

## Chapter 1

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# TEACHING AS EVOLUTION

*A life in teaching is a stitched-together affair, a crazy quilt of odd pieces and scrounged materials, equal parts invention and imposition. To make a life in teaching is largely to find your own way, to follow this or that thread, to work until your fingers ache, your mind feels as if it will unravel, and your eyes give out, and to make mistakes and then rework large pieces.*

William Ayers, *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher*

From that day in 1965 when I first stepped into the fourth-grade classroom where I would start my student teaching, I have experienced the exhilaration, anguish, satisfaction, uncertainty, frustration, and sheer joy that typify teaching. Years later, when I began teaching teachers, I fell in love with the profession all over again. Working with teachers who would in turn prepare young people for the future seemed to me a life worth living. I am as certain today as I was then that this is true.

Yet I also am perplexed about why teachers remain in teaching, why they dedicate their lives to a profession ostensibly honored but generally disrespected by the public in a climate increasingly hostile to public education and fixated on rigid conceptions of “standards” and accountability. There is nothing wrong with standards; on the contrary, it is high time that this concept was used in reference to urban public schools. But, unfortunately, the call for standards too often results in a climate that does little besides vilify teachers and their students. This is a punitive climate that may have ominous repercussions not only for many students but also for talented teachers, those who care most deeply about students.

Experience alone, as John Dewey reminds us, is hollow without reflection. My own evolution as a teacher might not have resulted in any particular insights were it not for the ongoing opportunities I’ve had to think about my experiences as part of the larger context in which education takes place. In what follows, I share my thinking as a teacher and teacher educator and the lessons I’ve learned along the way.

I start with my own story because I believe that all teaching is ultimately autobiographical and that it is a process of evolution. It is only through reflection on that evolution that we can understand our motives,

aspirations, and even success or failure as teachers. Using my own journey, I want to explore the tension between the *possibilities* of public education and the inherent *limits* placed on education by the context of society and schools.

### LESSONS LEARNED ALONG THE WAY

I became a teacher in 1966. But I am not now the same teacher I was in 1966, or in 1975, or 1990. As we all do, I have changed a great deal over the years, and so have my practices and ideas about teaching. These changes did not occur without warning; they have been responses to experiences that I have had as a teacher, teacher educator, mentor, mother, grandmother, scholar, and researcher. I have lately become more introspective about where I began, where I am now, and why and how I have changed along the way.

**Teaching Is Hard Work.** I studied elementary education in college knowing that I wanted to teach young children. But my first assignment was to Junior High School 278, a troubled school in Ocean Hill/Brownsville in Brooklyn. This was just as the community control and decentralization struggles of the time were beginning. The school to which I was assigned was in the thick of these conflicts. At the first staff meeting, we were told that teacher turnover at the school was nearly 50% a year; that September, I was one of 35 new teachers in a teaching staff totaling about 75.

My first months in the school were not easy. As a 22-year-old novice teacher, I was ill prepared for the rules and regulations that made my work difficult and frustrating: Teachers weren't allowed in classrooms before 7:45 in the morning (there were concerns about our safety); we weren't permitted to stay after 3 p.m. (the janitors needed to leave by that time); we were discouraged from making home visits (you never knew what could happen). I was also unprepared for the cynicism of many teachers, especially those who congregated in the teachers' room. "The kids are animals today" was a frequent complaint. "They're not academically oriented—but they *are* good with their hands," said one teacher. "Their parents don't care about education" was a common remark. Quite a number of teachers were angry, a mean-spirited kind of angry. But teachers weren't the only ones who were angry; the level of anger and dissatisfaction on the part of other staff, as well as community members, parents, and students was enormous. That year and the next, community protests and teacher strikes were the order of the day.

I was young and naive. As the only Puerto Rican staff member in the school, I thought I'd have a fairly easy time of it. I hadn't expected discipline to be so arduous; after all, I had been a student at similar schools. Yet

the kids I faced every day seemed angrier and more oppositional than what I remembered. Most of all, I was not prepared for the hopelessness that permeated the school on the part of the students and staff. I often went home and cried.

