

# Finding **Joy** in Teaching Students of **Diverse Backgrounds**

*Culturally  
Responsive  
and Socially  
Just Practices in  
U.S. Classrooms*



**Heinemann**  
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Chapter 3

# It's *Whom* You Teach, Not Just *What* You Teach

The best piece of advice I received during my teacher preparation program many years ago was “start where the kids are at.” This advice almost seems redundant. Where else *would* we start? At the same time, I was urged to leave my “cultural baggage at the door.” That these pieces of advice were contradictory didn’t seem to occur to my professors. Yet soon after beginning my teaching career in an intermediate school in Brooklyn, New York, it became clear that leaving my cultural baggage at the door—in essence, leaving my identity behind—was not only difficult but also impossible, because my identity, knowledge, and experiences were the best ways to connect with my students. This is true of all teachers, not just teachers of color teaching children of color, but for the connection to take place, all teachers need to truly get to know their students.

Given the kind of preparation they receive for the profession as well as their own limited experiences with diversity, many teachers do not *know* “where the kids are at.” Instead, as we’ll see in Roger Wallace’s reflections in this chapter, some teachers start where they *would like* their students to be. The result may be that teachers do not recognize where their students already are. At the same time they negate their students’ identities, teachers may also negate their own identities by failing to bring themselves fully into their teaching. Getting too close to our students, we’ve often been told, violates professional standards and the distance needed to maintain control in the classroom. But when teachers negate their own identities—believing that they must be “professional” or “neutral”—they deprive their students of the opportunity to get to know them more deeply and in the process to form meaningful relationships with them. ✨

This chapter focuses on Angeles Pérez and Roger Wallace, teachers who epitomize what it means to “start where the kids are at,” while also recognizing that it is almost impossible, as well as counterproductive, to leave their identities out of the classroom. They know that *whom* they teach is as or more important than what they teach and that whatever they teach—geometry or art, reading or math—is also about themselves and their view of the world.

## Starting Where Kids Are At

Although vastly different in many ways, Angeles Pérez and Roger Wallace nevertheless share this truth: *relationships are at the heart of teaching*. Nel Noddings’s influential work on the relational aspect of teaching has transformed how many teachers and researchers understand the need to create caring classrooms in order to build strong bonds with students. Since first published in 1992, her book *The Challenge to Care in Schools* has provided an alternative to the primary focus on methods and content that has been the yardstick by which teachers and their classrooms have traditionally been assessed. Throughout her body of work, Noddings has insisted that relationships are as important as the content in the curriculum.

Many scholars have since documented how caring manifests itself in schools around the nation and with different populations. Angela Valenzuela’s study of Mexican and Mexican American students and their teachers in a Texas high school (1999) found that students benefited academically from their teachers’ acts of kindness and thoughtfulness, from bringing in tacos to feed hungry students to being available to help them whenever needed. In a school with few examples of success, she found that the students who benefited from their teachers’ care also benefited academically. Valenzuela calls this “the politics of caring”: not simply saying “Good job!” or patting students on the back (particularly when accompanied by low expectations and cultural and racial stereotypes) but believing in students, showing an interest in their well-being, demanding only the best from them, having high expectations of them, and supporting them in meeting those high expectations.

Similarly, in research with Puerto Rican middle school girls, Rosalie Rolón-Dow (2005) proposes *critical care*, an approach founded on a historical understanding of students’ lives and their sociopolitical realities. For her, caring is not just an individual phenomenon but an institutional one. In the same vein, Mari Ann Roberts (2010) explores the ethic of care in a group of African American teachers of African American students. These teachers showed a genuine concern for the future of their students, while at the same time providing support for their present success. Roberts describes this as *culturally relevant critical teacher care* to highlight the significance of taking students’ identities into account when interacting with them. In both studies, the researchers make it clear that care is *not* colorblind, that it necessarily takes into account students’ identities, their histories, and their realities. Likewise, in his work with high school students of diverse backgrounds in summer and afterschool programs, Ernest Morrell (2008) emphasizes developing students’ sense

of efficacy through researching conditions in their schools and exploring how those conditions limit their educational opportunities.

There are many other factors besides care or lack of care—poverty, limited curricular and extra-curricular opportunities, poor health care and nutrition, stressors in the home, the nature of the community, among others—that also influence how students relate to school, but the research on teachers' relationships with students make it clear that care matters a great deal. Caring goes beyond superficial acts of charity. It is a genuine love for students that entails recognizing their talents, their identities, and their needs. It also means demonstrating an interest in their families and their communities by interacting frequently with them, attending community events, and becoming in some sense a member of those communities. ✓

## Bringing Your Identity into the Classroom

Parker Palmer, whose work focuses on education, social change, and spirituality, has famously written, “We teach who we are” (1998, p. 1). His statement captures what is at once the essence and also a taboo of teaching. The conventional wisdom is that teachers are supposed to be “professional,” detached, and objective. Except for kindergarten teachers, who are permitted the luxury of demonstrating their love for their students, even forgiven for hugging them and being their surrogate parents while at school, all other teachers are urged not to get too close to their students. One need only look at the advice given to novice teachers: “Don’t smile until Christmas!” they are warned, or they will forever lose the respect of their charges. Angeles Pérez is indignant at this advice, saying, “Don’t smile until Christmas?! That means you never really made a connection with them until Christmas!” This is a good reminder that teaching is always about relationships and about being oneself, whether on the first day of school or the last.

Many of the teachers I interviewed also spoke about how they develop strong bonds with their students by bringing themselves completely into their teaching. John Gunderson, a high school teacher of psychology and history in southern California, explained that what’s important to him is the students:

“Teaching is about relationships. It’s not about knowing how to do a lesson plan. It’s about knowing how to create an environment to foster humanity, to foster human relationships; when you do that, the content will be so much easier to transmit because you’re in a conversation with people and with that conversation you are telling a story.”

María Ramírez Acevedo, an early childhood education teacher in Milwaukee, spoke about her culture being important not only to her but also to her students: “It’s important to know where you come from. I’ve always been proud of being Puerto Rican, and I think it’s important for children to learn that as well.”

For María Federico Brummer, a high school teacher in Tucson, Arizona, it's about proudly representing her Mexican American identity and community. Being a mentor to her students is vital to María because, as a young student herself, she felt she'd sometimes been judged negatively because of her identity. She shares her own story about being counseled not to apply for college while at Tucson High School, the high school where she now teaches. She wants her students to understand that the advice she was given was counterproductive, even racist, and that they, like her, can overcome the stereotypes on which such advice is based.

