Go Where You Belong

Male Teachers as Cultural Workers in the Lives of Children, Families, and Communities

Lemuel W. Watson and
C. Sheldon Woods

TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION
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TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy's (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity–youth identity in particular–the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some "touchy-feely" educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.

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Printed on acid-free paper

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all of our teachers who work hard on a daily basis to change the lives of our students.

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PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to continue the dialogue about the importance of men in the lives of young children and the teaching profession. This book will also be beneficial for those teachers and administrators who work on a daily basis to enhance the education of children in early childhood and elementary education programs. By sharing their stories, male teachers in this book educate the reader about the challenges they face as men; however, their stories also offer solutions and suggestions as how to work with parents, students, peer teachers, and others in order to maximize student achievement. In fact, the male teachers in this volume are sincere culture workers (Freire, 2005) who strive to make a difference a difference in the lives of children, their families, and their schools. This book will inspire others to encourage more men to enter the profession of teaching, especially early childhood and elementary education. Men who are interested in working with young children will have a first hand glance of the journey of learning, playing, and teaching children and working with their parents on a daily basis through these narratives.

A secondary purpose of this book is to bring a more open and honest discourse about the many ways that men contribute to children's development. Through this dialogue, the reader might reflect on the vast array of diversity that exists within racial groups, gender, and sexual orientation. The book helps to broaden the groups "collective identity" and therefore, helps those who work with male teachers to expand their understanding in order to try new ways of helping. Cultural nuances of the professional field must be addressed from multiple levels in order to make an impact on male teachers' experiences. In addition, how male teachers construct meanings of how to live their lives in a society that restricts their own sense of masculinity will be addressed. This text will also provide a good introduction to issues of cultural persistence and transmission in early childhood and elementary education which hinders the progression of gender integration (Schonpflug, 2009).

In other word, the majority of males are disadvantaged by society's strict cultural/ gender norms, and conformity to these restrictive masculine behaviors that not only increases the level of anxiety about being socially ostracized, but also dictates males' range of social, emotional and academic roles and experiences. For example, most of the contact children have with men in elementary schools is normally limited to the principal, facilities personnel, or physical education teacher; and the main reason cited throughout the literature to enhance the number of male teachers is to be positive role models (Buxton, 2000; Sargent, 2002). Hence, the inability to explore and embrace other possibilities related to men ways of being reduces the opportunities they might have in society, especially as it relates to working with children.

This book is not intended to serve as a cookie cutter for men entering early childhood professions or to minimize the contributions of all of our female teachers. Instead, it might serve as a guide to enlighten the reader of the unlimited possibilities and opportunities that exist if we choose to be bold and to have the courage to challenge the status quo in following our own intuition about our life's work as men;

this is especially true for breaking down the cultural transmission of social/cultural gender roles in our society related to men's exploration of traditional female professions.

Audience

The primary audience for this book is anyone who is interested in children's development and ways to enhance their growth through creating a network to support them. In addition, the secondary audiences for the book are students in undergraduate and graduate programs in teacher education and early childhood professions. Administrators and superintendents who are in charge of creating well balanced environment for learning and development will be greatly interested in the narratives of the authors because they offer detailed information about how they worked with their administrators and school leaders to create better learning environments. Practicing teachers and educators will also find this text to be an important professional development tool due to the fact that all teachers are asked to work together to enhance the students' educational outcomes. In each chapter, authors share details about their trial and errors in order to find workable solutions that benefit their classrooms, schools, and partnerships. Each chapter focuses on the challenges and strategies that men utilized to remain in the classroom and to thrive in their personal and professional choices to stay where they belong – with children. This book is also organized and written so that the lay person could read the narratives and be inspired by the authors of each chapter; hence, creating a social network of individuals who support and encourage men to enter the field.

Scope and Treatment

This book provides a perspective to assist educators and professionals in moving their organizations and agencies toward the ideal of a well-adapted educational environment that celebrates the diversity that males and females bring to the classroom. The male voices in this book represent seasoned and novice teachers who have self-identified as male teachers with a story to tell about their experiences with children, parents, peer teachers, administrators, and communities. Rarely does the literature and research highlight for the reader the concerns of male teachers in their own voices. Minor editing has been done for clarity; however, preserving the individual's voices through their narrative was most important. Yet, what we present in this text are the teachers' concerns so that they might be utilized to develop and guide practice. We will give supporting documentation to the reader to help set the context for basic understanding of the materials presented; however, we do not waver with following the naturalistic approach of informing the reader of issues and concerns primarily through out own contextual lenses and experiences.

This book makes a contribution to the existing literature by bringing the reader to the first person narratives by male teachers. The uniqueness of this book resides in capturing some of the authors' experiences from a novice professional to becoming a seasoned advocate for such issues as directors of programs or professors in universities. All of the authors are forthcoming with how they became

involved with children, the rewards and challenges. In fact, this book paints the canvas of individuals' life work and their passion and commitment to fulfilling their purpose in the world; it helps readers to see the possibilities of a career in the field and the unlimited options to contribute to the lives of children, their families, and their community. This book will help the reader to understand and connect to authors in multiple ways as the narratives unfold in each chapter. Although the book is about men in the lives of children, it also teaches readers about their "ways of being" as men, fathers, teachers, and humans. This book is like having a personal coach for the novice teacher and a good friend for the seasoned. This book will also include a "resources" section with helpful hint for teachers and administrators.

The true test of any teacher education program is its ability to change, to respond strongly and positively to the emerging needs of society. In that process of change, it must base its decisions on specific and valid academic outcomes, on a vision of sustained growth and measured improvement in its processes and products, and on effective collaboration with all the active players in the educational enterprise, including local school districts, business and industry, liberal arts faculty, and other colleges and universities involved in the same enterprise.

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INTRODUCTION

Addressing the Culture of Gender Bias

It is becoming increasingly difficult to separate the problems of the public schools from the problems of society as a whole. Because the typical school is a mirror image of the community it serves, solutions to educational problems must likewise reflect solutions to broader social, racial, and economic problems. Men remain significantly underrepresented in elementary education and early childhood settings and in positions within the fields to make a difference regarding gender balance. In fact, according to Carrington, Tymms, and Merrell (2005) and Johnson (2008) show that male educators continue to experience bias in the hiring process; inequitable workloads, salaries and resources; and limited opportunities for growth.

We also have the tension between those advocating for more male teachers to work with children and those who are frustrated with the pace of reform. For example, there are lots of data reporting that the proportion of male teachers in schools is at it lowest in decades (National Education Association [NEA] 2003). In fact, only one of ten elementary classroom teachers is male (NEA, 2003). The literature cites multiple reasons such as the feminization of the field, low wages, social prejudice against men, lack of prestige, and social stigma are just some of the reasons for this phenomenon. Regardless of the reasons, there are debates about how to best teach children to learn. How to challenge them to be the best they can be. There is a litany of best practices, models, standards, rituals, so on and so forth as education and schooling is concerned. In some states, schools are reconsidering the fact that all children are different and need individualized instruction along with group instruction for specific subjects or skills. We are finally recognizing that perhaps a challenge to a child's learning is not the child, but the teacher, the environment, the pedagogy, the text, or the lesson plan. The debate has been long and hurtful and sometimes thought provoking. Who to educate and for what purpose has also had enough politics to fill the chambers of congress for years. The debate has also included who should teach and what qualifications should individuals have to stand before children; however, these are concerns not just for children, but "my children" and in for "my community" due to our lack of a national model or set of standards for all schools and learning.

