

Identity and Inquiry: A Love Letter to Teacher Candidates

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As coordinator of a well-established elementary professional development school, it is my task each year to shepherd about 60 college seniors through a yearlong internship. Their experiences, as well as our PDS, have been well documented (Nolan, Badiali, Bauer, & McDonough, 2007). Among all of the things I do in the PDS, the one I enjoy the most is writing to the interns. I call these periodic essays, “love letters,” a term to which my wife strongly objects. I assure her that my advanced age removes any trace of impropriety. And I’m pretty serious about these messages as expressions of a deep affection and admiration for those young people who feel so committed to a profession I believe to be noble beyond all others. To teach well is to give over all of one’s attention to another. Great teaching is a selfless act. For that, in my opinion, these young people deserve an occasional love letter.

In the example that follows, I am trying to “get behind” (Hubbard and Power, 1999) what might be seen to them as just another assignment they must fulfill to graduate. Our supervisors in the PDS are very good at seeing to it that their interns do things right. They

can, and do, encourage and coach students to give their best efforts. But there is a difference between doing things right and doing the right things for the right reasons and knowing the difference between those actions. In this essay, I attempt to explain to interns WHY. Why conduct inquiry? Why take this stance toward teaching? Why become an inquiring teacher?

Dear Interns,

My grandfather used to ask me an interesting question. “Who do you think you are?” He usually asked that after I did something out of line as a child. But he had a knack for asking me questions that made me think long after his question was asked. “Who do I think I am?” Well, I wasn’t really sure. Once, Mrs. McGargee, my senior English teacher, told me I was almost a student. Despite her penchant for sarcasm, she made me think. Really? Me? A student? Wow.

So let me ask – Who are you? Or, better yet, who do you think you are as a teacher? At least one respected person in our profession, Parker Palmer (1993), contends that, “We teach who we are.” I ask you this question because I believe that a person’s personal and professional identity formation is important to be aware of and it is something that goes on for a lifetime. Not long ago you were primarily “an undergrad,” “a coed,” or “an education major.” Today you are primarily “an intern.” Tomorrow you will be primarily “a teacher.” We have the capacity to invent and reinvent ourselves for as long as we have the ability and the will to think about who we really are.

To say that humans are complex is an understatement to be sure. I would go so far as to suggest that each of us has multiple dimensions with regard to our personal identities. There is the private self that only you know. There is the public self that others around you know. There is a professional self as well. More specifically, we might say that you have a “writer self,” or maybe a “musician self,” or an “athletic self,” etc. Because you have chosen to teach, I would

also argue that you have a “teaching self” or professional self. I am not suggesting that all of the “selves” can actually be separated. But for the sake of illustration, I want to limit this message to the Teaching Self because it is the teaching self that the PDS is designed to influence and guide.

Most everything your instructors, mentors, professors and supervisors have done is meant to cultivate your teaching self. They spend hours thinking about, discussing, and planning experiences that will nurture and develop that part of your identity. The calling to teach is the seed of the teaching self. When a person first discovers that teaching is what she wants to pursue for a lifetime, that seed begins to germinate.

More than a few interns have told us stories about knowing they wanted to teach very early in their lives. They give examples of teaching their dolls and stuffed animals or their younger siblings when they were only children themselves. The teaching self begins to sprout and continues to grow with every experience that you have helping others learn, whether it be in school, at camp, when tutoring, or when serving the various organizations to which you belong. To continue the metaphor, interns come to the PDS as saplings poised to grow their teaching identities into the equivalent of strong trees with deeper roots of understanding the craft of teaching. Our hope is that you will continue that growth process throughout your career. In order to continue to grow the teaching self, certain mindsets are more helpful than others. Teachers do not grow wiser about their craft naturally. Getting wiser about teaching requires a certain outlook or disposition or posture – something we call a “**stance**” toward teaching. Your stance has everything to do with your identity as a teacher. If you see teaching only as learning a series of routine behaviors, then you become one kind of teacher. If you see teaching as merely carrying out a scripted curriculum, then you become another kind of teacher. If you see teaching as only managing student behavior, then you become still another kind of teacher.

In the PDS, we want you to encourage your teaching self to see teaching as a continuous practice of finding and solving problems,

for there are many problems inherent in classrooms and schools. We want you always to be curious about not only the ways in which students are learning, but also the quality of what students learn. We want to encourage your teaching self not only to be puzzled by looking closely at your classroom experiences, but also to pursue and solve those puzzles.

