“Good Teachers” Require “Better Students”:
Identity Crisis in the Search for Empowering Pedagogy

Kimberly B. Pyne

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Education (Culture, Curriculum, and Change).

Chapel Hill
2006

Approved by
Advisor: George W. Noblit
Reader: Cheryl Mason Bolick
Reader: Mary Stone Hanley
Reader: Dwight R. Rogers
Reader: James Trier
ABSTRACT

KIMBERLY B. PYNE: “Good Teachers” Require “Better Students”: Identity Crisis in the Search for Empowering Pedagogy (Under the direction of George W. Noblit)

Although schools have often served as agents of cultural assimilation, they have also been sites of contestation and transformative change. Despite an increasingly substantial body of literature that addresses the need for teacher transformation, particularly among white teachers, there has been little focus on the process and implications of conscientization within specific settings. This dissertation chronicles a participatory, ethnographic study of the lived experience of one English Language Arts teacher dedicated to the more equitable transformation of self and school. Spanning interactions from 2003-2006, but concentrating primarily on her work as the only English teacher in a new program, it details her attempt to redefine practice in more critical and culturally relevant ways and explores the impact of such work on teacher identity. In particular, the emic tropes of the Good Teacher and the Better Student are explored as problematic identity constructions with crucial consequences for teacher-student relationships and pedagogical decisions. Sustained by stratified classrooms and defining achievement in limited ways, they oversimplify the complex set of interactions that necessarily comprise teaching and learning.

This study offers a window on transformative practice in process—its inception, its challenges, and its ultimate impact on teacher identity. Specifically, it includes an examination of 1) a teacher’s work in two separate school systems—a traditional, comprehensive, suburban high school serving a largely white population, and an alternative, urban Middle College program
serving mostly students of color; 2) the power and problems arising from authentic care-oriented classroom relations, and 3) the success and failure of reinvented pedagogical approaches. It argues that, in this case, transformation also creates an identity crisis that simultaneously empowers and destroys, undermining the teacher’s sense of self, efficacy, and sustainability even as it inspires her to advocate for marginalized students and to hope for wider social change.
~ to Frank ~
for surviving without a kitchen table when the books and drafts swallowed it whole,
for pencil drawings of kryptonite and super-teacher logos to clarify my analysis,
for never-ending laughter and unflagging support,
for being the love of my life always

and

~ to M.B. ~
for “visions and re-visions”
and for everything in between
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I often tell my students that writing is not a solitary endeavor. It is a practice deeply embedded in the social world, infused with the thoughts and beliefs of others, inspired by the multiplicitous voices that ebb and flow into our lives. It is best when undertaken collaboratively, the old adage that “two heads are better than one” often proving true. Even though nothing feels as solitary as the writing of a dissertation, nothing is more powerfully dialogic—in the conceptualizing, the research, and even the final draft itself, each stage showcasing the many supporting and conflicting voices that form your reason for writing at all. Truly, this is heteroglossia, a confluence of discourses, an undertaking that owes grateful thanks to the many people hidden inside the words on each and every page.

Unfortunately, the most giving voice in this dissertation is the one I cannot ethically name here, the woman you will come to know as Robin Sullivan in the pages of this text. The pseudonym both protects her and prevents her from being recognized for the amazing amount of time, thought, energy, and patience she showed throughout this process. She invited me into her teaching life without reservation and bestowed on me insights, honesty, and friendship. I look forward to our continued association in the future and hope I can somehow repay her trust.

I am likewise indebted to my preternaturally patient advisor, George Noblit. Just as Robin gave me story, George gave me interpretation. If there is any understanding here, it can probably be traced back to his substantial influence during my graduate career (from sociological perspectives to postcritical methods) and to his insightful words as I wrangled with the manuscript you hold in your hands. I am eternally grateful for his uncanny ability to hear things I never realized I was saying, and his thoughtful way of reflecting those ideas back to me like a magical mirror. George, I am also grateful for that bellow of “Pyne!” echoing down the hallway, the gigantic mailbox by your country road, your profound wisdom, and your steady belief that I, too, would eventually do this thing. Thanks for every conversation, every thought, every moment you spent shepherding me. Much obliged.

Likewise, my debt to my committee stretches far outside the temporal boundaries of this one project. These scholars have guided my steps almost since my arrival at UNC, have given their time, their encouragement, and their good humor all along the way, becoming role models in my ever-evolving vision of who I want to be when I grow up.

To Dwight Rogers, your eternal good humor and unflagging faith continue to astound and inspire me. You should know that you have had a fan club among the graduate students since our first semester, but the t-shirts emblazoned with “BLD” (Be Like Dwight”) and the fluffy white mustaches just never arrived from the store.
To Cheryl Bolick, the woman who kindly continued to support me even as my
technology focus slid into the margins. Your warmth, interest, and humanity give me
hope for the sometimes sterile, competitive world of academia. Your organization and
brilliance leave me in awe.

To Jim Trier, the sole flag-bearer for those of us with a passion for English Education.
Thanks for movie covers, opportunities and experiences, and critical vision. You
changed the way I see the word and the world.

And to Mary Hanley, gentle soul and freedom fighter, vanguard of the arts and the
revolution. Although unfortunate and unfair circumstances may take you far away, thank
you for every performance, every trip to the middle of somewhere, every story. You will
be missed more than you probably realize.

How many ways can I say “thank you” in these few pages? It needs to be said loudly, forcefully,
shouted from the mountaintop so that my amazing colleagues in the Ph.D. program can hear
reverberations in all the places they will someday bless. Without their shared laughter, angst, and
dedication, this road would have been long and lonely, indeed. Instead, it is paved with
memories, evidence of four years of adventure. To Beth, enthusiastic cheerleader and on-call
friend, one of the most profound and complex thinkers I have the honor to know. To Melanie,
my partner in literary crime, the “substance” to my “flash” from that very first collaborative
project. To Monifa, perhaps the greatest hidden gem among our cohort, magical and mighty
beneath a beautiful humble exterior. To Rita, who grounded me in what was really important,
and reminded me that faith really can move mountains. And to Susan, my office “roommate,”
who proved that dissertations could actually be done with elegance and flair.

Thanks also go to the faculty and students at Middle College High School, for allowing me into
your lives and cramped spaces, for sharing your perspectives and reminding me of the real world
of teaching.

I can never offer enough appreciation for my husband, Frank, the man who had to live through
this experience with me, who bolstered my waning confidence and shared my occasional victory
dances, who listened to my stories or allowed me to stew in silence, who enthusiastically
continued to point to that dim light flickering at the end of the long, dark tunnel. This would
never have happened without your love and support. You will always be the Great One to me.

And finally, a sincere thank-you to my parents, Bobby and Sherrill Beane, who valiantly tried to
understand why I quit a secure job to become a student—all over again. Thanks for prayers and
encouragement, for faith and love, for holding onto the belief that somehow, someday I would
emerge from this endeavor successfully. Although I am perhaps more surprised than anyone, I
think I might have finally done it.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Little Gidding” excerpt</th>
<th>xi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION: IDENTITY AND TRANSFORMATION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Identity: The Good Teacher</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Rationale for the Study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin Sullivan: A Moment of Introduction</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Story: Another Moment</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda: In the Beginning</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. “THE GOOD TEACHER” DISCOVERED</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oakwood City School System: Hidden Disparities</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Boycotting Seeing”: Colorblindness and the Shifting Terrain of Good Teaching</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I Was So Not Past My Own Blindness”: Examining Whiteness in Teacher Identity</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It’s a Matter of Re-Visioning”: Beginning to Refigure Practice</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“At the Very Beginning”: An Ever-Evolving Identity</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda: 2005</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. IN SEARCH OF “BETTER STUDENTS”</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle College High School: A Place of Potential</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting to Know the Place: My Arrival at MCHS</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Not Enough”: Reciprocity in Caring Teacher-Student Relationships</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda: The Cost of Care</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. TWO VOICES: A PEDAGOGY IN PROCESS</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside Room 64: A Portrait</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Keeping It Real”: Relationship, Relevance, and Rigor</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking the World: Dialogue and the Elusiveness of Cultural Equity</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting Literate: Mastery as Praxis</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda: The Price of Uncertainty</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. BETTER TEACHING: PUSHING THE LIMITS OF REACH</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Teachers and Better Teaching: Surviving the Shadowland</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to be a Better English Teacher: Last Words from Room 64</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda: In the Beginning, Once Again</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale for a Narrative Design</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory: Researcher-Teacher and Teacher Researcher</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positionality: Speaking for Myself, in the Here and Now</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Observation</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document Review</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis and Writing</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B: OAKWOOD’S EQUITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CURRICULUM</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

—from “Little Gidding,” T. S. Eliot
When you talk to people about their schooling experiences, most have vivid memories of at least a few teachers. Some teachers are creatures of nightmare, lurking behind their massive desks, hanging threateningly over the shoulder, wielding rulers like whips. Even years later, they cause blood pressure to rise, continuing to inspire fear and distress even as ghosts. Other teachers are figures of legend, offering a helping hand, setting surmountable challenges, shaping our vision of ourselves that still lingers late in life. For most of us, teachers have been both angels and demons, heroes and villains, good teachers and bad, characters out of memory whose touch remains palpable in our lives no matter how far away we roam from the old school house.

As I write this, my evenings are filled by thirty-one of these legendary (nightmarish?) figures. As an instructor for the university’s Masters of Education for Experienced Teachers, my job is to draw a group of busy teachers into the world of graduate school and provide the space and ideas for them to begin rethinking themselves and their choices in the classroom. The course, aptly called “Reinventing Teaching,” opens with a generally lighthearted examination of Ayers’ (2001) “myths of teaching”—a list of concepts that historically and currently seem to define the practice of excellent teachers, but which crumble, or at least fade, in the face of real-life practice. The list includes the notions that “good classroom management is the essential first step in becoming a good teacher,” “good teachers treat all students alike,” and “good teachers know what is going on in the classroom.”
On their first day of class, small groups of my teachers (students?) invariably point out the shallow generality of such definitions. This summer’s cohort is no exception. “Define ‘classroom management’,” Zoe (a pseudonym¹) exclaims sharply, her bright red lips narrowed with suppressed emotion. As a visual arts and performance teacher, she makes a passionate argument against the infamous silent classroom so admired by administrators and evaluators. From the other side of the room, Martha responds with vehement nods of her head, short grey hair wafting. “My classroom isn’t neatly ‘managed’ either and I teach reading,” she announces. “That doesn’t mean kids aren’t learning. It means they are!”

The group is nearly unanimous about the fallacy of treating all students alike. “Children aren’t alike,” argues Cameron, and the small group of her colleagues sitting near her murmur their support. “They don’t all need the same things. How is it fair to treat them all alike?”

Mirroring what Kohl (1995) writes about the difference between “equality” and “equity,” but without utilizing the discourse of the Academy in any way, this cadre of working practitioners articulate a powerful vision of children that acknowledges complexity, multiplicity of identity, and a willingness to challenge external assumptions about children, teachers, and schooling. Although many may not yet recognize just how dramatic and critical a teacher’s awareness of sociocultural difference can be, their daily interactions with children have instinctively laid the foundation for seeing with a depth and richness that non-teachers may often miss. In an age where curriculum is increasingly scripted, where teachers are regularly “deskilled” and federally-mandated assessments create inflexible benchmarks that ignore variation and individual needs among children, teachers still have the potential to know (Apple, 1990).

In part because of this awareness, my class is more indecisive and split over a statement such as “good teachers know what is going on in their classroom.” Teachers are expected to

¹ All names in this manuscript are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of each individual.
have eyes in the back of their heads, to see the impending spitball when their back is turned to write on the chalkboard, to know when notes are passed beneath the table, or when answers are scribbled surreptitiously on the underside of a baseball cap. Their success depends on a mythic, preternatural knowing moment by moment. “But I can’t catch everything,” Janet admits. “Kids get away with stuff all the time.” It is a hard admission, and the slow nods and dour expressions of her classmates show that the sensation is shared. Ayers points out an even deeper issue than missing a handful of hidden behaviors, however. Because teaching is an act of social relation, a space where individuals with their own deep and complicated stories interact, there are always layers which teachers do not and cannot know. Every interaction between students, every passing glance between teacher and class, is fraught with memories, emotions, pasts and futures, a lifetime in an instant. Teachers negotiate spaces they neither know nor may be able to comprehend, coming from lives not only older but qualitatively different from their charges. “I know what a kid needs academically,” one of the teachers suggests. “But they bring so much more into the classroom than academic needs.” As a former teacher (now college instructor), I participate at the edge of these conversations, sharing stories and prodding them to consider alternatives. As we talk through this topic, I confess that I don’t always even know the intricacies of a student’s academic needs, hoping to describe the chasm between what we believe we know based on limited evidence and the complexity of individual experiences, hoping—as I suspect many of them do at some point in our class discussions—that such words do not frame me as a bad teacher in their eyes. Even though I will have nearly two months to prove myself and my skill, the fear remains, fleeting and indistinct, but recognizable. Such interplay of hopes and fears, as instinctive as fight or flight, seems to be a natural moment in the work of teaching, a piece of what creates us.
In a sense, good teaching is a chimera, elusive and almost indefinable, part myth and part suggested reality, and yet a beast in the room of our minds, crucial to the way we think about ourselves as teachers. (I used to tease my high school students that everyone believes they are a good driver, no matter what their driving record or evidence to the contrary. Perhaps good teaching is similar.) The Good Teacher, however dimly and instinctively understood, twines itself into our identities and becomes an integral facet in our confidence and security as teachers. As we begin to poke and question it, challenging our ways of knowing and being in classrooms, we may find that it holds our surprisingly fragile teaching self in its teeth.

Teaching Identity: The Good Teacher

Notions of identity as holistic and uniform have been increasingly challenged by postmodern conceptualizations of identity as fluid, ever in-process, created and re-created in the moment, both reactive and stable simultaneously. Rather than possessing a united and stable self, we embody and perform multiple selves that are complex social and cultural creations and responses. Identity is discursive, a construction of multiple interwoven and sometimes conflicting discourses, which Gee (1996) defines as

ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (of ‘types of people’) by specific groups of people. . . . They are ‘ways of being in the world;’ they are ‘forms of life.’ They are, thus, always and everywhere social and products of social histories. (p. viii)

Discourses are “situated literacies” (Gee, 1999, p. 38) that encapsulate more than the traditional literacies of reading, writing, or speech. They are instantiations of self, “ways of being in the world.” Just as we might opt to foreground one discourse over another in response to social situations, identity is likewise socially and individually crafted, a product of both interior, ideological, and personal affects as well as external, collective, and circumstantial events. Identity is imbued by discourses both chosen and inflicted.
For Danielewicz (2001), learning to teach equates to the development of an acceptable teaching identity, a recognition of and deliberate positioning within social relations with students, other teachers, and the world of education.

Becoming a teacher means that an individual must adopt an identity as such. I take this strong position—insisting on identity—because the process of teaching, at once so complicated and deep, involves the self . . . . Teaching is a complex and delicate act. It demands that teachers analyze the situation, consider the variables of students, texts, knowledge, abilities, and goals to formulate an approach to teaching, and then to carry it out—every day, minute to minute, within the ever-shifting context of the classroom . . . . These abilities suggest that teaching demands nothing less than identity to accomplish these tasks; this is more than just playing a role. (p. 9-10)

As young teachers engage in the discursive practices of teaching, they are shaped by them and shape them in turn. In her most recent work about “beginning teacher identity discourses,” Alsup (2006) writes that “a teacher’s identity is a weaving together of various subjectivities or understandings of self as expressed through genres of discourse and influenced by multiple life experiences” (p. 41-42). She emphasizes what she calls “borderland discourse” in beginning teachers, the discourse that lies at the junction of professional and personal selves and foregrounds a critical awareness of cognitive and emotional dissonance in the work of learning to teach. It merges both traditional discourses of education and other discourses that thoughtfully resist the hegemonic orientation of traditional teaching, inviting students to infuse their choices with a profound but sustainable awareness of the complexity of classrooms. By scaffolding beginning teachers as they investigate and articulate a borderland discourse, she argues, teacher educators better support the establishing and nurturing of complex, reflective teaching identities. Both Danielewicz and Alsup describe the role of teacher educators as conductors, orchestrating experiences that allow new teachers to combine their pre-existing identities, student identities, and newfound professional identities. More than just naming oneself professionally, the act of becoming a teacher, then, is an act of investment in additive identity discourses and a constant re-negotiation of self. “Whereas roles can be assigned, the
taking up of an identity is a constant social negotiation that can never be permanently settled or
fixed, occurring as it necessarily does within the irreconcilable contradictions of situational and
historical constraints” (Britzman, 1986, p. 42).

Sociologist Richard Jenkins (1997) points out that identity is created in the “dialectical
interplay of processes of internal and external definition” (p. 25). Like student identity, teacher
identity is inflected by time and place, memory and affect, by “who we are, and were, and wish”
(Hanley, Green, Joyner, Powers-Costello, & Pyne, 2005). It is created in dialogic interactions
with both internal visions of self and external reflections from others. How teachers perceive
these daily interactions and perspectives necessarily affects how they perceive themselves, how
readily they can name themselves and their work as successful—as indicative of being or
becoming teachers of merit.

However, identity also lays on top of larger cultural prescriptions about teaching. Weber
and Mitchell (1995) remind us that “we live embedded in biographies that are simultaneously
personal, cultural, institutional, and historical. Our identities as teachers stem from both
individual and collective life history” (p. 9)

From schoolyard rhymes to “let’s play school,” there is a wealth of varied and sometimes
contradictory images of teachers that continues to be passed on from one generation to
the next. These images have remained largely unexamined and their significance
unnoticed. By exposing and probing the dialectical relationship between schooling and
the popular culture of everyday life, we explore the socially constructed knowledge of
teachers and teaching that is not confined to school buildings, but spills out into
television studios, movie theatres, homes, and playgrounds, infiltrating all arenas of
human activity. (p.5)

Drawing on cultural studies, critical theory, and literary criticism, Weber and Mitchell explore the
enculturation imposed by images of teachers in the popular mind and its possible impact on the
professional identity of teachers. By looking at the “cumulative cultural text of the teacher,” they
interrogate how teachers have been positioned historically, how the “contradictory images,
clichés, and stereotypes” of teaching seep into both curriculum and identity (p. 8). They list a
number of popular images, drawing from a wide variety of theorists and artistic sources
including: teacher as midwife (Socrates), teacher as artist/scientist (Dewey), teacher as technician
(Skinner), teacher as researcher (Stenhouse), teacher as artist (Eisner), and even teacher as
policewoman, chameleon, witch, and bitch (Bullough). Britzman (2003) articulates three further
conceptualizations of teachers that she finds problematic in her work with pre-service teachers:
teacher as expert, teacher as in-control, and teacher as self-made.

Like Ayers’ “myths” of teaching, such cultural images and metaphors inevitably simplify
and even mysticize the complex work of teaching, blurring the moral quandaries and daily
conflicts even as they showcase expected tensions (such as between rebel students and their
disconnected teachers). “Whereas metaphors can both enhance and clarify our understanding by
creating new meanings and perspectives, they can also limit, reduce, and oversimplify our sense
of ‘reality’ in any given situation” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 24). The very nature of such
images may posit the work of teaching as static, and the identities of teachers as falsely uniform.
Weber and Mitchell argue that teachers face a constant “struggle for identity” in a world
socialized to understand them in particular and limited ways (p. 20).

The creation of a teaching identity, then, is a constant act of balancing and negotiating
discourses, hidden and obvious, internal and external, local and historical/cultural. According to
Bakhtin (1981) each discourse, “having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical
moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living
dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness” (p. 276). In his work on
understanding discourse in novels, Bakhtin eloquently captures the ideologic multiplicity of all
discourse:

Indeed, any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed
already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value,
already enveloped in an obscuring mist—or, on the contrary, by the “light” of alien
words that have already been spoke about it. It is entangled, shot through with shared
thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents. The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile.” (p. 276)

Identity development, likewise, is heteroglossic, existing within a multiplicity of social voices and points of interrelation. Because discourses are ideologically-laden, they do not always interact peaceably, but may clash, compete, and conflict even within a single individual. As will be seen in this manuscript, and as Britzman (2003) has argued, contradictory voices are an inherent and potentially necessary aspect of teaching identity. Bakhtin describes two forms of competing discourse in particular: centripetal, or authoritative, discourse and centrifugal, or internally persuasive, discourse.

