Finding Joy in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds

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

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INTRODUCTION

Our society has undergone extraordinary changes in the past several decades, none more dramatic than the enormous increase in the diversity of our population. What teachers teach, how they teach, and who they teach have changed in innumerable ways. Teaching is, and has always been, hard work, but given the current demands of accountability and the accompanying deprofessionalization, it is more challenging than ever. Nevertheless, under conditions and in a context of respect and support, teaching is also tremendously rewarding and even life-changing, for both teachers and students.

These simple truths are what this book is about. In spite of their tremendous enthusiasm and commitment when they begin, many teachers are unprepared for the demands of teaching, particularly teaching students of diverse backgrounds in schools that are overlooked and under-resourced. It is no surprise that moments of joy and success may be hard to find. These teachers often end up exhausted and disillusioned and, in increasing numbers, leave the profession.

Thriving Teachers, Diversity, and Change

This book, however, is about teachers who thrive. They work in a variety of contexts: urban, suburban, and rural schools; elementary and secondary schools; struggling schools and successful schools. Some work with supportive colleagues and administrators; others, with colleagues and administrators who are less so. All of them feel the relentless pressures associated with inequality, standardization, and constant references to the “achievement gap.” In spite of the difficult school and societal contexts in which they may work, these teachers find joy in teaching. All teach students of diverse backgrounds and they are good at it; they find their jobs fulfilling, even though on some days, like all teachers, they struggle. These teachers are not merely survivors; they are thriving in the profession and in their classrooms, and they make a difference in the lives of their students.

What is it that helps teachers thrive in the classroom, especially teachers who work in challenging situations? The question has intrigued me for some time, not only because of my own experience as a classroom teacher, but also because for many years, first at Brooklyn College and later at the University of Massachusetts, I taught aspiring and practicing teachers. Before becoming a teacher educator, I was first a middle school and then an elementary school teacher. Close family members—my husband, daughter, and sister—have also chosen this profession. I have had the great privilege of working with teachers for many years as mentor, colleague, teacher, and friend, and I am always inspired by those who retain the energy, enthusiasm, and commitment to their craft, their subject matter, and, of course, their students. But given the conditions in the profession today, many are leaving. I am saddened by those who leave because many of them were also caring and talented teachers, and it makes me wonder what we can do, as a society and a profession, to help the most talented teachers remain.
Don’t think that thriving teachers are uniformly ecstatic every time they step foot in their classroom. They may not be consistently energetic and they are not Pollyannas unaware of the tremendous challenges in the profession. Several of the teachers I interviewed made it clear that they go through ups and downs just like all teachers, like people in all walks of life. María Ramirez could have been speaking for all thriving teachers when she said:

“
A thriving teacher is somebody who’s there for the long haul, who believes in what she’s doing, who is competent, who is effective with the children, and who loves the children she’s teaching.
”

Yet, on some days, even these teachers have their doubts and may question their effectiveness and staying power. Nevertheless, as a group and in general, thriving teachers are hopeful people who are both pragmatic and visionary.

About the book’s title: why “finding joy”? While there are certainly many teachers who love teaching students of diverse backgrounds, the title acknowledges that not all teachers, for a number of reasons, are joyful about doing so. They may know little about the students’ backgrounds or harbor misconceptions about them. They may have had little experience with people different from themselves. They may be severely tested by the students. They may be afraid to teach in a particular neighborhood. Nevertheless, all teachers can find joy in teaching students of diverse backgrounds. It takes humility, a willingness to learn, an openness to acknowledging and valuing the tremendous assets of students of diverse backgrounds, and a commitment to public education.

The Interviews

Given my desire to find teachers who find joy in teaching students of diverse backgrounds, whenever I traveled to a conference, university, or school district to give a presentation, I would ask my host to recommend such a teacher. It didn’t matter whether they were veteran teachers (Roger Wallace, for example, who had been teaching for more than thirty-seven years in Amherst, Massachusetts) or novice teachers (Angeles Pérez, in her second year of teaching in Dallas, Texas) or whether they taught kindergarten or high school or any level in between. In a couple of instances, I interviewed teachers I knew and had worked with. This is how I came to interview Roger Wallace from my hometown and known as an exemplary teacher. Also, because I frequently hear testimonials from neighbors and her students and fellow teachers about what a great teacher she is, I included my daughter, Alicia Lopez, a teacher for seventeen years in our hometown middle school.

In all, I interviewed twenty-two teachers. I conducted a two-hour group interview with nine of them, graduate students in bilingual education at Loyola Marymount University. Dr. Magaly Lavadenz, director of the program, said she couldn’t recommend just one because “they’re all fabulous!” (They
I conducted each individual interview (anywhere from one to three hours) in a hotel lobby, a restaurant, or a university or school classroom. I was inspired by these teachers’ humility, stamina, and enthusiasm, and I am indebted to them for allowing me to tell their stories.

Interviews are an effective, close-up way of gaining a personal perspective. The teachers were able to reflect on their philosophy and practice, something they rarely have the time to do otherwise. They also had the chance to talk about what’s important to them and why. Nonetheless, no research method is perfect. An interview reflects the perceptions and experiences of just one person. The people with whom a teacher interacts each day—students, colleagues, family members—might describe him or her quite differently. Interviews are also subjective. They are limited by what the interviewee chooses to disclose; no one wants everybody to know everything; everyone is likely to omit the most challenging, difficult, or embarrassing experiences. Still, most of the teachers were remarkably honest, sometimes putting themselves in a negative light in an effort to be totally open.