Turning attention to the low numbers of men who work with children as a vocation is a needed and important concern. This text features a collection of research studies, scholarly essays, and personal narratives that converge on a coherent and central problem: the challenges men face in attaining, surviving, and thriving in professions that involve children, especially early childhood and elementary education.

This edited volume presents gendered research and writing on issues that influence men's experiences in early childhood and elementary education as faculty, teachers, students and academic leaders. As an advocacy work, this text aims to stimulate interest, dialogue, and collective action in creating positive and equitable working

and learning environments for men who work with children. The authors include a diverse group of faculty, teachers, and administrators who have a range of experiences. They speak from experience, research, and personal opinions, across both private and public educational organizations. Their narratives and scholarship reflect a shared perspective for understanding the challenges and barriers that limit men's opportunities in vocations that work with children.

As editor, I am cognizant of the unique responsibility I have to authors and reader in allowing the voice of the author to shine through in their narrative. Here, narrative is to make sure that the reader gets enough information about the author and the purpose of their dialogue. In essence, how much does someone need to know in order to understand what is trying to be conveyed? I continue to be interested in the relationship between how the authors felt and how they made sense out of their world. According to Widdershoven (1993), who gives us the example of historians who tell stories about the past and through these stories people share about their life experiences, as a result stories become an important influence for our identity both individually and collectively. Therefore, the narratives in this book tell us who we are as men in the lives of children. "Again it can be asked what relation these stories have to the persons we are. Do they merely describe the experiences we had in the past, or are they some way constitutive for (past and actual) experience" (Widdershoven, 1993, p. 6). A question the reader might ask him or herself as they read the narratives is what is the meaning of this story and the unique issues that the writers face. All of the narratives were selected because we felt there was something to learn in addition to providing the field with some direction toward scholarship, practice, or policy. Having the authors share their experience through narratives, we learn about the cultural-historical context of the field. The authors not only share their stories about their experience and actions, they provide a mechanism for the reader to engage in a dialogue about the meaning of it all.

Widdershoven shares H. G. Gadamer's philosophical theory of interpretation from his 1960 book, Wahrheit und Method, which looks at the idea of interpretation as a dialogue that conveys the reader interprets of the text as he or she reads. In other words, interpretation through reading is a form of dialogue in which the reader and author come to terms with the issue of truth; hence this is known as fusions of horizons. This requires that we try to see what the experience has to say to us, that we try to apply it to our present situation, in simple terms, perhaps empathy.

With regards to the professional identity of the individuals and the identity as a group, male teachers, they provide for the development and construction of a bigger narrative that becomes available the field further research and practice through their shared narratives (Funkenstein, 1993). This collection of loosely biographical narrative data might be seen as life history, the subject connects and relates events, actions, and experiences with other events, actions, and experiences according to substantive and temporal patterns that do not necessarily follow the linear sequence of the 'objective time' but rather conforms to a perspectivist time model of 'subjective' or 'phenomenal' (Rosenthal, 1993 as quoted in Fischer, 1982 p. 138–215).

Given the reality there continues to be augments on both side regarding the need, benefit and relevance of men teachers in early childhood (Carrington, Francis, Hutchings, Skelton, Read, & Hall 2007; Jones, 2003), the collective voices of men who work with children on a daily basis who share their narrative give meaning to the reality in the field. "From a hermeneutic point of view, stories are based on life, and life is express, articulated, and manifested and modified in narratives" (Widdershoven, 1993, p. 9).

The stories shared through the narratives reveal the fact that to be male in early childhood is to also be cultural worker through just surviving and thriving. I believe that all teachers are cultural workers through the simple fact that teachers deal with a host of social-cultural issues through the day-to-day interactions with their pupils and their families. Male teachers, according to our authors and literature, must also deal with additional issues of gender discrimination from multiple individuals across multiple levels. The male teacher must learn very quickly how to interact to specific situation while learning the context of what is expected acceptable behavior as a male and what is not. The male teacher must become familiar with how people perceive him and understands what that means. For example, society in general still has a hard time with men being caregivers; if he is then he must be a homosexual, pervert, or weird. Hence, educating more than pupils, but the entire community and profession continues to be a challenge for the male teacher and his allies.

Finally, we have to address the issues that would divide a possible collective voice of male teachers which is the homosexual male teacher. This issue has remain silent within the teacher profession due to the fact that parents and school boards continue to be conservation given more weight to a persons sexuality than the quality of teaching and care the teacher bring to the child, school, and community. I am proud of the fact that we have narratives in this book that share openly and honestly about the challenges of gay teachers. Gay teachers are left to defend that they are not pervert or molesters in their genuine care for children. The stigma and perceptions of sexuality remains to be an issue that affects men entry into the field of early childhood. Perhaps, what is required is for all to say what does it matter if the child is learning.

Ultimately, children are the primary subject of this monograph. The "who" should teach is bigger than the gender issue. As educators we cannot excuse ourselves from responsibility in the fundamental quest for democracy and equality and how to participate in the search for its perfection (Freire, 2005). Who should teach children has to do with exposing children to differences. This difference is about what men and women of all walks of life bring to the community, schools and children's lives. The narratives of men in this text are very diverse and are all equally committed to healthy growth and development of the children they are involved with. Just as each female teacher brings gifts to the classroom so does each male teacher. In simple terms, this book is about equal rights for men and women, who are competent, intelligent, and commitment to children and their rights to live a professional life without discrimination and prejudice for choosing such a profession. This book is about helping men go where they belong.

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CHAPTER 1

BECOMING, BEING AND UNBECOMING AN EDUCATOR IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

I consider myself an educational phenomenologist, always asking questions that generate meaning in life's experiences. As I begin to write this biographical narrative, I find myself asking once again, if there are themes that run throughout my life as a male in the lives of young children. Immediately, what comes up for me is my becoming, being and unbecoming (Sumsion, 2002) in life's experiences as an early childhood educator. Sumsion (2002) suggests that this metaphor constitutes a journey, "[t]hroughout one's journey, one both shapes and is shaped by the landscapes through which one travels" (p. 3). I definitely travel through educational periods of becoming, being and unbecoming and find my way into deeply rich and meaning life experiences.

Becoming

As one of the many early childhood professionals in my area of the world, I look back and think about the unusual way I came into and stayed in this field. I see my early growth and formation in early education as my becoming educator period. During this time, I was restless, unsettled and easily influenced about arranging my classroom and career decisions.