There is the centripetal, or the tendency toward the norm which is embodied in authoritative discourse, and the centrifugal force, or the push against authority, the refusals, the breaks—the imaginative space—that constitute internally persuasive discourse . . . Authoritative discourse demands our allegiance and is embodied in ‘the word of the father, parent, teacher’ . . . Internally persuasive discourse is tentative, suggesting something about one’s own subjectivity and something about the subjectivities and conditions one confronts. (Britzman, 1992, p. 32)

The tension between conflicting discourses evokes a vision of identity that is also complicated and contradictory, where aspects of self collide, are questioned, discarded and even eventually reasserted. Such a “capacity for contradiction . . . can serve as the departure for a dialogic understanding that theorizes about how one understands the given realities of teaching as well as the realities that teaching makes possible” (p. 37).

* * * *

This dissertation is one such attempt to theorize the reality and possibility of teaching. It looks at how one teacher created meaning while navigating the social and cultural myths of
teaching, the impact of her perspectives on her life and the lives of her students, and the resultant teacher identity that existed at the junction of self and context. In particular, the idea of “the Good Teacher”—itself indicative of many cultural myths of teaching—became both a descriptor of herself and others, wielded as praise and also lifted as a standard for blame. It became shifting terrain, changing as her vision of her particular mission changed, both strengthened and made fragile by her relationships with students, and increasingly shot through with conflicting ideas and emotions as her personal transformation of “good teaching” crashed against socially and institutionally acceptable definitions. A simple phrase with simple words, it nevertheless framed a significant struggle for one English teacher and, as it turns out, for me as both researcher and teacher.

A Rationale for the Study

In the preface to her landmark work *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Ladson-Billings (1994) points out that “no challenge has been more daunting than that of improving the academic achievement of African American students. Burdened with a history that includes the denial of education, separate and unequal education, and relegation to unsafe, substandard inner-city schools, the quest for quality education remains an elusive dream” (p. ix). Numerous statistics condemn the American educational process as one that

---

2 Equity in English classrooms is of particular interest, not only because of my background as an English teacher but also because of the position English holds in the high school curriculum today. Gee (1996) believes English Language Arts teachers play a critical role as gatekeepers of literacy practices in our society, and as such, may serve either the bastions of tradition or as guides toward more inclusive practice. In most public schools, students are required to take and pass four years of English instruction, including elements of composition, canonical literature, standard grammar, and speech. Because of its cornerstone position in the American curriculum as the place where literacy is most directly addressed, and because literacy acts are a primary means by which we function in society, English is an important site for understanding how students are provided or denied access to the means of interacting meaningfully with the larger social world. The most striking continuity in the history of literacy is the way literacy has been used, in age after age, to solidify the social hierarchy, enrich elites, and ensure that people lower on the hierarchy accept the values, norms, and beliefs of the elites, even when it is not in their self-interest or group interest to do so. (p. 36)
systematically neglects children of color. Ladson-Billings cites only a significant handful, including the low percentage of teachers of color and the difficulty retaining them, the high numbers of black males in the criminal justice system (exceeding those in colleges), the lack of economic resources plaguing schools populated largely by minority students, and the prevalence of segregated schools within supposedly desegregated cities. According to the U.S. Department of Education, drop out rates for Latino/a students in 2001 was 27%, over three times that of whites. For students who remain in schools, the continued disparity between the scholastic success of white students and students of color has provoked decades of researchers to investigate possible causes and solutions for this gap. Partial explanations include socioeconomic factors such as parental education, current income, and historical wealth; cultural differences in values and group norms; access to opportunities and the reaction to potential future discrimination; parental involvement and other home resources such as books, computers, acceptable study space, etc.; the influence of peers; social and cultural capital, etc. (Grissmer, Flannagan, & Williamson, 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Steele, 1997).

Pratt (1996) points out that “difference…does not necessarily imply inequality—where it does, it does so as the result of a historical process” (p. 4). According to functionalist and critical theorists, education is one of many institutions that help maintain the stratification of power in society, often with partial consent of the disempowered. Schools not only sort students into varying societal positions, but also are involved in changing social consciousness to accept such sorting as natural and/or inevitable. Because education is seen as a common good and because the knowledge transmitted within schools is perceived to be neutral and objective, schools have a unique and significant role in cultivating (deliberately or unconsciously) the status quo. As part of this, the task of assimilating cultural differences has often fallen to schools in the name of creating national unity and providing an equal education to everyone. Schools purport
to advance the common good of the country and, in doing so, force students to “mean against” their own personal discourses and values (Gee, 1996, p. 135). In this way, schools give the impression of transmitting a shared culture, but are in fact legitimating a single dominant culture while ignoring the multiplicity of identities non-dominants could offer. Students perceived as lacking in acceptable cultural capital can be funneled to particular tracks, provided with differentiated curriculums appropriate to their supposed abilities, and counseled into particular societal positions. Numerous research and theoretical texts have highlighted practices that enforce schooling as a gatekeeper to important resources and a bottleneck for student aspirations and long-term success. (Anyon, 1981; Apple, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 2000; Hallinan, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Oakes, 1985, 1986; Valenzuela, 1999).

At the same time, schools are also sites of contestation, rupture, and transformative change. Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) describe schools as “agencies of social and cultural reproduction, exercising power through underlying interests embodied in the overt and hidden curricula, while at the same time offering limited possibilities for critical teaching and student empowerment” (p. 143). In order to shift schools in a more equitable direction, teachers can become “transformative intellectuals,” playing a key role by altering the way they function within existing structures. Rather than repeating the past, such teachers refuse traditional banking models of education in favor of new modes of thinking and acting in classrooms, possess new attitudes about the potential of students of color, and challenge sedimented practices in general. Although large-scale reform is most often conceptualized as a top-down process, teacher buy-in remains one of the most critical pieces for dramatic change. Given this, teacher self-transformation is a significant (if hard to measure) tool in the battle for more equitable schools.

Cochran-Smith (2004) indicates, however, that teachers who “work against the grain” are a striking minority in schools (p. 28). She describes their work as complex, difficult, and often
discouraging as they “understand and work both within and around the culture of teaching and the politics of schooling,” confronting administrators, disagreeing with supposed best practice, and balancing their dissent about standard measures of success with the need for their students to succeed on these very measures.

They have to be astute observers of individual learners with the ability to pose and explore questions that transcend cultural attribution, institutional habit, and the alleged certainty of outside experts. They have to see beyond and through the conventional labels and practices that sustain the status quo by raising unanswerable questions. Perhaps most importantly, teachers who work against the grain must wrestle with their own doubts, fend off the fatigue of reform, and depend on the strength of their individual and collaborative convictions that their work ultimately makes a difference in the fabric of social responsibility. (p. 28)

Given the size of this task, it is no surprise to note that very few teachers would meet these criteria. Research on both pre-service teachers and professional staff development repeatedly provides portraits of teachers who are colorblind, lack cultural competence, are unaware of sociological descriptions of power in schools, and who believe profoundly in deficit theories of student failure (Delpit, 1995; Garmon, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 1987). Even teachers who consider themselves “multicultural” often are able to marginalize the power issues of race by focusing on other –isms and issues of general discrimination. By framing prejudice as an individual reaction rather than as a socially-embedded pattern with a long history and continued ramifications, teachers and students avoid exploring the impact of race—including the privilege that accompanies whiteness and its consequences for the achievement gap.

Despite the popularity of the critical project in university discourse, such conversations and critiques are far from the norm in the American high school (Apple, 1990; Appleman, 2000; Carey-Webb; 2001; Giroux, 2001). For example, although whiteness studies have been in vogue in cultural studies and other realms of the Academy since the 1990s, offering philosophical explorations and revealing self-studies, this system of thought has found no ready home in the practical day-to-day of schools. Yet, the changing demographics of schools and the teaching
force highlight the need for dramatic change. According to National Education Association (2004) reports, in 2001-2002 60% of students were White, 17% Black, 17% Hispanic, and 5% other. The teaching force, however, was 90% white (up 2% in the last decade), 6% Black, and fewer than 5% other races. Over 40% of schools employed no teachers of color at all, especially in locations that have traditionally served lower numbers of students of color. Statistical projections show student diversity continuing to rise; students of color will comprise more than half the total American student population within the next 35 years. These predictions make no similar claim for teachers, foreseeing instead a continued increase in the whiteness of the teaching force. Such statistics voice a dual call for extensive recruitment of teachers of color for classrooms and, in the meantime, for research on how the massively white teaching force can become more culturally competent and critically aware in order to better serve the children currently in schools (NEA, 2004).

I do not wish to downplay the crucial need for more teachers of color by focusing only on the latter of these needs, but teachers, scholars, and teacher educators cannot overlook the pressing need to deal with the enormous numbers of whites already teaching and in pre-service programs. In my own experience working with a prestigious teaching fellowship program, I have seen the numbers of students of color drop off significantly for our current freshman class, which is already typically 70% or more European American. These students enter their pre-service program entrenched in an “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975), the images and beliefs prospective teachers possess which act as lenses on new experiences in classrooms. Their taken-for-granted filters frequently embrace narrow and uncritical views of student achievement along racial and class-based lines and may also include: a belief in the rightness of meritocracy (Ladson-Billings, 1999), the sense that racism/sexism is over (Howard, 1999), a view of tracking as a neutral practice and testing as truthful assessment (Oakes, 1986), a conceptualization that
the main purposes of school is assimilation into the work force (Apple, 1990), and the idea that student resistance is indicative of student inability (Kohl, 1995). Unchallenged, such ideas “may function as barriers to change by limiting the ideas that teacher education students are able and willing to entertain” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1016). So, even while advocating for increased diversity among their students, teacher educators can especially benefit from case models whose experiences challenge such beliefs and dispositions. Not only do teacher educators need models, but in-service teachers who lack systems of support for their developing ideologies may also benefit from the stories of those engaged in similar struggle.

Despite an increasingly substantial body of literature that addresses the need for teacher transformation, particularly among white teachers, there is very little focus on the process and implications of conscientization within specific settings. There are innumerable articles decrying the failure of pre-service courses in establishing lasting change in student assumptions and dispositions toward culturally different students, numbers of self-reflections and self-critiques from the vantage point of graduate students and professors in the field, and occasional snapshots of in-service teachers showcasing particular successful methodologies and action research projects (Fecho, 2004; Freedman, Simons, Kalnin,Casareno, & M-Class Teams, 1999; Rogers & Soter; 1997). The work of transformative education does not stop at initial awareness (Friere, 1970; Frankenburg, 1996), but ultimately depends on the quality of sustainable praxis that results. Rarely do we get extended, ethnographic portraits of teachers who are deeply involved in the work of re-inventing themselves and their work, and thus in-the-moment practice remains obscured.

As researchers, we need to understand what forces act against such teachers and how they find their strength, how they came to consciousness, how they move from simple awareness into active transformative practice, and what personal meaning they make of their
struggle. Consequently, this dissertation hopes to open a window on transformative practice, its inception, challenges, and impact on teacher identity.

Robin Sullivan: A Moment of Introduction

She comes in and glances around, eyes roving across the coffee counter, past the island of cups and condiments, searching for my face among the small gaggles of people at their classily mismatched tables. A slender figure in muted colors, she hesitates in the doorway and seems to blend into the clientele here—mothers meeting friends at the café, academics pausing amid the bustle of ideas and papers for a quick lunch, a wrap, some gourmet soup, a cappuccino latte. This vine-overgrown, deliberately second-hand place is a familiar meeting place for white faces at lunch, drawing from the major university and the doctors’ offices nearby. In this, we both seem to fit into this murmuring background with ease.

I watch her closely, waving to catch her attention and draw her toward my rickety (atmospheric) table where a black laptop and an already empty coffee cup take up most of the space. She hurries over, smiling. As always, she smiles with her whole face, green eyes glowing with that genuine delight that characterizes her interactions with colleagues, friends, students, everyone. We hug and fall naturally into conversation, even though it has been six months since we last spoke. Time collapses in shared exclamations of busy lives and work and families while we order lunch and return to settle in at the tiny, tilting table.

Sullivan is a white female, 35-years old, her reddish hair cut short and stylish, discrete glimpses of gold jewelry glittering at her ears. She has taught English for nine years at this meeting, and her enthusiasm for the work remains undiminished. Six months earlier I had the opportunity to supervise a student teacher in her classroom, re-initiating a professional acquaintance that had fallen into disrepair. Today, she talks about her classroom a little, a quick
amusing story about a student that counts on me to remember what it felt like to move in the world of the secondary English classroom. I offer an anecdote from graduate school and she sighs dramatically, resting her chin in her hand. “You’re living the dream,” she tells me with a wry smile, reminding me of long talks in empty classrooms where two teachers imagined becoming teacher educators someday. I shrug, uncertain how to both acknowledge the privilege of graduate school and the treason of having left the classroom, each fragment of self blended in inextricable ways. Instead, I mention that I’m working on a research project for a class and searching for a few teachers who might want to be involved in a series of interviews about their practice. I am watching her closely again, feeling the gulf between us more deeply than ever as I speak from my position not only as grad student but as educational researcher-in-training.

“What’s the study about?”

“Well.” I hesitate, searching for the words to speak about the loaded topic of race with another white teacher without the easy language of graduate classes to pave the way. I feel the absence of Delpit, Ladson-Billings, Bowles and Gintis, and Foucault keenly. “I’m interested in how English teachers think about the achievement gap,” I hear myself hedging. “About how race affects their classroom and their teaching—”

Her gasp startles me. She leans forward suddenly, eyes wide, one hand stretched across our shared table as if reaching over the gulf I feel has opened between us. “Are you?” she says, intense and animated. “I’ve been wanting someone to talk to about that. You see, we’ve been doing this equity training and—well, I’ve learned a lot. It’s shaken up the way I think about schools and kids and what I do, you know? Have—have you read anything by this woman named Peggy McIntosh?”

I’m sure that I must be blinking at her stupidly, my surprise written in the lift of my eyebrows and my fervently nodding head. This is a former colleague, a woman whom I have
always held in deepest respect, whose creativity and compassion for her students is legendary, and whom I always knew to be a better teacher than me. But, knowing who I was when I left the classroom and remembering our occasional interactions since then, I am not expecting this reaction. I am not expecting to hear the issues I was interested in exploring named so explicitly—colorblindness, code-switching, white privilege, cultural relevancy. In between bites of lunch and my agonizing that I didn’t bring my digital recorder, we talk about transformation, about seeing whiteness and seeing culture and concerns over how to reinvent practice to work against the entrenchment of a status quo that denies educational opportunities to so many students. Like all conversations, this one is partial, fragmented. Born out of a similar interest in engaging ideas about diversity and schools, it also stretches across the chasm of individual identities, social positions, and the distance of time. It only hints at the hopes, possibilities, fears and tears we will share over the next two and a half years as together we attempt to understand her journey of personal and professional transformation. And my place at the edges of that journey, both chronicler and fellow traveler.

My Story: Another Moment

In graduate school, one’s former teaching life becomes prime grist for the critical mill, or such has been my experience. Over these last four years of study, I often found myself reflecting back on individuals and events that grew dimmer day by day. Reading Delpit, I felt the criticism of white liberal teachers and their blind dedication to process writing. As a university supervisor of student teachers, I found myself sharing comparative stories from my five limited years in a high school English classroom. In teaching classes from undergraduate Social Foundations to Master’s level Reinventing Teaching, I drew from a half-latent memory of how to approach students, how to demand engagement, how to navigate classroom discussions. No matter how
far I drifted from my time in the proverbial trenches of public education, it remained central to how I claimed the identity of “teacher”—both then and now.

In Spring of 2004, my duties as a university supervisor sent me back into the highly polished hallways of my former high school. Although I had been absent for some years, the feel of the place lingered and, despite some new furniture in the main office and another teacher in my old classroom, it was deeply, poignantly familiar. I paused in doorways, greeted old colleagues, peered unobtrusively into places that used to be my and my students’ domain, temporarily swamped with the contradictory sense being a foreigner in this place of memory. It was my brief visit to the guidance office, however, that rattled me the most. One of the counselors stood just beyond the swinging glass door, looking perhaps a little greyer than before but with the same welcoming smile. As we disengaged from a hug, she announced, “We’d wondered when you would come back to see us.” And then, more quietly, almost conspiratorially. “We haven’t really ever replaced you.”

Seeing the school newspaper lying on the counter in front of me, I assumed she meant that other teachers continued to refuse to take the journalism program onto their already full plates. I understood the impulse and nodded, reaching for a copy of the paper curiously. “I heard it had been hard to find someone to take care of The Voice,” I acknowledged.

She put a hand on top of the stack of papers. “Oh, you don’t really want that. Believe me. It would depress you. But that’s not what I mean.”

I withdrew reluctantly, thinking to snatch a paper on my way out anyway. I had already seen horoscopes on the front page and my journalistic standards were grinding their proverbial teeth.

The guidance counselor continued. “It’s the black kids. Nobody’s ever been able to teach them like you could!”
The words cut through the warm feelings of welcome, seizing something inside me with icy fingers, stifling speech and thought. I started shaking my head, on autopilot, the smile I offered her feeling wrong, sickly, forced. “Now I really don’t believe that—” I finally began.

But she gave me one of those “you’re too modest” looks, laughing a little, sure she knew what I was thinking. “I’m serious! Those at-risk classes just—well, teachers have such a hard time with those kids. You know what I mean.”

I started to try to explain myself, how much differently I had learned to view my former practice since I left Northridge High (a pseudonym). How the choices I made regarding my “at-risk” English classes have haunted me, provided me a secure handhold for self-critique, evidence not only of underlying racism but also of the painful recognition that—for all my exceptional rapport with marginalized kids, for all my efforts to deal with serious issues in their lives, including race and class—I failed those kids by rarely demanding they perform to the same expectations as my “honors” classes. It only took a few stumbling statements of protest, however, before I realized that this was not a conversation that could happen meaningfully here, standing in the middle of the guidance office on a busy afternoon. I was making no sense, unable to speak this new “truth” in any way that could be heard. And, it was not as if I was unaware that I had a reputation for being a “good teacher” for marginalized kids, always defending and mothering those who didn’t fit in, couldn’t achieve, or had too many problems at home.

I gave up, made my excuses, and headed for my student teacher’s classroom. The old school building had lost a little of its warmth, the reality of my tenure there weighing on my shoulders as I walked up the spiral stairs to the second floor English classrooms. The truth was that I had been a schizophrenic teacher—a woman of many faces, depending on what group was

---

3 Like all people, all places have been given pseudonyms throughout this manuscript.
rambling in my doors. The honors kids got a tough-as-nails, demanding teacher who balanced
the challenge of the class with the interest sparked by creative, exploratory, and active projects.
The “at-risk” kids got a firm but affectionate teacher, who was willing to spend a month reading
a novel with (and sometimes to) them, who involved them in possibly meaningful discussions
but rarely expected completed homework or intense depth of thought. Honors kids got
philosophy. “At-risk” kids got games. Honors kids got complex novels and complicated formal
research papers. “At-risk” kids got short stories and business letters or short personal narratives.
Honors kids were later accepted into local and national universities. “At-risk” kids might have
thought about community college, but I doubted it. These two monolithic and (in my memory)
remarkably uniform groups lingered in my thoughts long after the finite details of daily teaching
life had faded, a source of regret and self-castigation.