I used interviews primarily because teachers’ voices are largely missing from current conversations and debates on public education. I knew they would share their stories of success and frustration, and these were the stories I wanted to hear. Gillian Maimon (2009) powerfully captures the significance of stories in today’s sociopolitical context: “In the current climate of increased scripting of curriculum and reliance on high-stakes tests as mirrors of children’s aptitudes, small stories from classrooms are emblems of resistance” (p. 217).

These “emblems of resistance” give us a different way of understanding both students and teachers. Rather than view students as what I have called “walking sets of deficiencies”—students who do not have two parents, speak English, or have books at home; students who do not get to go to museums or on vacation to mind-expanding places; and students whose parents do not have a formal education—thriving teachers recognize that all students, including students of diverse backgrounds, have assets that they bring with them to school, and they build on these assets.

In the pages that follow, I tell the stories of these teachers within the context of an educational system that, in too many cases, has gone terribly wrong: a system that has substituted test scores for learning, rigid standardization for high standards, and punitive accountability for social justice. In spite of these problems, the teachers highlighted here have found joy in teaching our most vulnerable and marginalized students.

NOTES

Part I

Recognizing the Current Context of Public Education

What does it mean to be a teacher in the current sociopolitical context? Chapter 1 lays the groundwork by reviewing federal policy over the past three decades and what it has meant for teachers, students, and schools. The high-stakes testing culture resulting from an increased demand for accountability has led to teacher surveillance as well as punitive measures like closing schools and characterizing schools as “underperforming” and teachers as “unsatisfactory.” These policies have created a climate of uncertainty and frustration among teachers and students and hold serious implications for public education, including narrowed curriculum, teacher deprofessionalization, and even fraud triggered by the intense pressure on teachers and schools to produce better test results.

The public at large is often confused about which of the many “solutions” offered for tackling the problems of underachievement and failure among students—charter schools, for-profit schools, others—are the best options. Chapter 1 also reviews research related
to teachers’ attitudes, beliefs, and staying power and discusses the nation’s demographics, which have changed dramatically over the past century, especially in schools: students of diverse backgrounds are now the majority in most cities and even in many suburbs.

It is not simply federal policy that has changed schools so radically. Societal barriers such as structural inequality, lack of access to decent housing and meaningful employment, and poor health care are also in the mix. Stubborn ideologies concerning race, ethnicity, native language, social class, and other social differences also play a part in creating a context that makes it difficult for the most vulnerable students to be successful. Conditions in the schools themselves, from a lack of resources to uninteresting and mindless curriculum, among many other factors, also create a stifling climate for both teachers and students.

How teachers are prepared for the profession, and evaluated once they enter it, is the subject of Chapter 2. Teachers often feel unprepared to teach students of diverse backgrounds, students who are learning English as a second language, and students with special needs, even though more states are requiring (and colleges and universities are offering) courses to address these populations. What is often missing is teaching from a social justice perspective, a topic also addressed in this chapter.

Assessing teachers has become a hotly contested issue, as schools and states consider such approaches as merit pay and value-added assessments. This is discussed in Chapter 2 as well, along with what professional development should ideally be.
Chapter 1

Surviving in Today’s Schools

Taking Stock of Where We Are

Novice teachers who join the profession with enthusiasm and high hopes may not be prepared for what they find when they first enter a classroom: rigid and unquestioned insistence on standardized tests as the arbiters of excellence, unparalleled surveillance of teachers’ work, a dizzying array of mandates to reach AYP (Annual Yearly Progress), and as a result an oftentimes joyless environment. While these things have all become “normal” parts of schooling, they do not define what schools should or can be. Before the present-day push for inflexible accountability and standardization, a push that began in earnest with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission of Excellence in Education 1983), most schools were quite different.

Now please do not misunderstand me: I don’t mean to imply that there was ever an idealized era in which all schools worked flawlessly, all students were successful learners, and all classrooms were staffed by caring, sensitive, and competent teachers. Given the history of public education as well as the dismal experience of many students in our public schools, especially immigrants, students of color, and students living in poverty, such a claim would be disingenuous. These are for the most part the students who have been least well served by our public schools. This is a major reason we find ourselves in the current predicament, precisely because too many youngsters are left behind, cheated out of the equal education to which they are entitled. That the parents and advocates of these children should demand more is no surprise. They know their children deserve more, and they expect no less.
However, their demands have largely either fallen on deaf ears or led to what we have today: teaching to the test, more scripted curricula, the firing of teachers, and the wholesale closing down of schools.

But demands from communities poorly served by public schools are not the only, or even the major, reason for the current obsession with accountability and standardization. Forces more sinister and self-serving than powerless parents are also at play, including big business interests, conservative think tanks and foundations, and educational testing companies. Chief among the critics of public education spearheading the current reform efforts have been those who believe that schools should be treated like any other free-market business. As a result, vouchers, charter schools, and other privatization schemes are the order of the day. The number of children in charter schools more than quadrupled between 1999–2010 (Aud et al. 2012). The historic role of public schools—to prepare young people for productive lives in a civil society—although never fully realized by any measure has been all but overshadowed by the modern fixation on accountability and marketization. In too many cases, such policies result in lifeless, dreary schools with unmotivated students and anxious teachers.

