Teaching as Political Work: Learning from Courageous and Caring Teachers

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Teaching is inherently political work. Although I do not mean to be unnecessarily provocative in making this assertion, after 40 years of teaching as both a K-12 teacher and, later, as a teacher educator, I have become convinced of the truth of this statement. Teaching is political in the sense that power and privilege—through decisions about funding, curriculum, class size, testing, tracking, and other matters of policy and practice—exacerbate rather than ease social class and race inequalities. In effect, then, education helps determine the life chances of young people based on their identities and zip codes. Teachers are an important part of this mix because what teachers say and do every day can have a tremendous impact on the lives of their students. Moreover, many of the students in our nation's classrooms reflect the tremendous structural inequalities that are today becoming more apparent than ever before. It takes more than a little courage and tremendous amounts of care to teach the most vulnerable students, and that is the subject of this paper.

In this increasingly standardized time, how one defines teaching has important implications for both public education and professional development. Teaching as political work suggests that the current definition of "highly qualified teacher" as developed and propagated by the federal government through the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law (a definition that includes deep subject matter knowledge and passing a certification test) is insufficient because it fails to take into account other qualities that also matter in becoming a competent teacher. The current definition of "highly qualified teacher" is also insufficient because it fails to take into account the sociopolitical context of education, which includes the tremendous diversity of language, social class, ethnicity, and race, among other differences, that are a fact of life in many school systems in our nation.

As a teacher educator, I've had the good fortune to work with, and learn from, many extraordinary teachers. In this paper, I describe what I have found to be some of the qualities of teachers who make a positive difference in the lives of students, particularly those students who've been marginalized by their schooling experiences. In order to do this, I will also respond to some essential questions that I believe are at the heart of teaching. For example, what is social justice in education? What does it mean to teach

for social justice? How can future teachers be prepared for diverse classrooms? And, most important, why should these questions matter to all of us, whether we are educators or not?

Because the concept of social justice figures prominently in my work and in my responses to these questions, I begin by defining what I mean by this term, particularly as it relates to education.

Defining Social Justice in Education

It seems that social justice is on everybody's mind these days, especially in educational circles. Yet, although often invoked, it is rarely defined. In the past several years, everybody has claimed to be "doing" social justice: every school and college of education worth its salt said that its programs were guided by it. Recently, however, the term has come under greater scrutiny and criticism because of its supposedly political and partisan nature. For instance, Frederick Hess, Director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a decidedly right-wing think tank, recently wrote about what he considers a "troubling tendency" among schools of education to "regulate the dispositions and beliefs of those who would teach in our nation's classrooms" (Hess, 2006, p. B07). Specifically, he singled out a number of departments and schools of education that used social justice as an underlying framework for their education programs, arguing instead that social justice has no place in teacher education because it "regulates dispositions and beliefs" (Hess, 2006, p. B07).

Given the current conservative political climate in the United States, Hess's charge is not surprising: ideas defined by the right as "unscientific" (that is, not proven as part of a randomized sample study, and using only qualitative measures) are likely to be attacked as romantic and unrealistic. Yet it seems to me that just the opposite is true: ideals such as social justice and equity are neither "soft" nor romantic, but rather the very hallmarks of our democracy. Attacking them as liberal, "touchy-feely," and misguided is to attack the very foundation of public education in our nation.

But before we can agree or disagree on the significance of social justice in teacher education programs, we need to agree on what is meant by this concept. For me, first and foremost, social justice is a fundamentally political project because it is about power: who has it, who makes

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the key decisions that can improve people's lives—or not—and who benefits from these decisions. Secondly, social justice is a quintessentially democratic project because it promotes inclusiveness and fairness. It is about understanding education and equal access to it as civil rights.

Along with my colleague Patty Bode, I define social justice as both a philosophy and actions that embody treating all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity (Nieto & Bode, forthcoming). On a societal scale, this means affording each person the real—not simply a theoretical—opportunity to reach their potential by giving them access to the goods, services, and social and cultural capital of a society, while also affirming the culture and talent of each individual and the group or groups with which they identify.

In terms of education in particular, social justice is not just about "being nice" to students, or about giving them a pat on the back (Nieto, forthcoming). Social justice in education includes four components: First, it challenges, confronts, and disrupts misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, social class, gender, and other social and human differences. In practical terms, this means that teachers with a social justice perspective consciously include topics that focus on inequality in the curriculum, and they encourage their students to work for equality and fairness both in and out of the classroom.