Now, I am a professor in early childhood education at Portland State University. I also work in the full-day laboratory school for young children as the pedagogical liaison to a constructivist master's degree program, which teaches through the lab school. There, we conduct many phenomenological (Van Manen, 1990) and action research projects with children, teachers and parents of the school. People working at our school and degree program are very interested in the cross-cultural and multiple-world perspectives of early education, especially as it relates to the inspired principles and practices of Reggio Emilia, Italy (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998), anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C. Task Force, 1989) and Resources for Infant Educarers (see RIE.org). Our work emerges through dialogue, collaboration, documentation and community reflection practices (Parnell, 2005). And, this work feels challenging and good most of the time!

However, way back in the day, as I was becoming an educator, I stumbled into this field as a poor work-study student at eighteen years old. I began my work part-time in the University of Oregon's off-campus housing parent cooperative school for children aged two through six. Friends had said, "Oh, you've got work-study! You should be a building guard so you can bring your books and study at your late-night workstation." Others suggested, "Why not work in the campus daycare center, where you can have fun and play with young children?" As I waded through the many on-campus options for work-study students, I ran across the Amazon Cooperative

Preschool posting. I took their card along with many others, planning to sift through and interview. As it so happened, I interviewed with the child care director first and was hired that day to work in Amazon's cooperative preschool as a student teacher employee.

Still close to my heart and mind is my learning from Amazon Cooperative pre-school, a so-called "experimental" school (as we were termed by the housing director). We used to respond and chuckle together by saying we were a really long experiment of over twenty years. The school was an off campus housing program, affiliated with the university and used as one of the many laboratory sites across campus. I *grew up* in this vegetarian and hippy cooperative to become a teacher of young children. This was certainly a *becoming teacher* period for me, a central component to my life's formation; helping me to develop my teaching, learning and research ways in the world. I learned how to be firm and loving, have boundaries, teach through fun and exploration, conduct morning meetings, plan daily activities for various age groups, keep center schedules, discuss important topics in staff meetings, cook vegetarian meals, clean for large groups and so forth.

I also learned some hard life-lessons such as not saying to parents that their child was "manipulative," but instead letting them know how ingenious their child was at getting her needs met. Learning how to relate with multiple constituents was a life-altering experience for me. I felt like such as failure as those parents pulled their child from our program because of me. I felt as if I would never recover, but had to keep on going at the same time. The director helped me to become acutely aware of the fact that some parents do not trust schools up front; they look for a way to leave before they really even begin, and that I would grow from this experience.

I learned at Amazon that parents may leave your program and remove their children from your education and care when you aren't mindful of their perspective and aren't gracious enough to listen and promote their existence as parent and co-participant in the school through one's family experience. I learned that I could cry about the things I didn't do well, but still persevere in the face of adversity, such as when my conversation with the "manipulative-genius" child's parent did not go as planned and my put down led to her immediate withdrawal from our program.

I also learned about staff hardships and the difficulties of collaboration and listening. I learned how hard it is to work with a burned out teacher who slowly throughout the year took everything out of our room, from books and puzzles to markers and music; ultimately, neglecting the spaces by not creating a place for child-hood. On the day our director finally decided to let her go, due to much protesting from student employees and my threat to leave the program if we didn't have an intervention with my co-teacher, I opened the outdoor shed and found all of our classroom materials stuffed away.

I was mostly shocked that I had not paid enough attention to notice all of the materials missing from the classroom spaces over many months. I kept trying to make due and cover up for my co-teacher, a 35-year veteran teacher who came to us with eight letters of recommendation. My challenges with her opened my eyes to the underside of early education teaching and the control some desire to have over others. I learned to be ingenious and keep children engaged under stressed circumstances,

but came up against my edge when I walked into the school early one day to find this teacher sitting on top of a child rubbing his back and saying, "We love you Chris!" While Chris firmly stating, "Get off of me!" I seemed to stay calm as I declared, "You heard his words and he was clear, now get off of him and it is time for you to go!"

As I reflect back on my becoming teacher moments, I realize that through this adversity of my co-teacher's control and my breakdown in communication with a parent I became a much stronger teacher. I resolved to be a better teacher and to give children places for play, engagement, learning and socialization, not just hollow spaces where teachers entertain children. I learned that thoughtful construction of spaces into places makes all of the difference in the flow of learning; that through this mindful construction of where and how we live in learning places, children can put their attention on great life questions such as how to peacefully negotiate for materials and spaces to create wonderment and invite big questions like how butterflies are born or what happens when you mix paint on your skin.

I grew from my first years' daze of *what did I get myself into* through *I've got power in teaching what I know* and landing on the realization that *I have so much to learn* working with parents and the community about children's educational experiences. When I graduated with a French and Italian romance language bachelor's degree, I stayed at the cooperative for one final lead-teaching year to glean and harness anything from my dynamic director. Each of the five years I was employed in the program brought me more curiously closer to the director, her family, and her ideas about relationships, joy, wisdom, and the acceptance of difference. Her dynamic engagements fostered a love and desire to carry forward this precarious *way*, which included enjoying every day and the experiences we have with one another in life. Her values reminded me of my mother, father, sister and extended family and our relationships. How our values for loving, living, communicating, and educating served as a way to raise a family amidst a community of families.

I believe that those formative years in the coop, where I was utterly accepted as a gentle person who wanted to nurture and educate children, formed my confidence to persevere even through my tough middle years. I call these years my *being educator* phase, a time when I feel secure and solid in my views of education and I begin to influence others with vision and insights. I have had so many experiences from the good to the bad and ugly in my work-world, much of it related to my gender and sexuality and society's pressures for men (me as a man) to perform manly jobs where a preschool teacher or director is not an accepted profession. Something more along the lines of my father's profession of lumberjack or my uncle's mill worker vocation would be more accepted.

Being

After I left Amazon, I directed an afterschool program where I would be the center of gossip by mothers out in the soccer field bleachers, worried I was going to turn their school-age children gay as if I had such power or desire to manipulate another's being in these ways. I called this *being teacher* experience the Stepford Wives phase,

to relate back to Levin's (1972) satire and horror. For me, the Stepford Wives were a group of highly controlled women, whose free will and thinking was taken away, so they could please their husbands and look good to their neighbors as if keeping up appearances was of the upmost importance.

During this period, I learned that school-age program teaching and directing is the last frontier in education. We were mostly seen as after-school sitters, not as fellow educators and colleagues in the school. However, I was in a state of being, in a more comfortable place within myself as an educator and human being. I felt as if I understood the multi-layered facets to my work as a teacher and director. It was hard to shake my confidence because my self-assurance was very high. Amazon and the University of Oregon experiences had taught me to stand on my own feet and not compromise myself or my values for teaching and learning. However, I did not realize that I may have placed myself directly in harm's way, not having the protective membrane of my former accepting and caring co-workers.

