Nieto, a former teacher and author of children's books, and they have two daughters and six grandchildren.

**Karen Gelzinis**

Karen Gelzinis has been a teacher in the Boston Public School System for thirty years. She has been an elementary school teacher, a reading teacher, and for the past eighteen years, a math teacher at The English High School. She was awarded a Golden Apple, a district wide teaching award, and was named Magnet School Teacher of the Year for her service to the Boston Public Schools. She believes that she is a better math teacher because she was a reading teacher first, and counts among her successes that she was co-author Sonie Felix's teacher.

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