Second, a social justice perspective means providing all students with the resources necessary to learn to their full potential. This includes material resources such as books, curricula, financial support, and so on. Equally vital are emotional resources such as a belief in students' ability and worth, care for them as individuals and learners, high expectations and rigorous demands on them, and the necessary social and cultural capital to negotiate the world. These are not just the responsibilities of individual teachers and schools, however. Going beyond the classroom level, social justice means reforming school policies and practices so that all students are provided an equal chance to learn. This entails viewing critically such policies as high-stakes testing, tracking, student retention, segregation, and parent and family outreach, among others.

Social justice in education is not just about giving students resources. A third component of a social justice perspective is drawing on the talents and strengths that students bring to their education. This requires a rejection of the deficit perspective that has characterized much of the education of marginalized students, to a perspective that views all students—not just those from privileged backgrounds—as having resources that can be a foundation for their learning. These resources include their languages, cultures, and experiences.

A fourth essential component of social justice is creating a learning environment that promotes critical thinking and supports agency for social change. Creating such environments can provide students with an apprenticeship in democracy, a vital part of preparing them for the future.

Having defined social justice in education, I now turn to a description of the sociopolitical context of education, a context that inevitably influences teachers' and administrators' beliefs and practices.

The Sociopolitical Context of Education

The sociopolitical context of education includes the conditions, laws, regulations, policies, practices, traditions, and ideologies that influence and define education at any given time. For instance, one condition that has a tremendous impact on the classroom and school is the turnover of teachers. About twenty percent of new teachers leave during the first three years of teaching, and nearly half of all new teachers in urban public schools quit within five years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000; Education Commission of the States, 2000). No one can deny that this turnover has a significant impact on schools, creating further instability and chaos in the most troubled schools.

Another aspect of the sociopolitical context is the growing diversity in our nation's schools. We have all seen the statistics, and we know these things from our everyday work in schools: Children living in poverty, children of color, and

those who speak native languages other than English are now the majority in most big cities, as well as in many urbanized suburbs, and in rural areas in many parts of the country. For example, children of color are now about forty percent of all children in our public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Every school—whether a crowded urban school, or a small rural outpost—has already felt, or will soon feel, the impact, for instance, of the growing number of English language learners in our country. No area is untouched by the increasing diversity.

The "achievement gap" between white students and students of color, between middle-class and poor children, and between native English-speaking children and those who speak languages other than English as their native language is also part of the sociopolitical context of education. The concept of "achievement gap," however, should not be left unexamined. I'd like to suggest that the so-called "achievement gap" could just as legitimately be called the resource gap or the caring gap because the gap is often a result of widely varying resources provided to students based on their ZIP codes, as well as widely varying amounts of support and care given to children based on their identities. For example, according to the 2005 Funding Gap report from Education Trust, $907 less is spent per student in the highest-poverty districts than in the most affluent districts across the country, and in some states, the difference is many thousands of dollars. In terms of the "caring gap," according to studies by such researchers as Angela Valenzuela (1999) and Nilda Flores-Gonzalez (2002), access to teachers' care is often related to students' racial/cultural/and social class identities. And by now, it's also clear that when students feel cared for, affirmed, and supported, they tend to do better in school. Yet we persist on calling attention to the so-called "achievement gap," once again laying the blame squarely on the children rather than on the system that created the gap in the first place.

The education reform movement of the past three decades, accompanied by pressures to "teach to the test," has resulted in a growing standardization and bureaucratization of education. This is especially evident in the NCLB law and other accountability structures demanding "adequate yearly progress" based only on standardized tests. Yet evidence is mounting that the testing frenzy—which is a direct result of the call for so-called "high standards"—is actually limiting pedagogical approaches and constricting the curriculum, especially in classrooms serving the most educationally battered students. For example, Audrey Amrein and David Berliner (2002) reported findings from research in 18 states that student learning was unchanged or actually went down when high-stakes testing policies were instituted.

The physical and emotional condition of public schools, especially schools in deteriorating and devastated communities, also has an impact on education. Many of the schools that our nation's most vulnerable children attend, especially those in economically strapped urban and rural areas, are rundown, abandoned, and receive little financial and moral support. A recent article in *Education Week* presented these disturbing statistics: one in four schools is overcrowded, and 3.5 million children attend schools that are in very poor or even non-operative condition. The author concluded,

> Even as policymakers seek to improve equity and close gaps in educational outcomes, disparities in facilities send disadvantaged students a visible and unmistakable message that we care less about their education than that of their more affluent peers (Mead, 2005).