**Becoming a Good Teacher Takes Time.** But I didn't give up. I vowed to improve my teaching and to create an affirming climate in my classroom. I worked hard to develop strong and positive relationships with my students and their families. It was a time of tremendous social upheaval, and many progressive books on the crisis of inequality in urban education were being written. I read them all. I was determined to go beyond the canned curriculum I had received, a curriculum so rigid that it included not only the daily objectives and lessons that teachers were to cover, but even the very words they were expected to say. At first comforting for its step-by-step guidance, the curriculum soon tested my patience and thwarted my creativity. I tried experimenting with my own notions about curriculum and teaching. And I avoided going to the teachers' room.

I also sought out teachers who believed in the young people they taught, and I talked with them about my hopes and fears. I remember Mr. Mannheim, a social studies teacher who invited me to sit in on his 8–13 class, a group of eighth graders thought of as “unteachable” by many others. Classes in the school were grouped by purported intelligence. Little was expected of Class 8–13, the bottom of 13 classes in the grade. But as soon as the class started, the kids came alive, sounding for all the world like college-bound students in a well-endowed private school. In that dingy classroom in a dilapidated urban public school in Brooklyn, I witnessed a Socratic dialogue between a teacher and his young African American and Latino students that most people would have deemed unthinkable. What I knew from my own experience—that poverty, race, ethnicity, native language, and other differences account neither for intelligence nor creativity—was powerfully reinforced in that classroom.

In that first year, I started bringing students home with me and taking them to museums, libraries, and other places where they might discover new worlds sometimes just minutes from their homes. I believed that by taking them to the American Museum of Natural History or the Cloisters, to plays and concerts, and to community activities, I could miraculously turn my students' previous academic failure into success. I also started visiting their homes and meeting their families, families who truly cared about the future of their children, and I got to know and appreciate their daily struggles more deeply.

I thought a lot about the power of the curriculum in those first years of teaching. This was before multicultural education had evolved as a field,

but even then I knew I had to begin with what was important to my students' daily lives and experiences. So I worked hard at designing curriculum that would help students explore their own world, and also go beyond it. In my teaching, I tried to be tough, demanding, and loving at the same time (I concluded that teachers needed to be, just like a TV commercial about Kleenex tissues at the time, "soft yet strong"). I sometimes worked until late at night. By early the next morning I was back at school, breaking the rules by getting to my classroom before 7:30. I would set up the day's activities—activities that I hoped would engage my students and push them to learn—assisted by a few students who would sneak up to the third floor each morning to help me.

To my great surprise, after a few months of teaching, the assistant principal said I was on my way to becoming a "master teacher." This was, of course, hyperbole, but a great boon to a new teacher who many days went home and wept out of sheer frustration and exhaustion. I knew I had a long way to go, but by that first winter, I began to notice a change: My students were listening and paying more attention, and they appeared to be more engaged in their learning. I felt a renewed sense of purpose, and to my delight, I also gained respect among students, fellow teachers, and administrators.

But in spite of my evolving and more critical philosophy of teaching and learning, being in the midst of the political turmoil swirling around Ocean Hill/Brownsville was draining. There were constant rancorous community meetings and rallies, as well as union threats and walkouts. Relationships between teachers and the community were contentious, and I felt trapped in the middle. I was a neophyte when it came to political movements and I felt overwhelmed by the turmoil. I decided to leave.

**Social Justice Is Part of Teaching.** Two years after I began teaching in that junior high school in Brooklyn, I found out about an elementary school in the Bronx that was beginning an experimental program in bilingual education, only the second such school in the nation. PS 25, still known today as the Bilingual School, received one of the initial Title VII grants for bilingual education programs in the country. Given what was at the time my rather unique status among my fellow New York City teachers of being bilingual and Puerto Rican, I applied to the school and was hired as a fourth-grade teacher in September 1968. The principal was Hernán LaFontaine, one of the first Puerto Rican principals in the city.

I was enthusiastic but wary about the goals Hernán had for the school. For example, I had many questions about the feasibility of bilingual education (after all, I had never been in a bilingual program and I had done well, hadn't I?) and about the school's almost militant support for paren-

tal and family involvement. Within a short time, however, I saw with my own eyes the value of both, and I became one of the staunchest advocates of these innovations. I realized that although I had “made it,” most others had not; I was one of the lucky ones. Being a founding member of PS 25 was a tremendous education, one of the best educational experiences I have had. I was forced, albeit gently, to rethink some of my notions about education. After having come face to face with the effects of inequality at JHS 278, I began to think more seriously about what social justice meant for public education.