While comfortable with myself and in my role, I faced many challenging events to deepen my being. In one school age program, children would look at me and say, "I don't have to listen to you, my mom's on the board and she can fire you!" In yet another, a parent demanded in a loud voice that I "get up and come over here (across a huge room) and plug this microwave in for me!" She was referring to the unplugged microwave that she wanted to use to heat up her daughter's breakfast; while I was over working with a science project at a table with a group of about seven children in the middle of pouring and mixing paints. At this stage of my career, I was in my eighth year of teaching and third of directing and I found myself longing for Amazon and my days of becoming and the safety of friendly folks. While I knew who I was, I didn't like how others were treating me. For this reason, I sought out better work places more aligned with my values and with preschool-aged children again, thinking I would find my comfort zone in a progressive preprimary school.

As my search for the right place went on, I encountered many growing pains across my career. Being a male director and hiring "younger and younger" teachers (maybe I was just getting older and older?) meant my *being educator* experiences were more about finding myself in constraining roles and power paradigms due to the attitudes of these young women coming into the field. I've encountered the label of "dad" at staff meetings such as the time when a teacher told of her difficulties and confusion of getting needs met when she goes to her "big sister" teacher and asks to purchase something; then, she is told "no" but later comes to director "dad" and is told "yes." I was the director "dad" in this scenario. I have noticed these role-labels placed on me more and more in my profession the older I get; all the while I find myself comfortable in my leadership skin, no matter what others label me. I find these labels curious more than dangerous, and I ask myself if that is how others *see and understand* me as a director. Labels lead me to wonder how else I can be tagged and what purpose these names give my profession.

I also wonder how I can exist in Beckett's (2007) notion of *in-between*, between me and the other trying to understand me, where there is pleasure in mutuality and in the unknown. I do consider what would happen if we were not able to label, but instead just exist with one another. What exists in-between me and others who try

and perceive my being and my work? How could the in-between aid in weakening the old power paradigm and releasing the wall of labels that substitute for relationships? These questions have led my desire for more quality relationships, as well as they guide me and help me seek out more meaning in my experiences with others in the lives of children. Seeking out what exists in the in-between has helped me to discover more meaningful places to work and live.

After leaving the school-age world and while directing in small parent cooperative I effectively learned about children under the age of two by a team of teachers who had been together for ten years, one of whom started the school as the toddler teacher eighteen years prior to my arrival. They taught me so much and so did this parent population, filled with concerned and engaged parents. I was still a young director to most of the families, and I did not have my own children. It seemed I would often hear the dreaded, "But you don't have children so you don't understand." So, while I am seen by teachers as "dad" on the one hand, I am also "non-parent" to the parents on the other hand. These labels and roles are others' ways of attaching meaning to my educator existence, but I've rejected them periodically or sometimes played into them. I've questioned them along the way as well. I believe that they have helped me to be who others need me to be for them, which allows me to pivot in my role as an educational leader. This phenomenon has allowed me to be open and listen to others; something I think most people seek—an ear and a listener, which situates them in the in-between.

The more I've lived in *being educator*, the more tools I've acquired in my own actualization (Mazlow, 1943). An example of this revolves around some of the hardest issues I've faced with staff and parents. During my doctoral degree and about nine years into coordinating and directing at the university lab school, our school underwent an expansion and renovation. I was incredibly busy learning to teach graduate students, researching Reggio Emilia, developing practices of documentation, collaboration and reflection in the lab school, and hanging on to my co-directing role.

During this wearing period, the state of Oregon briefly opened the rights for gays and lesbians to obtain a marriage license and we had a teacher marry her partner. Being on a liberal university campus most of our community were encouraging and compassionate at their teacher's happy occasion. This teacher wanted to celebrate her marriage in the school and shared her newspaper photo with her classroom of families and children. After two years of teaching with these families, everyone already knew the teacher personally and had met her partner during a family potluck or other community event, to which the staff's family is commonly invited. Also, being in a school that takes anti-bias education seriously, we supported this teacher's right and choice to celebrate in her school community, just as any other teacher has done, no matter a person's sexual orientation. While supportive of her decision, one family was also conflicted by their religious beliefs and worried about how to broach the conflicting conversations between church and school with their four-year-old daughter.

The family wanted help to determine how to proceed with developing their religious faith in their daughter's life and the incongruent values and messages she was receiving about her teacher's life in juxtaposition with her church. The family

did not approach me with their concerns, but instead went to my co-director. She took on this challenging situation by meeting with the family and taking a listening stand to aid them through their troubling internal conflict. In contrast, I was quite upset. I wanted to point out that our community would not support the biases represented by such religious beliefs and that we would want them to consider how they were hurting the teacher. Needless to say, my one-sided view was clouded by my own intolerance of a family's beliefs, which left me not wanting to listen or respond to them. I also felt righteousness in believing that our program's stance would supersede the encounters of prejudice such as those presented by this scenario. Living in a bubble does not create a healthy worldview, and I knew that I would need to grow internally to accommodate differences of beliefs and opinions, even when they directly affected me, not just a teacher in my community.

I had this nagging thought in the back of my head, one I attributed to my *being educator* phase. I kept wondering what I might have done when presented with a similar parent concern myself. What would I have done if I did not have a co-director willing to take up this problem? I felt an internal calling for my professional growth, to stretch in my thinking and to grow through my natural and comfortable way of believing.

I suddenly recognized that I had to reach into the zone of listening and seek to understand the other's point of view, even if I didn't share their same beliefs. Although I do not believe such questions about sexuality being a choice and being able to influence another's orientation by acknowledging one's own difference, I had to face real-world realities that even in my liberal community this way of thinking was alive and well and very much contrary to my own experiences in life. Having lived my entire life in a hetero-influencing culture, where the norms, images, and societal values do not support being gay or lesbian was counter to the claim that one "chooses this lifestyle" or has a "sexual preference."

In fact, I've always believed this was the way I was born and that I've always been different than the majority trying to influence me to be as they are through negative inducements such as losing family, friends, status at work, habitation, along with other social, political, and human rights enjoyed by masses of people. So instead, I found myself seeking out the positive benefits brought about by my nature, "does my being gay add to my nurturing qualities?" How can I deny my life as a gay man while working in a field that has so long supported my ability to nurture and be a gentile and loving person to children and their families? These ideas seem to go hand-in-hand in my mind and they make sense to me.

In the end, my co-director handled our particular conflict with grace, and I am still unsure of how I would have treated the matter. She listened and pointed out why we teach from a place of diversity of perspectives and countering biases. She told them that she would help them to find resources to better understand how to live with their child between two sets of values, those of church/home and of school/community.

For me, I asked myself to stretch in my being educator. I had to move out beyond my comfort zone to transcend barriers that exist between parents, teachers and me. I had to forgive others who had transgressed against me during my *Stepford Wives*

episodes and learn to believe in active listening and partnership as a way through tough work-relationship periods. I had to learn to articulate my point of view as my opinion, as something different from others who did not believe the same as me. I had to learn to live within a community which shares many points of view and welcome the other's opinions as a starting place for understanding and compassion.