I talk about myself here because this project brought home to me the impact of
researcher positionality and the power of the cultural norms surrounding teaching, even inside
the Academy. After months of feeling stymied in my analysis, distressed by a portrait that
seemed increasingly negative and yet somehow only partial, and after years of reading and
supposedly understanding the how researcher selves shaped research, it took a critical
conversation with my advisor to finally begin seeing myself inside the study. Despite my regular
assertions in my personal field notes that watching Sullivan was “like watching myself,” that she
was “making some of the same decisions I made as a teacher,” and it was “hard to see her for
seeing me,” I somehow imagined that the profound connection I felt with this teacher was not
playing an enormous role in my data collection and my analysis. When my participant critiqued
her own practice, I often found myself agreeing. I wanted to comfort, to reverse the critique by
pointing out the excellence I had expected to find, but those elements of practice that so
disturbed her also disturbed me. I found myself lost in her self-critique, unable to step back from the apparent reality of this classroom, these kids, and this remarkably self-critical woman.

Our conversations, particularly during our final “official” interviews, are a telling blend of voices – hers as teacher and possible not-teacher, mine as former-teacher and researcher, the kids, the colleagues, the family, the friends, and the leadership. In my analysis, I found myself listening to all of these except the one that emotionally was the loudest and most personally significant, but which I felt needed to be somehow sublimated in order to better honor the words and events that took place in my participant’s narrative history. Left out? My voice as teacher. In exploring our relationship, my teaching history and my personal critique of those years formed a distinct and important foundation for compassion, for sympathy, for shared stories and explorations, and—without my explicit knowledge—for a floundering critique of the classroom stories that were playing out in our work together.

Each interview for this study invariably touched on my past even as it foregrounded my participant’s, reflecting sometimes dimly my own present quest to better understand the intersection of race, privilege, and classrooms. As I became increasingly aware of the identity struggle within my participant, I also experienced a parallel challenge in myself. In these relationships with my participant and her class, I was both former colleague and outside researcher, both alike and ‘other.’ I was English teacher and teacher-of-teachers and researcher-of-teachers and still the one who once walked away from the profession entirely. I was perpetrator and ally, outsider invited in, insider who may have always been out, privileged by my race and by my opportunity to hear her stories. Most importantly, however, I was the teacher who still wrestled with the moral decisions made as a teacher of marginalized children and my own disturbing in/ability to claim the title of “good teacher.”
Coda: In the Beginning

I believe there is a great need for educators and researchers to listen to the stories of those attempting to understand their own privilege, to hear the silenced voices of people of color, and to translate their increased cultural and critical awareness into pedagogical practice. Although Sleeter (1996) argues that education reform will not happen based on individual teacher will (and pushes us to consider top-down approaches), I believe that individual teachers remain the gateway through which all reform eventually occurs. As such, they are important for galvanizing reform in education. We need a better understanding about how white teachers develop a critical mindset about race and how they translate their new ideologies into action—a vision of developing and sustaining transformative praxis. Shor (1992) argues that classrooms must be connected to the work of the wider transformation of society and, while teachers cannot bear the burden for solving all social ills, they can work toward their own critical awareness and contribute toward a potential paradigm shift. Whether within an individual or within society, such shifts are progressive rather than immediate and fluid rather than fixed (Kuhn, 1996). But the predominant motion is in the direction of agency, hope, and the possibility of achieving a more equitable world.

hooks (2003) writes:

If we fail to acknowledge the value and significance of individual anti-racist white people we not only diminish the work they have done and do to transform their thinking and behavior, but we prevent other white people from learning by their example. All people of color who suffer racial exploitation and oppression know that white supremacy will not end until racist white people change. (p. 57)

To this, I might add that if we fail to turn a researcher’s gaze on the experiences, beliefs, and practices of individual white teachers engaged in attempts to embody anti-racist, transformative teaching, we also endanger the work of anti-racism in schools. Without clear pictures of their motivation, struggle, success, and even failure, we have little to offer others who might be willing
to follow in their footsteps. If we are going to understand how to inspire transformative identities in teachers, we must examine how those identities develop and the challenges that continue to shape them.

In that spirit, the story that follows chronicles a collaborative effort between Sullivan and myself to understand something amorphous about teaching, about schools and students, and about ourselves. It begins in the fall of 2003, a midpoint in her journey of personal and professional transformation, then picks up in the fall of 2005 and spring of 2006, traveling with her as she takes stock of the journey and continues the work. It examines the tensions that exist within a single English teacher’s identity as a “good teacher,” how it develops and is sustained, how it is challenged by unfolding visions of equity and empowerment, how it runs up against the equally fluid and yet powerfully entrenched identities of students and tries to find acceptable ground in new professional spaces. It looks at the shifting ground of “good teaching” and the personal cost to a teacher trapped in the uncertain space between conflicting identities. It challenges the long-standing security of a professional system that both supports and denies the individual heroics of real teachers and real kids. Unlike the archetypical teachers of memory, celebration and critique are simultaneously bound here in the rich voices that weave through the ever-evolving narrative of a teacher’s life.

---

4 Because this manuscript wants to privilege the narrative voices at play rather than the more instrumental requirements of a dissertation, the traditional methods chapter appears as an Appendix at the end. Likewise, the literature review may be found throughout in an abbreviated, footnoted form.
CHAPTER 2
“THE GOOD TEACHER” DISCOVERED

The classroom is focused, almost silent. The rustling of clothing. The occasional drum of rubber soles on highly-polished tile floors. A hand-muffled cough. A tiny oven timer ticks softly on a cart near the whiteboard. Students bend low over their desks, pens and pencils roving across a single sheet of paper. One dark-skinned girl at the front, intricate black braids spilling over her shoulder and onto the desk below, frowns intently and chews the cap of her ink pen for a moment. Then, her hand rushes downward to scratch line after line of curly script, the text slanting downward at an increasing angle on the unlined paper. A boy in a violently fluorescent yellow t-shirt rests the side of his face on his paper so that only the top of his sandy brown hair is visible to me where I sit in a corner. I can see his index finger scratching irregularly at the desktop, penciless, as if hoping to give the impression he’s still writing.

The teacher, a tall, slim white woman in her mid-thirties, glances around the tightly-packed semi-square of desks. Short rows of two or three line three sides of the space, facing inward, creating a pseudo-thrust stage in the center with only one wall (the board) free of desks. Robin Sullivan moves along the three student-filled edges like an actor breaking the fourth wall, gauging the response of her audience. She slides between two rows, aiming for another boy who has just exchanged his pen for a game-playing calculator. “How deeply are you thinking,” she murmurs, bending close to his ear, “if you’re able to finish that fast?
He looks up at her, eyes widening slightly, and pushes his paper toward her. “I’m done,” he insists. “Look at everything I wrote.” But the calculator is quickly stuffed back in the open book bag at his feet.

“Keep thinking. Keep writing,” she urges and moves on, ghosting between rows, making soft exclamations about various things she reads in passing on the papers. Brief smiles follow in her wake. One African American male, his face partially obscured by a black sweatshirt hood, sprawls half out of his desk and has to pull one long leg in to clear the aisle for her. He gives the teacher a quick flash of teeth and a confident nod as she approaches. “Hey, Ms. S, you ever seen *Boyz in the Hood*?” he asks in a low voice, watching her face as she scans his work. She hasn’t seen the movie and shakes her head. The brilliant grin flashes again and he points at his hooded face before deadpanning, “Well, now you has.”

Sullivan stares at him for a beat, her face registering confusion, surprise, and then delight in the space of a moment. Her laughter is quiet in the working classroom, lilting, easy, and familiar, and the young man leans further back in his too-small desk, pleased with his joke and her response. The girl with the braids shakes her head, gives a loud and dramatic sigh, and gestures for the teacher to hurry up and read her work, too, before the timer runs out.

“This is the first year where I can sense that there is a very solidly positive dynamic between me and my students of color in my two regular classes,” Sullivan tells me after class as we settle in the vacant faculty workroom to talk. “I’m feeling so good about it because I can see how all this work and thinking and personal reflection can really make the difference.”

Her excitement and joy are infectious and I know I’m smiling at her over my legal pad, as comfortable in her presence as the class of students who just left us. Attentive yet not stiff, she settles into her desk chair and swivels around to better interact with me. Her short reddish-blond hair gets a quick push back behind an ear. She crosses her legs beneath her long, narrow
skirt. As always, she is neat, professional, and imminently practical in sandals and a thin sweater. She seems unconscious of her own style, an open disaffection and humbleness that is instantly appealing.

I have known Sullivan since her first days as a teacher, before her tenure at this particular school, when we both taught for a few years at Northridge High in central North Carolina. She began her adult career as an employee in the U.S. Postal Service, but her love for people and for literature drew her back to school in search of a teaching license. After graduating with honors from Wake Forest University’s Master Teacher Fellows program, she arrived at Northridge to replace a retiring British Literature teacher and took up residence on the other end of the second floor from me. For those few years, our dirty classroom windows both looked out onto the wide, largely unused front lawn of Northridge, the town’s “white” high school. Although the school served a substantial number of students of color, they were typically segregated into lower track classes and rarely visible except on the athletic field. Like both Sullivan and me, most of the faculty was middle class and white. In fact, it had proved difficult to retain the few African American teachers hired in the English Department over the years, some even leaving mid-year for other nearby school systems. At the time, it wasn’t something either of us thought about beyond acknowledging that sometimes we thought the department was better off without teachers who were sub par, or who rarely mingled with the rest of us even during school hours. Although I frequently talked about the racial challenge of the school with our African American assistant principal—the man who had been sent to Northridge many years ago explicitly to desegregate the administrative staff and who was later driven out by a new administrative

---

5 English teachers, like all teachers (given today’s demographics), are themselves largely white and usually unaware of the potential impact of racial identity on their assumptions about their subject, their students, and their colleagues. In the ongoing public dialogue about race, the existence and construction of whiteness is a piece often overlooked. Such is the power of whiteness. It can embody so many powerful things—normalcy, achievement, objectivity, trust—and yet remain submerged, seemingly non-existent (Fine, Weiss, Pruitt, & Burns, 2004).
team—and explored ethical issues of race with my students, somehow the vast disparities among my colleagues never crossed my mind. Sullivan, too, was unaware of racial tensions among staff or students.

For me at the time, Sullivan was that teacher down the hall who threw tea parties for her British Literature students in the library, who painted one entire wall in her institutional white classroom a vivid purple and gold, who had the best bumper stickers and inspirational posters filling every square inch of wall. She stood out to me, perhaps, because I was the teacher on the other side of the floor holding beatnik poetry readings (snap!) and covering my cinderblock walls with student-posted quotes and 30-foot long faux bulletin boards. Although we rarely saw each other in action, the passing reports from students described Sullivan as dynamic, innovative, energetic, and above all, kind. Her ready laugh and her compassion drew students to her and supported the rigor of her college preparatory and honors classes. For the first time since I had begun teaching, I could cheerfully assure my junior honors students that they did not have to take AP English (with the department chairwoman) next year if they still wanted to be wildly engaged by an English class. Sullivan’s skill her English IV Honors course made it equally worthy of their time.

When she chose to move to Oakwood, another nearby school system, we felt her loss keenly. I missed the rambling conversations that took place after the students had left for the day, sitting on desktops, speculating about projects and kids and our own futures. I missed the comfortable knowledge that my work with honors students would be extended in useful ways when they opted for her class as seniors. But Oakwood was—and still is—a nationally-ranked school system. Securing a teaching position among its faculty was an arduous process with numerous interviews, model teaching, and academic screening. If anyone could meet their standards for excellence at the time, Sullivan could. She was an archetypical “good teacher”—
embodying academic rigor, rapport with students, continual self-reflection, and a true dedication to intellectual life. Demanding parents respected her, students engaged with her, and perhaps most importantly, she genuinely enjoyed being an English teacher.

* * * *

She had been teaching at North Oakwood High School for six years when we began this research project in fall of 2003. In terms of her general demeanor and skill, little had changed. According to colleagues, students, student teachers under her mentorship, and my own observations, Sullivan remained one of the best. Her classroom was still bedecked with colorful posters, now mostly hand-drawn motivational sayings and student creative work which gave the room a personal flair. In my several visits over that year, both as part of our research and as a university supervisor evaluating her student teachers, I always found something new to read on her artistically busy walls. Smothered with literary bumper stickers (“Metaphors Be with You”), student photos, and postcards, her desk claimed only a small back corner of the space. Like the three-sided square of student desks, her personal space was a physical metaphor for her view of a teacher’s role in the classroom—recognizably secondary to her students, supporting them, pushing them to take ownership in their learning, more “guide on the side” than “sage on the stage.” Her signature cheery greeting invariably welcomed both me and each student into the room with energy and real feeling.

For all the familiarity of her North Oakwood classroom, there were also new touches, equally symbolic. Among all of the inviting stickers and signs plastered to the glass beside her classroom door was a small gay/lesbian/transgender-friendly icon with a message of invitation and support. The crowded bookshelf along the back wall of the classroom was still crammed to
capacity with canonical texts, literary criticism, and anthologies, but these “Englishy” texts were now half-obscured by the well-thumbed multicultural paperbacks and young adult novels which stood in front of them or balanced at haphazard angles on the edges of shelves. It was easy to see which novels had been used recently by both her and her students. Many copies of *The House on Mango Street* lay in piles around her desk, recently-returned student copies. The standard-issue textbook on a student desk sat open to a page of *A Raisin in the Sun*.

It was only later that I stumbled over most of the following information about her. Her awards, accomplishments, and professional service were not elements that she offered during our conversations, a particular silence that spoke more loudly about her than the list itself. She was the recipient of a first-year teaching award, as well as Wake’s prestigious Waddill Award for Excellence in Teaching (2000), and is Nationally Board Certified. She has published articles in the primary professional journal for English teachers, *English Journal*, regularly presents at the national conference for English teachers (NCTE), and is a contributor to a major textbook for pre-service English education classes.6

In 2003, she had nine years of experience teaching honors, college preparatory, and remedial English for a variety of grade levels. The semester we renewed our acquaintance, she was teaching a mixture of ninth grade honors, regular (basic) and “collaborative” (a blend of levels, including students with diagnosed disabilities, supplemented by an assistant in the classroom). Perhaps most significantly, however, she had also taken on the role of an Equity Team trainer for her school as part of a district-wide initiative to close the achievement gap for students of color. Although she was originally drafted into the position, it became one of the most life- and identity-shaping of her career. During our interviews, she talked passionately about the remarkable shift that had occurred in how she viewed herself and her practice, a move

---

away from being the “good teacher” she had always seen herself as to being a more culturally relevant teacher, focused on finding “a new way of being in the classroom.”

This chapter explores this major turning point in Sullivan’s teaching life and teaching self, the shift from being a Good Teacher in the English classroom to being something more, an ally and advocate for all children, especially students of color. Hinging on her accidental and somewhat unwitting involvement in a district-wide equity move, it is the story of learning to see self—to comprehend and deliberately investigate aspects of white privilege, to listen to the silences and the speech of black colleagues, to begin re-imagining curriculum to align with shifting priorities, and to wrestle with the need to extend her reach in order to share her increasingly radical new vision. Deeply situated in its particular context of North Oakwood High, it is a portrait of one teacher beginning to question years of “good teaching” and incorporate growing insights into a new professional identity.

Oakwood City School System: Hidden Disparities

The township of Oakwood spills across low hills, beneath pine and hickory trees, and rambles around the outskirts of a large, well-known public university. In the center of town, bearded professors on bicycles chat outside of the organic grocery and café. Shop owners display consignment clothing, used books, and elaborate metal jewelry, batik scarves, and college memorabilia on the main drag near campus. One street over, men in dusty cloth jackets sit on the front steps of the homeless shelter, toboggans pulled low over their eyes. Elegant, expensive restaurants and new student condos bump uncomfortable elbows with the tiny houses of Oakwood’s suburban poor.

According to its own press, the Oakwood community boasts one of the “highest educated populations in America.” Since the town is located central to several universities and
colleges, both public and private, and close to a large technological research park, such press is hardly surprising. The area is rich with cultural and occupational opportunity, thriving arts and recreational industries, and its 50,000 population continues to swell.

The public education program has much to boast about, as well. Nationally ranked among the top 37 districts in the United States, as well as considered the top-performing district in the state, it prides itself on exceptional test scores, a wide variety of opportunities for students, and above-average support for teachers in terms of salary supplements and professional development. As such, it is both a respected and desirable school system for both parents and teachers. In fact, a significant challenge for the Oakwood City School System (OCSS) is keeping abreast of the area’s rapid growth. The ninth elementary school opened its doors in 2003, and construction is expected to begin on the third high school later in 2006.

North Oakwood High School (hereafter referred to as North) is the newer of the two existing secondary schools. A state-of-the-art comprehensive high school, it compliments its neighborhood of large brick homes and wrought-iron gates. Surrounded by the green grass of multiple playing fields, the massive brick edifice is fronted by colonnade arches and picnic areas. In 2003, it was recognized by Newsweek as one of the 55 best high schools in the country. (As of this writing, it has moved up the list dramatically.) North maintains the highest SAT average for any public high school in the state and projects that 94% of its students will continue into higher

---

7 The Oakwood City School System (OCSS) is ranked as one of the top-performing districts for its national region based on SAT, Advanced Placement enrollments, and the number of National Merit Scholars, among other data. In its home state alone, Oakwood Schools can claim the honor of the highest average SAT and End-of-Course test results, the highest percentage of students taking the SAT, the highest local funding of public schools, the lowest high school dropout rate, and the highest percentage of graduates pursuing higher education. With extensive programs in visual and performing arts, numerous sports and interest clubs, the opportunity for dual enrollment at major area colleges and universities, and award-winning programs for students with disabilities, OCSS has much about which to boast.

8 At the newer high school, End-of-Course (EOC) test scores during 2001-2002 (the school year just before this study begins) were at least 12% higher than the state averages, with 100% of students passing the Physics exam, and 88.3% passing the English I exam. The older high school showed even more impressive results at 15% above those of the state averages. In English I, for example, 89% of students passed the tests, compared to 69.7% statewide.
education. In 2003, slightly less than a third of the 1,393 students took Advanced Placement tests. All students enrolled in AP classes are required to take the exams and the majority score 3 or higher, numbers well above the state average. Less than five percent of students enroll in vocational classes, a figure substantially lower than the state average. More than 60% of teachers hold Master’s degrees and almost half have ten or more years of experience. Average class size is 23 students per class, with a student/teacher ratio of 12/1. Because the school serves a largely middle and/or upper class population, only 7.3% of students participate in free and reduced lunch programs. Racially, the student body is 69% white, 16% African American, 3% Hispanic, and 12% Asian/other minority.

Even with ready resources, experienced faculty, and a location in the most “highly educated” community in the state, OCSS nevertheless suffers from one of the most glaring disparities of contemporary schools: the achievement gap between white students and students of color. A few years previous, when the ostensibly phenomenal End-of-Course test scores were disaggregated by race, both high schools discovered that students of color were performing dramatically worse than white counterparts in all subject areas. At North, they were even performing below state averages. While 92.6% of white students were passing the EOC tests, only 41.3% of black students passed those same tests. Something was shockingly wrong in the Oakwood Schools.9

Immediately, the OCSS administration was challenged by parents of color to make educational equity a more significant priority system-wide. In response to statistical data that highlighted the disparities as well as pressure from parents, the system moved “Equity” to the

---

9 The problem extends beyond the achievement gap. Sullivan points to issues among faculty, as well: We have a minority faculty group who meet once a week at lunch—mostly African American teachers, and they talk about the issues that maybe they’re not comfortable saying in faculty meeting or whatever mixed group. They feel like this school, this district, this community is so white, without even recognizing what that means, that they really have a hard time being heard, being respected, working in support of their kids.
top spot in their overall agenda and began an initiative that attempted to satisfy multiple prongs of the problem—support for individual students, professional development for teachers, and investigation of structural issues of equity and access by administrative teams.

Built on the backbone of an anti-racist training workshop called Beyond Diversity™, the staff development initiative was an attempt to begin healing the racial achievement gap in the system. It attempted to develop individualized and personal understanding of racial issues within schools in general, beginning with each participant’s own racial identity and extending through a series of topics meant to raise anti-racist awareness and foster constructive communication regarding local race issues. During the workshops, personal will and deep-seated assumptions were pushed to the foreground, issues of power and inequality served as ideological discussion prompts, and the focus lay most strongly on empowering participants to work toward action within schools and classrooms. This part of the process was understood as intensely intrinsic and evolutionary and was initially slated for a four-phase implementation and long-term continuation.