PS 25 was an exciting place to be at a critical moment in history. It was the height of the post-civil rights movement, a time when the Black Panthers were in the news every day and the Young Lords marched thousands strong in the Puerto Rican Day Parade. It was a time of the anti-Vietnam War movement and of university takeovers. At PS 25 a small but dedicated and mostly youthful group of Latino, European American, and African American educators, all bilingual in Spanish and English, were determined to change the way things were. We were also certain that our Puerto Rican and African American students were capable of learning, and we had the energy, love, and commitment to make it happen. When almost all the city’s 900-plus schools closed down for a strike, PS 25 was one of five that remained open. After the custodians’ union walked out in support of the teachers, Hernán and a few of the male teachers slept in the school at night to keep the place heated and to open it up in the morning.

The political climate spilled over into the school in other ways as well. For one thing, most of us no longer accepted the notion that complete assimilation was necessary for success. We brought language and culture out of the closet and into the curriculum. We relished our bilingualism and biculturalism and we taught students that understanding the world in different ways was valuable, even glorious. For the first time in my life, at least in the United States, knowing a language other than English and being adept in two cultural settings became an asset. In my second year at the school, I gave birth to my first daughter, Alicia (who, because she was the first baby born to a staff member at the school, was quickly dubbed “the bilingual baby”) and I wanted for her what I had not had for myself as a young child: an education that would respect, even admire, her bilingualism and biculturalism and that would expect and demand that she be capable of great things. This is how the political becomes personal, and it was a powerful transformative experience for me.

Because the idea of bilingual education for children who spoke a native language other than English was a novel one in modern U.S. education, virtually no materials were available. Most books and curricula from Spain and Latin America were culturally and linguistically inappropriate,

so we fashioned our own books, posters, bulletin boards, and other home-grown materials. Our mimeograph machine was well worn by the end of that first year.

The many fresh ideas bursting onto the education scene after the sedate, conservative 1950s and early 1960s also inspired us. We experimented with such innovations as open classrooms, individualized reading programs, team-teaching, and other approaches. Our curriculum included Puerto Rican and Black history and, among the more daring teachers, an examination of the colonization of Puerto Rico and the history and oppression of Puerto Ricans and other marginalized groups in the United States. We welcomed parents and entire families into our classrooms, and cultural norms such as *respeto*, *dignidad*, and *familia* permeated our teaching. We even had a room reserved for parents and community members, a room often humming with activity as parents engaged in workshops or meetings.

At PS 25, we changed many things: Our teaching practices were more in keeping with new approaches that focused on student engagement; we created our own materials to be more relevant to the lives and experiences of our students; we had high hopes and rigorous expectations for them; and we had close and respectful relationships with parents. But in spite of all these things, many children still were not learning. It was at this point that I began to question many of my assumptions about teaching and learning.

**There Is No Level Playing Field.** In spite of the excitement and energy that exemplified the Bilingual School, our success was far from complete. Looking back on those first years of teaching, first at JHS 278 and later at PS 25, I like to think that I did in fact influence the lives of some of my students. But after a few years of teaching in devastated urban areas, I realized that something was very wrong. Although I worked hard and tried all sorts of innovative approaches, and in spite of the love and respect my students and I had for one another, too many of my students were still not doing well. This reality was both disheartening and humbling. In spite of hard-won successes with students whom others had given up on, some of the young people I taught continued to experience tremendous failure. No matter how much they or I tried, something was holding us back. It was at this point that I began to question whether the “level playing field” I had always been taught about really existed for all people in the United States.

Looking back now, I realize that when I started teaching I innocently thought that individual teachers could do it all. I was convinced that I could change students’ lives through hard work and dedication, and by taking them to the Museum of Natural History and the Cloisters. Not only did I believe that education was the “great equalizer,” but I also was certain that individual teachers could turn students’ lives around by sheer willpower.

Yet for most of the students I had taught and in spite of my best intentions and efforts, a college education was out of the question and even high school graduation was an unfulfilled dream. Too many of my students still dropped out before reaching high school, many of the girls became mothers at 14 or 15, and most faced a future of poverty and dashed hopes.