All the teachers I interviewed identified the connection with students as a primary reason they thrived in the classroom. Amber Bechard, a language arts teacher in a public middle school in an urbanized suburb with a very diverse student body who had previously taught kindergarten children in a privileged private school, found that regardless of the students' ages, socioeconomic circumstances, or identities, "it's this interaction, this experience that we have together, that I think makes teachers thrive." John Nguyen, a high school teacher in New Haven, Connecticut, credited being honest for his close relationship with students. He explained: "They know that if they ask me a question, I'm very honest with them, unless it's a political issue. Then I'll give them both sides, but I won't tell them where I stand. For the most part, anything else is fair game." That kind of honesty is another example of bringing one's identity into the classroom.

In this chapter, we see how Angeles Pérez and Roger Wallace create classrooms founded on caring for students through their willingness to bring themselves fully into the classroom.

## Two Models of Caring

*A* Saying that relationships, the *whom* of teaching, are essential in no way diminishes the centrality of content knowledge, the *what* of teaching. Teachers must be competent in teaching content, and they need to remain curious, excited about learning, always on the lookout for both information and pedagogical approaches that will keep them current and fresh. Being knowledgeable about one's subject matter is indispensable—but it is not enough. Good teachers understand that knowing their students well and tailoring their pedagogy to the students in their classroom make a difference in the quality of the education students receive.

Angeles Pérez and Roger Wallace, although separated by age, gender, ethnicity, geography, years in the profession, and experience, nonetheless epitomize what it means to focus on relationships. Their stories hold lessons for all of us who care about children of diverse backgrounds and their future.

### *Angeles Pérez*

When I interviewed fourth-grade bilingual teacher Angeles Pérez in 2010, she was in only her second year of teaching language arts, social studies, and ESL (English as a second language) in a K–5 Title 1 school in the Sheldon, Texas, Independent School District, where 87 percent of the students are



**Angeles Pérez** is now an instructional specialist in the Aldine Independent School District, in Houston, Texas. She began her career in the Sheldon Independent School District, where for three years she was a fourth-grade bilingual teacher in a self-contained classroom. Angeles has a bachelor's degree in Spanish and a master's degree in educational administration and technology leadership. She has worked with English language learners, special education students, and gifted and talented students. In her current position, Angeles provides interventions for struggling students. The ELL population at her current school is more than 70 percent, the number of students at or below the poverty line

more than 80 percent. Serving students from diverse backgrounds and in challenging situations is Angeles's passion. She loves what she does and, more important, loves her students. She hopes one day to obtain a position that will allow her to have a larger impact on students from various backgrounds living in urban areas.

Latinos/as and 96 percent are classified as economically disadvantaged. Angeles purposely chose this school because although many of the students live in poverty, she believes strongly that they deserve excellent teachers. She was indignant that these children have to attend poorly resourced schools and often have inexperienced teachers who do not want to be there. She asked, "What about the kids that it's not their fault? Because they're economically disadvantaged, they're going to get stuck with the leftovers?" In making this statement, Angeles is reflecting the hard reality that many effective teachers tend to teach in middle-class schools while those who are least experienced and least effective end up in high poverty schools. This is not to say that these teachers cannot *become* excellent teachers, but only to point out that teaching in difficult circumstances places a great strain on new teachers and also jeopardizes the future of the students they teach.

Angeles recognized that although long on enthusiasm and energy, she was short on experience. Yet, at just twenty-two years old, she was wise beyond her years. The big difference between Angeles and other novice teachers is that she purposely chose to teach at her school, recognizing that although lacking in experience, she had the knowledge, the desire, and the kinds of attitudes that could make a difference in the lives of her students. Bilingual, bicultural, and with some of the same experiences as her students, she was different from them in that she had attended good schools as a child and wanted to make certain that her students had the same chance. Her husband, a Mexican American who is a vice principal at another school, made the same choice to work in a high-poverty urban school with mostly Mexican and Mexican American students.

Although Angeles went to Catholic or private schools all her life and graduated from "a really affluent school" where she took many honors courses, she never felt that she fit in, one reason being she didn't have any role models:

*In my high school, you could count the Hispanics on your hand, so I was either told I needed to be in ESL (when I spoke perfect English) or I hung out with the ESL kids. When I wanted to take an honors class or I wanted to test out of something they were like, “Are you sure?” I just felt it was a bad experience.*

Angeles bubbled over with enthusiasm when describing her students: “I’m their biggest fan.” About teaching, she said, “I come out of school and I feel like a really cool person because these kids just bring you up and I like to think that I do the same for them.” For example, given the low status of bilingual programs in most schools, Angeles was ecstatic when one of her students won the spelling bee *in English* at her school. While most of the previous winners had been fifth graders, he was in fourth grade. Beaming with pride, she said: “I don’t mean to brag but my student just won the spelling bee! I can’t believe it! That for me is so big that I feel like *I* won the spelling bee! Their success is my success, I guess.”

### ***Angeles’s Approach***

Angeles builds relationships—with one student at a time and with her entire class—by creating a learning community that is nurturing and accepting. For example, she has instituted the last ten minutes of the day as “hanging out with Ms. Pérez time” because she wants to make sure to learn something about each student’s interests and experiences. No student is invisible in her class. Angeles remembered the mother who came to her in tears, confiding that before her son was in Angeles’s class, he had never been happy in school:

*He had told his mother that since my name is Angeles, I was an angel for-him because he’s never had a teacher understand him. That day, I cried my eyes out because it just goes to show that they know when you care, and if you show them you care, they will work for you.*

Describing some of the strategies she uses to build relationships with her students, Angeles recognized that students need to be cared for not just as students but also as individuals:

*I make it a point to greet them at the door every day. I’m at the door, I’m smiling. And at the end of each day, they run to give me a hug and it’s the best feeling because they care so much about me. They will work for me because they know I work for them. I love them.*



Believing that students need to determine their own learning, Angeles helps each student set high goals at the beginning of the year, and she works with each one individually to help her or him meet those goals. "I pride myself on getting them to set their goals and they're not low goals, they're high goals." She's as thrilled as the students when they reach their goal. Then she helps them set the next one.

Using her students' identities in the curriculum is another significant strategy in Angeles's teaching. She jokes that she's a Puerto Rican transplant in a heavily Mexican American community. She challenges the stereotype that all Hispanics are alike and she has made it her responsibility to learn about her students' Mexican and Central American backgrounds; if her students' identities are visible in the curriculum, learning is more exciting and students become better writers and more enthusiastic learners. Her students are her greatest teachers. For example, when she discovers a Mexican holiday or piece of history or phrase in Spanish that she didn't know, she asks her students about it and finds a way to incorporate this information into the curriculum, especially in writing: if it's a topic they know something about, or something that interests them, they'll become more enthusiastic writers.

Angeles gave an interesting example of how she learns about her students' culture. One day a student asked her if they should "hacer sangría," or *make sangría*. To Angeles, *sangría* was a Spanish alcoholic beverage made with wine and fruit, but to her students, *sangría* means indenting a paragraph using two fingers. "So now I have *hacemos sangría* as part of our writing process." She also created a legends curriculum that highlighted La Llorona, a famous character in Mexican folklore, doing research and locating appropriate books. As she said, "Finding out about La Llorona was so exciting!"