As part of the process, each OCSS principal was asked to appoint an in-house Equity Team, a small corps of teachers responsible for leading the faculty workshops and study groups

10 OCSS approached the achievement gap at the student level by funding programs such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), a minority achievement initiative designed to narrow the gap by providing a more challenging education for selected students of color, those who meet entry criteria based on previous grades and attitudes toward school. “AVID encourages underserved students and their parents because it offers them immediate academic assistance and it seems to hold out the promise of further opportunities for other underserved families” (Hubbard & Mehan, 1999, p. 224). Through tutoring and special advocacy, students are supported in higher-level course placements and prepared to attend college after graduation. While this program cannot meet the needs of all students of color, it is able to reach some of those with a professed interest in succeeding in school and progressing into higher education. However, according to Hubbard and Mehan’s 1999 study of the Oakwood system, the program is not expected to be enough to alter the overall dynamics of the achievement gap. “As long as the program is relegated to a safe niche, it will offer hope and opportunity to a small number of low-achieving students and their families, but will not seriously challenge the special privileges accruing to students and their families in high-track classes.”

11 The Equity Staff Development curriculum was a tailored product created by a district committee of central office administrators, principals, and teachers, with the guidance of an outside consulting firm, and meant to specifically address substantive issues for OCSS. Built to fit the needs and knowledges of this particular school system, it was not conceived as a panacea, suitable for the ills of any generic school, but utilized context-specificity as a key strength. For a more thorough description of this program, see Appendix B.
that would begin developing a critical, politicized, and pedagogy-altering view of race and
education. For Robin Sullivan, this is where her story of transformation began.

“Boycotting Seeing”:
Colorblindness and the Shifting Terrain of Good Teaching

Before the district-wide focus on equity (and, arguably, after it), race-based patterns of
success and failure seemed to stay underneath teachers’ radar despite visible evidence. In the
heavily-tracked English department, an honors or Advanced Placement class regularly served no
more than two students of color, and these often struggled to compete with their white
counterparts. Many such classes were entirely white. Equally glaring was the composition of
lower level classes, in which numerous African American students, a few Latino students, and a
smattering of students with disabilities studied an easier, more watered down curriculum. The
disaggregation of End-of-Course test scores and subsequent parent reactions served as a
necessary catalyst for recognizing long-standing inequities at the system level, however general
teacher response was largely one of defensiveness rather than concern.

As part of our conversations, Sullivan remembered her experience of the racially-charged
events that led to OCSS prioritizing equity-based reform and her response the new “equity
agenda” itself. Like many of her white colleagues, her initial reaction was one of indignation.
“Don’t they think I know about the achievement gap? Don’t they think I went to college?” she
recalled thinking angrily, feeling as if her knowledge and experience were under fire. As a Good
Teacher, she had recognized some disparities but believed that they existed outside of her

---

12 Anyon (1981) examined the curricula at schools stratified by class, showing that working class children were
provided an education substantially different than children in executive schools. Numerous other studies have
explored the same phenomenon within ability tracks, with lower track students experiencing a less rigorous
curriculum that concentrates extensively on obedience and behavioral expectations rather than intellectual challenge
(Oakes, 1986).
control, residing inside students and parents rather than in the choices of teachers. “If people don’t think I’m doing my job–,” she began, only to interrupt herself with a protest that reflects a deep-seated personal and professional self-identity from the time. “I’m working sooo hard. I love every kid. I treat every kid the same.”

For Sullivan, as for many teachers in contemporary public schools, Good Teaching was uniformly located in the actions of the teacher instead of the success or failure of students. Good Teachers put in exceedingly long hours, maintained an interested and thoughtful (if ultimately distanced) relationship with students during class, and addressed rigorous content standards that reflected the scope and sequence of course subject matter. Although some students excelled and some did not, teachers could feel confident in their work and in their professional selves as long as they were capable of these things. Indeed, student success occurred because of good teachers. Student failure happened in spite of good teachers.

* * * *

Sullivan and I were sitting in a local Mexican restaurant as she recollected her story. She leaned forward over her salad, voice and expression earnest, intent to take responsibility for her previous thoughts. “That was my attitude and I’ll be totally honest about that. I was very off-put about even starting this [equity] process because I felt like they were going to use teachers as an

13 Studies of pre-service and in-service teachers, most often white females, show a common tendency to see the self and the world in racially neutral ways (McIntyre, 1997; Sleeter, 1995). Seemingly unavoidable discriminatory practices are overlooked as evidence of student choice, apathy, or deficit. McIntyre (1997) noted that the pre-service teachers in her study frequently conflated race with ethnicity (European Irish, Italian, English, German, etc.), a move that allowed them to believe bootstrapping myths that defined success in decontextualized, individual terms and ignored the social, political, and economic histories surrounding such cases. Whites frequently employ such rhetorical strategies to “whitewash” the issues and maintain the unquestioned dominance of their beliefs. They resist the implication that their conception of the world may be wrong, and the resulting “white talk” serves to redirect the critique away from white identity and protects the status quo from disruption (Hyttén & Warren, 2003; McIntyre, 1991; Sleeter, 1995).
excuse. That *this* is why their gap is that way.” Teachers risked becoming scapegoats in “their” fight. It was unclear whether “their” meant the administrators who have suddenly defined the gap or the community of color itself, however, as Sullivan spoke dramatically—performing her former self—her language localized the problem externally rather than with the teachers or schools.¹⁴ Good Teachers were protected; identities were secure even in the face of this overwhelming critique of the success of the schools for all students. To recognize complicity in a system that disenfranchised students of color would also mean renegotiating the ways teachers understood their working lives. Like most of her white colleagues, Sullivan feared being labeled, and therefore blamed; such an accusation seemed both unfair and impossible given how diligently she and other teachers worked to create effective, efficient learning environments.¹⁵

In order for teachers to air their grievances with the situation, faculty meetings were held inviting feedback.

[The principal] asked people to give him feedback on what they wanted to have happen… I, who at that time was in a very conservative department with lots of teachers who’d been teaching for 30 years and all of them white and everybody against this whole new push for equity. And hearing that and knowing what the perception was, I came up with these seven things that I thought we needed to be careful about.

Among the seven items, she pinpointed two particularly. First, it was important for the principal to soothe the faculty and re-establish faith that he believed they did good work with students and, second, that it was similarly important to shift the equity rhetoric away from the language of blame. The faculty did not need, nor were they prepared, to hear themselves described as

---

¹⁴ Throughout our interactions, Sullivan often spoke with a multiplicity of interwoven voices, speaking for herself at different historical and ideological points in her life and giving voice to different pieces of her evolving identity. These voices enter into dialogue with each other, sometimes obviously, sometimes unwittingly. Their byplay often highlights key points in her struggle with re-establishing a new, empowering teacher identity, a phenomenon described by Elbaz-Luwisch (2005). Bloom (1998) also pointed to such “non-unitary subjectivities” as significant for understanding the lives of women especially, “the subjectivity and the validation of conflict as a source through which women become strong and learn to speak their own experiences” (p. 192).

¹⁵ For white teachers, the charge of racism or cultural bias that creates student failure is a glaring and discomfiting experience (McIntyre, 1997).
culpable for the achievement gap. While some agreed that equity could be a useful topic to address, it was clear that it needed to be framed in ways that did not inculpate the teachers themselves and eradicate any possibility for sympathy or buy-in.

As we sat and talked, Sullivan questioned that logic, wondering if perhaps learning to work through the blame was an important (if unpleasant) step for resistant white teachers, a crucial move toward accepting responsibility for the achievement of all students in your classroom.

How much of it is teacher’s will? I totally remember saying to my departmental colleagues: “If they think the minority student achievement gap is going to be fixed by some teacher changing her will to teach, they’re insane.” That literally came out of my mouth. Now, I am not going to discount the other stuff that’s surrounding the gap, however, do I think teacher will is pretty much way up there on the list? Yes.

The inability to re-vision the self as incriminated in systemic discrimination allowed the myth of the Good Teacher to remain intact, allowed teachers to continue their current practices without critique, and avoided challenging the status quo in any substantial way.

One of the major turning points for Sullivan was a now infamous school board meeting. Members of the community, mostly parents and community leaders of color, approached the school board to “levy the reality of the gap in the school system and they came out fighting. They said some very articulate things and some very personal things,” Sullivan recalled. “A mother of one of the students at North Oakwood High School, point blank, called a teacher out as being a racist.”

The controversy skyrocketed when the board mandated that all faculty members across the system view an unedited video of the event at a full faculty meeting in the North auditorium.

Immediately, pretty much most white folks, myself included, rallied around the issue of “There’s no way in heck we’re going to watch a colleague called out. There’s just no way.” And we have a little email thing called Faculty Forum. It’s not about business; it’s about issues. It’s a forum for discussion. And what happened was that immediately people just started taking sides. For a couple of days that forum was full of white folks
ranting and raving about the fact that our district was going to call out some white person.

The online dialogue generated over 90 messages within a three day span, all directed toward the professionalism issues of showing this video and the faculty’s plans to refuse to attend the showing in protest. No one addressed the potential truth of the racist allegations or the significance of such a parental perspective on the school, even if it turned out to be false. No one mentioned the statistical evidence that something was indeed problematic for students of color. No protests were planned to show solidarity with the community of color.

After three days, one teacher of color finally joined the discussion, sending her own fiery, emotional reaction into the virtual conversation. Sullivan remembered the message and paraphrased it for me:

Do you people look at what you’re doing? You are totally disassociating yourself from what the parents are raising. Once again, you are trying to find a way to get around talking about this issue. Every single message in the past few days has been about this teacher, about how you’re going to boycott … So, you want an auditorium of faculty of color who already know about this problem, listen to the problem, have already lived the problem, when you guys who don’t know about it are just using something to get yourself out of it . . . Do you really want to teach my children?

By directly challenging the existing way of being in classrooms, this one black teacher also challenged the professional identities of the white faculty at North. By speaking her experience as someone who knows, listens to, and lives the problem of racism at the school, she offered a powerful counterstory to the prevailing wisdom of white teachers. Like the parents of color, the teacher was immediately re-categorized as aggressive, angry, loud, and—above all—unprofessional. By questioning her worth as a teacher, the faculty could continue to defend their own sense of being Good Teachers.

The last sentence, with its particular use of “my children,” stirred animosity from large numbers of the white faculty, including the normally even-tempered Sullivan. “I was so offended by that because the way I took it was, ‘Okay, so basically what this woman’s saying is that if
you’re white you can’t teach black children.” In their anger, many of the faculty continued to overlook the core meaning of the teacher’s comment—that they were avoiding an important and very real issue that had been raised by concerned parents of color. By boycotting the video, they refused to see a parent trying to make her child’s plight visible. “We were boycotting seeing,” Sullivan acknowledged. “The whole issue was being deflected.” In the end, the administration agreed to “bleep” the name of the offending teacher and the video was shown. More importantly, Sullivan remembered that the angry, accusing parent seemed wild, crazed, and barely articulate. She and her perspectives were easy to write off as ignorant, unimportant, meaningless.

Such tunnel vision grows out of the definition of Good Teaching at North Oakwood—from the notion that all children should and could be treated the same. Although teachers are quick to recognize learning style differences, citing Gardner’s multiple intelligences or documented learning disabilities in individual children, issues of racial or cultural identity are rarely part of the conversation. The individual success of a handful of black children in predominantly white honors classes becomes evidence that all children can perform in any well-taught classroom, that student needs have no cultural basis or difference. Such colorblindness helps to keep a particular vision of teaching entrenched in the school and the minds of teachers.

16 For many teachers, there is a deep-seated belief that culture—codified particularly as race—should not play a role in how people are treated. Fearing accusations of racism, they conflate recognition of race with an act of prejudice and instead prefer to pretend that children come in only one shade. Because whiteness tends to be normative in teachers’ minds, the bias implicit in this way of seeing is easily ignored. In this way, racial culture becomes an exclusively negative thing rather than a genuine and critical part of a child’s identity (Gay, 2000). Such beliefs have been supported by the most dominant views of psychological stage theory as taught in many pre-service classes, which define child development exclusively in terms of individual progress separate from contextual factors. It becomes simple to think of children as concrete operational thinkers rather than as products of the many cultural contexts they actually exist inside.

17 “Colorblindness” is the tendency to avoid recognizing racial or ethnic heritages as significant. Because whites frequently equate seeing (and naming) race with racism, teachers avoid signaling their awareness of race by simply claiming to treat all students the same, regardless of racial differences. But “people do not deny seeing what they actually do not see,” Sleeter (1993) points out. Beyond the surface dishonesty of such a view, colorblindness invites teachers deny critical aspects of student identity and opens the door to deficit models that link student difficulty to
Sullivan recognized that her experiences as a young teacher were the product of an unexamined, colorblind worldview. Like the teacher incriminated by the video, she, too, remembered being accused of racism in her classroom:

My first year here, I had a situation where two kids of color were late pretty much every day to my fifth period class and it became such a point of contention that I handled so badly that it escalated to the point where those two kids went to an assistant principal and claimed that I was racist. And at this point I remember actually using a cuss word in the assistant principal’s office because I couldn’t see at all where they could come up with that. And I—I just said, you know, that is BS. They are manufacturing something to get them out of being in trouble for this.

Again, the blame was returned to the students, the accusation triggering a deep and personal anger because it questioned her abilities in the classroom. Years later as part of our interviews, however, she offered a cogent critique of the situation:

Looking back and looking at their behavior, and looking at how I handle tardies now, I kind of see their viewpoint. In that, what I would do is, they’re down the hall and I would see them plain as day, but they’re late everyday. That bell rings and—boom!—I slammed the door … I’d close the door in their face and pretty much lock the door and have a note on it that says, “Go get a note.” And to them—just the power dynamics of that, and the bad decision on my part of not seeing [how that was perceived].

She contrasted her 2003 tardy policy with the above event. While it did not prevent students from occasionally coming in late, it had dramatically changed the atmosphere of her classroom.

Today, two students came in [late . . . It’s great to have] just the comfort level of being able to say, “Uh-oh guys! Here comes two of our friends. What shall we do?” And then someone in the class would say, “Where were ya?”

The students responded directly to their peers as well as Sullivan, giving a potentially legitimate excuse about having to help someone who had hurt his ankle on the stairs. Sullivan smiled warmly as she remembered the classroom event. “Everyone’s laughing and they sit down and

dysfunctional families and lack of ability in general. This discourse of “at-risk”ness allows teachers to slide the responsibility for educating children of color and of poverty onto the shoulders of the families and the children themselves, dodging their own potential complicity in student failure.
get into it. Okay, yes, they were tardy; yes, I want kids to be on time. Did they show up in the
classroom? Yes. Was there a confrontation? No.” Sullivan found ways to avoid calling out her
African American students, recognizing that they might perceive the interaction as an attack
predicated on race. Rather than make a proverbial “mountain out of a molehill,” she handled a
small disciplinary matter with humor and the understanding pressure of peers. Although it was a
small change, it was indicative of how the notion of being a Good Teacher had begun to shift in
her mind, taking into account racial dynamics in ways previous hidden to her.

“I Was So Not Past My Own Blindness”:
Examining Whiteness in Teacher Identity

Despite faculty resistance, the OCSS administration continued with their equity-oriented
plans. Primary central office staff, principals, and a small number of principal-nominated
teachers (including Sullivan and other future Equity Team trainers) participated in the intensive
Beyond Diversity™ training with consultant Glen Singleton. These workshops were more
intensive and thorough than those later provided for general faculty, and began with a look
inward.18 By focusing strongly on understanding the privilege and blindness that can accompany
whiteness, the training debunked the myths of white as “normal,” a standard which inscribes all
other races as somehow “abnormal.” Although she was chosen by her principal because he saw
her as a potential bridge between teachers with conflicting beliefs, Sullivan admitted that she
went into the training with no idea of how life- and career-changing it would be.

In fact, she was a year and a half into the training and equity group meetings before the
seriousness truly clicked for her. “I was getting a lot out of it,” she said, but there were two

---
18 Scholars make a strong case for teachers to first explore their own cultures so that they can better derail their
assumptions about others and find places of synchronicity with their students (Adams, M., Bell, L. A., & Griffin, P,
1997). Once they have a grasp on themselves, they are more likely to be able to understand the cultures of their
specific students and recognize when a cultural mismatch might affect learning.
events that ultimately made the process both real and personal. The first involved a particular reading/activity. She pushed a copy of the activity across our interview lunch table, eager to share it with me. I’ve seen it before, an excerpted part of the Beyond Diversity™ materials. Two columns of words showcase how language is used to normalize difference as deficit. One column represents language associated with those of privilege; the second lists language associated with those traditionally oppressed. Sullivan points to economically disadvantaged and explains:

Immediately when you use the term “dis” and you’re talking about a human being or cultural group, you’ve already done something just with your language. This is how the model or the norm gets formed. And that is so powerful to me. To someone who’s a language-oriented person. Seeing it right there in front of me. You can’t deny that othering is at the fundamental heart of our whole culture. It’s weird, but this was such a turning point for me in thinking about how [white] culture, maybe consciously, maybe unconsciously, uses language to define and…

She searched for a word that captured what she meant, grasping for the discourse that was both new and increasingly central to her, personally and professionally. “To other,” she decided, tentatively.

For me, it finally makes it personal, like “Oh, yeah, I see the world that way. And I can’t help but see the world that way because of who I am and where I’m from.” And you’ve got to take every day thinking about that to not have that be true.

The second major event for her happened during a workshop at which an African American colleague openly discussed his experiences with racism. “You have to hear,” she pointed out later. “You have to listen. You have to know that that’s the reality.” Powerful voices of colleagues of color, expressed in the diversity workshops, helped to reveal the truth—and more importantly, the affect—behind stories of racism. “That idea of hearing someone you trust
and respect, that’s so powerful. They’re telling you something true even though you’ve had no experience with that.”

For Sullivan, the question of self-transformation was first and foremost a question of learning to see her life experiences as crucially distinct from those of people of color. It was a journey into her own whiteness and incumbent privilege, of seeing herself as a racialized person acting in racial contexts.

I would like to say that even before three years ago, I thought of myself as someone who was trying to make texts relevant to kids and honor different perspectives. But the thing was, I was so not past my own blindness to how whiteness was affecting me, that even though I was saying that and believing it, I wasn’t doing that yet for all of my students. I wasn’t even conscious of how much I was influenced by my own whiteness.

She also saw a problematic side to such personal revelations by people of color. “But it’s not fair to them either. Why are they the ones that always have to be teaching and sharing?” she wondered.

While there is no hierarchy of oppression, no way to claim that one person’s pain is greater than another’s, there are hierarchies of disenfranchisement and disempowerment. The innate privilege of whiteness allows allies to stand outside of these in ways which people of color cannot (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). Hytten and Warren (2003) show how discourses of whiteness can also allow whites to resist critical engagement and distract attention from the problem of racism itself, effectively re-centering the work around people of privilege. There is “a real danger in this discourse, and this is in the relativizing of all differences and putting them on some sort of equal footing…trivializing racism in the process” (p. 71). One common move is for whites to bring up their own experiences of discrimination (for gender, body type, bookishness, etc.) in an act of empathizing with people of color that also has the side-effect of refiguring the conversation with whiteness once again at the center.

The literature on whiteness as a concept has exploded in the last fifteen years, producing cross-disciplinary studies that attempt to illumine racial disadvantage and privilege by acknowledging and critiquing whiteness both as a performative identity and as a political and rhetorical power (Giroux, 1997; McIntosh, 1997; Morrison, 1992; Warren & Fassett, 2004). Understanding that marginality is defined against a center, scholars have begun critically exploring how whiteness exists in the center of power and privilege, how it remains a hidden way of being, even in multicultural circles. Whiteness research often serves to critique existing social relations and advocate for anti-racist practices (Warren, 1999). One of the most well-known and influential studies is Frankenberg’s (1993) *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* in which she analyzes women’s ways of creating and articulating their white racial identity. She is able to categorize four ways her participants construct race, including 1) evasion of racial discourse and denial of the salience of race, 2) acknowledging race but choosing other identity elements as more important, 3) recognizing race and racial issues but not ways to undertake social change, and finally, 4) explicit involvement in ways to alter social relations based in race. This transformative way of speaking and thinking about racial topics is framed as the most rare and difficult to undertake.