Given my own experiences growing up in a struggling, working-class Puerto Rican family in New York City in the 1940s and 1950s, I thought I knew firsthand about inequality. But my work as a teacher with students whose lives were far more difficult than mine had ever been opened my eyes to the impact of daily, unrelenting injustice and hopelessness. I saw that successful student learning was not simply a matter of positive interactions between individual teachers and their students. I began to understand that conditions outside the control of most classroom teachers, including inequality in schools and outside them, prevented many students from learning.

I continued to work hard and to believe that all students were capable of learning, but my natural optimism was giving way to a more sobering awareness of the limits of the influence that individual teachers could have. This realization challenged my beliefs about our society's stated ideals concerning public education, and it changed how I was to work with future teachers in the years to come.

**Education Is Politics.** "Education is always political" is a statement that the late Paulo Freire made famous in his landmark book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.<sup>1</sup> A few years after he wrote these words, he pointed out even more directly the relationship between education and politics. "This is a great discovery," he wrote, "education is politics!" And he added, "[T]he teacher has to ask, What kind of politics am I doing in the classroom? That is, in favor of whom am I being a teacher?"<sup>2</sup> These words became riveting to me as my own political awareness developed.

Several years after beginning to teach, I was recruited by the Department of Puerto Rican Studies at Brooklyn College to help launch a bilingual education teacher preparation program to be cosponsored by the School of Education. At 29 years old, I was one of the youngest faculty members in the entire college. I was in for some heady years.

My political coming of age took place during my 3 years at Brooklyn College. With the small but growing community of Puerto Rican students, and with other politically active students and faculty from the college, we were engaged in a constant and often bitter struggle to gain support for our fledgling department. Through it all—confrontations, building takeovers, weekly rallies, and even an arrest at which I was labeled one of the "BC 44"—I became enamored of teaching all over again. At the same time, I began to see education as *political work*, just as and perhaps even more

political than attending rallies and taking over the president's office. To work with future teachers, and to help them understand teaching as political and ethical work was exhilarating. I threw myself into this new challenge, convinced that this was to be my future. Along with a growing commitment to the work, however, came more changes in my ideas about teaching and the role of teachers, changes that would accelerate when I began my doctoral studies.

### THE PROMISE OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

By now, I was certain that I wanted to continue teaching teachers. In order to do so, I needed a doctoral degree. In 1975, after 3 years of my working at Brooklyn College, my family and I left New York and moved to Massachusetts, where I began my doctoral studies. At the time, the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts was well known for its innovative and even radical approaches to teaching. I was not disappointed. My program of studies at the university was thrilling; it provided me with the most stimulating learning I had experienced in my life. But it also shattered the remnants of my dearly held belief that equality and fair play were available to all people in our nation. It was when I started my studies that I began to understand more fully how social and political forces either undermine or advance educational goals. No longer could I view education as simply personal advancement based on individual talents.

When I arrived at the university, my interest was piqued by a course with the title "Foundations of Multicultural Education," first taught in the fall semester of 1975 by Professor Bob Suzuki. I was intrigued: What *was* this thing called multicultural education and what did it have to do with the major goal I envisioned for my doctoral studies, that is, exploring how education could be improved for all children? I decided to take the course to find out.

The course proved to be one of the most engaging I had ever taken, but more important, it put into words many of the ideas I had wanted to express since beginning to teach. I learned that multicultural education, as a natural outgrowth of the civil rights movement, begun by African Americans and their allies, had tremendous potential for changing the life chances of children of all backgrounds. I began to see multicultural education as a humanizing alternative to business as usual, a hopeful framework for confronting the widespread and entrenched inequality in our nation's schools. This is because multicultural education has always challenged traditional ideologies that are based on a bell-curve mentality. Instead, it is based on

the assumption that students of all backgrounds and all circumstances are capable of learning and achieving. Hence, multicultural education became an essential part of my philosophy and practice, and it has remained so to this day.

There are many critics of multicultural education. They charge it with all manner of evils, from lowering standards to undermining our children's "ability to read, write, and reason."<sup>3</sup> While some of their criticisms are far-fetched and wildly exaggerated, I share the concerns of some that multicultural education is sometimes little more than lessons in self-esteem, or celebrations of ethnic heroes and quaint customs. I have never considered multicultural education in this way. Such limited views hold an exotic view of culture, relegating it to a nonessential frill, or consider it to be a narrow and prescribed kind of thing that either you have or you don't. Rather, from the beginning, I defined multicultural education as antiracist, basic education that must be firmly related to student learning and that should permeate all areas of schooling. It is for *all* students, encompassing not only race, ethnicity, and language but also gender, social class, sexual orientation, ability, and other differences. Moreover, it needs to be accompanied by a deep commitment to social justice and equal access to resources.