Believing that her identity is important in her role as a teacher, Angeles is a role model for her kids. She is not only bilingual and comfortable in a variety of cultural settings but also college-educated and successful. She is proud that some of her students want to be teachers so they can be "like Ms. Pérez." Angeles feels that showing young people greater options in life is crucial: "Seeing me, especially how young I am, these kids are so amazed at having a successful young Hispanic teacher, especially female, that they just love me and it shows them they can be that way."

At the same time that Angeles focuses on culture, language, and identity, she insists that each student is an individual and it's her responsibility to figure each student out and then tap into his or her interests. She spoke about the importance of going beyond the surface: "You could know their name, you could know the kinds of things that they like, but you've really got to get to know where their walls are. How they put up their walls." She says it's her job to learn "how to really just destroy that wall and never let that wall go up again, and then you've really got to take yourself out of the picture." She tries never to humiliate her students if they misbehave or to threaten to call home or to call them out if they haven't done their homework, knowing that their "walls will go up" immediately. In these cases, she meets with students about these things individually, often during her lunch hour. "Everything has to be about the student."

Angeles also spoke about students who are reluctant to raise their hand in class because they feel that their English is not good enough or that they're not the smartest kid in the class. She makes sure

to respect their feelings, while at the same time finding other ways to assess them and, eventually, helping them feel comfortable enough to participate in a more public way.

Angeles says that high test scores, AYP, and other mandates are not foremost on her mind; they are just givens. Although she does not teach to the test, she is certain that her students will do fine on the mandated tests because she has taught them well. For her, succeeding as a teacher goes beyond having students score well on tests: “I guess I’m thriving in that my kids are successful, not only based on the state standards, which is big in Texas, but beyond that, they learned and they were excited to learn.” She mentioned a student who at the beginning of the year was certain he couldn’t make it to fifth grade and identified as a nonreader, insisting that he couldn’t, wouldn’t, read. “He’s reading fifth-grade books now,” she said proudly.

Although the students she taught her first year did very well on the state test (unusual and unexpected for a first-year teacher), thriving is about more: “I feel as if I’m thriving in that the TAKS in Texas is on the side burner; I know they’re going to succeed in that.” Happy as she was with the test results, seeing her students learn to accept who they are and be happy with themselves was her greatest achievement.

Not everything was peaches and cream in the beginning. Being in the bilingual program, Angeles sometimes felt isolated: “In bilingual you’re in a little corner, you’re shipped off to the side, you’re not the main focus: especially your first year nobody wants to take you seriously.” As a first-year teacher, she frequently second-guessed herself and was afraid to venture outside the prescribed curriculum. She also felt that the other teachers thought she didn’t know very much or thought of her as “silly.” By the second year, that attitude had mostly disappeared, primarily because of how well her students had done on the state test. By the time she was interviewed, Angeles had become both more flexible and more confident. She said she now was focused on fighting for what was best for her kids.

### ***Roger Wallace***

When he was interviewed in 2011, Roger Wallace, a veteran teacher, had been the only African American male teacher at Fort River School, in Amherst, Massachusetts, since he had begun teaching there (he retired in 2012 after serving thirty-nine years). Originally planning to become a juvenile justice lawyer, Roger did well on his law boards, gaining admission to the prestigious University of Virginia Law School. But something happened on the way to law school: Roger got hooked on teaching.

A member of the Clark University basketball team, Roger started hanging out with kids from the neighborhood, coaching and playing ball with them. He had always had a knack for talking with kids, and in his senior year, during a semester-long internship in an afterschool program in Worcester, Massachusetts, he realized his passion. He found the work so rewarding that he thought, “Where can I work with kids *before* they get into a great deal of trouble?” Roger also loved economics, history, and math, and wanted these subjects in his life as well. He realized that to help kids before they got into trouble and to keep learning the things he loved “it had to be in a school.”



**Roger Wallace** was born the youngest of four children in Springfield, Massachusetts. He was a student in the A Better Chance (ABC) program for underserved urban youths with academic promise. Through ABC, he attended Wilbraham Academy, an independent school, from 1966 through 1969, and then attended Clark University, in Worcester, Massachusetts, graduating in 1973. His love for educating children was acquired on the basketball courts around the city. At Clark he met Jacqueline Davis, who agreed to marry him. They are the parents of two daughters who are excellent educators in their own right. Roger taught one year at Elm Park Community School, in Worcester, Massachusetts, before leaving for Fort River Elementary School, in Amherst. In his thirty-nine years at Fort River he endeavored to make each year, for each student in his classroom and for the school community, a journey not through the curriculum but of self-discovery. Roger was instrumental in shaping the Amherst-Pelham School System's determination to meet the challenges of teaching students of diverse cultures and social classes. Shortly after his retirement, to recognize the impact he has had on so many students, teachers, and community members, the annual Roger Wallace Excellence in Teaching Award was established to honor an elementary school teacher in the Amherst-Pelham School District.

Immediately after graduating from Clark University, Roger became a teacher. His mother was pleased with his decision: "My mother always told me when I was little, 'You should be a preacher because you never shut up.' I said, 'Mom, preaching and teaching are not far apart.' So that made her happy." Raised in Springfield, an urban area in western Massachusetts, Roger was one of four children of a single mother who for several years relied on public assistance. This experience left an indelible mark, influencing not only his life but also his teaching. As a sixth-grade teacher in Amherst, a socially diverse college town of about 35,000, he wanted his students to understand that some families need more help than others and that some are more fortunate than others. He would speak with his students about this:

*To admit that you're poor growing up is something most people don't want to do. The government may have given my mother assistance. I can't tell you how much but my brothers and my sisters and I have more than paid it back in our taxes. The government made a good investment. So when you look at someone and you know they have free lunch or reduced-price lunch, take a pause before you open your mouth.*

Roger has a legion of fans in town. Given the scarcity of African American teachers in the school system, people of color in the community frequently want him to teach their children (although the same is true of many White children and their families, who know his reputation as an exceptional

teacher). The school's student body is quite diverse, about 65 percent White, with African Americans, Latinos/as (primarily Puerto Ricans, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans), Cambodians, and the children of international graduate students making up the remainder. Roger's students range from those who are very wealthy to those who live in poverty.

There is no greater calling than teaching for Roger, and he says he has certain responsibilities as a Black man: "I remember my cultural history and what was important to my grandma and granddad and my mom." One of the responsibilities he takes seriously is being who he is with all his students. He feels a special responsibility for African American and other students of color: "I do know that in sixth grade, the expectation is that an African American child, particularly a male, but male or female, is coming to my class." Most of the Black children in his school have had Roger as a teacher. But many White parents, knowing his reputation as an excellent teacher, also want their children to be in his class.