This situation is eloquently described in *A Declaration of Professional Conscience for Teachers*, written by Kenneth Goodman in 1990, and it is even truer today. Goodman states, in part:

> There are strong pressures today to dehumanize, to depersonalize, to industrialize our schools. In the name of cost effectiveness, of efficiency, of system, of accountability, of minimal competency, of a return to the basics, schools are being turned into sterile, hostile institutions at war with the young people they are intended to serve.

The tendency to treat schools as if they were simply another business is not new, as we see in the following quotation from a 1912 edition of *The American Teacher*:

> We have yielded to the arrogance of “big businessmen” and have accepted their criteria of efficiency at their own validation, without question. We have consented to measure results of educational efforts in terms of price and product—the terms that prevail in the factory and the department store. But education, since it deals in the first place with human organisms, and in the second place with individualities, is not analogous to a standardizable manufacturing process. Education must first and foremost measure its efficiency not in terms of so many promotions per dollar of expenditure, nor even in terms of so many student-hours per dollar of salary, it must measure its efficiency in terms of increased humanism, increased power to do, increased capacity to appreciate (Gruenberg 1912, p. 90).

A more recent critic, Henry Giroux (2010), besides being disdainful of the education-as-business metaphor, also condemns what he has called “the triumph of management over leadership” that perpetuates a situation that “increasingly relies on punishment models of governance when dealing with
teachers and unions while simultaneously using harsh disciplinary measures against those students viewed as disposable because they are poor, black, or viewed as flawed learners.”

It is not my purpose to provide a comprehensive review of the troubling story of current federal education policies, but a brief review helps us understand how such policies are wreaking havoc on the lives of students, teachers, and the educational system as a whole, and envision another kind of education, one that is joyful and liberatory.

Federal Policy and the Marketization of Schooling

Using the civil rights–like discourse of challenging “the soft bigotry of low expectations,” President George W. Bush in 2002 promoted the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a federal law that was to change dramatically how education was viewed, funded, and assessed. NCLB was followed by Race to the Top (RttT), a policy proposed by President Obama a decade later yet surprisingly similar to NCLB in its punitive character and reliance on standardized test scores. Although it is true that countless children have suffered the consequences of “the soft bigotry of low expectations,” the proposed remedy, in the minds of many teachers, parents, scholars, and the public, has worsened the problem. Rather than more meaningful teacher education and professional development, smaller classes, better pay for teachers, and more resources for poor schools, NCLB and RttT put in place an unparalleled program of mandated standardized tests that has significantly changed the nature of teaching and learning for millions of teachers and students around the nation. Most notably affected have been students in under-resourced schools and the teachers who work with them.

The newest federal government mandate is the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), adopted by all but a few states even before the standards were complete. The Common Core is supposed to address the lack of rigor and quality of the texts students currently read. By concentrating on depth rather than breadth, it is meant to create a more demanding curriculum comprising both fiction and nonfiction texts, encourage collegial pedagogical and curricular conversations, give writing a more central role in the curriculum, and most important, discourage teaching to the test. Many teachers, administrators, professional organizations, and policymakers have endorsed these goals.

Although the Common Core has the potential to raise expectations for student learning and enhance the quality of the curriculum, it comes with several potentially troubling problems. One is the claim that it will raise student achievement. Yet, according to a recent study by Joshua Goodman (2012) at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, changes to state standards over the past twenty years have had little, if any, impact on student achievement. Goodman found that from 1994 to the present, standards have not been linked to student growth except in relation to eighth graders in schools characterized by ineffective teaching. He concludes, “Little is known . . . about how the quality of written standards translates into improvements in curriculum, pedagogy, and student achievement” (p. 1). This is a cautionary tale about rushing headlong into unproven policies.
Another problem is that the Common Core will be accompanied by a slew of new tests, expected to be in full use by the 2014–15 school year. More grades will be tested and there will be more tests per grade. Whether the tests will be better or more relevant than current tests is debatable. According to FairTest, the new tests are “a mixed bag, only marginally better than other tests” (The National Center for Fair and Open Testing 2012a, n.p.). In any case, their effects may be just as detrimental as previous testing programs, because states may continue to use student scores to evaluate both school and teacher effectiveness. The tests will also be expensive: a study about the potential costs of implementing the Common Core found that while test-development costs will be covered by the federal government, states will probably incur over $10 billion in one-time costs in preparing teachers for the new standards, buying new textbooks and other materials aligned with the standards, and upgrading technology (Accountability Works 2012). All this at a time when states are increasingly facing other unfunded mandates.

In a critique of the Common Core, Thomas Newkirk (2013) has made a number of serious allegations about its purported goals, design, implementation, and possible outcomes. First, he finds an inherent conflict of interest, because the testing companies engaged to write the standards (the College Board and ACT) also intend to design tests to accompany the standards. Newkirk asserts this is comparable to asking pharmaceutical companies to write health standards. Also, the Common Core will be a bonanza for publishing companies, who can now “align” their products with the standards, a process that has already begun. While one of the problems that the standards are supposed to tackle is that reading texts are not complex enough, Newkirk suggests that the Common Core will exacerbate the problem, explaining that it has taken the top five percent of students “and made it the new norm,” thus creating unrealistic expectations and more blame for teachers and schools (p. 2).