That's right, we want you to look for puzzles or problems. Maybe problem is the wrong word. Maybe what we want is for you to look for the mysteries embedded in classroom life. You already know, having done a detailed case study, that some students are mysteries. (Personally, I think they are all little mysteries.) Some lessons are also mysteries because they go well or they go badly. Why? That's a great mystery – Why do some lessons go really well and some bomb? Was it the plan? Was it the curriculum? The materials? The abstract nature of the content? The time of day? Your level of enthusiasm? The strategies you used? The way you grouped students? Lessons themselves and their outcomes can be loaded with mysteries – if you are looking for them. They are also loaded with potential inquiries.

Personally, I pity the teacher who is no longer surprised or delighted or disappointed in what occurs in the classroom. How dull. When you are no longer surprised, please find another line of work, for that would mean that you have lost your inquiry stance. When you stop wondering, you should stop working in the classroom. When you stop marveling at the insights and antics of your students, hang it up.

When you look at the children in your class, what do you wonder about them? What motivates them to learn? What shuts them down? What are they good at? What do they need to work on? Where are their talents? With what do they struggle? What impact do your actions have on their understanding? How do you know?

I wonder what knowledge and skills will be of most value to the children you teach? I wonder what part of the curriculum we teach is now worthless? For example, I wonder why we still need to teach

handwriting? What about music and art? I wonder if how we teach certain subjects turns students off or does the opposite? I wonder if I had been taught math conceptually would I have become an astronaut? What do you think is the most valuable part of the curriculum you teach? Why? Would your students agree? What knowledge is really the most valuable? What obligations do those of us in America have to insuring an enduring democracy?

Surely, students are part of the puzzle in the complicated life of schools. So is the content that they are expected to learn. Did you know that you were born in the age that historians now describe as the knowledge explosion? That's right. The boundaries of content knowledge today have pushed out more dramatically than at any other period in time. There are millions of more facts known today than there were known when your teachers were in school. I wonder what has been the latest development in the biological sciences? I wonder what dark matter really is? I wonder about artificial intelligence and whether or not machines will really be much smarter than humans in the first half of your lifetime? I wonder what new technologies will change the way we teach and when? (Personally, I'm waiting for the iBrain) I wonder what economic principles will correct the financial mistakes of this decade? Most of all, I wonder how to translate the answers to my wonderings to information my students can use?

That's the big question, isn't it? What approaches can I use in my teaching that will enable students to learn the most? The best? What can I do that will rivet their attention so sharply that they will lose themselves in learning and want to go on learning forever? What moves can I make to get them there? Now that's a puzzle.

What would come first in my quest to become the best teacher I can be? I believe it is to first acknowledge that the quest is a lifelong, self-motivated journey. Is it my beliefs about teaching and learning? Or is it my actions? Is what I believe about teaching and learning aligned pretty well with the way I act? How could I even assess that? Do I know what I believe? Have I named those things I really believe in? Do I have any way of knowing if my beliefs really have

evidence to hold them up? Who do I think I am, anyway?

I wonder if school is really fair for every child? Would they say so? What would they say isn't fair about school? Are they in a good position to know? Are you? What would you say about what is fair and right in school? Is it fair to place students in levels for instruction? Is it fair that some teachers are better than others? Is it fair that some students get privileges and others don't? Is it fair that grown-ups make all the rules? Is it fair that children get pulled out of class?

By now you've figured out that these questions I have been asking pretty much line up with the "passions" that Dana and Sylva (2008) write about in the text we are using for class this semester. I wonder if you are able to "locate" your own wonderings under one or more of these passions? I sincerely wonder what your inquiry will be. I really do. In a few weeks, when we collect your inquiry briefs, I'll be poring over them to see what questions you plan to follow, what puzzles you aim to solve, what mysteries you intend to unravel. There is something about the questions interns ask that is a reflection on the quality of a class in this PDS. All of your instructors have high hopes for you in this quest. Best of luck with your inquiry. If you really pay attention, the process will help you find out a little more about who you are.

Best regards,
Bernard

Epilogue

At the end of each letter, I invite interns to respond with any thoughts or reflections. They often indulge me. The following are a few of the many reactions to this essay.

Response one

I must say, I truly enjoyed the "Why Inquiry" essay. One thing I have always complained about throughout my college career in

education is the fact that we are constantly presented with questions and problems... but never given an answer. I love that we have the opportunity to attempt to pursue an answer to something that we are truly wondering.