Another part of Roger's cultural legacy is to accept all children for who they are rather than what he, or anyone else, expects them to be. He explained that some White teachers expect children of color to be just like the White kids despite their unique individual and cultural differences. Although it's not always easy to explain to White teachers why some strategies might not work with their students of color or working-class students, he attempts to do so:

*Look, it ain't going to work, they ain't never going to be White. Can you teach them as they are instead of "I'll teach them when they become what I want them to be and then they'll be ready to learn"? They're ready to learn, they need to learn now. So if you want to be a successful teacher of kids of diverse backgrounds, put your stuff away.*

"Putting your stuff away" is about listening to students; learning from them; and discarding any negative preconceptions, biases, and untested assumptions about them. Recognizing that everyone harbors biases, Roger nevertheless encourages teachers to walk into a classroom with fresh eyes and an open heart.

### ***Roger's Approach***

Given his feelings about the importance of identity, it is no surprise that Roger is known as a culturally responsive teacher. He is highly respected by parents and by his peers, and recently he was recognized with the town's prized Martin Luther King Award. An active member of the school district's Diversity Committee, he also helped formulate the district's social justice framework, an important document on which he worked with colleagues to affirm the district's commitment to diversity and equity.

Diversity and social justice are at the heart of Roger's teaching philosophy and pedagogy. He is direct with his colleagues when it comes to these concerns:

*Some of my peers, when cooperative learning was the thing, couldn't figure out why sometimes kids of color fought against that. Because they don't get a cooperative attitude at home. It's, "Boy, you better take out the trash now!" It's not, "How do you feel about that? Could you share that experience with your neighbor?" Many parents of color, particularly those with blue-collar roots, they're not playing that game. It's momma's way or the highway.*

In this Roger underscores Lisa Delpit's (1988) caution on "teaching other people's children": that rather than a one-size-fits-all mentality about pedagogy, teachers need to fit the pedagogy to the students instead of the other way around. Roger said that many of his students of color have spoken to him about why some things don't work for them, "particularly all that cooperative learning stuff." They wanted to hear things from the teacher's mouth, not from their peers: "Have the teacher tell me, because that's the authority figure." This doesn't mean that Roger doesn't use various strategies in his teaching, but rather that he first thinks about how certain approaches will work and how to introduce those strategies.

Roger communicates with his students every day through the lessons he plans, the feedback he gives, and the pedagogy he uses. The most important way to communicate, he says, is to listen: "I'm a good listener and that's a real key thing for a good teacher." He's proud that if his students have a question or a concern, they can call him on either his home or cell phone. "I do that with every child, every child, 24/7. Not just the Black kids, not just the poor kids, not just the White kids, every kid has my number. I would say that out of my eighteen students this year, at least thirteen or fourteen have called me."

Roger is also clear that he can never know what impact his lessons, his pedagogy, or his philosophy will have. Deeply religious and very involved in his church, Roger often used biblical metaphors during our interview to describe his teaching. He compared himself to a sower of seeds, acknowledging that sometimes there are obstacles:

*We know that oftentimes the seeds can't find a place to root because the ground is too rocky. There's going to be rocks in the way of making children independent, empowered learners so you move the rocks away. Then there are the children for whom you throw the seeds out, the earth covers them correctly, and you begin to see the sprouts and they grow and they're growing at a good pace for them. I use that analogy. I do read the bible—I'm a man of God—and I know that that's my job.*

Roger also communicates often and openly with parents, because he recognizes that all parents try to do the best for their kids despite sometimes tremendous obstacles. Being from a one-parent home himself, Roger has little patience with teachers who attribute a child's lack of success in school to

having a single parent. “Excuse me?! Have you met the momma? Do you want to meet a single parent who did both jobs? Meet *my* momma.” While he acknowledges that there are disadvantages to having just one parent, he is grateful for the tenacity, resilience, and determination of his mother, who made sure that all her children went to college and were able to have successful lives.

Roger sees himself not only as a teacher but also as a friend, a neighbor, and a counselor. For him education is not a 9 to 3 job; he says he has the “country doctor philosophy.” When students call him at home, the only thing he asks in return is that they learn phone etiquette. He practices with them by pretending to be Mrs. Wallace, and he makes sure they learn to be respectful when they speak with her. Rather than a hurried, “Is Mr. Wallace there?” he encourages better manners: “Hi Mrs. Wallace. This is Jerome. How are you?” And after a response, “Is Mr. Wallace home? May I speak with him?”

Recognizing the importance of reaching out to families, Roger builds relationships with them by meeting them where they feel comfortable. He gave a humorous example:

“I like to have parent conferences in laundromats. If I know a parent goes to a laundromat on Thursdays, I show up with clean hands and a willingness to fold everything but the underwear! Now you may laugh but I have parents who will tell you that they’ve had their parent conference with me in the laundromat. I’ll say, “Just sit down and look through the papers while I fold your clothes.” It’s what I do. That’s why I think I thrive.”

Because family outreach was a significant part of Roger Wallace’s success, parents knew they could count on him to do everything possible for their child. As a result of his efforts, he created enormous good will and respect in the community over his nearly four decades of teaching.

## Conclusion: Teaching Is an Act of Love

Angeles and Roger differ in many ways to be sure. Angeles was the youngest and most novice teacher I interviewed, Roger the most veteran. They teach in tremendously different sociopolitical contexts, and their backgrounds differ in early upbringing, language, and ethnicity. What they have in common is more important than those differences. Both teach in ways that respect and honor their students’ identities and transcend gender, race, and experience. It is an outlook that views each child, regardless of background or circumstance, as a learner capable of great things, now and in the future.

What can we learn from Roger and Angeles? Even in these brief glimpses into their world, we have seen that for these thriving teachers *teaching is an act of love*. Effective teachers know that students who feel loved and valued are free to learn. In both Angeles’s and Roger’s classrooms, teaching is about more

than content; it is also about caring for their students' well-being. They focus their energies on *whom* they teach, not only on what they teach.

Angeles Pérez explained that she loved her students and they loved her in return, and it was because of this love that they worked hard. She called her students her "buddies" and her "babies." When asked what thriving meant to her, she kept going back to the students: it meant getting them excited to learn or seeing them believe in themselves. Our interview took place near the end of the school year. Angeles said, "Especially this group, I don't know what I'm going to do when they go."