Another of Newkirk’s criticisms is that while one of the goals of the Common Core is to help the U.S. catch up with nations such as Finland and Singapore in student achievement, those countries do not use standardized tests in the same ways we do. He poses a thoughtful question: “Are standardized tests compatible with the more complex goals of twenty-first century literacy?” (p. 4). His response is that standardized tests are not suitable for assessing such skills as expressive abilities, speaking, writing, interpersonal skills, and creativity in general, all of which will be sorely needed in the coming years in our postindustrial economy. Wayne Au, who has written persuasively on the dangers of the marketization of education (2009), is also wary of the direction the Common Core seems to be taking, particularly with regard to the social studies. Claiming that it will inevitably lead to standardized high-stakes tests similar to those associated with NCLB, Au worries that the seeming flexibility it provides will disappear once the tests appear (2013).

Diane Ravitch (2013), an influential voice against high-stakes testing, has also come out against the Common Core: “I have come to the conclusion that the Common Core standards effort is fundamentally flawed by the process by which they have been foisted upon the nation.” First, because most states accepted the Common Core as a condition for receiving Race to the Top funding, she believes little thinking has gone into the standards’ implementation. In addition, she strongly believes that
the standards should be thoroughly reviewed and tested before being implemented and free of any mandates that teach teachers how to teach, because “there are many ways to be a good teacher, not just one.” In addition, the standards were neither a grassroots effort nor developed by the states, but rather by two organizations generously funded by the Gates Foundation, Achieve, and the National Governors Association. And like Newkirk, Ravitch also believes that, given the arbitrary cutoff scores, the implementation of the CCSS will see a precipitous decline in test scores.

Despite these powerful and commonsensical critiques of the Common Core, teachers, school systems, and other educational organizations around the country are looking for ways to make the CCSS more meaningful and less restrictive than former standards. Although particular texts are recommended by the Common Core, there are no mandated texts. However, the standards do recommend an approach for how texts should be selected. At the same time, publishing companies are jumping on the bandwagon and developing texts to go along with the CCSS. In many cases principals and school districts have ordered only those texts recommended by the CCSS, which seems contrary to their stated purpose.

Still, since specific texts are not required but only recommended, the Common Core may be more flexible than mandates like NCLB. For example, Teaching Tolerance (TT), a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) “dedicated to reducing prejudice, improving intergroup relations and supporting equitable school experiences for our nation’s children” (tolerance.org) believes that the Common Core offers a good opportunity to embed culturally responsive texts and strategies into instruction. They believe that what texts students read is just as significant as how they read these texts (a major stated goal of the CCSS). Consequently, Teaching Tolerance is working on Perspectives for a Diverse America, a free web-based anti-bias K–12 literacy curriculum that pairs the relevance of multicultural content with the rigor of the Common Core standards (see http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-43-spring-2013/perspectives). Perspectives maintains the CCSS approach to text complexity and fiction/nonfiction ratio and improves on that approach by adding criteria for selecting texts that reflect the diversity of the students and families in our nation.

We can only hope that the Common Core will result in better outcomes than either the NCLB or RttT and that policymakers will not once again blame students and teachers for the longstanding and intractable problems of poverty, racism, and structural inequality. Unfortunately, our national testing policies have not led to the promised results. In too many cases high-stakes testing has led to cheating, fraud, unhealthy competition, higher dropout rates, a constricting of the curriculum, and a decline in creative pedagogy (see, for example, How Standardized Testing Damages Education, National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 2012b). To top it all off, student achievement has not been noticeably improved. A review by the Center on Education Policy (2010) found that although there has been some progress in narrowing reading and math gaps, it has been uneven. Gaps by race, ethnicity, and income have remained significant and persistent. An especially damaging report from the National Center for Education Statistics (2011) found that the “achievement gap” between Latino/a and White students
has been unchanged for two decades. In addition, there has been a decided drop in teacher resilience and resolve to remain in the profession. (For incisive and comprehensive critiques on these and other consequences of NCLB and RtT, see Au 2009; Darling-Hammond 2010; Nichols & Berliner 2007; Ravitch 2012. Also see information about the impact of high-stakes tests from the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, FairTest, 2012b & 2012c.)

Given this damaging context, we ask a great deal of teachers if we expect them to be joyful, professionally fulfilled, and committed to their students. Greg Michie (2012), a talented teacher and writer who returned to the classroom after twelve years in teacher education, eloquently describes what the transition back to a public school was like. Although he returned to the classroom because that is where his heart is and he had frequently returned to schools to observe student teachers, he was unprepared for the often invisible destructive effects of tests on a school’s culture, including eliminating or reducing recess in order to keep the school quiet, and, when tests are web-based, severely limiting the use of computers for other students (Michie, 2012).

Since the passage of NCLB, teachers and students have found themselves in the crosshairs of educational policy, and they have been its greatest victims. What was once viewed as a noble albeit poorly compensated profession is now vilified by many in the general public. Teachers are blamed for everything from students’ low test scores to their bad behavior. This is both grossly inaccurate and eminently unfair. Although there are certainly incompetent and uncaring teachers everywhere, the vast majority of teachers are hard-working, competent, and caring. Students too, especially the most vulnerable, are blamed for their failure to learn, with little mention of the meager resources and lack of opportunities in crumbling schools. Instead of doing something about the school, state, and national policies and practices that have largely caused these problems—including poverty and the lack of adequate health care, housing, and employment—the tendency has been to focus exclusively on the perceived shortcomings of teachers and students.

A graphic example of the blame game is the ubiquitous term achievement gap that has found its way into every debate over the deficiencies of public education. The term is used as if students alone were responsible for their failure to learn, while little attention has been paid to the context in which this failure occurs. Jacqueline Irvine (2010) has suggested that instead of focusing on the “achievement gap,” we shift the focus to “the teacher quality gap; the teacher training gap; the challenging curriculum gap; the school funding gap; the digital divide gap; the wealth and income gap; the employment opportunity gap; the affordable housing gap; the health care gap; the nutrition gap; the school integration gap; and the quality childcare gap” (p. xii). Until such gaps are addressed, achievement differentials will remain significant.

Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) too has suggested that in contrast to the attention given to the “achievement gap,” we focus instead on opportunity gaps, that is, “the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources—expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful information resources—that support learning
at home and at school” (p. 28). Such opportunity gaps are the result of inequality created and sustained in schools and society, and exacerbated by the current sociopolitical context.

**Sociopolitical Issues in Schools and Society**

To understand how we have reached the point where all the responsibility for failing schools seems to fall on students and teachers, we first need to understand the various barriers that get in the way of an equal education, including the most impenetrable barrier to equitable schools: the ideological one.

**Societal Barriers**

Societal barriers to equal education have existed since the beginning of what is now the United States. These barriers have been created and kept in place through various means: the denial of state-supported education to enslaved Africans and American Indians; racial segregation, either by the enforcement of Jim Crow laws in the South, as in the case of African Americans, or by tradition and legal obstacles, as in the case of Mexican Americans and some Asian Americans in the South and Southwest; residential housing patterns in the North and Midwest that kept children of diverse backgrounds in inferior schools; and unequal opportunities for a high-quality education by either separating children from their families, as in the case of Native Americans forcibly removed to boarding schools, or by offering substandard schooling that prepared students of numerous ethnic backgrounds for little more than menial labor. (For discussions of inequality in education in the United States, see Spring 2013 and Nieto 2005a.)

The legacy of such societal barriers lingers, however. Although racial segregation is no longer permitted by law, many barriers remain in place through policy, practice, and tradition. A recent report from the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, for instance, found that in spite of the nation’s gains in integrating public schools from the 1960s to the 1980s, segregation has returned with a vengeance. Moreover, racial segregation is increasingly accompanied by segregation of the social classes, and this “double segregation” is having an enormously negative impact on African American and Latino/a students, who are more likely to attend impoverished and racially segregated schools. Black students still face tremendously high segregation, particularly in the South, while Hispanics now attend the most segregated schools in generations in terms of both ethnicity and resources. The report concludes that segregation is closely and systematically linked with unequal educational opportunities. According to the study’s authors, “The consensus of nearly sixty years of social science research on the harms of school segregation is clear: separate remains extremely unequal” (Orfield et al. 2012, p. 7). Another recent report, this one from the Center for American Progress, found that a “comparability loophole” in federal district policy, not just differences in property taxes, leads to local district budgeting policies that create and sustain inequality. According to the report, “we are living in a world in which schools are patently unequal” (Spatig-Amerikaner 2012, p. 1).
The problem is deep-seated, and solving it requires redistributing resources and carefully rethinking policies that unfairly benefit some students at the expense of others. Current “reforms,” however, focus on policies that have done little to remedy the situation: more testing, taking over failing schools, firing teachers indiscriminately, chartering more schools, setting up shortcuts to teacher accreditation, and hiring enthusiastic but poorly prepared teachers through such programs as Teach for America.

Equal education is more a political problem than an educational one. It is not simply a matter of firing teachers, giving students more tests, or providing poor families with vouchers for private schools. According to economist Richard Rothstein (2004), the quality of a school explains only about a third of the variation in student achievement. The remainder is explained by factors such as poverty, lack of quality preschool and afterschool programs, and inadequate employment, health care, and housing. These “out-of-school factors” also include poor nutrition, unhealthy neighborhoods, and limited prenatal care, among others (Berliner 2009). Without these resources, many children living in poverty are doomed not just to educational failure but also to a life of diminished possibilities. In a more recent blog, Rothstein (2011) asserts that current nonschool factors such as the economic downturn, a weak labor outlook, and high unemployment will have an even greater impact on education than do school factors. He writes: “I make a discouraging prediction: academic achievement gaps between advantaged children and the various categories of disadvantaged children will grow in coming years, and education policy will be powerless to prevent this.” In the same vein, Jean Anyon (2005) has explained that “macroeconomic policies like those regulating the minimum wage, job availability, tax rates, federal transportation, and affordable housing create conditions in cities that no existing educational policy or urban school reform can transcend” (p. 2).

Eliminating poverty is a tall order but it is clear that more can be done. Stephen Krashen, speaking about the impact of poverty on student learning in a 2011 commencement address at Lewis and Clark University, suggested that rather than focus on improving teacher quality, as the federal government has done, the best way to improve learning is to reduce poverty. He cautioned:

The fact that American students who are not living in poverty do very well shows that there is no crisis in teacher quality. The problem is poverty. . . . [T]he best teaching in the world will have little effect when students are hungry, are in poor health because of inadequate diet and inadequate health care, and have low literacy development because of a lack of access to books.

Going a step further, a report from the Children’s Defense Fund (2012) warns of the sobering future that awaits African American and Latino boys: unless dramatic changes in education and the opportunity structure are made, an African American boy born in 2001 has a one in three chance of going to prison in his lifetime, a Latino boy one in six. The report also points out the high cost of poverty: “Every year we maintain current poverty levels costs us $500 billion a year in lost productivity” (p. 2). Linda Darling-
Hammond’s analysis of the inequality of school funding (2010) is a good example of the old dictum “penny wise and pound foolish”: “States that would not spend $10,000 a year to ensure adequate education for young children of color spend $30,000 a year to keep them in jail” (p. 24).