Her realization reflects Torres (1998) and other scholars who point out that “the fight for equity and recognition should be coupled with a fight for redistribution and equality, not only equity. This suggestion opens the way for a more radical understanding of the problem, that … the discussion should start with the question of whiteness” (p.176).
Although she always considered herself a Good Teacher, one who acknowledged differences in student reaction to texts and who heard and utilized individual opinions and ideas, she had not previously recognized the spaces where she “wasn’t doing” for certain students and was overlooking the significance of predictable patterns of failure and disaffection with English. Sullivan’s newfound critique was levied against both herself and the milieu of the high school in general, including the resistance enacted by the majority of faculty members. As a member of the Equity Team, tasked with leading her colleagues on their unwanted quest to confront whiteness and privilege, she found herself often frustrated by their response.

There are a lot of folks in our school who really are tired of the talking about the minority achievement gap. Or, they’re tired of talking instead of acting. So there’s two camps: one camp that says, “Hey, why is this all we ever talk about?” There’s another camp that says, “Okay, we see the problem, but I want a solution to it. I don’t want to talk about it.” And that’s the camp that bothers me, only because—I guess, for me, there’s no way—unless I had done so much of this reading and tried to really talk in groups with other people and thought about me, concentrate on me and what I do, I’m not ready for a solution. And I don’t know if we’re doing a good enough job with those folks of communicating that idea.

The path to change meant more than seeing the cracks in the monolithic Good Teacher image, but committing to exploring those disjunctures with reflection and determination. “It takes work,” she explained ardently. “You need to read. You need to think. You need to journal. You need to talk.” She defined the “work” as a collaborative, intellectual, and emotional effort, a personal exploration into conceptions of self supported by the courage to engage others about your burgeoning ideas, fears, and imaginings. Significantly, it also “takes me having thought through what I believe about kids.” For Sullivan, re-creating herself as something more than a Good Teacher meant more than disconnected self-study, but also involved a close explication of attitudes and beliefs about students, especially those marginalized by systemic racist practices. In her own examination, Sullivan was surprised to find fear behind some of her usual pedagogical choices.
[Before,] I never ever would have seen that. Now I see how often in my teaching fear [was] masked as, maybe, “I don’t know how to deal with this student” or “He just doesn’t want to do any work.” It was fear. It was me not knowing how to go up and say, “Michael, I don’t accept that from you. You need to do this.” Or, you know, just really relating to that student as someone who I expected great things out of.

Sullivan worried that the first critical step in becoming a “teacher for all students,” examining whiteness and its assumptions about students, had been too overlooked even in the equity study groups themselves. “There are a lot of people in my department who have not gone through any of the actual work. And so it’s very hard to talk with someone about the minority student achievement gap who you don’t believe has done any serious amount of work.” For Sullivan, the “work” was a forerunner of finding a potential “solution,” and consisted of self-analysis, open-minded research, and practical understanding. It meant redefining the Good Teacher to include expectations for critical and culturally-sensitive explorations.

But Sullivan found that other white teachers rarely wanted to talk about privilege, much less become immersed in critiquing their own practice on such grounds. While her personal quest to see inequities involved substantial self-effort, the struggle to discuss such topics with colleagues was even more difficult. Just as with the incriminatory video, teachers felt “called out” and blamed, challenged in their identity of established and concerned teachers. It was less painful to simply refuse to listen, to deny ownership in a problem, to “boycott seeing.”

And what I want to do better at is being able to articulate it to my white colleagues because so many of them don’t see that. Don’t want to listen to that. “There’s nothing I’m doing that’s creating this result,” is what I’m hearing from them. And it’s not true.

---

23 Cooney and Akintunde (1999) articulate the attitudes that fed resistance in a group of white pre-service teacher candidates, a study which parallels Sullivan’s description of many of her colleagues. They overlook racial inequality, even after experiencing equity/diversity training. They feel blamed and perceive discussions of white privilege as attacks. They can only bring limited personal perspectives to bear on questions of inequality, rather than cultivating an awareness of structural and systemic issues. And, most significantly, they seek finite directions for negotiating race rather than investigating their own assumptions and how race impacts their classrooms.
“It’s a Matter of Re-Visioning”:  
Beginning to Refigure Practice

Recently, an administrator preparing to observe Sullivan’s classroom asked what she would see in regards to the minority student achievement gap. Her response provided a window on the inroads she was making in the Good Teacher myth. The first thing Sullivan predicted was a warm atmosphere, a palpable comfort level in her interactions with students of color. As long as I have known her, she has been someone I would consider “warm,” friendly, sometimes almost too cheery. However, she recognized what I never did during my occasional visits—that her relationships with students of color were more uncertain, less comfortable, and even sometimes characterized by a low-level fear and distance. No longer was it acceptable to foster inequitable relationships; instead she wanted to be genuine and open with all students. “I can be both human being and professional educator,” she told me. “And person to whom they think they can come—not as authority, but as someone who knows what’s going on in this room.” From friendly-giver-of-curriculum, Sullivan began to see herself as embedded in her own humanity, enacting curriculum with kids who themselves brought their real humanity to bear. She saw herself not as authority-figure, but as someone striving to be aware in more meaningful and respectful ways. She acknowledged that, unlike the monolithic and ever-accurate Good Teacher, she was learning and developing in her knowledge of kids. Openness and honesty replaced cautious distance. “[I want to be able] to just say to a class, you know, that I need to get better at this,” she said.

An outgrowth of her new focus on relationships included “the most radical change” in terms of her growth as a teacher—a policy of “coming down hard on everybody who’s not doing what I know they can do.” She explained that in previous years, she felt less likely to push students of color, but now she was determined that no one opted out of success. For example:
I looked at a team and I saw one girl just not dialoguing with her partner and the other partner writing. The girl who wasn’t doing it was a kid of color. [The important change is] in knowing how to negotiate that. Here’s the white kid doing the work and here’s Kiesha who’s not. What happened here? And am I going to let that go? Am I going to be fine with that? No… So I bee-lined it over there, sat with them, pulled a chair up and talked through what was happening. Really, it was a matter of confidence. The girl just wasn’t going to say out loud to this other kid, “Hey, I think this is what we’ve got here.” Even though she could say it to me while I’m sitting in front of her. So, I think knowing maybe what’s behind a kid not performing, too, I’ve gotten a lot better at. Or knowing what to ask to get at what’s behind a kid. And working on confidence [in doing all of these things].

Sullivan accepted that her responsibility was to consciously create spaces of achievement for all students, particularly students of color. And perhaps more importantly, she understood the racial undercurrents at play in her own classroom and moved to help students of color survive in places that may seem foreign to them. Formerly, the impact of race on achievement was hidden to her, now it was performed around her and within her on a daily basis. “I need to go an extra mile with these kids,” she said of students who had registered for honors classes for the first time. An open enrollment policy was part of the OCSS equity agenda, so occasionally she found herself teaching students of color who had never participated in upper level English classes before and whose skills tended to be far behind the rest of the class. 24

They are supposed to be learning what this is about. It’s not like, okay, they’re in here [to] sink or swim. It’s gotta be me understanding that this is going to be a learning curve for you. And the goal is, if you keep doing it, it’s going to feel more natural to you.

In order to invite students of color into the curriculum, Sullivan believed schools must refigure both content and methodology in more inclusive ways. “We always talk about making the curriculum relevant to the kids in the classroom,” she says. “Sometimes that’s a superficial gloss like, ‘Hey! We’re reading a black author!’ And that’s the first most superficial level. But

---

24 Oakwood’s high schools maintain an open-enrollment policy to encourage minority students to enroll in higher level courses. It rarely has the desired effect. Instead “under qualified” white students flood into honors and Advanced Placement classes and students of color remain exactly where they have always been, in the lower level courses.
really structuring the curriculum so that whiteness is not the base takes a lot of thinking and work.”

Like all ninth grade English teachers, Sullivan must teach *The Odyssey* and various literary terms such as “archetype,” a concept that students frequently found challenging. Confident that they could all learn it if she could find appropriate ways of teaching if, Sullivan located a set of prints entitled *The Black Odyssey*, based on Homer’s epic, but chronicling the journey of a slave to the New World. Using both the Greek epic and the African slave prints, Sullivan found ways to teach the concept of “archetype” as a pattern across cultures as well as time.

It’s not just about diversity for diversity’s sake. It’s about the fact that everybody learned the concept of archetype more fully because I was able to broaden it out from Western culture. It was such a revelation to me. It’s about curriculum being delivered in a different way.

Whereas Good Teachers deliver interesting curriculum, Sullivan relocated her teaching self in the pre-delivery stages first. “I only found *The Black Odyssey* because I’d gone through this previous two years of work where I needed to be actively seeking. If I’m not doing this, I am maintaining the status quo.” More than simply covering subject matter, she redefined her responsibility as deliberately enacting a pedagogy of reform, a transformative pedagogy that broadened the potential for difficult concepts to be mastered by students of all backgrounds. While Ferguson (1998) and others acknowledge that sweeping curriculum changes may require too much of a teacher’s limited time, Sullivan argued that “it’s not a matter of adding something on, it’s a matter of re-visioning what’s there. It’s nothing extra. It’s a reorientation of priorities.”

Those new priorities for Sullivan also included investigating racism directly with her students, and she selected multicultural authors and books, plays, and poetry that invited discussions about racial issues. She was particularly determined to make use of “teachable moments,” to follow student leads and address matters that occurred within her classroom in ways that could challenge student assumptions, privilege and white dominance. She described
one such moment when she began a unit on *A Raisin in the Sun*. In order to give students the flavor of the play, to allow them to hear the richness of the black dialect, she shared an audio-recording of the first scene.

The first day I start the tape, scene one, the first thing out of somebody’s mouth is “These are some ignorant people.” Play goes off. Tape recorder goes off. We just put it out on the table and we talked about it. So, I think the only way to deal with it because this stuff is going to come up, is just—First of all, hearing that comment. Being attuned to [the fact that] something’s going to come up in a minute when I start playing this tape. What’s it going to be? Wait for it. And then do your lesson on it, just putting it on the table. “I just want to honor what you just said. Did anyone hear what so-and-so just said? Can anyone speak more to that? Or can you counter that? Is there something different that you’re feeling?” And just not being afraid to deal with reality.

Recognizing and dealing with race included recognizing whiteness. She found herself newly conscious of the preponderance of whiteness in her classroom. White students continued outnumber other students in all of her classes. Despite a system-wide effort to “cluster” African American students in groups (in order to increase comfort and support), her lower level classes only served six or seven students of color in a class of over 20. As a white teacher frequently speaking to classes filled mostly with white kids, she tried to use her newfound view of the world as a platform from which to approach issues of race with students who were frequently as colorblind and privilege-blind as she felt she had been. “[Sometimes] it’s an issue of you,” she said, reflecting on how to teach race in a homogeneous classroom.

Because of your sense of the world, you just made this comment. Do you see how being who you are made you react that way? . . . So you don’t need anything but yourself and your whiteness in order to talk about it...And that can be really profound.

Beyond the closed classroom door, Sullivan struggled with how to enact her changing teacher identity in relationships with colleagues, as well. One particularly challenging relationship existed in her mentoring of a first-year teacher. The only two students of color in this new teacher’s AP English class both entered at a disadvantage, having moved from courses that did not normally feed into AP. Uncomfortable and unprepared, both girls “perceived so many
things in the way that classroom was organized. They said things like ‘you never call on us.’ [My 
mentee] might not even be aware that she’s not doing that, but it’s not an excuse.” The young 
teacher maintained that the two students misread her classroom, believing their perceptions had 
nothing to do with their performance. Sullivan encouraged her to listen to the girls. “They’re 
saying it has everything to do with everything,” she pointed out. But the new teacher was 
uninterested in “inaccurate” student ideas, particularly those that might challenge her own 
confidence in her abilities as a teacher.

In another instance,

I’m sitting there with my mentee as she’s grading papers. Every time an ‘-ed’ verb ending 
is left off or a subject-verb agreement is out of order, she’s circling it. She’s going 
ballistic. “How can they write like this?!” Okay, what I’m saying to her—trying to say to 

kids— [is] “Do you notice that all the errors you’re marking are exactly the same? Do 
you see a pattern emerging here?” . . . . And for a teacher of English who can’t look at 
that or identify that there’s a pattern being built—that bothers me.

Faced with her mentee’s defensive refusal to see possible cultural differences in student writing, 
Sullivan’s found herself frustrated. It was, perhaps, one thing to not be able to sway the entire 
faculty; but her mentee and her colleagues in the English Department were closer home. Even 
among other experienced English teachers, Sullivan’s ideas of cultural relevancy, particularly 
about the place of standard English in the classroom, varied significantly from accepted 
standards of Good Teaching.

I was prepared to teach A Raisin in the Sun with my Regular kids. And the way I deal with 
[language issues] is I put it all out there on the table. I like to talk about it. I like to 
question the word “standard” with them. I like to listen to them talk as they enter the 
classroom and write on the board what I hear and then talk about the richness of the 
language, but—and I do all those things . . . . So, I will never ever use the word 
“standard” English as being the only right way. I won’t and I can’t do that… I’m all 
about code-switching. I’m all about celebrating what’s what . . . I really think there’s a 
difference between saying “this is incorrect” versus “this is a code you need to use.” You 
know what I mean?

This year, she began her lower level classes with three stories written in African American 
dialect, an effort to value spoken home languages and start making a bridge to other varieties of
English, including the misnamed “standard” English. “There is meaning and there is beauty and richness in this language,” she pointed out, to students and to me.

“At the Very Beginning”: An Ever-Evolving Identity

Despite these deliberate transformations in her practice, shedding the old Good Teacher identity remained a challenge. She also spoke of slippages, struggles within her own mind, lingering resentments from a professional lifetime of blaming students.

These three students who are in my honors class are so under prepared. Their skills are so low, the disparity is so enormous. And what I’m fighting in myself is, I can sit here and say, well, obviously, yes, this needs to happen. But when I’m faced with it in the classroom, even though I know how to differentiate instruction—I’m not an idiot, but there’s a part of me that still resents it when they don’t do their homework . . . Everything about their awareness of what an honors community is like is so different. And I still find myself bucking against it. So I’m—every time I do something where I overreact, I regret it the next day. Like “you don’t have your paper today? Major paper due today, and we’re in honors, so what do you mean you don’t have your paper?!” It doesn’t make sense to me. And so, I react in a way like, “Oh well, you know, I’m sorry, you don’t have your paper, whatever” (She makes a shrugging it off gesture; speaks in matter-of-fact, disassociated voice). But they—it’s new to them, but how do you uphold expectations while kind of holding their hand?

As she spoke, I could clearly hear two voices vying against each other, narratives of tension between the Good Teacher of North Oakwood and the new, raw, partial identity that included students in different ways. The new frame of teaching had room for understanding “disparity,” acknowledged the internal “fight,” and avowed that changes “need[ed] to happen.” But the expectations of the honors class “bucked against” such changes, allowed her to bite out sarcastic and dismissive responses to the students. Relationship and rigor clashed head-on, blinding her to other possibilities, grey areas that might have redefined both.

I was once again reminded of the class described at the beginning of this chapter: After “silent seminar”-style shared writing on open-ended questions about race, education, and judgment, the class entered a lively discussion of their written thoughts as a preface to *To Kill a
Mockingbird. As the class drew to a close, Sullivan had one more topic to cover in this frank conversation: their typical (i.e. poor) reading habits. In order to cover Lee’s novel in a reasonable amount of time, substantial portions of it would have to be read outside of class, something many of these students showed very little intention of doing. Most seemed interested in the story itself, particularly following their discussion, but they were hesitant to commit to a heavy reading load. Some cheerfully and proudly confessed to have never read an entire novel in their lives.

Her expression serious, hopeful, Sullivan continued. This moment was clearly important to her, something she had considered for a long time. “If we have to read the whole thing in class, it’ll be the same boring stuff everyday. It prevents us from doing lots of fun activities that I know you’ll want to do. So, I need you to tell me, how many pages would you be willing to be responsible for at home each night? Honestly, now. Let’s try to find a way to work this.” She handed out half-sheets of paper. “Write down a number of pages you’re willing to commit to and sign at the bottom. I can’t guarantee we’ll always do that number, but I need you to promise me that you’ll give something each night.” A few students wrote as high as 30 or 40 pages. The hooded boy wrote 0-5 and signed with a flourish. Most seemed to fall around 15, so Sullivan decided that would be the limit for assigned reading. In the end, only some of the students kept their end of the bargain, but their teacher remained determined to continue to challenge them.

The structural complications for reinventing a teaching self in culturally-meaningful, aware, committed ways seemed numerous. But for Sullivan, the challenge was worth the effort, the resistance, and even the frustration. “If you were in another job for eight years, do you feel like you’re really revolutionizing something?” she said. “Here I am. And I feel like I’m at the very beginning. So, it’s so beautiful. I love it.”
Coda: 2005

Two years later, Sullivan found herself still in the process of wrestling with re-creating an image of Good Teaching along more personally acceptable lines, striving to develop a way of being that works for marginalized—and for all—kids. Feeling limited by the traditional schooling structure of North Oakwood and hoping to work in a classroom with greater diversity, Sullivan began looking for a space that promised more potential for experimentation, collaboration, and the intense relationships with kids she felt were still neglected by the current OCSS system, despite their massive but fading “equity agenda.”

In the summer of 2005, she packed up her posters and bumper stickers and books and arrived at her new position, as the only English teacher for the new Middle College High School.
Frustrated with the rhetoric-only approach of her colleagues, feeling limited by the rigid traditional high school day, and deeply committed to working with students of color, Sullivan began searching for a place where she could “do school” differently.” Although she enjoyed her North Oakwood students, she wanted to work in a school where the faces in her classroom did not mostly look like hers, where diversity was central, important, and celebrated, where she could explore her conviction that teachers could be successful with all students—if they were willing to experiment, learn, and make substantive changes to their usual ways of working.

When I decided to leave North Oakwood last year, I was hungry for an environment that was personal, warm, student-centered, a school whose very design, in its size and schedule, would be different from the assembly-line, student-as-number model. I was searching for a community that would be interested in the whole student—academic, emotional, and social—a school that knew its students and was designed around who they were and what they needed . . . [and a faculty] committed to reform, to shaping a new way of being with both students and colleagues in an intimate, collaborative, creative approach.

Over the last few years, Sullivan had increasingly found her vision of teaching reframed by new priorities. Her passion for and in-depth knowledge of English subject matter had shifted aside, still present but no longer as immediate. Instead, as her statement above shows, her primary focus was on “whole students,” on crafting “personal” relationships that fed not only academic needs but also reached emotional and social levels. Knowing “who they were” as humans and as students became the foundation necessary to develop an entirely “new way of being” as a teacher. Other priorities show up in her language, as well: intimacy, collaboration,
creativity, warmth, collegiality, and a genuine belief that traditional school structures need shaking. To include these in authentic ways, she concluded, she would need to search for a better place, one more aligned with the vision of teaching she had developed through North’s equity training and her own in-classroom experiences.

In spring of 2005, a newly developing high school program offered an intriguing possibility. Small enough to allow for relationships among students, faculty, and administrative staff, flexible enough to allow innovative and perhaps radical pedagogies, alternative enough to invite students who felt themselves underserved by traditional schools, the planned Middle College High School (MCHS) looked like the perfect space for Sullivan to play out and continue developing her new teaching self. She applied immediately, gave up her comfortable, hard-won tenured position at North, and started over with high hopes, excitement, and commitment to doing things differently.