Communicating with her students' families is also key to Angeles Pérez's success as a teacher. She said that she had been told in a training session to contact parents twice a month and she tries to do so: "I call the parents for good, I call the parents if I see something concerning. I don't just call them because their kids didn't do their homework." She has also gotten several parents to volunteer in her classroom and the school, realizing that a teacher can't expect parents to come in for no reason: "You've got to call them. You call them, you get them excited." The important thing for her is to personalize communication with families. She also gets her students involved because the more excited they become, the more likely it is that their families will become involved. In many schools like Angeles's, teachers and administrators bemoan the fact that parents don't show up for school-sponsored events because "they don't care." Angeles's experience belies this claim:

*"We had a Dad's Night; three hundred dads showed up! That was amazing and it was because all week I was building it up with any student I saw in the hallway. We had so many dads we didn't know what to do! You've got to get them excited. When parents came to pick up their kids, we're telling them, 'It's going to be so much fun, come!' I load the kids in the car, I'm like, 'Hey, you've got to come today. You're coming, right?'"*

For his part, Roger made it clear that loving his students is indispensable to being a teacher. He knows some people might consider his philosophy "soft": "Oh, this is a nice teacher from the seventies, touchy-feely." But for Roger, teaching as an act of love is anything but soft; it is about pushing each student to the limit. He goes so far as to visit his students' homes to help them organize their rooms so that they can study more efficiently or help them with a problem they might have. "They don't pass two vocabulary tests and see if I don't show up at their house and say, 'Where do you study your vocabulary? How do you study? Let's go to your room and organize.'"

Roger says that to be successful with students of color, you have to love them for seven hours a day, 180 days a year, and you have to stick with them no matter what. "To teach kids of diverse backgrounds, you have to be someone who can shuffle a lot of cards." Those cards include being effective with White students as well, many of whom have been changed forever by having had Roger as a teacher. He remembers each and every student he's taught all these years and he keeps records of

all of them. He also spoke about teaching the children of former students, and about the many former students who come back to visit him.

Roger said that students often ask him which class has been his favorite over the many years he's been teaching. He tells them that every class is his favorite, because he gives his all to each student he has ever taught and no two groups of kids are alike. Although he has had challenging students every year, he views these challenges in terms of something his stepfather, a skilled carpenter, told him: "There's never a bad piece of wood. There's only wood that needs extra planing. You have to find the right purpose for the piece of wood." That has become Roger's philosophy about his students: he pushes for excellence with each student by listening and learning from them. That is what it means to love his students.

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## Chapter 9

# Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds

### *What Does It Take?*

The teachers we've met in this book are thriving in spite of the many obstacles that can stand in their way. While policymakers—through commissions, reports, and conferences—may debate the relative advantages and disadvantages of particular policies that have a direct impact on teachers and their students, teachers rarely have the opportunity to engage in such high-level conversations. Yet they have a great deal to teach us about what works, what's important, and what needs to change in education.

To expand on some of their ideas, we return to the themes in the concluding segments in Chapters 3 to 8:

- Teaching is an act of love.
- Teaching is an ethical endeavor.
- Teachers thrive when they keep learning.
- Teaching is honoring students' identities and believing in their futures.
- Teaching is challenging the status quo.
- Teaching is advocacy.

This chapter elaborates on these themes.

## Teaching Is an Act of Love

In Chapter 3, Angeles Pérez and Roger Wallace spoke about their vocation as an act of love, and the other teachers echoed this sentiment during their interviews. Teaching is *who they are*, not just *what they do*. John Gunderson had not set out to be a teacher but fit into the role as easily as fitting his hand into a glove: “I just felt alive, it was me,” is how he described it. In spite of what he called “this behavioristic mill” of the high-stakes testing culture, John said, “I love what I do and I love getting kids to think. I look forward to work every morning.” When asked what made teaching most rewarding, John said, “Knowing that they want to be in my class.”

When I speak about loving one’s students, I’m not referring to maudlin, sentimentalized love but rather *critical* love (Nieto 2010)—believing in students, pushing and cajoling them, being both nurturing and demanding, and working tirelessly on their behalf. It also means being steadfast. For John Gunderson, teaching doesn’t finish “when the bell rings.” María Federico Brummer takes it even further, telling her students she will be there with them “forever.” Angeles Pérez’s sense of effectiveness as a teacher is tied to the relationships she has with her students. She was more thrilled for her student who won the spelling bee than he was. “I’m their biggest fan so when they succeed, I feel like I’m succeeding.”

Loving one’s students is also feeling both *solidarity* with and *empathy* for them. A number of years ago I edited a book of essays written by teachers (Nieto 2005b) in which they demonstrated how they related to students’ experiences and lives even if markedly different from their own. Empathy “is produced within networks of power relations” (Ullman & Hecsh 2012, p. 624). Teachers cannot negate their own identity and power when interacting with students, but they *can* attempt to understand their identity as intertwined with those of the students they teach. In their study of preservice teachers, Ullman and Hecsh found that although preservice teachers of color were more likely to have a socio-cultural consciousness—an awareness and understanding of their students’ realities—the vast majority of teachers of all backgrounds did not come to the classroom with these understandings. Rather, they developed them by working with young people who had difficult lives and by analyzing the structural and historical contexts that explained how these lives had come to be.

No matter one’s own identity, loving one’s students is not always easy. I once asked Angel, my husband, who was a wonderful middle and high school teacher, whether he loved his students. “Of course!” he responded without hesitation, adding, “How can you teach if you don’t love your students?” Then he laughed. “Of course, I don’t always love them when they’re all *together!*” That’s a reality all teachers understand. Carmen Tisdale spoke about loving students unconditionally in spite of everything. She also made it clear that loving one’s students is standing up for them: “I’ve done a lot of fighting,” she said. Remember her powerful words: “You can do anything you want to me, but if you want to fight, mess with my children.”

Loving one's students also requires the humility to recognize that one does not always have the only, right, answer. Roger Wallace said, "That's how I became a teacher: love of children, the love of exchange of ideas, the love that my perspective wasn't the only one, that there are a lot of others." Just as important, loving one's students is not letting preconceived notions about students get in the way of teaching. These preconceptions—whether based on students' race, language, accent, social status, ability, or other differences; the advice or warnings of other teachers; or a student's cumulative record—can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Instead we must look beyond all these things and think of each student as a *possibility*. Roger Wallace's admonition to "put your stuff away!" is one of the wisest pieces of advice in this book. If all teachers put their "stuff" away, there would be more engaged students, more exciting learning, and more joyful schools.

## Teaching Is an Ethical Endeavor

Teaching is a moral endeavor in many ways, including modeling ethical behavior. Almost all the teachers I interviewed discussed how they attempt to be authentic with their students. Amber Bechard said, "I'm not a different person when I go to school. I don't walk in the classroom and put on a teaching persona." When teachers are authentic, students pick up other essential messages as well: the importance of being truthful, the fact that teachers do not know everything, the need for personal connection. Hyung Nam still feels uneasy when he can't answer every student question on the spot saying: "If I don't have an answer they're going to see me as being incompetent, that I should know these answers." Nevertheless, he's come to realize that "it's so important for us to show them we are learners and that there are no simple answers in the world anyway."