I began to live in an enlightened state where mindfulness was an ongoing part of my practice at work. For me, this state of being began to look like practicing affirmations for myself that I was contented in my work-place and surrounded by people who recognized my value as an educator, a gay male educator who was impassioned with creative drive to give children the best a society and school could offer; to show the child's strength and capacity through the image of the child as inspired by the work in Reggio Emilia, Italy (Edwards et al., 1998).

Unbecoming

An unbecoming period would generally include walking away from whatever I was before, as I was formerly acting in my being educator. However, for me, unbecoming has been about releasing the old to become and be more fully in education. So, how have I released the old of my educator being, and what has this release left me with being?

I entered an educational leadership doctoral program in 2003, wanting to explore leadership at new levels. I had been a director and teacher in early childhood education for over 20 years at this point in time. I wanted to explore more education and professionally grow or I knew I would find myself leaving early education entirely. The taxing job of directing was stripping me of my desire to work with teachers, families, and children.

The educational leadership program, the major expansion and renovation of my school, and the creation of a master's specialization in early education were converging, tiring, and transformative. I began to move more and more into teacher education and away from program directing. I began to dynamically influence the pedagogy of a transforming school through teaching the teachers. In addition, I found myself shedding my old skin of being a program director to move into the new role of professor.

My unbecoming is happening simultaneously to a new becoming. As I fall away from the daily running of a school, I fall toward a tenure professor role. I think that tenure-track makes a person unravel from an old way of being. However, I'm not sure what one becomes through this process? Maybe this is the point where I stand at the precipice of someone new, not knowing or recognizing who I am or will become. It is terrifying for me. The judgment of my writing, my research, my articulation and ideas of what school means is so harsh by my peers and colleagues. I never know if others (peer-reviewers) are playing out their fantasies of having power or being the one who holds the knowledge not letting others in or if they really are trying to help me learn to better articulate my point of view, or both in a paradox; one which I cannot escape in my new vocation. I also wonder if this is part of the becoming professor for most everyone in this chosen path of becoming professor (Cooper & Stevens, 2003).

The tenure process has really taken over my life. It affects my daily existence by infiltrating the way I think about my work-life and my future in education. I love research, writing, teaching and community engagement as I disseminate my experiences and research into the world. I feel as if the constraining peer-review process has hindered my ability to fully articulate my point of view at the same time as has helped me to consider how I articulate my work for broader audiences to understand my thinking. This paradox is difficult, and I am seeking a way through to a place of calm and peace of mind. Sometimes I think I am arriving at a mindful state of being, letting go of my need to control the outcomes of my fate. At other times, I begin to unravel as I sometimes encounter the rejection and feedback that my writing, thinking or research was not accepted by the journal's reviewers for the many reasons explained, even with some conflicting opinions from reviewers.

Beyond the ups and downs of peer-review, I have internal university reviews which sometimes leave me confused. I work incredibly hard on my campus. However, my peers are mostly interested in what I've published. I receive high marks on my evaluations for every course I teach; however, my peers pressure me on how much I've published in peer-review journals. Moreover, I work fifty percent of my time at the laboratory school, designing the pedagogy of the school. I sit on two community school boards. I have designed and developed a website related to my teaching and scholarship. I help to facilitate and organize Oregon's Reggio Inspiration Network, a volunteer community organization with over 300 members. I present peer-reviewed research papers at two to three national or international education conferences each year and help my students present at local or regional conferences. I helped to create and now coordinate a master's specialization in early childhood education with over 50 students in its third year. I work with doctoral students and master's students on their research projects annually. However, my peers are most interested in underscoring my peer-reviewed publications. Their preoccupation, which is now my obsession, with publication is unraveling my experiences of living life and working with children, families and staff in early education.

Ultimately, my unbecoming educator mostly includes losing parent contact and direct experiences of learning with children. I miss this very much so as I find parents who teach me through their desires for betterment of their child's life. Children also teach me so much about living in the moment, holding on to curiosity, moving through emotions and not generally staying stuck for too long in one way of feeling and thinking about a worldview. Children are the best of human beings. They offer the world this gift as their citizenship. They are producers of a glorious way of living, not bound by all of the constraints we've put on ourselves as adults. I often wonder who makes up some of our more ridiculous rules in society; those we live by at a cost to our humanity, such as why a forty-hour work week, or why lock up food and housing is so expense? And, why we make it so hard to get along with ourselves and others.

Rinaldi (2006) says that our differences in and of themselves are not what is at stake, it is the way we treat the differences in society that is what causes us to lose our ability to listen to one another. Listening is what we are in jeopardy of losing as

a fundamental factor to human relationships. Her statements undergird a new question for me. How do I stay intact and maintain the courage to go forward listening as I unravel or unbecome the old me? Is this my pathway to becoming again?

Conclusions

My crisis in the unbecoming educator is only a placeholder for what is to come next in my life. As I move through entropy and come apart at a molecular level, I realize that there is a flaw in the belief of the fatal law; the belief that all life will end in a full heat death. Instead, I have chosen to believe that as life is coming apart, there is a seed of opportunity created from the energy of breakdown. This kernel of energy allows for new life to be born from the ashes of the old. As Marx-Hubbard (1997) suggests, "Life eats entropy!" She goes on to explain that we need all of this breakdown in order to create the energy to take a quantum leap forward into the new creation of life.

I've chosen to believe in Marx-Hubbard's (1997) theory for my own reconstruction. I have encountered the random disordering time and again in my becoming, being and unbecoming processes and I have watched it turn into experiences full of meaning. With this thought in mind, I search out my copy of the book, *A Simpler Way*, by Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996). I open it directly to the page on the complexity of order in life where the word emergence is significant. There is something familiar in this book to the statement of "life eats entropy" by Marx-Hubbard (1997) and it is framed around order or the emergence of life. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers state:

> Emergence is a common phenomenon found everywhere in life. Social insects are a particularly stunning example. The tower-building termites of Africa and Australia accomplish little when they act alone; they dig only lowly piles of dirt. But as they attract other termites to their vicinity, a collective forms. As a group, they become builders of immense towers. (p. 68)

As we connect our stories with those of others, we find we can build immense towers, bridges to understanding and meaningful moments in the in-between. I wish life experiences will help me to grow and become a better person in order to influence the lives of the most wonderful of humans, the lives of young children. This grand desire creates a reordering of my life's priorities and develops a more complex way of seeing into the world. It also carries with it the struggle for meaning and the complexity of identity reconstruction and intense listening that is required of each human being working in teaching and learning.

In the end, as a man in the lives of young children, I challenge others to deeply consider and reflect on their own experiences with our youngest. Who do we want to be when we are standing in front of the best of human beings? Will we begin the labels game? Or, will we seek to live in the in-between where the good rises up into strong and unmediated relationships? I believe that to create this space requires a will to want to stop, pay attention, deeply listen, and generate doubt and the precariousness we feel when encountering one another.