Middle College High School: A Place of Potential

A collaborative venture undertaken by three area school systems and one local community college, Middle College High School (MCHS) was built on the success of other similar initiatives nationwide. For the last two decades, Middle and Early College programs have grown increasingly common in the United States. Offering a very different secondary schooling experience, these unique schools are dedicated to enabling high-potential, low-performing students to obtain a quality high school education while simultaneously receiving access to college courses and services. In the most typical organization, a community college works in partnership with local schools, housing a small high school on its campus and providing access to college coursework and other resources. The curriculum becomes a mix of traditional secondary and community college courses, with students taking mandatory core high school
classes with high school teachers and gradually adding college classes as electives or
substitutions. For example, a student’s schedule might include English III from the high school,
Chemistry from the college, U.S. History from the high school, and Business Administration
from the college. College classes provide college credit and students receive intensive career
counseling and administrative attention to sort out appropriate schedules.

The original Middle College was conceived and developed at LaGuardia Community
College in New York City in 1974 and was designed to proactively address the large number of
students that were dropping out of the city's high schools. According to Celia Cunningham,
director of the Middle College National Consortium, “these schools work because they are
embedded in a college that helps to insulate them from the turbulence of educational fads, gives
them legitimacy, and allows them freedom to do what is best for students. Location on a college
campus gives students physical contact and builds familiarity and comfort with that
environment” (American Youth Policy Forum, 2004). Many of the students choose to attend
because they feel disenchanted with or outside of the traditional education process. They usually
have a history of low achievement and limited future aspirations. The Middle College provides a
new start, a sheltered introduction to the possibilities of higher education, and a more flexible
schedule that partially mirrors that of the community college.

Similar to other established Middle Colleges, the website for Sullivan’s new high school
announced its mission “to expand opportunities for academically capable high school juniors
and seniors to complete the high school diploma” and highlighted the possibility of receiving
credit toward a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or associate’s degree. Various promotional
materials promised academic rigor, student responsibility for their own education, flexibility in
scheduling and course choices, a smaller, more personalized learning environment, and
meaningful relationships with faculty. Of course, there were expected trade-offs, as well,
including a complete absence of athletics and performing arts, less access to some kinds of support, and limited transportation. Many students rode the public bus to campus.

The school systems supporting the new school included OCSS (25% of student body), Greene County Schools (25%), and Highgate Public Schools (50%). Unlike either Oakwood or its surrounding county, Highgate is an urban sprawl that began as a tobacco and textile town and still prides itself on its blue-collar traditions. Although the city includes a major private university and medical center, a well-respected historically black university, and some of the state’s leading technology research centers, Highgate Community College (HCC) tends to serve the city’s substantial working poor. Despite intensive recruitment aimed at inviting students from all walks of life, the first student body for MCHS reflected that of its collegiate partner, over three-quarters African American poor or working class. Of the projected 100 students, only 38 applied and were accepted. Very few were denied. During my time observing at MCHS, new students arrived frequently and second semester numbers rose close to 50 although the demographics remained stable.

Staffed only by four teachers from the local schools (each teaching all necessary core courses within their subject of English, Math, Science, or Social Studies), a guidance counselor, the principal, and one administrative assistant, MCHS truly began small. For Sullivan, it seemed ideal: small classes, flexible schedule, highly diverse student body, explicit history (from similar

---

25 In his analysis of the rise of community colleges, Labaree (1997) points out that they began as and continue to be low status education. The increasing numbers of bachelor’s degrees in the marketplace tends to lower the value of community college associate’s degrees and vocational certificates, and the nature of the community college mission focuses on largely vocational track education. “In spite of ‘false promises’ to provide equal opportunity, the primary function of this institution is to promote the reproduction of social inequality” (p. 217). Community colleges allow the lower classes a measure of advancement, while concurrently meeting the employment needs of a stratified economic structure. They hold out a promise of social mobility while continuing to reify the pre-existing structure.

These tensions also afflicted the Middle College, evident in student doubts about the likelihood of long-term success based on educational achievements. While some, such as Yolanda, had aspirations to get ahead in college classes, most saw MCHS as on par with other high schools in terms of potential credentialing. “Students found that the college’s offer of an entrée into the semiprofessions was one that they could easily refuse and that the offer of transfer to the university was one that the college was both unwilling and increasingly unable to redeem” (Labaree, 1997, p. 219).
schools) of offering a better educational experience for marginalized teens, and a promise of close relationships among all involved. What better place to be?

Getting to Know the Place: My Arrival at MCHS

If you follow Biggs Street off the expressway, between small warehouses and sheet metal offices, you pass through HCC’s campus—a set of low, brick buildings squatting on the browning grass, surrounded by parking lots. This was the first time I had been back in the area since my truncated year as a part-time HCC student, taking programming classes while working a fall-back job nearby, biding my time before deciding whether I wanted to continue in education as either teacher or student. Although I respected the mission of the college to provide higher education at a reasonable cost and without the sometimes insurmountable hurdle of prior academic success, I found my instructors to be largely ineffective, unconcerned, and unspeakably obscure. Some of that sense certainly stemmed from my own ineptness with the material. Some of it did not.

My field notes for my first visit to MCHS capture my sense of uneasiness with my new position, my new studenthood at a larger university instead of the community college, and a deep-seated awareness of the privilege signaled simply by where one attended school. “It looks the same,” I wrote. “It doesn’t feel the same.” I was not the same. And I was already conscious of a need to recognize and move past my relatively negative experience with the school in order to see it as Sullivan, her students, and her faculty peers did.

Misjudging distance, I arrived far too early and circled around the neighborhood, relearning the area. It was impossible to overlook that fact that every face that walked down the road was darker than mine, half-hidden beneath heavy winter coats or gliding past behind the windows of vehicles on the road. A few blocks away, the local HBCU was decorated for the
holiday season, swags of greenery and red bows hanging from its sign. Between the university and the community college were public housing areas—square brick buildings with low concrete stoops, built tightly together in pods of three or four identical houses. Four African American children in colorful winter jackets huddled together on one step, a single splash of vivid color and life in the otherwise empty dirt yards.

From my personal notes, that morning:

With an hour to kill, I drive around the area a moment, still aware that I'm the only white face I've seen since I left the expressway. I head back the way I came, for lack of anywhere better to go, and turn off again four exits later to stop at Alice's Café & Bakery, parking in the Whole Foods lot nearby.

I'm only a few exits up from HCC and the difference is remarkable. Here, backed up against [the private] University, the people at the tables around me are almost entirely white. Like me, several type on laptops. One pair has a bottle of liquor on their table, a gold bow on the top suggesting it's a present for someone. Out of the twenty-five patrons, only two have darker faces, faces that look like those around HCC. But the similarities end there. One, an older black woman with her laptop and piles of notes and books, dials a cell phone. The second, younger, also with laptop and books, flicks through a textbook on biochemistry.

The manicured bushes and twiggy crepe myrtles outside the window are a far cry from the half-abandoned industrial complexes a few exits away. The irony of where I stopped to wile away an hour is not lost on me. And it's stronger for realizing—with the free internet wireless here—that I'll probably be back to work some other mornings. With my laptop, my piles of papers and books, and my oh-so-glaring privilege.

I returned to campus on time. Small groups of African Americans in their early twenties stood talking in front of the main building, laughing, passing time between classes. A few single students wandered down to the quad, a small circular sidewalk in front of the library. As I approached the main door, an older white male carrying a briefcase pushed his way out, nodded, and headed for the parking lot.

Inside, I followed the misnumbered doors down a yellowing tile hallway, stopping to read an optometry poster (“Common Visual Occlusions” with simulated photos of partial blindness) under the fluorescent lighting. A tiny faux-wood sign pointed to Academic Advising. A few doors down, a color computer print-out taped to the wall indicated “Middle College High
School.” None of the short list of names on placards beneath it were familiar. Principal’s office, then.

Continuing down the long hallway, I passed a cafeteria, the overlapping bursts of raucous laughter and the smell of grease hanging in the air. Unsurprisingly, almost all of the students squeezed into the bright orange booths or perched on metal chairs were African American. A scattering of other brown faces, Latino, Asian, here and there. A single white student stood in line. Further down the hall, a smaller MCHS sign pointed to the faculty “offices”—a single cramped, cubicle-filled room down a dim, narrow corridor that led to a classroom at the far end. The dark faux-wood paneled walls were nearly obscured by cabinets, bookshelves, printer tables, rolling carts, and piles of papers, books, and a hodgepodge of technical bits and pieces. The four teacher cubicles filled the floor so that only a single person could squeeze along any of the ambiguous pathways at any one time. A room in the back had the counselor’s name on the door.

Sullivan slid from her chair in response to my tentative knock on the open door, careful not to upset the loose papers and books that frame her workspace. She greeted me with a trademark smile and hug while I tried to do what I came to think of as “the doorway dance”—sliding out of the way for one of the teachers to pass by with a pushcart, sliding back so the door could be opened, stepping into another empty space so that it could be closed again. It was rather like living one of those sliding puzzles, with only one space to move a piece to, opening up another space to move yet one more piece. “They told us we might get separate offices next year,” Sullivan commented wryly. “It sure would help.”

Because MCHS teachers are scheduled into HCC classrooms as necessary, Sullivan no longer had a room of her own to decorate, showcase student work, or even keep her collection of books and the detritus of eleven years of teaching. Her work, she told me, was spread across
multiple spaces—some here in the tightly-packed office, some in her car, much at her single apartment. Her most immediate tools lived in a small, rickety rolling cart, dragged up and down the corridors with a leash-like piece of twine: whiteboard markers and eraser, a stapler, trays of highlighters and pens, scraps of paper, today’s handouts, paperclips, and other predictable teacher miscellany. “You get used to it.”

The official day for faculty began at 11:30, when they are expected to arrive on campus. For students, the block scheduled day with MCHS teachers started at 12:30. First period ran until 2:00, then everyone had a half-hour break. Second ran from 2:30-4:00 and third followed immediately from 4:00-5:30. Classes met everyday and each semester constituted a full course, just as with the college classes. Grade-level enrollment prerequisites no longer existed, so that the first cohort (all juniors) could enroll in either English III (normally junior-level American Literature) or in English IV (senior-level British Literature) from Sullivan. During the first semester, only a few students were allowed to take HCC classes while getting acclimated to the new environment. By Spring, students were required to carry a load of four classes, and most opted to fill as their schedule with college courses, assuming they passed pre-requisite placement testing. (At this point, many did not.) Psychology was particularly popular and several of the students talked about wanting to pursue higher education degrees in the subject.

Now that students were taking HCC classes, every student’s schedule was quite different. Some came to campus for 8 a.m. classes, took one or two high school classes in the afternoon, and then went to their late afternoon and evening jobs. Others only came in for late afternoon and evening classes. MCHS no longer took school-wide attendance (a logistical nightmare), however teachers kept their own records individually. Three absences supposedly meant failing the class, although it was unclear whether this rule had ever been stringently enforced.
In the late fall of 2005, I asked Sullivan if she’s enjoying the new school—clearly a very different entity from the traditional, comprehensive high school at North. She hesitated. “I love the kids,” she offered seriously after a moment. “I definitely love these kids. Big time.”

It was both truth and evasion. By October of the first semester, many of the formerly promising aspects of MCHS seemed to have faded, replaced by barriers every bit as high as those in Oakwood. During the early spring semester, as I visited, observed, and continued to talk with her, I too learned about the reality behind the carefully-couched mission statement, the distressing and all-too-familiar challenges of MCHS.

The Least of the Problems: Structural Challenges at MCHS

Although Highgate Community College agreed to serve as the collegiate campus for the new Middle College, Sullivan pointed out that in practice, the high school students and faculty had been less than welcome. She described hostile interactions with the HCC professors who also taught in “her” classroom after she leaves for the day. Although she re-arranged the room every day to suit her plans for students, she was scrupulously meticulous about returning it to its previous state. Many days, I arrived in the class ahead of her, at her request, and spent several minutes shoving the little desks into a more usable format for her class—a circle, facing rows, a double arc focused tightly on the front board, or small groupings of two or four. And before leaving for the evening, after her three block classes, we invariably dragged the scattered desks back into rigid, even rows facing the white board, made certain the long table and rolling teacher chair were front and center, erased all scribbling on the board, and tucked the overhead projector neatly on a desk in the corner. Except for the soda bottles and random detritus in the trash can, the room looked unused and Sullivan always made certain she was leaving on time. Nevertheless, the older male professor who occasionally arrived early for his class and pushed
past her into the room, often muttered under his breath about the inappropriateness of sharing quarters with high school classes and made snide remarks about her timing.

Throughout spring semester, the relationship with HCC continued to be rocky, at best. Security guards complained about the need to police underage smoking on campus, since many of the students were 16 or 17, and made it a major priority in their patrols. Student-guard interactions over smoking often became catalysts for students to resist what they saw as unfair treatment (after all, MCHS promised more freedoms and treatment similar to college students). When one 18 year old senior allowed her junior friend a drag on her cigarette, the campus police confronted her, demanding identification from both students and railing about the rules against underage smoking. The senior’s tenuous leash on her temper slipped. “You need to step out of my face,” she told him, voice low and steady, drawing on her cigarette deeply and meeting the angry guard’s eyes. He, however, had no intention of “taking lip” from a high school student, and the resulting shouting match ended with both students suspended for three days. This scenario played out repeatedly over the year, as students clashed with security over the smoking issue. Some finally learned to hop in a car and drive off campus during breaks. Others, particularly African American females, continued to refuse to be pushed around by “rent-a-cops.”

As Sullivan pointed out, many of these students saw the police as a genuine threat, a “very visible aspect” in their home neighborhoods. During one English project in which students examined systemic forces (ie. “The Man”) acting in their lives as part of studying Orwell’s *1984*, students immediately pinpointed legal systems that worked to restrain and even attack them. Only with guided discussion could Sullivan convince them to look beyond their emotional and personal reaction to the police and begin examining the presence and impact of other social structures, including education. With mistrust and even hatred already at play, the
security guards’ insistence on maintaining the war on smoking often provoked students who otherwise would avoid confrontations with authority. Three days of suspension meant three days of missed class, a heavy educational penalty for a non-education-related infringement. Neither Sullivan nor I considered the battle worth the cost.

Smoking was not the only issue between the MCHS students and HCC adults. The principal was repeatedly warned by HCC authorities to keep his kids in control and quiet while they were in hallways and the small cafeteria. Fears about student misbehavior actually led to the permanent cancellation of a half-hour break between second and third period, moving the start of the school day forward to 12:30 instead of noon. In this way, students came to school later, often grabbed lunch before arriving on campus (if at all), and had almost no time to interact outside of classes except the one remaining half-hour break between first and second periods. With classes that ran for 90 minutes, the absence of a break later in the day was noticeable both for Sullivan, who had previously used the time as last-minute preparation for the third class, and for the students. By early spring, the principal was also pressured to mandate a faculty “patrol” of the hallways and assigned the math teacher to stand in the hall during break as student surveillance.

In the months that I visited the school, however, I never once saw students out-of-control, misbehaving in the halls, or even talking very loudly or boisterously. The cafeteria was often at a low roar, but most of the students inside were older college students, laughing with their friends. The MCHS kids occasionally filled the front tables or lingered around the soda machines, but they seemed comparatively quiet. Rashad and Omar, hoods pulled up over their faces, drifted silently up and down the hall before classes. Marlo and Nikki talked and postured on the steps outside. Jack and Gregory sat in their vehicles. Once in a while, Chelsey screamed across the parking lot at someone before flying toward them in a long-limbed, too-skinny run.
Jon, Tony, and a handful of other boys spent breaks in Sullivan’s classroom playing poker or Uno, voices raised exuberantly over the game but unheard in the corridor outside. Although one student, a quiet African American male, was expelled for selling marijuana in the nearby woods before classes, most of these students were no more rowdy or disruptive than their college counterparts. The HCC administration’s critique seemed to me to hinge more on expectations for this particular student population than real experience.

As the year waned, an unexpected impact of the afternoon schedule also began to surface. Attendance during third period classes—always somewhat shaky—dropped away. Sullivan’s third period class of fourteen English IV students was almost always missing someone and, on particularly bad days, might be without up to half of its numbers. Some students opted to attend first period English IV instead, trying to avoid the 4:00-5:30 haul. Sullivan allowed such flexibility because she understood the situation, also feeling exhausted by the third class period. “Third hour is a rough time of the day. Believe me,” she admitted, “if I could be gone, I would be.” Because classes were small, a few more or less made little difference and actually changed the dynamic of classes in interesting and often useful ways. Still, there was a clear drop in energy during the last MCHS class of the day. Previously engaging activities seemed dull, discussions came and went in spurts, and everyone complained of being tired. After eleven years of schooling that ended by 3:00, students and faculty found the later hours to be arduous work.

Outside pressures could be felt, as well. The principal, Dr. John Xavier, was pushed by the supporting school systems to build a sizeable student body. By the following year, MCHS would be expected to serve at least 120 students; current enrollment was only 38. Many of his days were spent at local high schools recruiting. Because the school could not afford to lose students, it also allowed a few concessions which may have compromised student success. A prime example could be seen in the case of Chandra Harris, a soft-spoken African American girl
who was home-schooled until this year. “Her mother thinks Chandra can only handle one class at a time, not four” Sullivan explained. “We had a huge conference with her mother, but Xavier can’t lose a single student since we need so many more. He let her do it. Just take one class a semester.” The problem increased when Chandra’s mother announced that her daughter could not arrive any earlier than 12:30 and often would be late—and that she needed to work a job that began at 1:35. Chandra’s schedule for her only class, Sullivan’s first period English IV which met from 12:30-2:00, was significantly truncated. She regularly missed a third of it and, when she was present, a single fifteen-minute task might take her nearly an hour to complete. Sullivan suspected that her slowness was a legacy of her home-schooling. Although she worked with her, the lack of expectations set by MCHS itself worked against Chandra’s future success as a potential college student.

Irregular and sometimes antagonistic relations with the community college, negative assumptions about student abilities and behavior, difficult hours, and potentially unrealistic external expectations provided a shaky foundation for the new school’s initial year. But such structural issues were the least of Sullivan’s problems with the school.

“Forget Methodology, Let’s Talk Humanity”:
Colleague Matters at MCHS

During my first visit to MCHS, I met the rest of the faculty completely by accident after Sullivan was called away by students. I waited at her desk in the teachers’ office, and as the faculty stopped in before classes, I introduced myself simply as a visiting “friend” of Sullivan’s. It was as if I had opened a floodgate. Without knowing any more about me or what I intended to do there, two of the teachers happily regaled me with stories about the school, the students, and themselves.
In the cubicle next to Sullivan’s, the Math teacher chatted at me warmly. A stocky, older woman with graying black hair, Ruby Odum exuded a kind of sedate energy, clearly enjoying her conversations even when the topic was unpleasant. Extroverted, engaging, and forceful in her opinions, she always seemed ready to speak to any willing ear, including mine. Within a few sentences, I knew that she used to teach at a prestigious private school in town that specialized in students gifted in science and mathematics. I knew she held a doctorate, an Ed.D. from a small public university, and that she had taken this particular job with the understanding that she would be working with college-capable students. Within a few more sentences, I knew that MCHS had not lived up to its promises in her eyes, that the position was “not appropriate” for someone of her credentials, and that she had every intention of returning to the college level of teaching as soon as possible. “I used to teach college,” she told me. “It’s where I belong. Not here with these sort of kids.” Her knowing smile was amiable, confident, and included me as a potential ally in her valiant struggle to find a worthy position. Although I was a complete stranger to her, somehow she believed that I must understand her obvious gifts, needs, and attitudes. I later realized that this absorption in her own actions and blindness to others also exemplified her teaching style. She was the first person to express the implicit philosophy held by most of the MCHS faculty: a hope to some day find students that could live up to the instruction they were provided. Although I didn’t realize it at the time, the search for Better Students had been framed in that moment of introduction.