A related phenomenon is the growing segregation of public schools. As Gary Orfield (2001) has exhaustively documented, poor students attend schools that are today more segregated than at any time since the Brown v. Board of Education decision. As a result, poor children of all backgrounds, but particularly poor children of color and children for whom English is a second language, are at the bottom of the ladder for receiving a high quality education.

Finally, there is the long-standing and growing structural and social inequality that results in the related negative effects of poverty, joblessness, little or no access to health care, and racism and hopelessness as experienced by many people on a daily basis. All of these issues have recently been amply documented in a number of research studies and reports by Jean Anyon (2005), David Berliner (2005), Jonathan Kozol (2005), and Richard Rothstein (2004). Each of these authors, in his or her own way, has argued that macroeconomic policies that regulate such

things as the minimum wage, job availability, tax rates, health care, and affordable housing, among others, have severe consequences for those living in poverty, and that these are the chief culprits for creating school failure. They argue—and I also believe—that without changing these macroeconomic policies, educational policies by themselves cannot completely reform our school system. The struggle for equal and high-quality education, therefore, has to be fought at many levels and in numerous arenas.

In sum: the sociopolitical context of education graphically demonstrates the enormous inequalities that exist in students' access to an excellent, high quality education, inequalities that are regularly based on race, social class, language, and other differences.

In spite of the dismal picture I've sketched, it is widely recognized that good teaching can help overcome handicaps such as poverty or other social ills. In fact, there is growing research that good teachers make the single greatest difference in promoting or deterring student achievement. In its 1996 report, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, for instance, found that teachers' knowledge and practices are critical in determining what students learn. Another widely-cited study found that students who are assigned to several highly effective teachers in a row have significantly greater gains in achievement than those assigned to less effective teachers, and that the influence of each teacher has effects that spill over into later years. Because of the potential they have for changing the course of students' lives, we should view good teachers who care about students and make a difference in their lives as a national treasure. But in this difficult time for public education in our nation, they're often thought of in demeaning ways. This context was the catalyst for my decision to gather the stories of caring, committed, and competent teachers to figure out why they teach, and to see if their experiences might have broader implications for teacher education and professional development.

The Why We Teach Project

In 2004, I began a project that I called Why We Teach. My goal was to ask a group of teachers who are dedicated to the craft of teaching and passionate about their work to write essays about why they teach. I especially wanted to engage those who teach students of diverse backgrounds because I thought their ideas would be beneficial for both teachers and teacher educators struggling with the question of how best to be prepared for diverse classrooms. The result is a book that includes reflections by 21 teachers who work in public elementary, middle, and high schools. This is a highly diverse group: some are fairly new to teaching, others are veterans. Most teach students of diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and social class backgrounds, and their own backgrounds also are diverse in terms of ethnicity, race, social class background, sexual orientation, life experiences, and other differences. They teach in urban and suburban schools, both large and small. I knew some of them well, others less well, and some not at all. Some were recommended by colleagues and by other teachers; I met one of them at a meeting, while I read about another one in a local newspaper. Although this is a very distinct group of teachers —I make no claim that they are "representative" of the teaching profession as a whole—I am convinced that teachers such as these can be found in all schools throughout the nation.

Before proceeding, I offer a word of caution: in education, we have the tendency to jump on the bandwagon of the latest "quick fix." New ideas, especially those that come attractively packaged, are often spoon-fed to teachers and administrators through articles, programs, kits, checklists, university courses, or inservice workshops as if they were the answer we'd all been waiting for. Some of these ideas may have merit; they often do. But quick fixes never work. I would especially hate to see the qualities I describe in this paper to turn up on a list of "dispositions of excellent teachers" ("loves students—check"; "has a passion for teaching—check", etc.) as if a checklist could determine what it means to be an excellent, caring, and committed teacher.