CHAPTER 1

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A TALE OF COLLECTIVE ACHIEVEMENT

When I first started teaching public school in New York City over a decade ago, I was concerned with how I would be perceived as an African American male elementary school teacher in a climate where most of the teachers in public schools were, and still are, white females. I will never forget when I was a student teacher at the same school the year before one morning a visibly shaken Latina mother approached me as I was taking down desks off the tables saying, "I know this is a progressive school and all, but I have to draw the line at this." She handed me what appeared upon first glance to be the classified section of a local newspaper that was filled with ads of naked women (except for strategically placed black dots covering certain parts of their anatomy) and I looked at her with a puzzled look. She then told me that her son—who had come into the classroom a few minutes before she arrived and was, at the moment, on the other side of the classroom at the lizard tank in the science area—was looking at these pages of ads at their home and he told her that I had given it to him.

My concern about being a male teacher quickly began to take on nightmare proportions. Well, without missing a beat, I called the student, and he began to walk over slowly, head hanging low—the walk of guilt. It didn't take much questioning before he revealed through tears that he had lied to her. His mother said, "Oh my God, Darrell, I'm so sorry." I told her, "I would never…" and before I could finish my sentence she began to give him a verbal spanking, letting him know that he could have gotten me in some serious trouble and had him apologize to us both. That moment taught me how important—no, sacred, it is to build trusting relationships with children's families and that you have to be honest and understanding—and fully present. I ended up teaching her daughter for three years during my subsequent time as a teacher at the same school and this mother was one of my strongest supporters. Years later, thanks to the internet, we are all still in contact today. Both her children are attending college and are doing well.

In my eyes, my real development as an educator actually began on the last day of class of my first year teaching public school. I was struggling to hold back the emotions of having to say goodbye to the twenty-four children that I had come to care for deeply. It was a year that started off full of hopes and dreams by any new teacher. The summer before I began teaching was spent dreaming of what my classroom would look like and sound like. I imagined happy, worry-free children reading books, drawing pictures, and playing learning games. In preparation for making this dream a reality, I would frequently hop into my little Honda Civic that summer and storm teacher supply stores. My favorite place to shop was one located in an outer borough of New York City. I remember walking into what appeared to be a sprawling suburban supermarket complete with four-wheeled shopping carts, the only difference

was that this store was not filled with produce, meats, and aisles of colorfully packaged canned-goods—it was filled with posters, board games, mathematics and science materials, and seemingly every workbook known to mankind. I would roam up and down the aisle grabbing items to put in my cart that caught my eye—sometimes, without even checking the price. After loading up the trunk of my car with my latest bounty of school supplies, I would drive back to NYC, still dreaming.

I was young and determined, and I wanted to have the perfect first year. So, when I transported my purchases to my classroom on the third floor of the school, upon entering the room, I immediately noticed that the "horrible" magenta and brown walls were not in keeping with my "perfect classroom" dream, and I quickly approached the principal of my school to ask for permission to paint the walls of my classroom. "Sure" and a smile was what I received in response, and off I went with credit card in hand. I learned from one of my graduate courses that the most learning-conducive color for a classroom for children was something like a school-bus yellow—my dream was another step closer to being a reality.

Well, by the time I made it from the first floor to the doorway of my classroom with freshly mixed cans of paint, the telephone in my empty classroom began to ring. I answered and it was the principal of my school asking me to come down to the main office on the second floor to talk to her for a second. She sat me down and told me that I couldn't paint my classroom and the ultimate decision was out of her hands. Again, I was young, determined, and naïve with minimal background on the politics of the public school system and public school buildings. "It's ok, I'll use the paint (formidable expensive Benjamin Moore) for something else." I stored it away on the very bottom shelf of my classroom closet and sat on the bench in my class-room looking at those "horrible" walls and decided to strategically hang big Day-Glo flowers on the walls—in combination with the posters and other items I'd purchased, my room would still be eye-catching and festive for my future first and second grade students. I was determined to have my own "Martha Stewart moment" on that first day of school.

So there I was on that sunny September morning with a smile on my face, expecting that my little first and second graders would be so happy that they had such a cool looking classroom. It wasn't until after morning meeting, about an hour into the school day watching children who were more focused on each other than the classroom walls, I realized that when I was putting together my classroom it was from the perspective of a 6 foot 2 inch tall man's and not from the perspective of the average height of a first or second grader. Well, I spent the next couple of hours at the end of the day lowering everything that I could to their level of vision.

That year, I listened to the "experienced wisdom" of my fellow teachers at my non-traditional school and kept my students happy playing games, drawing, painting, encouraging invented spelling, and choice-time made up a large portion of our day. For a while it seemed like we celebrated the drop of a pencil with cupcakes and juice in my classroom—I wanted my students to enjoy school. My assigned mentor, a fellow teacher with years of "experienced wisdom," would come to observe me from time to time teaching a lesson that I had prepared, and as I taught, I noticed her meandering around my classroom checking the markers in the containers at each

table by rubbing them on a blank sheet of paper. When she grabbed the first marker, I thought she was getting ready to take some copious notes on my lesson, but I was mistaken. Her feedback consisted of a somewhat begrudgingly: "That was good." while handing me a couple of markers, "These are dry!" Then advising me to replace them as she walked out and back to her own classroom. The word "hazing" comes to mind now. I remember staff meetings where the focus seemed to be either how "delicious" or, on the opposite end of the spectrum, how "emotionally disturbed" students were. Looking back on those times now it seems like we rarely spoke about children's academic development in comparison to the large amount of time we spent discussing their emotional and social development.

So on that last day of my first year of teaching, my students and I celebrated the end of the school year with pizza, music, and dancing. When the last student hugged me good-bye that hot June afternoon, I returned to that bench in my classroom that I'd sat at months before dreaming of what my first year would be like, and I sobbed. No, these were not tears of joy at my accomplishment of surviving my first year in the classroom, not tears about the fact that I would miss them—and I would, without question. No, I cried because I asked myself one question on that bench, "What did I teach them?" and the tears flowed because I couldn't answer it with any conviction or real proof. I vowed at that moment that as long as I was a teacher this would be a question that I would be able to answer yearly, monthly, weekly, daily, moment to moment, and to each individual child.

At the time, I felt that I had not "done right"; that is, done my best by the children that I had grown to love and had grown to love me. I had not done right by their families who were entrusting me with their care and well-being. I began to realize upon reflection that "I'd put my good sense on the shelf" (as my mother used to say) that first year and listened to the "hazers." Although I didn't always agree with them, I was an insecure first-year teacher. Still, it wasn't like I didn't know who my students were; it wasn't like there was some pre-existing cultural discontinuity or divide between us. I identified with my Black and Latino students, many of whom came from neighborhoods like the one I had grown up in as a child in the Bronx. Their families were like my friends' families—like my Bronx neighbors. Actually, watching them was like watching my self as a child. The urgency to rectify this experience for me as a teacher had to do with the fact that I knew how important these childhood years were and that they were irreplaceable and precious—they were the foundational year. Rising off that bench I vowed, "Never again!" would I let this happen to me or my students.