It should come as no surprise that poverty has an enormous impact on student learning, on school conditions, and on the general quality of life of our nation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, forty-six million Americans, or one in six, are living below the federal poverty rate, the highest number in our history (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2011). The Children’s Defense Fund (2012) states it even more starkly: children under five are the poorest age group in the nation. At the international level, the United States also fares poorly: the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (2011) found that our nation has the highest overall poverty rate and the highest childhood poverty rate of any major industrialized nation in the world. Even more disturbing, in the past three decades the wealthiest Americans made the most income gains of any group: the richest one percent made an average $1.3 million after-tax dollars, compared with $17,700 for the poorest 20 percent.

It is unfortunate, given these realities, that the blame game continues to be used against children living in poverty. A prime example is the work of Ruby Payne (2005), an educator whose self-published book on poverty has sold well over a million copies and whose ideas have spread around the country through thousands of professional development seminars. Using a framework that emphasizes a deficit view of children and families living in poverty, Payne’s work is a salve to school systems and teachers eager to find a cultural explanation for why students fail. If it’s part of students’ “culture,” these educators may reason, then there is little they can do about it. Paul Gorski (2008), in a thorough review of Payne’s work, has countered that Payne fails to base her approach on creditable research, while also failing to acknowledge the root causes of poverty. In addition, Mistilina Sato and Timothy Lensmire (2009) suggest that teachers can challenge the misinformation on poverty by emphasizing students’ competence, focusing on teachers’ cultural identities, and developing a professional development model based on ongoing collaborative work among teachers.

Children living in poverty face an uphill battle to obtain a decent education. Teachers who work in overcrowded and poorly resourced schools characterized by low morale also pay a price. In these circumstances, it is easy to understand how they struggle to find joy in teaching.

**School Conditions**

Anyone who has stepped foot in a school with guards and metal detectors at the door, filthy and nonfunctioning bathrooms, overcrowded classrooms, as well as few books, computers, and other resources, knows that the physical environment influences learning. The physical condition of a school also affects its emotional environment. Are there aesthetically pleasing plants, posters, and welcoming signs? Is there respect for parents and families of different cultures? Do they feel welcome? Are there signs in various languages and is the staff friendly? These things make a tremendous difference in how schools are experienced by those who work and learn there as well as by visitors.
While the condition of a school alone does not determine whether students and teachers are engaged or disaffected, it is hard to imagine being enthusiastic and productive in a depressing environment. Well-resourced public schools and elite private schools seem opulent by comparison, with expanded curricular choices, smaller classes, rich resources (books, libraries, computer labs), music and art instruction, large athletic fields, and many opportunities to participate in a variety of sports and other extracurricular activities.

A school’s emotional environment is even more vital. Whether schools are open or forbidding, friendly or unwelcoming, joyful or fearful, largely depends on the policies and practices enacted in a school as a whole and in particular classrooms. Negative policies and practices include unfair disciplinary policies, unequal distribution of services such as special education and classes for the gifted and talented, poor access to high-level curriculum, high rates of retention, and inadequate outreach to families, among others. As one more example, many schools have cut back on music and art in spite of research revealing that exposure to the arts is tied not only to emotional well-being but also to higher student achievement in mathematics and reading (Americans for the Arts 2010). And students in poorly resourced schools and communities are often afraid to walk to school and, once in school, remain afraid for their safety. How can learning take place in this situation?

The Ideological Barrier

Conventional wisdom rules much of what happens in public education. Our received ideas about students and their intelligence, capabilities, and learning potential often have more to do with ideology than with science, research, or reality. Two of the most damaging (and unfounded) societal ideologies are that students’ social and cultural identities and backgrounds determine their intelligence and ability, and that intelligence is fixed and unchanging. These ideologies find their way into school policies and practices through the actions of educators, administrators, and policymakers. Students themselves may come to believe negative perceptions about their identities and abilities. It is also unfortunately true that racism is still a fact of life in the United States. A recent poll by the Associated Press found that racist attitudes have increased slightly since Barack Obama was elected as the first Black president of our nation. Specifically, 51 percent of Americans expressed prejudice toward Blacks whether they recognize these feelings or not. Most Americans (57 percent) also express anti-Hispanic attitudes (Ross & Agiesta 2012).

Biases and stereotypes about race, ethnicity, and social class affect everyone, even the most well intentioned, and unless teachers and administrators make a concerted effort to face and change these biases, they may unintentionally act on them. This can lead to what Patty Bode and I have referred to as “the expectations gap” (Nieto & Bode 2012, p. 13), that is, the expectation that students will perform based on others’ perceptions of their backgrounds rather than on their true ability. It is by now a well-known and amply documented fact that African American and Latino/a students living in poverty are recommended by their teachers for gifted and talented programs in far lower numbers than White and Asian students are, even though the former may be just as gifted. The same is true of placement in AP and honors courses in high schools. Conversely, students of color are far more likely to be placed in special education
than are their peers (Oakes 2005; Harry & Klingner 2006), fulfilling what Alfredo Artiles (2011) has termed “the racialization of ability.” This kind of tracking often results in permanent placements that are almost impossible to change as the years pass, even if they have been made on the flimsiest of evidence.

It is worth keeping in mind that nonacademic factors play a role in tracking: whether a child speaks English or not, and among those who do speak English, whether they speak Standard English or Ebonics; whether a child is obedient and well-behaved or not; the social skills of the student; and the like. Unless students have parents who are well versed in school policy, speak English fluently (and understand educational jargon), and feel comfortable in confronting school officials about these inequities, the situation remains unchanged.