Preparing students to be moral human beings is a theme that ran through all the interviews. Carmen Tisdale said teaching for her is primarily about preparing good people, while at the same time giving students the hope of having options in life. She wants her students to dream, to hope, and to imagine other possibilities. Adam Heenan had been taught by his mother from an early age always to think of other people, not just himself, and he decided when he was in high school that he wanted to be a teacher. For Adam, teaching is a way to serve his community. Similarly, although she had decided as a young girl not to follow in the footsteps of her parents who were teachers, after hearing Jonathan Kozol speak about his book *Savage Inequalities* (1991) about the dismal conditions of education for vulnerable students, Alicia López decided that teaching was the most important thing she could do with her life. She recalled: "I thought, 'I want to do something to help people.'" Once she started she "was hooked, even though it was so hard."

Most of these teachers made it clear that the goal of teaching is to prepare young people to make ethical life choices, not simply get high scores on tests. María Guerrero, who became a teacher to help

working-class families like hers, found it was becoming more difficult than ever to do so in the current sociopolitical context. In spite of this context, many of the teachers mentioned that teaching students to think, to question, to challenge, to rethink, and to understand their own responsibility to help improve the world was why they remained in the profession.

Being a social justice educator is very important to Hyung Nam; he wants his students to understand larger social issues and how they affect their lives. In that way, they can learn to think beyond their own limited perspectives and become empowered, productive citizens in a democratic society. Katie Shibata, who is currently an ESL teacher in California but who began teaching Somalian high school immigrants in Minnesota, was forever changed by the experience: when they arrived at the high school, many did not even know how to hold a pencil, yet a few years later some of them were graduating from college.

Teaching is also ethical in terms of how one prepares and presents the curriculum. According to Geoffrey Winikur, a “bogus multicultural curriculum” contradicts the goals of teaching students complex and nuanced concepts and ideas. For Geoffrey, “if you have diverse schools, you can’t have standardized scores and you can’t have a watered-down curriculum where you just read a story about an Asian family, or a Latino family, or an African family, or an Eastern European family.” For Geoffrey, an authentic multicultural curriculum presents students with complex issues and genuine food for thought that can help them ponder real moral issues.

## Teachers Thrive When They Keep Learning

All these teachers were, in one way or another, enthusiastic lifelong learners. This was certainly evident with Alicia López and John Nguyen (Chapter 4) but true of the others as well. Roger Wallace joked about how he loves teaching anything and everything: “I even like teaching how to diagram sentences. Now, that’s scary!” he said, laughing. Roger also loves learning about sociology, psychology, advanced mathematics—in a word, everything.

Amber Bechard is equally passionate about learning. For her, “there’s never enough!” She said she hoped her enthusiasm for learning was obvious to her students, and that they might think, “Look at that passion! You can’t *not* catch it!” Amber has not only completed a master’s and a doctoral degree but also dedicates each summer to her continued professional learning. She has been awarded a number of Fulbright and Freeman grants, traveling to Mexico, South Africa, China, and Japan and bringing back her newfound knowledge and insights to share with her middle school students. She also earned National Board Certification and has taken a number of seminars to enrich her curriculum. It isn’t so much the content of learning that keeps her engaged but rather, she said, “I finally decided after twenty years of teaching that I like the *process* of learning, and teaching others to learn.”

One of fifteen children, twelve of whom were older, Amber knew well what to expect in school. Her second-grade teacher didn’t know what to do with her because Amber already knew the math curriculum:

*My second grade teacher said, "I'm going to send you back to first grade, and your first-grade teacher will use you as a tutor." As a second grader I went into the first-grade classroom and had my own math group! It was so empowering, it was so much fun. So I decided that I wanted to be a teacher.*

For Amber, education is also the way out of poverty and hopelessness: "I see education as a path to make your dreams come true. You can be anything you want to be. You can go wherever you want to go, whether it's in a book, whether it's in a school." It's why she is so passionate about teaching and learning. Amber is eternally grateful to her first teachers, saying: "I'm a teacher still because of what my first- and second-grade teachers did for me. I think that's what made me fall in love with it. It becomes who you are, and I think that's why I'll never tire of it." But learning is not just something that she does to keep ahead of her students. Amber simply loves to learn: "Just as much as I want my kids to learn, to devour literature, to read a book or to learn to speak, or debate, or to think, I also want to continue to learn those things."

Geoffrey Winikur too spoke about teaching as being above all a love of learning. He keeps very busy as a learner and thrives on his varied learning experiences. But he learns just as much from his students: "I love culture, I love art, and I love history even though I'm not formally trained in studying history. I love that I can learn with my students about Caribbean culture, or whatever their culture may be, or religion even." Geoffrey was quick to equate teaching and learning with happiness: "Anytime we have really powerful dialogue about a book or a film, that to me is joy because I'm learning more from the kids than they're learning from me." At the same time, Geoffrey is a demanding teacher, selecting texts that are "pretty substantial," ones commonly read in college or even graduate school, in an urban school and with students who are not often offered this kind of curriculum.

A learner at heart, Geoffrey loves the give-and-take of teaching, learning from both his students and his colleagues. Self-initiated professional development is a vital part of learning for him: he's taken courses offered by the National Endowment for the Humanities and is an ongoing member of the Philadelphia Writing Project, which he has co-facilitated for several years. This work, he says, "has been a gift." He has also mentored novice teachers, work that he says helps change the culture of the school and is another way for him to keep learning. Geoffrey says:

*The NEH courses were really important and the work with the Writing Project. I also do some work with Teach for America. I really like working with my colleagues; we engage strongly with one another. I love the adult relationships in teaching. And I like kids. I like teaching kids and I love watching kids learn, you know, "the light in their eyes" [Nieto 2010]. When I read those words, I was like, "Yes, I know exactly what that means." I love that stuff.*

But learning is not just what happens through the curriculum. John Nguyen does not relegate learning to a particular lesson or unit. He cherishes those moments that although not part of the curriculum, take off from it: “My favorite lessons now are the ones that are not content related.” Although he knows his responsibility is to make sure everyone is on task, he insisted, “You have your moments away from it, and I think you should build these moments into the curriculum.”

As a high school student in Chicago, Adam Heenan won a coveted Golden Apple Award ([www.goldenapple.org](http://www.goldenapple.org)), given to one hundred students in Illinois each year. While paying for a good part of a college education, Golden Apple Awards come with the stipulation that awardees teach in a “school of need” for five years. That “clicked”: he had never considered teaching anywhere *but* such a school (he’d attended one himself). For Adam, lifelong learning is the kind of learning that benefits not only him but also his students. He said that teachers need to be resourceful, to find out everything they can about what the community has to offer, that this is a sacred responsibility: “It is the number one thing that you can be as a teacher for your kids: a pipeline to other opportunities outside the classroom.” This pipeline can and often does offer students options they might not otherwise have. It gives them cultural and social capital that those from under-resourced communities usually don’t have access to (Stanton-Salazar 2001).