But as fate would have it, I was asked to "loop up" for the upcoming school year to teach the next grade with many of the same students. I saw it as divine intervention and a chance to "get it right." I spent the next summer taking graduate education courses, and definitely not spending too much time and money at the teacher supply stores. I reflected on the things that I thought I did well as a teacher and the areas that I needed to improve. But most of all, I thought about my students—each one of them—what did they need? What had I learned from them? Then I thought about my own childhood teachers, what had they done that worked? What were the things that didn't seem to work and why? The questions came and so did some of the answers.

Ironically, the most powerful learning experience that summer was a brief vacation trip to India. While I was there, I visited a school in a small fishing village and once the news spread through the village that I was a teacher, I was invited by some of the school's teachers to visit the village school. I remember thinking how similar the children were in NYC to children in the fishing village, when I approached the school I saw young children my students' age at recess playing with cars and trucks that were individually attached to a long string. So as one child pulled the pint-sized vehicle, the others chased behind laughing and smiling. But upon closer inspection, I realized that the cars and trucks that I dismissed as "just like the ones my kids had," were actually small colored-boxes with no wheels at all. When I was invited into the school to meet the teachers, they were warm and friendly, but the classroom was not like mine at all. It had a dirt floor, bare stone walls and an old small chalkboard.

Then the teacher asked if I would lead the class in an English lesson and handed me a workbook that had seen better days. I smiled and moved up front and with no "Eat at Joe's" environmental distractions, I turned my attention squarely to the children. They were sitting not at tables or desks but next to each other on a few wooden pews—their eyes locked on me. As I went over the story and the vocabulary word fill-ins on the page, I transported us all, in my mind, to my classroom with all its "Eat at Joe's" accoutrements and began to immediately imagine their heads turning away from me—their eyes looking for distraction. It was at that moment that I realized that part of the reason that urban students, in particular Black and Latino boys, were labeled with attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder (ADD/ADHD) had more to do with the environment and less to do with them. It had more to do with how and what they are taught to pay attention to and less about an inability to focus. If ten or more things are competing for my attention at the same time, then how can I possibly focus on one of them for any length of time? I was inspired by the teachers and the learners in the poor fishing village in India. Especially by two fourth graders at that school, who were building a scale model of the school out of paper, outside of their school principal's office. They had simple rulers, no bells and whistles-materials like the children in many schools in NYC, yet the work they produced was of the highest quality. My mind pondered how these village children with next to nothing were so focused, so intelligent, so engaged. While in many of New York's public schools, children were basically tripping over books and materials daily, yet many of them were unfocused and struggling academically in school.

Fueled by my experience in India, the following September my second and third grade students walked into a classroom that was not riddled with pre-made posters and charts—I left some of the flowers. I explained to them that when we put things up on the walls, it's because we decided that we need it for our work. They got it and suddenly all those decorative extras disappeared and only reappeared if it related to the teaching and learning that occurred. So we went from "Eat at Joe's" to "Let's Build Joe's"—it was powerful. I taught them as if my life and theirs were at stake— they were. I knew that these urban children didn't stand a chance unless I got them to work at and beyond what the academic standards for their grade suggested. My goal was to provide them with the tools they needed to dream their futures and still

dream my own future as a new teacher. Knowing that what I was about to do would rub some people the wrong way—mainly the "hazers," I planned how to better address their academic needs in progressive ways by shaping a curriculum that mixed the "tried and true" with the new.

As I reinvested in the power of education to transform lives, I reinvested in the art of teaching and the gift of learning. I took strategies into my classroom that I'd learned from the renowned teacher education school I was attending for my master's degree at the time. I adapted and differentiated instruction based on my students' needs sometimes a day or two after I had learned a method in a particular course and gave feedback to my professors and classmates at our next class meeting. Some of my students resisted these changes and my high expectations, especially those who had been at the school since kindergarten and had become use to being engaged based upon their social and emotional whims—where opting out of learning at times was allowed. I was focused on their academic development from that moment on. In the beginning of this period of change in my teaching, I found myself having to revisit classroom management and behavioral issues regularly. There would be no more "time outs" for students who were horse-playing or engaging in off-task behavior. Children at my school were often sent to "visit" other classrooms or the principal's office for misbehavior. Now, things were different; the only option for my students was "time in" with me. In other words, my expectation was that I would give them a few in-class minutes/seconds to get themselves together because they were not leaving the classroom. I would often say to students who early on asked to leave the classroom for unacceptable reasons, "absolutely not. I am not teaching in the hallway or the principal's office. You are a part of this learning community and we are expecting you to contribute to our learning by focusing on your work and not disturbing our community. We need you here with us." Overtime, this mantra took effect and we got down to the business of learning and the horse-play and requests stopped.

Another turning point I experienced a few years later was taking my students out of the classroom. For example, I discovered that two of the older boys who were previously slated to receive special services before they became my students, were picked up by the special education teacher and taken to his room. As fate would have it, I was on a prep and went to check to see how they were doing with the writing assignment I gave and were supposed to be working on with the assistance of the special education teacher. To my surprise, I found this particular teacher sitting at his desk on one side of the room completely lost in the pages of the *New York Times*. My two students sat a distance away playing with two action figures, there notebooks nowhere in sight. I took them and their notebooks with me back to my classroom, leaving the special education teacher still lost in his newspaper. He didn't even notice that I entered the room. With a finger to my lips and a sweeping motion, they quietly got up and left with me. I quietly closed the door behind me. It actually took over five minutes for the teacher to show up at my classroom door. After a conversation with my school's principal, I made sure that he never took another one of my students out of my classroom again, but he was always welcome to come in and work with them in my classroom. No matter where my students would go,

recess or lunch, I went too. I tried to find out if they behaved differently in different contexts. More important, I wanted to support them in their activities and inform my teaching; an informed teacher is an effective teacher.

The constant observation of my students reinforced at the time, the importance of staying informed about the work of my colleagues. I would frequently visit the art, movement, and gym teachers' classrooms when my students were with them. Not necessarily to check on the teachers, but to build on our work with the children. I also encouraged these same teachers to come visit my classroom. This often led to the development of collaborative projects that further enhanced the learning experiences of my students, and our professional development as teachers.

I was relentless and transparent with my students. I would tell them what I expected now and how I expected them to handle their responsibilities as my students. I affectionately referred to them as "my babies"; they loved it. I was inspired by my educator role models such as Lorraine Monroe, Lisa Delpit, and many others. I built relationships with each student and facilitated their building of constructive and supportive relationships with each other. We were not only a team but a family of learners. It was not uncommon for a child to have posed a question to me with, "Daddy (and sometimes, humorously) Mommy this or that…" to which I would smile and respond "Yes, son or yes, my child." We'd share a laugh and keep working. They knew I loved them. I told them regularly and without hesitation, both girls and boys. For many, I wasn't just their teacher but the nurturing father figure they may not have had. But they were all clear about my role as their teacher, and their roles as students. I was not a peer or a friend; I was a caring responsible adult. Mutual respect was of the utmost importance to me.