Trying to figure out why people go into the teaching profession, and what makes them successful, is not a new endeavor; a great deal of research has already been done on this topic. Some of the broadly acknowledged qualities of effective teachers gleaned from research include a solid general education background, a deep knowledge of their subject matter, familiarity with numerous pedagogical approaches, strong communication skills, and effective organizational skills (see, for instance, Lortie, 1977, 2002). In the past two decades, a greater amount

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of research has concentrated on what makes teachers effective with students of diverse backgrounds, an especially fruitful topic for discussion because of the growing diversity in the nation's schools. For such teachers, the list also includes knowledge of students' culture and language, high expectations for students, respect for—and outreach to—students' families and communities, and a deep desire to support student learning (García, 1999; Gordon, 1999; Haberman, 1988; Irvine, 2003; Knapp et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lucas et al., 1990; Rose, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

This is an essential list, one that describes what it takes to be a good teacher. But I want to propose an additional set of qualities that became apparent to me as I read the teachers' essays. These qualities have to do with ideals, attitudes, sensibilities, and values. The five qualities that I found most prevalent in the Why We Teach teachers' essays are:

- a sense of mission;
- solidarity with, and empathy for, their students;
- the courage to challenge mainstream knowledge;
- improvisation;
- a passion for social justice.

In what follows, I describe each briefly and give a few examples (all quotations and examples are from Nieto, 2005).

A Sense of Mission

All the teachers wrote about their sense of mission as a major reason for teaching. Although the teachers describe their work as a mission, they shy away from seeing teaching as missionary work. Instead, they see themselves as serving the public good. For example, teacher Nina Tepper, a veteran of over 25 years in the classroom, explained, "I teach for the youth and the future." Ayla Gavins, a teacher in the Boston area, added, "As a teacher, I exude my values and what is important to me. My sense of right and wrong filters through the rules, the standard of good work, and how we treat each other in my classroom. What is important to me is out there for everyone to see." And Yahaira Marquez, who was a first-year teacher, wrote:

> As a teacher I'm able to help others better themselves, share one of the subjects I'm

passionate about, interact with and learn more about others, establish different kinds of relationships, and learn more about myself while making myself stronger. All that with one job and at the age of 23!

Rather than being stymied by the negative discourse about students in urban schools, Melinda Pellerin-Duck, a teacher in Springfield, Massachusetts, wrote, "I teach because I see extraordinary possibilities in students."

Some of the teachers also mentioned the significance of public education for our democracy. Jennifer Welborn, a middle school science teacher wrote,

> I teach in public school because I still believe in public education. I believe that the purpose of public school, whether it delivers or not, is to give a quality education to all kids who come through the doors. I want to be part of that lofty mission… I may be naïve, but I believe that what I do day in and day out does makes a difference.

Mary Cowhey, a first and second-grade teacher in Northampton, Massachusetts, explained,

> I teach because I would be foolish to think I am done learning, or that I could learn more by myself than with others. I teach because I would be selfish not to share what I have had the privilege to learn from elders, from books, from teachers, from nature, from experience. I teach because I am part of a community, a country, and a world that could be better. I teach because I agree with Gandhi, "If we are to reach real peace in the world, we shall have to begin with the children."

Solidarity with, and Empathy for, Students

At this juncture, it's important to emphasize that students' lives and futures are not the sole responsibility of teachers as if issues of inequality, personal and institutional racism and other biases, lack of resources, poor infrastructure, unfair bureaucratic policies, and so on, did not matter. On the contrary, they matter a great deal. In spite of this, the teachers who wrote essays

know from firsthand experience that relationships are at the heart of teaching. Care is a key ingredient in good teaching and it underscores the fact that even in difficult situations, teachers' relationships with their students make a difference. Caring for students, however, is more than a sentimental emotion. It means having genuine respect for students, including their identities, as well as high expectations and admiration for them. Veteran teacher Sandra Jenoure, who taught in Harlem for 32 years, expressed it, this way: "I know it's easy to sit back and listen to the gossip in schools. 'These kids can't learn,' is what you hear. The truth is they can and do. We have to see and believe." Stephen Gordon, a veteran of 35 years and now in retirement working as a literacy coach, wrote, "Meeting former students makes me feel I have done right by them, that they remember that I cared about them, that I respect their identity and intelligence, their hopes and difficulties. In this momentary meeting, I once more feel the joy and privilege of having been their teacher."

Such sentiments are not limited to veteran teachers, however. Seth Peterson, who has taught in the Boston Public Schools for a little over a decade, writes a letter to his students at the beginning of each school year. In his essay, he included the letter he wrote to his students a number of years ago, a small portion of which is printed below.