Across from Sullivan’s desk sat Peter Mason, a squarish, bearded, middle-aged man with narrow glasses and a perpetual worried frown. He wore a button-down white shirt, conservative tie and dark slacks. Later I would understand that he rarely participated in the talk in the workroom, but on this first day he deigned to offer me a piece of paper still warm from the printer. “This place is pretty bad,” he agreed with Odum. “I hate it here. Really. But it’s going to
be worth staying, looks like.” The paper showed projected salaries for state teachers over the next several years, with new hard-won raises factored into the figures. He reached for the paper again and I returned it, making appropriate remarks about the state teacher organization and their effective lobbying for much-needed pay increases. “Yeah,” Mason replied. His voice was flat and strangely distant even though he seemed engaged by the topic. “I came here because I like the schedule, thought it might be easier than teaching all day in a regular high school. It is. And if I can get these salaries for less work—” He shrugged, gave a dry laugh. “I just don’t like the students. But I can live with that. It’s a job.” In answer to my casual questions, I learned that in addition to teaching the Social Studies classes he also advised the school’s only club, a Debate Team. Mention of the team seemed to pour stress into him, but he also smiled a little before scurrying out of the workroom.

As with Odum, his scathing critique of students shocked me. It was immediate, real, and clearly on these teachers’ minds. In ten minutes of casual conversation, my assumptions about who would choose to join a Middle College faculty had been completely overturned. I wondered if the students were truly out-of-control, unteachable, and unpleasant. Unlike Odum, who actively seemed to dream of better students, Mason had already succumbed to simply accepting and surviving his years as a teacher with students who fed his dislike and depression.

The Science teacher, Karen Goforth, emerged from behind a cubicle wall to slide out behind him, pushing a huge rolling cart piled with papers, books, and various odds and ends. I squeezed out of her way, pressing myself into the book locker. Even though I said hello, she just nodded in passing, her wispy, reddish-dyed hair falling out of her haphazard bun. Even at the start of the day, she looked weary. The oldest and ostensibly most experienced of the faculty, she did not interact with her colleagues at all that morning. Later, Sullivan explained that Goforth and Odum loathed each other and had a hard time being in the same room without screaming.
Their shouting matches in the workroom were legendary. In order to keep the peace, they simply no longer acknowledged each other’s presence in any way. Since I had been speaking to Odum, I, too, was not to be engaged at that time. (I am pleased to report that while these two teachers were never overtly friendly with each other, they did grow did seem to grow to tolerate each other later in the semester.)

When I began visiting the school regularly a few weeks later, Sullivan re-introduced me to her colleagues as someone writing an ethnographic study of her classroom for my dissertation. Although I expected the teachers would act chagrinned for the negativity they showed previously, none of the three seemed concerned. In fact, Odum once again began to regale me with stories of bad students and classroom misdemeanors, a seemingly daily event. It was as if she wanted me to get an “accurate” portrait of MCHS, including the untenable teenagers that it served and the unhappy faculty that staffed it. Always warm and accepting of me as a researcher and a “fellow” future doctorate, she regularly let me know that the school had one great need—better students.26

Sullivan’s perspective on her colleagues was complicated, and grew increasingly so as the semester waned. “The worst methodology I’ve ever—no, forget methodology. The worst humanness I’ve ever seen.” And yet, she pointed out that she experienced only “good” relations with her colleagues. They remembered her when shopping at the consignment store, bringing her items she might enjoy. They gave her children gifts. They were generally polite with her and seemed to enjoy her company in the office. Mild, even-tempered, and preternaturally cheerful,

26 According to Labaree (1997), Continued reliance on exclusion and selection of students as the basis for high academic standards—such as by promoting school choice and by creating more schools that are special in some way or another—will only make the task of raising achievement in the residual comprehensive high school even more difficult. These approaches substitute sorting for schooling. The result is a system in which some high schools boast a concentration of high achievers, not because they teach students more effectively but because they attract students who are more capable in the first place. (p. 91) MCHS was a school whose structure attracted a concentration of low achievers, and yet whose teachers demanded otherwise. Their definition of appropriate students relied heavily on a “sorting” mentality.
Sullivan seemed accepted and well-liked by all three teachers, the guidance counselor (a twenty-three year old woman who trained as an elementary school counselor), and the single administrative assistant. She was also deeply respected by the principal, who regularly asked her opinion on policy matters and called her “the best teacher he had.” According to Sullivan, these were “bad teachers” and, in respect to their relations with students, “bad humans.” Over the months of my visiting, she wrestled with the discrepancy between their treatment of her and their treatment of students, tried to deal with her own guilt over seeing their negativity and finding it hard to teach among them. “Why does it matter? They shouldn’t be defining my work life, but they do. They do.”

By necessity, Sullivan’s depiction of her colleagues was inherently partial and could not capture the actual complexity of their individual teaching lives, the hidden dilemmas and challenges that they experienced on a daily basis and within their own identities as teachers. These men and women are portrayed here as figures more symbolic than “true” in any objective sense. They are creations of her consciousness, constructions developed in reaction to the issues with which she struggled. Her sense of relationship to them was, in a very real way, her relationship to the discourses of Good Teaching and to her own prior identities. The characteristics that emerged in her view of them often highlighted those fragments of identity that had become problematic in her mind, which she debated as part of her new ways of being in classrooms. Their portrayal in the following pages is parsed heavily through that lens, a marker of her uncertainties, passions, and beliefs about students and teaching.

She continually questioned her own sense of right and wrong in the classroom, aware that perhaps she blamed her colleagues especially for being blind to the issues of race and class among their students, issues that had been writ large to her for years now. “But it’s not fair to blame these other teachers,” she agonized, pointing to herself in previous years. “I never have
taught like I teach [now].” Looking backward, she saw the past few years as a tremendous opportunity to advance in the ways she understood students, culture, and the responsibility of teachers. Her colleagues, she rationalized, had “never thought about some things. That’s where they are.” Perhaps her argument said more about her gentle and forgiving personality than it did about either her previous teaching self (which never bordered on cruel, hostile, or hateful toward students) or the work of her colleagues (which, in her mind, regularly did).

Although she tried to avoid condemning her colleagues for their behavior and their attitudes about students, their antics regularly peppered our interviews and shaped her days at work. “I feel like a lot of what I’m doing, for better or for worse, is mitigating these other circumstances [created by colleagues in conflict with students]. And that serves a little bit of a purpose, but not enough.”

One prime example occurred during the first months of the fall semester, when Sullivan became increasingly aware that several students rarely received adequate nutrition. Because MCHS is part of the community college environment, free- and reduced- lunches were not available in the college cafeteria, despite the fact that most of the MCHS students previously utilized this program. “All of them are needy,” Sullivan explained, “but some of them are seriously beyond needy in terms of food and basic needs.” She told me about one African American female, a feisty but studious girl named Tramaine who excelled in English III during the first semester.

I took Tramaine home last week. She works at Bojangles all the time, like, all the time. She lives with her mom, a single mom. She eats half of a frozen Swanson’s dinner for lunch and saves the other half for the next day’s lunch. And does not eat dinner . . . . She rides the public bus all the time, but her mom was supposed to pick her up one day last week and she never showed up. So, when I was leaving, I see her standing outside in the dark and so I said, y’know, “What are you doing here?”

And she said, “Oh, I don’t know. I guess my mom forgot me.”

So I took her home and on the way home all this stuff comes out about how she had a hot pocket for Thanksgiving dinner. Her mom told her “I didn’t expect you to be
home for Thanksgiving dinner.” It’s just awful. So, I asked her if I could get her something to eat for dinner. And she says, “No, no, no.”

“But seriously, what would you like?”
She says, “I don’t care.”
So we go to the Chick-fil-a drive through—which is nothing, but it’s right there—and we both got Chick-fil-a.

Also recognizing the need of students like Tramaine, the guidance counselor proposed that the school quietly adopt some of the neediest students, “do something nice for them” and provide them with some food and resources. Sullivan thought it sounded like a fantastic and much-needed idea, but the other three teachers did not.

Their reasoning? “Kids have cell phones.” Because many of even the poorest students carried mobile phones, the faculty believed them to be more financially capable that they appeared. Overlooking the fact that, for many of these students, communication with family members and their own small children might take priority over other basic needs, the faculty staunchly refused to establish any sort of care-giving system at the school. During the months I spent at the school, I occasionally saw students with baskets of French fries from the cafeteria or sandwiches from home. I initially assumed many of them grabbed lunch off campus before first period, but grew to understand that some students simply did not eat. Sullivan often shared her lunch with students who would mention casually that they were hungry, and she was both saddened and amused by their reaction to what she chose for lunches. “Once I had brought this totally weird healthy food thing and they were like—” She grimaced dramatically, wrinkling her nose and pulling backward in disgust, then told me about another afternoon during the break between classes:

Nikki and Marlo are in [the classroom], and Nikki goes “Um, Ms. Sullivan, do you have any food? I’m hungry.”
So I went and brought something back [to the classroom]. What did I have? I had some weird cheese and French bread that day, or something, so I was sharing it with everybody. And they saw the package of the cheese. (embarrassed laughter) You know when you get an expensive cheese, it does seem absurd? This was a little block of – I don’t even know what it was. Okay, it was Manchego. A little expensive.
So, Nikki sees the Whole Foods label with, literally, $6.99 on it. And she’s like, “What the hell kind of cheese is this?”

“I know. It’s really expensive, but it’s my favorite cheese and sometimes I splurge.”

And they were so funny. “We need to get you on some food stamps.” And they start plotting. “Don’t you know you can use the food stamps at the dollar store? Don’t you know you can buy the crackers, the cereal, the milk, the cheese, at the dollar store?” I mean, they’re all on foodstamps, Ebony, Tramaine, Kendra, Nikki, Marlo. That is how they eat. And here I am with my $6.99 cheese.

While many of the students could provide for themselves (and occasionally even brought Sullivan burritos from a cantina a few miles away—as humorous payment for being ten minutes late to class), others could not. Sullivan’s willingness to share what she had stood in stark contrast to the refusal of the rest of the faculty to even consider the possibility of such problems at the school. The prevailing attitude seemed to be that this was first-and-foremost a college campus. College students provide for themselves—both in resources and in academic needs. These are the mythic Better Students of faculty dreams, academically capable and financially supported, raceless, classless, and problem-free.²⁷

This construction of students figured in another regular complaint among the faculty, as well: the disapproval that “honors was not really honors” at MCHS. All recruitment information described the school’s classes as rigorous, honors-level work, but none of the teachers felt that they were able to offer a true “honors” course. Even Sullivan regularly pointed to differences between her curriculum and her former honors classes at North Oakwood. “These are kids who haven’t taken honors before so they don’t have the foundation,” she acknowledged. Much of the work at MCHS was providing challenge while scaffolding students toward higher expectations, bridging students from low-performance toward something greater and more meaningful to

²⁷ Apple (1990) notes that educators tend to obscure “what are profound interrelations between persons through the use of a ‘neutral’ commodity language,” an act of “thingification” (p. 133). By reducing students to abstractions and labels, teachers can continue to believe that their relationships with students are appropriate and politically neutral, perhaps even helpful in teaching institutional codes of behavior.
them. Sullivan’s colleagues, however, accepted their positions with an expectation that they would teach traditional honors courses to students already prepared to learn exclusively in those ways. They also expected to use a college course methodology—lecture, test, recitation and review outside of classes, along with supplemental homework.

Sullivan wondered at the passionate defense of the concept of “honors” during almost every faculty meeting. “Why is it so important? Do we have to get fired up every staff meeting about how these are called honors but they’re not honors? I don’t know. I guess I just say call ‘em whatever you want to call ‘em.” Concentrating more on the students’ needs and less on the labels given to classes, Sullivan tried to relinquish the cultural capital28 of “honors” in favor of providing education that worked for the real students in her classroom, while the other teachers lobbied for reducing the label to something that reflected the students’ actual performance. “But who is that hurting?” Sullivan wanted to know. “I think it’s a way of avoiding the conversation [about who is achieving, about why the kids aren’t performing in MCHS classes]. It puts the responsibility off of you.” In her mind, the Math, Science, and Social Studies teachers were more obsessed with naming, labels, and feeling like college professors, than interested in examining student achievement or collaborating over student problems.

One of the reasons given for the success of Middle Colleges nationwide is the collaborative support teachers are able to offer students. With a small student body and faculty, teachers can examine performance across classes, discuss strategies for improvement, and consider interdisciplinary and non-traditional ways of approaching coursework. However, none

28 According to Bourdieu (1986) and other theorists, schools not only supply and preserve economic property, but also symbolic property, a “cultural capital” or currency which carries weight in the wider world. In doing so, they play into both economic and cultural stratification (p. 243). He argues that the *habitus* of the middle class infuses schools, and student success is frequently determined by their ability to navigate that often unfamiliar culture. “By taking all children as equal, while implicitly favoring those who have already acquired the linguistic and social competencies to handle middle-class culture, schools take as natural what is essentially a social gift, i.e. cultural capital” (Dale, et. al, 1976, p. 4, as cited in Apple, 1990). Sullivan struggled increasingly with this in her own choices, torn between students’ need for cultural capital and her desire to avoid reifying the very structures that had stratified students in the first place.
of this existed at MCHS. Instead of being the focus for school development, students were seen as interfering in the published mission of the school to provide high level content. One case in point was the story of Clarence, one of the few African American males at the school:

He’s a pretty rough-looking kid. He’s very big. He writes rap lyrics constantly during classes. That’s all he wants to do. And there were concerns that he might be selling drugs on campus from the HCC people. But he’s also very gentle-tempered, and, I think, very very smart because anybody who writes with that sense of rhythm, sense of language, [has to be] very talented. Today’s a perfect example. Today we did progress reports and Clarence has an 86 in English, which is phenomenal. But he’s failing everything else. And not only is he failing everything else, he acts out.

Apparently in Science today, the teacher went out of the room for a couple minutes and someone totally destroyed her overhead projector. The kids told her that Clarence had done it. The only reason I know any of this is that in the office after school the other teachers were all in there complaining about Clarence. Anyway, she sent him to the principal. So Dr. Xavier said that anyone failing all their classes at this end of this semester is going to flunk out, so everyone’s [asking] “He’s failing your class, right? He’s failing your class, right?” Like they’re bonding over the fact that this kid’s failing.

So I’m keeping my mouth totally shut, I’m working on my stuff, I’m not saying a word—which is like everyday. I don’t talk to any of them. I feel totally alone. And they’re saying he’s failing Math, Science—“What about English?”

I’m like, ummmmm. (stalling) And I found myself feeling, hedging for a minute, saying, “Well, it’s not the same because he’s a writer, so—I was feeling the pressure like, uh-oh! He’s not failing English! So then I finally explained he’s doing well in English. And so then, I’m getting the feeling—it’s that old feeling in me that says, okay, am I doing something wrong because somebody’s not failing? You know what I mean? It’s that Oakwood thing. Am I not challenging him?

While clearly able to see that her colleagues were unwilling to work together to solve student problems, and personally dedicated to an opposite path, Sullivan nevertheless found herself awash in the peer pressure to conform to the faculty standards. For them, Good Teaching was defined quite simply—the act of providing rigorous, traditional coursework and weeding out those students who may have different needs, learning styles, or extrinsic barriers to expected success. This was not the first time during our conversations that Sullivan admitted questioning her own methods with students, but it was the most dramatic—and foreshadowed her later harsh self-critique. Here she recognized that her colleagues’ expectations stemmed from a very different context, from the honors classes of prestigious, privileged schools such as North
Oakwood and schools exclusively for gifted students.\(^{29}\) (It may be worth noting that the Math teacher had been fired from the latter school before applying to MCHS. The Science teacher, too, had previously been fired from her secondary position in Greene County. So perhaps the identity of Good Teacher was more an identity claim than backed by personal experience.)

“It’s that Oakwood thing,” Sullivan told me. Briefly, she worried that her classes did not meet this amorphous and decontextualized “honors” standard. If a student like Clarence—ie. culturally and socio-economically different from the “usual” honors student, with a history of failure—was succeeding, then something must be wrong with the course and/or the teacher.\(^{30}\) She struggled against the sudden sense of inadequacy by speculating on why Clarence might not be achieving or behaving in his other classes. And on her sense that there was no space for open or authentic conversation about either Clarence’s issues or pedagogical possibilities among her colleagues:

[The other teachers] teach in a college classroom because they think it’s a college. And they’ve got kids who can’t function in a regular high school, let alone a college. So if you send Clarence home with a chapter of Chemistry to read, he’s not going to read it. He

\(^{29}\) While tracking policies present themselves as a rational response to student need, providing space to assist students who have not attained success while also supporting those who wish to excel more quickly, they have also resulted in a re-segregation of schools along racial and socioeconomic lines (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). Disproportionate numbers of white, middle class students in advanced classes contrast with the working class, students of color that fill regular or vocational track classrooms, not-so-subtly announcing school’s beliefs about the status, future, and worth of these children. “Tracking fosters the illusion of meritocratic competition while in reality functioning as a ‘ranking’ system that legitimates differences based on race, gender, and social power” (McLaren, 1988, p. 49).

In *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, Oakes (1985) emphatically illustrates how the practice of sorting students undermines not only student self-esteem but also their ability to improve their status in the social hierarchy. She noted differences in student access to knowledge (with higher tracks being exposed to “high status” literature, research, and conceptual writing and lower tracks relegated to worksheets, mechanical language drills, and subpar selections from readers and anthologies). “Alienation, distance, and hostility” characterized interactions between students and teachers in the substandard (non-honors) classrooms, but the resultant student failure was decried as a mark of student deficiencies rather than a systemic failure to adequately respond to student needs (Oakes, 1986, p. 383).

\(^{30}\) Sullivan’s no-failure classroom flies in the face of our familiar system of classifying students based on disconnected standards of academic merit, a system which is “fundamental to our cultural understanding of what constitutes a school in this country . . . . Without failure, success is meritocratically meaningless” (Labaree, 1997, p. 74). But for these students, and increasingly more students around the country, the notion that high schools have weight as credentialing institutions is patently false. High school can no longer be seen as a culminating point in education and good grades/academic success at this level is ultimately separated from the “meritocratic incentives” that once might have spurred students to excel (p. 90).
doesn’t have the reading skills, number one, to read a textbook and make meaning. And then when the rest of class is sitting in front of the overhead and taking notes, he’s not going to do that either. [It seems pointless to him.] But if I was to say that [to my colleagues] . . . it would be like saying that it’s okay to act out because [they’re] bad teachers. I feel totally isolated.

Each teacher handled the “problem students” that made up most of MCHS somewhat differently, but all three shared common ground that located their achievement ideology within the act of instruction instead of in meaningful interactions with learners. By believing their own construction of Better Students, they maintained their own claimed identity as Good Teachers, even in the face of massive student failure, antagonism, and even loss of position.

Mr. Mason: Definitions, Benchmarks, and Pepto-Bismol

With End-of-Course preliminary benchmark testing nearly upon them, Mason sat at his desk, sucking on a bottle of Pepto-Bismol and agonizing that none of the students were going to pass. Sullivan worried that he would have a heart attack before the school year ended. “He tells us he left here on Friday [at the start of spring break] and crawled into bed and didn’t get out until Sunday night the next week. It’s sad.”

Of all the teachers, I knew the least about Mason, although I had a partial window on his classroom through the open doorway as I moved back and forth from the offices to Sullivan’s room. Every day seemed largely the same—he lectured a set of history notes. One afternoon, at Sullivan’s behest, I stopped in the doorway and listened to the steady, dry voice that washed over the class, the words unclear behind the wall that blocked part of the class from view. Several students slept, heads tucked on their arms or face-down on the desk. A few boys goofed around in the back, bouncing wildly and waving at me before going back to throwing paper at each other. One African American girl in the front lifted her head and waved me away from the doorway before I draw the teacher’s attention and interrupted her rest. Not a single student in
my vision, which was most of the class, seemed to be listening. “They don’t give a shit,” Sullivan agreed, sadly. “So they don’t pass EOCs because they—don’t—care.”