I told my students that I would speak to them the same way, in the same tone (especially, if I was being stern at the time) in front of their parents as I was speaking to them in the moment. I learned that some children played with their hard-working parents emotions, and for attention they would inflate reprimands at school to make themselves look like the victims of a cruel or insensitive teacher. Parents, who feel guilty for not always being able to be around for their children due to work, fall for this tactic, and it could lead to confusion and resentment, and sometimes, confrontations between home and school. I knew that my students' success was directly tied to keeping the lines of communication between home and school open and active. Parents could call me at home and on my cell phone, and I made sure that I had their contact numbers as well. I called most often to share positive news about their child's development as a learner and sometimes to share a concern. I also sent home notes of praise to parents regarding their child's accomplishments. An informed parent is a trusting parent.

Over time, many of my conversations with parents were about them seeking my advice on managing their child's behavior at home and outside of school, and we worked things out together. The running jokes among my students were that I had cameras watching them at home when they left me at the end of the school day, or that I slept at the school, or never slept at all. What they didn't realize is that their parents would share their lives with me on a regular basis. I learned about families' weddings, trips, birthdays, and occurrences that may have happened to or from school.

When I learned about the death of a loved one in one of my students' families, I offered a shoulder to cry on if needed. We were a big extended family, and it was common for my students to request that we spend the night or weekend at school. Their families were welcomed into our classroom to work with us at anytime. An emotionally safe learning environment is an engaging and effective learning environment.

Over the years, my students' attendance records were outstanding. I will never forget the day when the "attendance woman" from the Department of Education came to my classroom to meet me and shake my hand. She said, "I don't know what you're doing but your kids are never absent." I responded, "Yes, they like school." Honestly, parents would tell me that even when their children were really sick and bed-ridden they would be upset about missing school. That was a huge testament to our co-constructed learning environment because the children worked hard and their achievement on formal and informal assessments was off the charts. We did not do drill and kill test prep sessions everyday either, but I embedded test-taking strategies into my progressive teaching methods and pointed out connections across the curriculum to them regularly, reminding them of connections to something that we learned yesterday or even a year ago. I encouraged them to speak up when they didn't understand something; that was their job! And yes, we celebrated their achievements with the same frequency and vigor as we did holidays and birthdays. I wanted to convey that learning and achievement should be acknowledged and praised. In my eyes, I was only an effective teacher if they were effective learners.

Overtime, some of the "hazers" became "haters" but it didn't bother me. I was there for the children and managed to build some very supportive collegial relationships despite being in a climate where, at one time, I was once told by another peer that it wasn't fair to the other teachers in our school that my class was so high functioning. The comment packed a wallop because it came from someone I trusted at the time and respected as a colleague; however, I let it go and held on to my high expectations of myself, my students and the school. Sometimes raising your standards means that people around you have to raise theirs. I began to see that change happening at my school. Our professional development meetings were being spent on sharing academic development strategies as well as socio-emotional development strategies. We began to look at the connections within grade levels and across grade levels in our school. It was around this time that I made the decision to leave the elementary classroom to pursue doctoral studies in education. I wanted to reach more children and be an agent of change on a systemic level.

After recently finishing my doctoral degree a few years ago, I still find myself in the classroom. Now my students are future teachers enrolled in teacher education programs at a major university. By working with the next generation of public school teachers, I'd like to think that I am being an agent of change in the lives of even more children than before. Most of my current students are still majority white females and most of their public school students will be majority Black and Latino. So my mission is to get them ready to touch the lives of these children in positive ways give them the theoretical, practical, culturally responsive, and self-reflective tools they need to help their future urban students dream their future.

My years teaching young children have helped to shape my own research agenda. The research study I conducted for my doctoral dissertation was a qualitative study of the cross-generational schooling experiences of African American males. I interviewed elementary school age boys and older males in their immediate and extended family to find out what school was like from their perspectives and how would their experiences inform the educational system that continues to host them in the bottom tiers of academic achievement. What do these voices say about the challenges they face and more importantly do their voices say about the existing statistical data may not capture?

The narrative stories of the African American males participating in this study, across the generations, reveal a common thread about education. It is multifaceted and it involves the work of many—students, parents, community members, administrators, etc. Upon analysis of these narratives, simply put, good schooling is invested in collective achievement and bad schooling is not invested in collective achievement.

Most of the males in the study have experienced more of the later. Regardless of age, they were clearly able to articulate and extrapolate what teaching that is invested in collective achievement should look like. It is caring, filled with high expectations; it is resourceful; it is culturally responsive; it is dynamic; it is connected and builds on other stakeholder contributions, and it doesn't matter who is doing it male, female, Black or White, etc. And most importantly, according to the youngest participants in this study—it should be fun. Ladson Billing's work on culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy provided a framework for reforming teacher education and impacting student achievement for marginalized students. Collective achievement builds on her seminal work and offers another framework that will reach not only students and teachers, but all stakeholders in and outside the classroom.

The question we must ask ourselves is: should students' academic trajectory be predetermined by the assumptions and beliefs that teachers have of students, their families, and their communities? No, but it happens everyday in schools, based on teachers' perceptions of the educational legacy and experiences that are passed on generation to generation that enters the classroom with each student they teach. The demographics of the majority who are teaching in public school classrooms today are white, middle-class females, in contrast to students they teach, who are students of color. Again, what assumptions do teachers make because of differences of race, ethnicity, gender and class? How do teachers view and respond to the educational legacies that walk into schools and classrooms each day? These are critical questions that teachers and schools must ask.

This year I will be attending the high school graduations of many of my former elementary school students, and I will be just as proud of them on that day as I was when they graduated from the school I taught. I was an elementary school teacher in a large urban public school system for several years prior to pursuing my doctoral studies. A few years ago, I attended the eighth grade graduation ceremony of my former third grade students. After the ceremony, I found myself locked in a warm embrace with a former student and his family. As we shared in this moment of celebration, this African American mother said to me, "You did it, you should be so proud. Look at what you've done, all your hard work." Still hugging them, I said,

"No, look at what *we've* done." Now, through the lens of my research, I see that moment as a defining moment of collective achievement. In lifting each of their roles, I then addressed my own. I told his mother she got him ready for school everyday and every time she attended class conferences. I reminded the father about the time when he read books with his son on the bus to and from school. I shared with his aunt how she helped him with his homework after school. And to the student I said, "You worked hard and wanted to learn." I was able to do my work because from the start I acknowledged and incorporated their work with my own. On that graduation day, I shared in many moments such as this that I now see as key examples of collective achievement. These moments continue to resonate in my head and have helped me put the pieces together, in concert with the literature, and most definitely with the voices of the African American males in my study.

In examining the schooling experiences and achievement of African American males, educators and researchers have often not viewed them as being knowledgeable informants of their own experiences. Contrary to this approach, I asked African American boys and men to share their schooling experiences with me and they did. My participants taught me about how they negotiate their identity as African American males and navigate the terrain of availability and access to opportunity regarding their education. These are voices of experience that can inform the work of educators, administrators, researchers, parents, community organizations, and policy-makers. Collective achievement is a model of reciprocity. As teachers and students our fates are linked. It breeds shared responsibility and shared accountability.