## Teaching Is Honoring Students’ Identities and Believing in Their Futures

Although conventional wisdom and generations of practice have defined assimilating students into mainstream American life and culture as a primary role of teachers, the teachers in this book see their role differently. Of course, they recognize that no matter what subject they happen to teach, they have a responsibility to teach their students English—and to teach it well so students become fluent Standard English speakers able to participate fully in U.S. life. In addition, they know they have a responsibility to open up opportunities and options for their students by exposing them to U.S. life, history, and contemporary culture. At the same time, these teachers do not accept that their students must divest themselves of who they are in order to succeed in the United States. On the contrary, they welcome their students’ identities into the classroom, encouraging them to retain their native or community language and to maintain ties to their families and communities, knowing that these ties will in the end prove immensely important to their students’ emotional and psychological well-being. They are an anchor that will keep students grounded, a truth eloquently expressed in a recent inspiring book of the voices of immigrant youths (Sadowski 2013).

Teachers’ actions, even if they are subconscious, reflect how they value or do not value their students’ cultures and identities. Elsewhere I have made several practical recommendations about how teachers can honor students’ identities: learn another language; become “students of their students”;

make a sincere effort to get to know the families of their students; become involved in the community in which they teach; and use students' real names and learn to say them correctly (Nieto 2012). The last suggestion, as innocuous as it may seem, is violated every time a teacher changes a student's name from María to Mary or mispronounces a student's name. It is an example of cultural disrespect. Actions like these have been called *microaggressions*, "subtle daily insults that as a form of racism, support a racial and cultural hierarchy of minority inferiority" (Kohli & Solórzano 2012, p. 441). In their research on the K-12 memories of people now mostly in their twenties and thirties, Rita Kohli and Daniel Solórzano documented painful memories of shame, embarrassment, and humiliation when teachers mispronounced or changed students' names or other students laughed at and mimicked them. Some students went through their entire K-12 schooling with a name different from the one they had been given at birth or voluntarily changed their name to avoid humiliation. One student refused to go on stage to receive a prestigious award because she knew her name would be mispronounced.

Examples of how teachers manage this delicate balance are clear in the words of these teachers. For many, their own identity is a way for them to understand the significance of culture and language for their students. Maricela Meza Buenrostro talked about her own experience as a second language learner. She was fortunate to find teachers who affirmed her identity while teaching her English. Angela Fajardo knew firsthand how difficult it was to learn English, and that experience motivated her to become a teacher. She calls herself an English language learner still; connecting her personal experience as an immigrant with her students inspires her.

Carmen Tisdale, an African American teacher of African American students, takes her responsibility to affirm her students' identities very seriously. It is her way of counteracting the negative messages they hear. Yolanda Harris, also African American, has been particularly effective with African American and Latino males, many of whom have special needs. Feeling abandoned by many of their teachers over the years, these young men respond positively to Yolanda for a variety of reasons: their shared identity as urban people of color, the community in which they all live, Yolanda's being a mother of boys, and her uncompromising demands in the classroom.

Alicia López's identity as Puerto Rican and Spanish helps her understand students of diverse backgrounds, both immigrant and nonimmigrant. "I think it's also very important for my students to know": it shows her White middle-class students a different model of what it means to be Latina and is an affirmation for her Latino/a and immigrant students of who they are. For Angeles Pérez, being a role model and mentor to her fourth graders, all of whom are also Latinos/as, is especially significant. She wants them to see a successful Latina because "it shows them that they can be that way." Several of her fourth graders have decided that they want to become teachers too.

Honoring culture and language are just as important for teachers whose identity is different from the identities' of their students. John Nguyen, who emigrated from Vietnam with his family at an early age, decided to become a teacher in New Haven, where most of his students are African American, because he felt he could have more of an impact there than in a wealthy suburb. John is a student

of his students, learning as much as he can about them yet always feeling there's more to know. He wants to know "where they live" and someday would love to spend an entire twenty-four hours shadowing a student, seeing what his classes are like, following him from home to school, going with him to work, and so on. He said that in this way, he would have a better idea of what it's like to walk in his students' shoes.

When Amber Bechard took a class in multicultural education before moving to Chicago, she found that what she learned was relevant as well for the privileged and overwhelmingly White kindergarten students she was then teaching. Being exposed to issues of diversity, race, privilege, and power expanded Amber's world and taught her that issues of identity were significant for all of her students. She has made it a point ever since to have open discussions about identity, encouraging students to speak about who they are and why it's important to them. "I want everybody in my classroom to feel okay however they decide to identify themselves." Sometimes some of her White students—a distinct minority in her current school—confess that they feel they don't have a culture. She pushes them to understand that everyone has a culture: "They do have an identity. I don't want them to feel invisible. They get to be who they are too. And that is just as valuable."

Teaching students of diverse backgrounds is what Geoffrey Winikur wanted to do. "If you like diversity, then you're going to love working with diverse students." Building on his interest in African literature and culture, he created a curriculum that benefited his students as well as himself.

## Teaching Is Challenging the Status Quo

Standing up for children and for what is right may mean challenging the status quo. It takes courage to do this. We've seen numerous examples of courage in the words and experiences of the teachers in this book. Their courage is evident in small ways (Angeles Pérez and Maricela Meza Buenrostro rejected the advice of veteran teachers to "not smile until Christmas") and large (María Federico Brummer and other Tucson High teachers defined their Mexican American Studies program as a "sacred space" for which they were ready to fight in whatever way they could).

Courage can be demonstrated in everyday interactions as well as in one's very philosophy of teaching, a philosophy that might contradict conventional wisdom, "the way things are done." Amber Bechard says, "I don't see my role as a teacher to deposit knowledge into a kid. I see my role as a teacher to facilitate that student's learning for himself or herself." These teachers speak up when they feel they have to defend their students, their curriculum, their pedagogy, and their profession. Sometimes this gets them in hot water but they do it nevertheless. According to Adam Heenan, "My family tells me I am just not prudent in the things I am saying. Sometimes I don't keep my mouth shut, I get involved too much, but that was what I was brought up to do." Griselda Benítez challenges



the status quo by continuing her Community Circle activity in spite of high-stakes tests and similar mandates that make such practices less common and, in some schools, no longer permitted.

The pressure to have students do well on standardized tests was the elephant in the room during many of the interviews. Teachers often felt stifled, particularly those who worked in under-resourced schools. Nevertheless, most also felt up to the challenge. Amber Bechard doesn't let tests get in the way of her job, even though they are always in the background. Angeles Pérez decided early on that she would not "teach to the test," certain that her students would do well on them—and she was right.