It has been my experience that when they are made better for the students who are most vulnerable, schools become better for everybody. That is why, although I have always included students from the majority culture in my view of multicultural education, in my research and writing I have especially focused on those students whose race, social class, ethnicity, native language, and other differences have resulted in their bearing the lion's share of educational failure. These young people have been victimized not through any fault of their own, but rather because their very identities and circumstances can doom them to receive less than they deserve. When I understood the implications of this situation, I made sure to include the lives and realities of my students in the curriculum; I encouraged them to speak and cherish their native languages; I refused to accept anything but the best work from them; I welcomed their families into the classroom—in short, I did everything I could to let them know that they could claim a rightful place in school and in the world.

But I knew that focusing on multicultural education was not enough. Even before having the language to talk about it, I had been trying to "do" multicultural education in my classroom. At the same time, I realized that a multicultural perspective, as helpful and progressive as it might be, needed to be complemented by a critical understanding of the reality of inequality in our nation's schools.

## THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF EDUCATION

As I continued my doctoral studies, my belief in the ideals of equal education was further challenged when I took a graduate course in the economics department that was taught by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, in which they used their now classic book, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, at that time still in manuscript form.<sup>4</sup> Bowles and Gintis's thesis—that education is largely influenced by market forces and that educational achievement corresponds fairly neatly with economic privilege—had a profound impact on me, adding to my disillusionment with the ideals of public education that I had so cherished.

The course that Bowles and Gintis taught was one of the most exciting educational experiences I had ever had because we discussed thought-provoking ideas that disrupted taken-for-granted truths. In spite of the excitement, the atmosphere in the class was imbued with despair. By and large the students in the class, mostly economics majors, were cynical about the promise of public education. But the few of us who were graduate students in the School of Education knew that, as teachers, we could not even face a classroom of young people if we didn't conceive of education as a hopeful enterprise. For us, the marriage of *hope* with *critique* was not only possible but also indispensable. So, although I was no longer the Pollyanna I had been when I started teaching, neither was I the skeptic I thought I had become. This is probably because at the same time that I was studying about the limits of educational reform through an economics lens, I was absorbed in the writings of progressive and innovative educators such as Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene, Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Jonathan Kozol, and Herbert Kohl, as well as budding scholars in multicultural education such as James Banks, Geneva Gay, Carlos Cortés, and Carl Grant.<sup>5</sup>

Through my studies, I also saw that with some notable exceptions, U.S. schools have historically reflected societal inequalities quite faithfully. These inequalities, especially those related to students' race, ethnicity, social class, and gender, are mirrored in educational policies and practices such as funding, ability tracking, access to high-status content, depictions of diversity in the curriculum, expectations of students, and disciplinary and counseling practices, among others.<sup>6</sup> This, what I came to call the *sociopolitical context* of education, became a major lens through which I began to understand education, and it was the basis for my book *Affirming Diversity*, first published in 1992.<sup>7</sup>

What do I mean by the sociopolitical context of education? I can best describe it by referring to a letter to teachers written by Paulo Freire. In it, Freire wrote: "It is obvious that the problems associated with education are not just pedagogical problems. They may also be political, ethical, and

financial problems.” When considering the phenomenon of dropping out of school, Freire explained, “In reality, we do not have children who drop out of school for no reason at all, as if they just decide not to stay. What we have are conditions in schools that either prevent them from coming to school or prevent them from staying in school.”<sup>8</sup> This explanation is a graphic example of what I mean by the sociopolitical context of education. Most of us have been trained to think of dropping out, or of failing to learn to read, or of poor learning in general, as simply *personal problems* caused by the shortcomings of *individual* students, or as indications of a particular family’s poor habits, laziness, or lack of interest in education. It was a great awakening for me to recognize something that I had in some ways always sensed: These problems do not develop out of the blue, but are at least partly a result of the social, political, and economic context in which schools are rooted.

### TEACHERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Shortly after starting my work in teacher education, I had begun to doubt that teachers could do very much to improve the situation of the young people they teach. I had, in fact, begun to suspect that the job of teachers was almost impossible, maybe even futile.