To the Snowden Class of 2007:

My name is Seth Peterson and I would like to welcome you to Snowden International School. It's a pleasure and honor for me to call myself your teacher as I welcome you to this class, this cluster, this school, and this four-year journey through time and knowledge. Though they will go by quickly, these years will help define you, contribute to your sense of self and place in this complicated world. I hope you will leave here with the world at your fingertips and no regrets.

I teach because I believe that knowledge is power and I am committed to seeing each of you empowered in a society that far too often tries to limit your power or discredit your voice. Yet, being a teacher also comes with great responsibility. It is my job to make sure you leave here with the reading and writing skills necessary to succeed in whatever path you choose. I owe it to you, your family, and myself to ensure that no lack of knowledge, practice, or skill ever holds you back…

All over the state, and all over the nation, people are arguing about what we should teach and how you should learn. Publishers are getting rich pushing the latest curriculum model. Politicians are using your test scores, your successes and failures, to further their careers. Even in this corrupt environment, I still see tremendous potential in turning this classroom into a true workshop for our ideas and art… We must have the strength, patience, and courage to make the reading and writing we do here mean something.

I try not to take myself too seriously, but as you can tell, I take my job and your learning very seriously. In turn, I expect you to be serious about your education and the work that comes with it. I look forward to reading your thoughts and hearing your ideas.

Sincerely,

Seth Peterson

The Courage to Question Mainstream Knowledge and Conventional Wisdom

The teachers in Why We Teach view teaching as advocacy and risk-taking. They challenge the mainstream knowledge that's in the text, as well as conventional wisdom about the so-called limits of their students. In this regard, the challenge for teachers is to develop the courage to confront—and to teach their students to confront—what Michel Foucault (1980) calls the "regimes of truth," that is, the kind of discourses promoted by each society as truth, and produced, transmitted, and kept in place by systems of power such as universities, the military, and the media. The result of these "regimes of truth" is that perspectives and realities different from those that are officially sanctioned tend to remain invisible. This

means that teachers need to develop more nuanced understandings of complex issues, and to learn to confront and learn from different perspectives.

Jennifer Welborn, a middle school science teacher, provides a vivid example of what it means to challenge conventional wisdom and mainstream knowledge. It was the book *The Mismeasure of Man* by Stephen Jay Gould (1981) that helped change how she looked at science. The book became the impetus for a unit on scientific racism and the social construction of race that she has taught every year for the past 10 years. She wrote:

> I want my students to realize that science is not the objective pursuit of knowledge that it is professed to be. I want them to understand that data may support a hypothesis that is not valid to begin with. I want them to know that correlation does not imply causality. I want them to know there are hidden variables that may affect an experiment. I want them to know about researcher bias. I want them to know all this so that when they read in the newspaper that "minority SAT scores are down," they know that these data must be due to social, economic, and political inequities in our society. They are not due to genetic inferiority.

In her essay, Jennifer also wrote that she wants her students to "learn to be skeptics," to "differentiate between good science, bad science, and pseudoscience." She also wants students to think about the advantages and disadvantages that race automatically confers to individuals and groups, because according to Jennifer, "it is through this knowledge and dialogue that students can understand the complexity of racism in our country."

Improvisation

Educator, artist, and performer Theresa Jenoure (2000) has written about the intersection of jazz improvisation and teaching. She defines improvisation as a system of composing, but beyond music, it is also a way of thinking and behaving. In teaching, she sees jazz improvisation as a metaphor for creativity within structure. Improvisation means being prepared for uncertainty, both the joy and the frustration of it. In teaching, improvisation means seeing beyond

frameworks, rubrics, and models, something that is becoming more difficult given the bureaucratization of schools. In fact, according to veteran English teacher Judith Baker, many schools are in "template heaven," viewing templates as the end rather than the means to effective instruction.

Rather than relying on templates, the teachers in this project use the stance of improvisation in their teaching. For Ayla Gavins, for instance, teaching is like being on a "moving train," because "on any given day, teachers make hundreds, even thousands of decisions to keep a balance of fairness and equity." For Yahaira Marquez, teaching is an adventure. She writes, "I go into class each morning not knowing what kind of day it will be… It is that uncertainty, that element of surprise, that I think drives me even harder." This means viewing even imperfections in a positive light as in the case of art teacher Kerri Warfield, who writes, "I hope that my students will remember my class not because it was perfect, but because of its unique flaws."