Limiting ideologies are also the foundation for assumptions about families and whether or not they are interested and involved in their children’s education. Parents who do not attend parent-teacher meetings or accompany students on class trips may be seen as indifferent even though any number of other reasons—lack of child-care, lost pay if work is missed, discomfort about visiting schools because of their own negative experiences as students—may be at work.

Another policy influenced by ideology is the curricular offerings available to students. Well-resourced schools with middle-class students typically have a broader range of course options than do poor schools, even though the students who attend the latter schools may be just as able and intelligent as their middle-class peers. Yet the kinds of courses students take, especially in high school, have a direct relationship to how prepared they will be for college. Too many students who attend poorly resourced schools are not only deprived of the option of taking particular courses but may be unaware (because of the lack of counseling services available to them) that certain courses are essential for postsecondary education. When senior year rolls around, young people who thought they might be going to college are left with few options for doing so.

Because they are based on deficit perceptions about what students are capable of accomplishing, it is evident that negative ideologies get in the way of student learning. Unless these ideologies are confronted at both the individual and institutional levels, little is likely to change. However, as pointed out in the previous section, negative ideologies alone are not responsible for the dismal state of public education for the most vulnerable populations. Taken together, social and school conditions and negative perceptions and expectations of students are a poisonous brew that gets in the way of the nation’s stated ideals of equal education.

**Students and Teachers in U.S. Public Schools**

The ability of teachers to influence student learning has been proven time and again, not only through anecdotal evidence (who among us have not had a teacher who changed our life in positive or negative ways?), but also through research (see Nieto 2003 and 2005b). Given the current context in which many teachers work, it might be hard for them to believe that they hold tremendous power, in fact wield more power over the lives and learning of children than almost anyone or anything else. As far
back as 1978, researchers found positive and long-term effects of first-grade teachers on the adult success of disadvantaged students, an impressive finding given the obstacles with which many of these students cope every day (Pederson 1978). A frequently cited report from 1996 states that “what teachers know and do is one of the most important influences on what students learn” (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future 1996). A more recent study by Spyros Konstantopoulos and Vicki Chung (2011) finds that the cumulative effects of high-quality teachers on students’ lives are considerable and that their influence persists through the elementary grades. Even more conclusive, Caroline Chauncey’s review of the research on the issue (2005) finds that teacher quality has far more of an impact on student learning than class size, per-pupil spending, students’ socioeconomic backgrounds, or previous academic performance. This is powerful evidence that teachers, in spite of the current sociopolitical context, can make an enormous difference in the lives of their students.

Teachers: Between a Rock and a Hard Place
There are currently over 3.5 million teachers in U.S. public schools. A large majority (approximately 84 percent) are women, and about the same percentage are White (Aud 2010). A MetLife survey conducted in 2010 found that a majority of teachers (59 percent) were satisfied with teaching as a career and three-quarters of them said they wanted to continue to work in education beyond retirement. Within this rosy picture, however, 50 percent of teachers in urban schools were less satisfied with teaching as a career, and newer teachers were less satisfied than veteran teachers. One explanation may be that a substantial majority of teachers (69 percent) felt that teachers’ voices were not being heard in the current climate of reform. Even more sobering, Teaching for a Living, a nationwide survey of nearly nine hundred teachers conducted by Public Agenda and Learning Point Associates (Johnson et al. 2009), found that 40 percent of K–12 teachers in the nation were disheartened and disappointed with their job. Of these, more than half taught in low-income schools.

A 2012 MetLife survey produced more negative results. In the two years since the previous MetLife survey, teachers were decidedly more dissatisfied with their career. Teacher satisfaction dropped by 15 points in those two years, the most dramatic decrease in job satisfaction in two decades. This, along with an increasing percentage of teachers who said they would leave their job, sends an unequivocal message about low teacher morale. Reductions in jobs and services (including substantial cuts in art, music, foreign language, and physical education), increasing class size, inadequate compensation for the work they do, and job insecurity are some of the reasons for the low morale. (For example, 34 percent of teachers surveyed feel insecure about their job, compared with just 8 percent in 2006.) In contrast, teachers who are very satisfied “are more likely to feel their jobs are secure and say they are treated as a professional by the community. They are also more likely to have adequate opportunities for professional development, time to collaborate with other teachers, more preparation and supports to engage parents effectively, and greater involvement of parents and their schools in coming together to improve the learning and success of students” (p. 5).
These surveys make it clear, first of all, that teachers are greatly influenced by the context in which they work as well as by their experiences in their schools. A factor barely mentioned but enormously significant in both surveys is that the majority of teachers in urban schools, who are White, teach students who are largely Latino/a and African American. In the 2010 MetLife study, for instance, highly satisfied teachers, most of whom work in middle-class and affluent schools, had a strong belief in the success of their students and greater confidence in their own ability to help their students succeed. They were also more likely to have high expectations for their students. The same was not true of many of the teachers who worked in low-income schools with students of diverse backgrounds.

These findings were corroborated through research by Douglas Ready and David Wright (2011), who used nationally representative data to explore the links between teacher perceptions and children’s sociodemographic backgrounds. Holding students’ social and academic backgrounds constant, the researchers found that teachers in high-poverty schools with lower-achieving students often underestimated their students’ abilities. On the other hand, teachers overestimated the skills of White students compared with Hispanic students, even when English was their primary language. These expectations influenced their interactions with their students and drove important decisions related to placement in academic programs. Although some of these misperceptions disappeared over time, such decisions have important consequences in both the short and long term. The researchers concluded that the characteristics of classrooms are more strongly associated with teacher biases than with teachers’ own backgrounds.