But now, after working with practicing teachers and future teachers all these years, my ideas about teachers have come almost full circle. Nevertheless, my faith in the power of teachers is not what it was when I first began teaching. It is now tempered by a deeper understanding of the limits of personal commitment and hard work on the part of individual teachers. While I know that there are certainly limits to what teachers can do, given the sociopolitical context in which they work and the rampant inequalities in educational access, I believe more strongly than ever in the power of teachers. This is because I have seen breathtaking teachers in action, and I have witnessed firsthand what they can achieve. I have also come to understand that teachers are not mere sponges, absorbing the dominant ideologies and expectations floating around in the atmosphere. They are also active agents whose words and deeds change lives and mold futures, for better or worse. Teachers *can* and *do* exert a great deal of power and influence in the lives of their students.

I also understand, perhaps more clearly than ever before, that a simple focus on teaching practices or on technical aspects of curriculum development are inadequate to address the complex problems of education. While vital and necessary, these things are insufficient, especially if we mean to change the outlook for children who are the most poorly served by public

schools. Teachers also need to elaborate a more critical approach to education so that they may understand the context in which their work takes place and learn to think strategically about how to change not only the context of their own classroom but also the broader context of teaching.

Given how difficult it is to be a teacher, I've become increasingly interested in why teachers stay in teaching, particularly excellent and caring teachers of students of diverse backgrounds and students challenged by poverty, racism, and injustice. It is clear to me that such teachers are often at the center of student success. Through their daily practice, they play a key role in upholding the ideals of equal and high-quality education that are articulated by our society. I am not so ingenuous as to believe that teachers can fix all the problems of schools single-handedly. On the contrary, my experience over the past 35 years has led me to believe that it is only through a combination of personal, collective, and institutional actions that real change can take place, a subject I addressed extensively in a previous book.<sup>9</sup> This means tackling educational problems not just in the classroom and community, but at the highest policy and ideological levels as well, in other words, becoming active agents for change. But even if they work only in their classrooms—a difficult enough job—teachers *can still* make a difference in their schools and in the lives of their students.

We've all heard stories about "the teacher who made a difference," and most of us even have our own stories to tell. When I address groups at conferences or in schools or universities, I frequently ask members of the audience to raise their hands if a teacher or teachers changed their lives. Invariably, most hands go up. We also see these stories in numerous memoirs and biographies. These are mostly hopeful accounts, and they are too numerous to allow us to dismiss the power of individual teachers. There's the case of a young person who had thought of herself as "dumb" being elevated to "smart" by a simple phrase uttered by a teacher; or of the student who began the road to his future when a teacher told him he was a gifted artist; or of the young woman, stunned when first called a "scientist" by her teacher, deciding that this was not an impossible dream after all.

Recently I wrote the preface for *Narratives*, a journal that invites educators to write about their experiences. This particular issue also included a short piece by Beatriz Campuzano, a high school senior whose father came to the United States from Mexico with less than a third-grade education and who constantly extolled the virtues of education to her. But given her placement in low-level classes and the generally minimal expectations for immigrants at her school, his optimism might not have been enough. In her narrative, Beatriz describes how participating in the Saturday Mathematics Academy at the University of California at Irvine shaped her future goals. She begins the story, however, much earlier in her school career.

Beatriz had been in an ELD (English Language Development) class, while also taking other classes that were too easy for her. One of her teachers in elementary school, a Mr. Wilke, had wanted Beatriz to be placed in more challenging classes in junior high school. He gave her extra homework and made her work hard; he didn't stop until her grades went up and she was able to attend the Saturday Mathematics Academy. She writes:

In the sixth grade, my English teacher, Mr. Wilke, helped me to understand that I was capable of achieving anything. I began to believe in myself. My self-esteem grew as Mr. Wilke told me day after day that I was a "gift to the world." I loved education because it made me feel smart. Knowing that I had knowledge made me feel invincible.<sup>10</sup>

Beatriz plans to attend a 4-year university, where she wants to study to become a high school math teacher.

Imagine what it might be like to have all the children in our schools hear that they are "a gift to the world." The power of something so simple as this phrase changed Beatriz's outlook on education, and it might do the same for many other children. It is because of the power of stories such as these that I have given a great deal of thought lately to the work that teachers do, the impact they have, their resilience, and the key role they can play in enacting our society's stated commitment to equality and fair play.