A Passion for Social Justice

Finally, the teachers in Why We Teach share a passion for social justice. As Mary Ginley, who has taught both economically impoverished as well as very privileged children, writes, "If I just teach them how to survive in this inequitable society, how to get along, I am doing them a tremendous disservice." Ambrizeth Lima, a teacher of primarily Cape Verdean students in Boston, maintains that "teaching is always about power. That is why it must also be about social justice. " For Kristen French, social justice is embodied as mentoring, a lesson she learned from her community college professor, Dale, who gave her the courage to succeed at a time when she needed it most.

For Patty Bode, an art teacher for 16 years, social justice meant tackling difficult topics through the curriculum. She describes how, a number of years ago, she decided to do a skin color lesson because of a situation that erupted in her classroom. Students were engaged in a landscape lesson, coloring trees. A white student, Andrew, sitting next to Damon, a black student, began to chant, "My color is better than your color, my color is better than your color…" Damon complained that Andrew was making fun of his skin color. Andrew vehemently objected, saying that although he had been teasing, it

was not about Damon's skin but about the tree color. The boys nearly got into a fight, and Patty decided it was time to talk about the taboo subject of skin color and race. She talked with them about context and how certain words and ideas are understood or misunderstood. They also discussed the historical abuse of privilege and power related to race. Rather than sending the boys to the principal's office, she arranged to have Andrew and Damon help her prepare a new art lesson for the following day, a lesson that would turn out to be a foundation of her teaching K-12 students as well as teachers in professional development workshops for years afterward.

The next day, Patty put her landscape lesson on hold (another good example of improvisation), and Andrew and Damon helped her hang magazine photos of children's faces of many tints and shades on the bulletin board. In addition, students made a list of what they already knew as they looked at the photos: that people have many shades of skin color, that some families have different shades and tones in one family and that, when exposed to sun, some people get darker brown while others get red and sunburned. They also made a list of what they wondered about and wanted to know. Questions included: Why are some people darker or lighter than others? What makes people's skin color different? Does geographic region influence skin color? If geography makes a difference, why do so many people of so many different skin colors live in the same town? Why do some people call other people names about skin color? Why does it hurt so much when those names are used? What are some words that are helpful and not hurtful to describe skin color and race? Why is it uncomfortable to talk about skin color?

Students also learned how to mix red, yellow, and blue to make brown and, in this way, match the skin color of every human being on earth. Damon and Andrew traced their hands on a big piece of paper at the bulletin board. Then they demonstrated paint mixing techniques to achieve various tones of skin color. Students ran around the room holding up their hands and arms to one another, discussing the various tones of their skin colors.

After learning how to mix colors, the students noticed that they felt more comfortable talking about skin color because the art activity had given them language and tools to approach the difficult topic of race. To answer the questions from their chart paper that required more research, Patty enlisted the help of classroom teachers and the librarian to research questions about physiology and melanin as well as historical events and political language used to describe racial and cultural groups. She also asked the guidance counselor to help the students talk about what to do with hurtful feelings. Eventually this project turned into a fully developed fourth grade unit integrating science, math, language arts, and social studies through art.

The following year when the fourth graders became fifth graders, Patty invited them to lead a school-wide art lesson in which everybody in the school—each student and all adults from custodian to principal—painted their hands and learned about skin color and race. This lesson became the springboard of Patty's year-long art curriculum. Patty writes, "my skin color art lesson tells me so much about my students, but more important, it tells my students why I teach: to create a classroom that is deliberately anti-racist, where respectful dialogue, critical thinking, and lots of messy art-making are required."

Conclusion

For the teachers highlighted in this paper, it is clear that teaching is political work because power and privilege are deeply embedded in everything having to do with teaching, from classroom practices to infrastructure, from disciplinary policies to teacher recruitment, from testing issues to curriculum decisions. It is clear, too, that education is always political. How could it be otherwise when students are forced to attend schools that are crumbling and dangerous, when standardized testing becomes the major focus of education, and when schools nearly perfectly reflect the social class and racial divide rather than challenge it?

Teaching is not simply about reading, or math, or art. Instead, it is also about who is heard, listened to, and read, who gets to count, and who can paint the picture. It's about who moves ahead and who gets left behind. In this sense, teaching is political work, and it has always been so. Perhaps it is time for teacher educators, policymakers, and the public at large to recognize this fact and use the political nature of education to help turn things around for our most vulnerable students. If we believe in the power of education in a democratic society to offer all students a chance to dream, that is the least we can do.

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