It is evident, then, that in spite of the significance of teacher quality on student learning, not all children have access to qualified teachers. According to Linda Darling-Hammond (2010), “In the United States, teachers are the most inequitably distributed school resource” (p. 40). The most highly qualified teachers tend to be in the best-resourced and most middle-class schools, while the most inexperienced, least qualified, most underprepared, tend to be in the most challenged schools. Darling-Hammond contends that the “achievement gap” would be dramatically reduced if low-income students of color were assigned to highly qualified teachers. It should also be noted, however, that teachers in different schools have different access to mentoring, professional development, curricular materials, and other resources. Therefore teachers in high-poverty schools, like their students, often suffer from a lack of adequate resources and support.

Given this toxic context, how can teachers thrive? Before we begin to answer this question, we need to know something about the students in our public schools.

Students in U.S. Public Schools: Change and Diversity

Our society is changing from a largely White, European American population to one that is tremendously diverse. Our neighbors now hail from all over the world, some displaced by war, others driven by hunger, still others in search of a free and democratic society or simply a decent job and a good education for their children. Our public schools are usually the first to reflect these demographic
changes, from the many languages heard in school hallways to the complexion of the students in those hallways. Every urban, suburban, town, and rural school is now diverse in numerous ways.

*The Condition of Education* (Aud 2012), the annual report mandated by Congress and prepared by the National Center for Education Statistics, found that as of 2011, there were 49.5 million students in U.S. schools; 54 percent were White, a marked change from 1990, when 67 percent were White. The greatest increase was among Hispanics*: 23 percent of the entire school population in 2011 was Hispanic compared with 12 percent in 1990. Students for whom English is a second language now number over 5 million, from about 3.7 million just a decade earlier. The number of immigrants, currently estimated at over 50 million, is also having a significant impact on schools. One in four public school students now speaks a language other than English at home. In addition, immigrant children account for one-third of all children living in poverty, and nearly a third of all immigrant families lack health care insurance (Camarota 2012). The number of students with special needs and disabilities, 6.5 million, has also increased substantially in the past several decades.

Preschool enrollment is an increasingly important indicator of later school success. One study (Reynolds et al. 2011) found that providing preschool services for low-income families had significant economic benefits that exceeded costs, sometimes by as much as $10.83 per dollar invested, up to age 26. Yet access to preschool is not equal. The percentage of Asian children enrolled in preprimary programs was 71 percent, noticeably higher than the percentage of Hispanic children (56 percent, the lowest percentage among all racial/ethnic groups) (Aud et al. 2012).

*Please note in this book, depending on the context, I use both Hispanic and Latino/a to refer to those of Caribbean, Central American, and South American descent and others whose native or heritage language is Spanish (or, in some few cases, an indigenous language of South America). Government publications generally use Hispanic, while most Latino/a scholars prefer Latino/a.
Conclusion: Context Always Influences Teaching

The demographics of student and teaching populations have changed greatly over the past several decades, the change most notable among students. While about 45 percent of students in U.S. schools are students of color (Latinos/as, African Americans, Asian Americans, and American Indians, as well as biracial and multiracial students), only about 17 percent of teachers are teachers of color (Aud et al. 2012). Not only are the demographics divergent, but also many teachers (of all backgrounds, not just White) have had little personal or professional experience with the populations they teach. Teachers of all backgrounds are responsible for teaching all students effectively; however, without personal or professional experience with diversity, miscommunication, mistrust, and discomfort between teachers and students of different backgrounds are common.

There is no question that teachers and students are influenced, positively and negatively, by societal, educational, and ideological contexts. These contexts include insufficient resources, punitive school policies, and unquestioned negative ideologies about the abilities of students and teachers alike. The “expectations gap” of students of some backgrounds certainly has a negative impact on whether or not they thrive in school. At the same time, the “expectations gap” of teachers held by many in our society has an impact on whether or not teachers can be effective, competent, and caring. A study of over 1,200 K–12 teachers nationwide (Richards 2012) found that the five top stressors associated with teaching are teaching needy and unmotivated students without the needed support; having too many responsibilities; lacking control over decisions that affect students; and being constantly subject to accountability measures. The results of these stressors included physical exhaustion, a waning enthusiasm for and idealism about teaching, self-doubt about abilities and job security, and negative effects on personal relationships. Researcher Robert Bullough (2011) has written forcefully on the toll taken on teachers in an atmosphere of incessant stress and inflexible accountability: “Where educational ends are test-score dominated, narrow, and uninspiring, educators find investing fully in their work difficult, and aspirations lower and performance flattens” (p. 16).

But context is not destiny; although there are many improvements that can and must be made in many of the nation’s most troubled schools, these conditions can be positively affected by teachers willing to work in conjunction with their students, their students’ families, and community members to change them. How some teachers manage to do so, and to thrive in the process, is the topic of subsequent chapters. This is not to take the responsibility away from administrators, policymakers, and others, but rather to say that while larger structural changes that can equalize opportunities for all students are crucial, teachers can, and will, continue to make a difference in their students’ lives.

In the chapters that follow, we learn how a group of teachers push back on a toxic policy context and negative expectations and instead challenge both the societal and the school conditions they face on a daily basis to build strong and nurturing relationships with their students.
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