Response two

One thing I enjoy about PDS is the constant thoughts that are presented to us by numerous people who are trying to help us succeed in our profession. I appreciate the deepness of our discussions and continuous attempts to keep us on our toes... and wondering. From living with two education majors in the "regular program" this is something I feel as though they do not have the privilege of. PDS is constantly pushing us to find out "who we are" and help us develop and peruse our passions.

Response three

Thank you for sharing that document. I agree with the majority of your philosophies as well as your questions about teaching. Some days I wake up and I ask myself, is this job for me? What if I can't get through to them? What if I fail? Then other days I am thankful that I even have those doubts because that must mean deep down inside, I care. I care about what my students are learning, how they're learning it, and if what I'm doing is enough. I must want to be the best teacher I can be or I wouldn't be worried about my ability to teach. I know that this career chose me the day I became fascinated with making a difference in a child's life. But, I also know that it's not easy. It's a job that's unpredictable and every day is a new experience. We learn about routine and we learn about organization, but I think in the end, teaching is all about learning how to be flexible. Not every day is going to be different, however, not every day is going to be the same. You have to grow and learn from your experiences until being flexible becomes natural. I don't think we should ever stop questioning our abilities and who we are as a professional. Once we stop asking, we stop thinking and I truly think that's a tragedy. How can we expect our students to think and question what's

going on in their world if we ourselves no longer have the urge to ask ourselves, what can I do to make this day better? I am at a point in my life where I feel overwhelmed, scared, excited, and exhausted. I might hear people tell me I'm a great teacher, but how do they know? Why can't there be some machine that tells you, this is the career for you, you're great at your job. I think I'm most excited to be at a point where I can make the decisions. It's hard hearing so many people give you their opinions on what you're doing right and wrong, but sometimes I wonder how do they know? Maybe it's right for them, but does that mean it's right for my students and me? So far, this experience has been great and I've been left with many unanswered questions, but I don't mind it. I think it's a part of growing up and a great way to relate life to inquiry. It's all about thinking how you can make an impact. I don't think there's a right or wrong answer. It is up to you to find the answers to your questions depending on how you want to interpret what the answer really is.

Response four

I read your "Why Inquiry" paper and the part that spoke to me most was when you told us to look for mysteries in our classroom. I was originally thinking of inquiry as a problem, or something that I needed to fix. But when you phrase it as a mystery, I am more inclined to look for reasons behind that mystery and go about different strategies to try to solve the mystery. I also think I will value the experience more if I think of inquiry as a mystery rather than a problem.

Response five

I thought I would take a moment to reflect upon what we have discussed in Seminar and my thoughts on my inquiry. Having read your letter, I have come to realize that so much of what happens in our classrooms, even to veteran teachers, are left to wonderings. Classes come in and out, generations change from one to the next. I am now left wondering, as the closest link to the generation I am currently teaching, how they enter school without so many of the

values and morals that were instilled in countless children when I was young. Is this just a change in generation? A change in the role of parenting?

There are so many wonderings that must be left unsolved because they are out of our hands as teachers. However, once those children enter your classroom and their class community, it is up to you as an adult to provide the lessons and activities which build and instill values, morals, and positive character qualities. Will doing so have an impact down the line for these children? May they be more accepting of others? I can only hope. Thanks for your letter, it really rattled my thoughts!

As the Director of a Professional Development School, I endeavor to engage teacher candidates in many ways. Occasional letters to interns like the one above have resulted in thoughtful exchanges between myself and my students. My hope is that they also encourage dialogue throughout the PDS community. I hope they understand these letters first as an expression of care, but also as a vehicle to focus and stimulate their thinking about educational issues and about the profession that they have chosen to become a part.

I would like to acknowledge just a few of the dedicated and insightful educators who have influenced this letter to my students. Of course, Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle have written brilliantly about teacher research, and as inquiry as a stance toward teaching (1993). Likewise Ruth Hubbard and Brenda Power (2003) have given our interns the tools by which they may conduct inquiry in their classroom. Add to that the inspiration and focus provided by the writings of two good colleagues, Nancy Dana and Diane Yendol-Hoppey (2008). Of course, in any work written about preparing teachers for the nation's schools John Goodlad's (1990) vision, insight and commitment to democratic ideals must be acknowledged. His writings have been the inspiration for the partnership movement in this country. These writers and researchers, along with the dedi-

cated teachers, mentors, supervisors and interns which whom I work everyday give me hope for the future of public education. Finally, I credit the wisdom of Parker Palmer (1993), who has encouraged all educators to see with the second eye, the eye of the heart.

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