John Gunderson, openly critical of the current high-stakes environment, bemoaned the fact that schools have become "this behavioristic mill that's churning out what you have to do instead of focusing on learning and making kids see the relevancy of education in their lives." Rather than fall in line with this kind of thinking, he's worked hard to "find a little island and create a class that focuses on kids' lives." It's relationships that matter, not templates or models or rubrics. "The crux of it for me is finding that the relationship with your kids and your classroom is more important than any other template." Given all the demands on teachers today, María Guerrero said she felt suffocated. Nevertheless, she was eloquent in refusing to give up her values and commitment, believing that it's more important to stay true to herself and to retain her spirit.

Another way to challenge the status quo is through the curriculum. Hyung Nam feels that his students need him "to expand their horizons," and he uses the curriculum to do it. Because they aren't used to his problem-posing and dialogical approach, his students have a hard time when there's not a "right answer" and exams aren't multiple choice. They do, however, learn how to learn in this way and most of them appreciate being exposed to content that isn't taught in other classes. For example, Hyung mentioned that, given the learning environment he creates in the class, students feel free to discuss issues they might not address in other classes. When they discussed health care reform, for instance, one of Hyung's students talked about the struggles her family had gone through. The same had happened when they discussed family members' unemployment stemming from the depressed economy. That they feel comfortable contributing to these discussions like this is a testament to Hyung's curriculum.

John Nguyen was attracted to social studies in the first place because it relates to people's lives. It also gives him the opportunity to discuss meaningful topics with his students—discussions in which they may question the current state of affairs. He considers himself a teacher with a social justice perspective, and his classes discuss issues often considered taboo in school. Knowing that many of his students have difficult and sometimes tragic lives, John tries both to teach them to be critical thinkers and to encourage them to continue their education. He realizes this is a tough sell for some of his students and that it's important to understand the circumstances in which they're living. At the beginning of the academic year, he shares his story as a member of an immigrant family and asks them to write their personal stories:

*Some students will write long stories. Invariably, all of them will have a death of someone close in there. This year they were so emotional. I read so many; it was heart wrenching. Just to know that there were so many deaths that they had to go through, so many drug problems.*

Because of the stories his students have shared, John has come to admire their resilience and courage more than ever, saying, “It’s pretty impressive. It’s understandable if they have a bad day, or a couple of bad days.”

John knows his teaching can have an impact on his students’ lives: “You never know what the effect is until they come back. They’ll remember some of the stuff that I taught them, and I’m shocked because I forgot that I taught that.”

## Teaching Is Advocacy

These teachers recognize that teaching is advocacy. The decisions they make—curricular, pedagogical, other—are primarily for the benefit of their students. Advocacy can be as simple as listening to one’s students. John Nguyen recalled asking his students why they liked him. When they responded, “Well, you listen to us,” John was appalled that some teachers won’t even bother to listen to their students: “It’s so *basic*. To hear them say they don’t have people who listen to them blows my mind.” For Gabriela Olmedo, advocacy means, among other things, having a refrigerator, microwave, and food in her classroom to feed students who are frequently hungry. For John Gunderson, advocacy is being fully present in class: “When I’m with you,” he tells his students, “you get all of me, and in return I expect you to be here too.”

Advocacy also involves cultivating relationships and giving students hope and another vision for the future. María Guerrero talked about the need for classrooms to “resonate with the importance of building relationships. It’s the human element in teaching. You cannot divorce that. It has to be a base in the classroom.” Angeles Pérez is the consummate advocate. She needed to learn how to handle a student who always “put up his walls.” Rather than humiliate him when he didn’t do his homework or call on him and put him on the spot, she made sure to recognize him in other ways. Showing immense wisdom for a second-year teacher, Angeles said, “Each kid, he really has his own individual thing that you’ve got to know.” Carmen Tisdale also advocates for her students by getting to know them individually. About a child in her classroom, she said, “It’s my place to show him that you can be more and that you need to be more.”

Gabriela Olmedo told the poignant story of trying to convince a student about the importance of an education even though he confronted her with his reality: gangs, friends getting shot, and other tremendous obstacles in his life. But teachers who are advocates continue to push hope in spite of these obstacles, not with naiveté but with the understanding that their students, even the most vulnerable, need to hear other scripts for how their lives might go.

Advocacy is also helping students grow and flourish. Roger Wallace used the metaphor of teacher as gardener: “You’re planting seeds, and a sower of seeds really does not want to see the seedling come up too soon. They have very little root so they might blow away. We also know that oftentimes the seeds can’t find a place to root because the ground is too rocky. So my job then becomes to help the children move the rocks.”

Roger’s advocacy takes many forms: he gives his students his home and cell phone numbers and encourages them to call him whenever they need to; he meets frequently with parents whenever and wherever it’s comfortable for them, even at the laundromat. He tries to understand each child on his or her terms. “Being in my class is not about the capitol of Idaho is Boise or the Atlantic Ocean is contained in part by the Gulf Stream.” Instead, his students learn what kind of learners they are, how best they learn and under what conditions. Teaching students of different ethnicities, races, and social classes, he recognizes that some children have more resources and opportunities than others, and he tries to even the playing field:

*They don’t pass two vocabulary tests and see if I don’t show up at their house and say, “Where do you study for your vocabulary? How do you study? Let’s go to your room and organize.” I don’t know how many teachers go to their kid’s houses but I do. Some parents say, “Now, don’t you be coming over here,” but that’s very rare.*

For María Federico Brummer, advocacy takes on a collective meaning that encompasses the welfare and future of her students and their community. Recalling the civil rights and Chicano Power movements, she and her colleagues in the Mexican American Studies Program felt that advocacy went beyond individual students and included the entire community: “We’re continuing the work of the movement.” Many of the Loyola Marymount University teachers in Los Angeles also spoke of teaching as advocacy for their students and their students’ communities. Several recalled their own experiences as children feeling lost and alone with nobody to turn to. It is no wonder that they take their responsibility as advocates very seriously.

## Conclusion: Teachers Make a Difference

Although teachers would certainly benefit from better pay and improved working conditions, providing monetary and other incentives based on students' test scores is not the answer. Merit pay and higher salaries haven't made a big difference in teacher satisfaction. A survey of over two hundred New York City public schools at which incentives were tried (Fryer 2011) found no evidence that they increased student performance, attendance, or graduation rates, nor did they change teacher or student behavior. If anything, researcher Roland Fryer suggests that teacher incentives might even *decrease* student achievement, especially in larger schools.

There are many caring and committed teachers in our nation's schools but they are often invisible. It is to our detriment as a society for them to remain so. Having highlighted these teachers' stories, their hopes, and their experiences, I hope that others—teachers, administrators, families, policymakers, the general public—will see the tremendous difference teachers can make in the education and future of our children, particularly if they are given the chance to do so unencumbered by rigid accountability schemes that rob teachers of their creativity and joy.

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