Mason’s claim to fame in the classroom was his standard weekly homework assignment: definitions. Students were given 99 terms at the beginning of every week which they must define and turn in on Fridays. On Thursdays, over lunch and during breaks, they often copied each other’s work, sharing and trying to reword definitions so the History teacher thinks they worked alone. They cut-and-paste from online sources, emailing definitions to each other. Luna, a tall white female with a serious Harry Potter addiction, agonized that he would catch them and penalize them all. One afternoon, third period boiled into English class in furious shock, having received two weeks of definitions in advance—176 words. “It’s just not fair,” Luna wailed to me, holding her forehead dramatically in her hand. “When am I going to do 176 terms?”

It was interesting that—outside of the definition assignments—neither Sullivan nor the students talked very much about Mason, as if he was nearly a non-entity in their day. He was Definition-Man and Lecture-Man to them, a stressed figure to be tolerated, generally meaningless and disconnected from their busy lives.

Ms. Goforth: One Step Forward, Another Step Back

The Science teacher’s claim to fame seemed to be the steady stream of disruptive students on their way to the principal’s office. Her teaching style: “Shut up. Sit down. This is my classroom. Do as I say.” Because many of the students at MCHS had a long and negative history of resisting strict authoritarian classes, her tight ship approach provoked numerous occasions of acting out. One white male, who Sullivan describes as “just happy to be able to think or have an idea of his own,” was quickly expelled from Science this semester. “He just can’t shut up when [teachers] are saying irrational things like, ‘this is my classroom. You shut up.’” She demanded
obedience and silence, wielding her authority as the teacher alongside the threat of being expelled from the classroom. Karen Goforth’s stringent policy for who speaks and who does not left fewer than 10 students taking Science this semester.

Students aren’t the only ones who found Goforth overly demanding and often out-of-line. At HCC’s request, MCHS employed a strict chain-of-command for queries about community college resources and policies. All teachers must go through Dr. Xavier for any requests, scheduling issues, or other needs; no teacher was allowed to contact HCC administrators or staff directly. Goforth, however, regularly sent emails to HCC personnel in order to resolve her problems. In response, HCC regularly sent emails complaining about her to Xavier. As the only science teacher, she also used college labs and equipment in her classes, and there were several documented complaints about events occurring in the lab.

In early February, Sullivan arrived at our breakfast interview with surprising news, given the science teacher’s generally abrasive relations with most people: Goforth had offered to team-teach an interdisciplinary lesson with her. Having heard Sullivan complain about wanting to do something truly different with students, she asked if the English teacher would like to create some language arts activities around their Science topic, nuclear energy, and a film she planned to show over the next two days. Thrilled by the possibility of teaching cross-discipline, Sullivan quickly agreed. Before classes began that morning, she scripted several writing topics based on critical issues in the science video—courage, government regulation, freedom, and responsibility.

“Even though I do have a curriculum,” she thought, “I have a lot of freedom since I don’t have to be tested on anything. I can gladly be the one to work around other people’s curriculum. And I feel confident that whatever the material is, I know how to weave writing, speaking, listening, and reading into it.”
Both English and Science classes met together to engage in these activities, beginning that same day. For a quickly tossed together lesson with little co-planning in advance, Sullivan felt it was relatively effective until “teacher personalities” interfered. Goforth had taken the reins, delivering most of the informational content, while Sullivan lurked around the edges of the class, prepared to support their post-movie writing activities. “I’m blaming myself for this,” she told me later. “I saw it.”

Several of the English students were not enrolled in Science this semester, so the sudden Science/English collaboration seemed somewhat pointless and outside of their current academic venues. Tyson, an African American female, decided that Goforth’s preliminary science notes were simply not meant for her. Sullivan described Tyson as a girl who “does not care if you’re the president of the United States. If you do her wrong, she will come right at you.” In my experience, Tyson was strong-willed, tough, but always involved in classroom activities. When working one-on-one with me, she proved to be sometimes self-denigrating of her own abilities, but willing to accept guidance and try. She generally worked hard, completed assignments, and could be a genuine star in the classroom. She demanded respect, but also gave it readily. Nevertheless, I had no difficulty imagining her reacting aggressively to perceived threats and disrespect from authority figures.

While Goforth was reviewing science facts on the board, Tyson pulled out a newspaper to search for a current event for her history class. “It didn’t really bother me,” Sullivan shrugged. “She wasn’t being really overt, [just] looking at it but not saying anything. But I am blaming myself, because I could have gone over there two seconds earlier and put my hand on her shoulder and said no. But I didn’t.”

Instead, Goforth noticed Tyson in the third row and turned on her sharply. “Young lady!” the science teacher demanded, her anger already visible and her voice quickly rising into a
shout. “I don’t know who you are, but if you think I’m going to stand here and let you read a newspaper while I’m lecturing, you don’t know me very well!”

Barely glancing at the irate teacher, Tyson shook out the newspaper firmly and continued to work. Sullivan cringed. It was a clear signal that the young woman did not appreciate being shouted at, but that she also would not escalate the matter by responding directly. A truce offering, a deflection that maintained her own dignity and gave the science teacher a chance to approach the issue differently.

Goforth, however, stepped smartly in front of her desk and seized the paper. In response, Tyson’s fingers closed around it more tightly and she looked up, eyes snapping with silent anger, lips pursed.

“If you don’t let go of this paper,” the teacher threatened, “I’m going to go get Dr. Xavier.”

At last, Tyson replied, her voice loud, firm, and sassy. “You go get whoever you want.” Her grip on the newspaper did not slacken and, after moment of futile tug-of-war, Goforth did just as she threatened, storming from the room in a huff in search of the principal to back her up.

Throughout this scene, Sullivan stood frozen in the back of the classroom, shocked and amazed at the sudden escalation of what seemed a tiny and even understandable misdemeanor in her mind. Although she knew that the student’s response was inappropriate, she felt torn, unable to support her co-teacher’s crazed behavior either. As students turned to look at her in the ensuing silence, wondering how she would respond, she sighed. “Well, I think this is going well, don’t you?” she quipped to a range of nervous smiles that reflected her own.

After a few minutes, Xavier arrived and removed Tyson, who stalked out with eyes narrowed and head high. Goforth started the movie on nuclear energy and, as the film rolled,
approached Sullivan in the back of the classroom. “I don’t know if you take behavior like that,” she seethed quietly, “but I don’t.”

_Great_, Sullivan thought. _Now she thinks I’m raising bad children._

Over the next two days of this spur-of-the-moment collaboration, the newspaper tug-o-war was far from the only incident. “It was very, very stressful to me and kinda ruined the rest of the [collaboration] for me because I just kept thinking—nobody can learn in a climate of stress and it was very stressful in there. And she did it several different times, about stupid stuff. This is the hard part of collaboration. If you don’t share a teaching style—or a discipline style—it’s a disaster.” Conflicting definitions of Good Teaching made collaboration rocky, even in a school capable of reducing many of the normal barriers, such as scheduling conflicts and large class sizes. But afterward, despite the trials, even Goforth admitted she enjoyed the collaboration and found it valuable (including the fact that the grading load for reading the essays fell on her partner).

Sullivan grimaced. “She says she wouldn’t have ever thought of those writing topics. She’s never done anything like grouping kids to read an article. And she wouldn’t have known what that looked like. I should be praising her for trying.”

Unfortunately, interdisciplinary Science/English did not get a second trial.

In mid-February, Xavier decided not to renew Goforth’s contract and visited her classroom before second period to break the news. When she demanded to know why, he refused. By law, during the first three years of new employment, a principal does not have to provide any specific reason for non-renewal of a contract. Goforth left the school in tears during the break, only returning the following day after sending a barrage of angry emails to students, students’ families, and faculty. Upset and furious with both Xavier’s decision and his reluctance to explain, she spent first period talking to students in her classroom, easily inciting several of
them to reaction. “They don’t like her,” Sullivan noted. “[But] it’s not about her. It’s about getting out of school.” A small group of students, led by Chelsey (a boisterous, distractible white female who is severely attention-deficit), arranged to protest during the break and then refused to attend second period.

Calling in the Director of Human Resources to assist him, Xavier confronted Goforth in his office, demanding that she desist interrupting the educational day. When she hotly refused, they demanded her resignation and she once again stormed out to hire a union lawyer. Eventually, students were wrangled back to their lessons, but the disruptive events resonated for days. Even Sullivan found herself dealing with two students who continued to want to “protest” by disengaging from class work and whispering angrily to each other on cell phones. “What they’re most upset about,” she pointed out with a small sigh and shrug, “is that Karen gets fired, but the person they hate the most remains—Ruby. They don’t understand.”

In the end, Goforth was given paid leave until the end of the year when her contract was still not renewed. The Science classroom stood teacherless for several days while a suitable long-term substitute was found. Chelsey and her supporters (mostly other white females who had suddenly reversed their well-documented dislike of the Science teacher) scribbled their names on a fabric bag with markers as a final act of support. Within three days, the cause was forgotten. Human Resources forced Xavier to provide the former teacher with a written reason for his decision, which he cited as her inability to get along with staff. Sullivan, however, claimed it was only partially true. “She’s very abrasive,” she admitted. “HCC people complained to him about her. And he’s the one who has to keep all this working. But how can you say that when you’ve got Ruby, who really doesn’t get along with anybody?”

*Dr. Odum: “No Students Allowed”*
The wooden door to the crowded teacher workroom/office was usually closed, providing a little more space, and occasionally locked. Plastered with paper signs, it offered information to students about a variety of topics, but most significant was a vivid pink sign that explained one of the main reasons why it was so often shut. It read, “Please understand that we are working with confidential information here and sometimes we may need to have a space without students.” At the beginning of the first semester, Sullivan prepared the sign in response to faculty requests that the constant flood of students into and out of the offices be curtailed. There simply wasn’t enough space and they did need to handle sensitive information privately.

In February, a new sign appeared on the teacher workroom door: a huge yellow piece of paper with “NO STUDENTS ALLOWED” in large, block letters. Created by the Mathematics teacher on the spur of the moment, the new sign replaced the previous explanation, trumpeting a more complete and forceful point. Students were not welcome in the teacher workroom. Period. The sign also seemed to be symbolic of the Math teacher’s attitude toward students in general. As far as she was concerned, she spent enough time with “those students” in class and in the mandatory 2-hour tutorial she ran during the mornings. Although the workroom was off limits, she often seemed to wish her classroom could also be off-limits, a space where she could instruct without interruption. Despite two extra hours of instruction daily, it seemed both surprising and suggestive that all of the students taking Mathematics this semester were failing.

Like Goforth, Odum frequently threw students out of class for insubordination and lack of engagement, but rarely sent them to the principal. Instead, the students wandered the halls, went home early, or even came to “visit” in Sullivan’s class. Although the list of students Odum disliked was massive, two of the most frequent cast-outs were Kendra and Juelle, students I knew as two of the hardest-working, most engaged, and politest African American girls in English IV. In the workroom, Odum raved about each of the young women, criticizing Juelle
particularly for becoming pregnant at age fifteen. But the Juelle who attended English IV was lively, dedicated to learning, looking ahead to college and a career as a psychologist. When she first met me, she responded quietly to my greeting and a little abruptly to my attempts at polite chat as we walked down the hallway from the ladies’ room together. My personal field notes document my own feelings about being summarily dismissed in the middle of our “conversation” as she turned off into the cafeteria. As she became familiar with me, however, she happily talked about other classes, events in the school, her friends, her aspirations. She was genuine, warm, affectionate and strong, a young woman who cared about her schooling, her child, and her future. But in Math class, she was the “ringleader,” according to Odum, deliberately disruptive, hostile, and inciting other students to the same. One day after throwing Juelle out of class, Odum told them, “Now that your ringleader is gone, maybe the rest of you will behave!” Predictably, the students angrily rallied to their friend’s defense and made class unbearable for the day. In the teacher offices afterward, Odum was seething, speculating that Juelle must be a gang leader.

Perhaps Odum’s bitterest complaint was against Kendra, who apparently refused to bring her calculator to class even after Odum provided her with one. Such stubbornness and disrespect meant that Kendra had been outside of class almost as often as inside. According to Sullivan, Kendra struggled with depression and her two-semester failure at Math continued to erode her confidence in herself as a student. “I can’t go in there anymore,” she told Sullivan one day when Sullivan found her walking the hallway at the beginning of class. “I’ll just get in trouble. I can’t fight it anymore, so I think I’m just going to go to the cafeteria.” When Sullivan told her she needed to attend the class no matter what, she continued, “I can’t sit in there. I can’t do it! It depresses me, makes me think I’m stupid.” She already attended Odum’s before-class tutorials from 10am-12. She completed all of her homework, but often did not understand how.
She continued to fall behind. Although Sullivan never asked after the seemingly lost calculator, we both theorized it might have been pawned by Kendra’s family, who were extremely impoverished.

“She’s teaching college,” Sullivan said about Odum. “So she stays on track [no matter what students need]. It doesn’t faze her if everyone fails; she’s staying on track with material.” For Odum, progress through the textbook, through a set list of content topics, was top priority. If the students fall behind, she offered more of the same in tutorials. When students acted out in frustration, they were simply avoided, sent away, ignored. I wondered why Odum did not keep a stash of calculators in her classroom, like many high school teachers, rather than allowing Kendra’s education to be the cost for forgetfulness. “She’s all about the students,” Sullivan explained in a wry, ironic twist, “how they don’t learn, they don’t care, they don’t do.”

While Odum’s classroom was utterly impersonal, some students did merit further attention unrelated to class. One student reported receiving a piece of “helpful advice” from Odum by email, obviously meant to be supportive but betraying problematic assumptions about the student and their aspirations. When Yolanda, a vocal, stylish African American girl, was the only student to show up to meet a visiting alum from Howard University (a HBCU located in Washington DC) and learn more about the school, Odum fired off an email to warn her that Howard was located in an extremely bad neighborhood. She did not think that such a sophisticated young woman should be interested in attending such a school. Offended by the slight to both Howard (her intended future college) and by the racial ignorance of the statement, Yolanda bristled and ranted to Sullivan, “Does that woman think I’m an idiot? Does she think I don’t know [that Howard is located in a black neighborhood]?” In Yolanda’s perception, Odum’s concern translated as elitism and racism.
Given the bitterness with which she spoke of students, it was not a surprising leap. During my last few visits, she had even started growling at Sullivan for permitting students to speak with her in the workroom and for using “inappropriate” terms of affection with them. (Sullivan tends to call everyone she meets “sweetie” or a variety of other pet names, so much so that it became a fond joke among her students who seemed to love the attention and the implied affection.) For Odum, Good Teaching was a product of content coverage, an identity far too frequently interrupted by resistant students. Unsurprisingly, the students responded to her with a shocking amount of hatred and academic failure. Even Sullivan feared that the Math teacher lacked “the capacity for five seconds to stop and say, ‘what do I believe about them? What am I projecting about what I believe about them? Why do they despise me? Why can’t they perform for me?’ That’s nowhere in her.”

*Dr. Xavier: Perpetuating the Myth*

“Why Goforth and not Odum?” This question ran like wildfire among the students and several groups of them converged in the principal’s office in an attempt to understand the mid-year “firing” and to continue voicing their dissatisfaction with Math class, in particular. Their concerns went largely unheard.

Xavier hired all four of the teachers out of a substantial pool of applicants, some of whom Sullivan knew as innovative, experienced, student-focused teachers. Unfortunately, these teachers also were known as people who would speak out about issues, who were not afraid to rock the proverbial boat, an attitude that might not have been welcomed on the ground level of a new, unstable schooling venture. Xavier reported that his decisions had to be made quickly and might have been better, but he remained reasonably satisfied, especially once the troublesome Science teacher was replaced with a long-term substitute. Despite the student outcry and the
evidence of low achievement, he believed both Odum and Mason were talented, useful, and
effective teachers—Good Teachers, despite everything. He insisted that Odum's commitment to
excellence and high expectations for students could be seen clearly in her classroom style.
“When I walk in there,” he said, “there's instruction going on. She’s at the board.”

The act of disconnected instruction, not meaningful learning, was key here. Even for the
school’s leadership, Good Teaching got equated to coverage instead of mastery. High
expectations were defined as expectations for the teacher, in terms of page count, concepts
discussed, terms defined, and problems worked, and not for students, who consistently tuned
out. Teaching meant effort on the teacher’s part, meant standing at the board and shoveling
curriculum, facts, figures, dates, and theorems. It meant not sending students to the principal for
discipline, but handling it personally in any way that worked, including letting them sleep or
wander the halls. In no sense did it entail real concern for or interaction with students, attempts
to inspire or engage, activities that touched them where they lived or considered where they
might be academically. It meant lecture, worksheets, and repetition. Reminiscent of the methods
employed in Anyon’s (1981) working class schools31, teachers at MCHS provided instruction and
acclimation suited to passive, obedient, and uncritical lives.

Xavier acknowledged that there might have been problems with “relationships,”
particularly between the students and the Math teacher as evidenced by the numbers of
complaints he received each week. But although he heard the obvious animosity, he assumed
that student opinions could be fixed by addressing the problems within the students themselves.
Like their academic struggle, their failure to synch with the Math teacher and her methods was
further proof that these kids required repairing. They were deficient in appropriate social

31 In her landmark article, “Social Class and School Knowledge, Anyon (1981) gathered data on the nature and
distribution of school knowledge in five elementary schools serving students across a wide range of social class. Her
comparative investigation of curriculum, pedagogy, and pupil evaluation practices revealed that, even under the
prescription of a "standardized" curriculum, social stratification of knowledge is possible and even likely.
attitudes and skills. “We can work on the animosity the kids have for her,” he explained to Sullivan once. “It’s just age and schoolmarmy ways. Kids need to just learn to respect her.” As with all challenges at MCHS, problems remained situated entirely inside the students and could be solved by “fixing” them.

According to the principal, the hope of the school rested in future cohorts of students. “Next year will be so much better,” Xavier knew. “We’ll have so much better students.” The phrase “better students” cropped up frequently in our interviews, as Sullivan reported on the school. This semester, Xavier recruited heavily from North Oakwood and other schools that serve largely white populations. Although he was pleased by the large turnouts to his presentations, the final lists of potentially interested students typically looked very much like the current study body. “Which makes sense,” Sullivan said. “Someone who’s fitting into the status quo and finding support at North is not going to be looking for an alternative.” Recently, she recognized one of the names on the prospective students list from North, “a very sweet kid, a genius at writing lyrics, and who’s failing all his classes. That is the profile of the kids we have now and that’s not the profile that the people I’m working with are interested in working with.”

The student, who had been in her lower level classes at North, planned to visit, to see the school, to sit in on her English classes before making his decision. “I have a hard time being honest with him,” she sighed. “I’m not sure I can say ‘yeah, this is for you.’”

After sitting in on a race discussion in one English class, a tense but meaningful conversation in which African American students began questioning race relations within the classroom itself, Xavier warned her: “You’d better take care of those three white kids. I don’t want to hear anything from those parents that we’re not addressing or respecting their children. We don’t have enough white kids as it is.” Better Students also have Better Parents, parents like those Sullivan remembers from North Oakwood. Parents who email daily, challenge teacher
decisions on a regular basis, and make often outrageous demands for special attention for their children. They are difficult and forceful; they hold power in the system and can even threaten a principal’s position successfully. In trying to maintain and increase numbers, Xavier needed to make certain white students (and their parents), distinctly in the minority at MCHS, felt comfortable. And while all students should find school non-threatening, the notion that “we don’t have enough white kids as it is” signaled how the construction of Better Students was also recognized as largely white.

Echoing Xavier’s intent to obtain “better students,” the promotional rhetoric of MCHS continued to focus on the “honors” nature of classes and the “jump start” on future college plans. A memo from the Oakwood Schools superintendent pointed out emphatically that this Middle College was a program for “students who are academically capable of performing on grade level. It is not a remedial program” and reminded readers that it was also “not an alternative high school.” Nowhere in the early organizational minutes available to the public was the usual mission of a Middle College mentioned—the intent to provide a unique quality education to low-performing students and potential drop outs. These were not the students the school wanted to serve—even if they were the students admitted.

Some days, Sullivan believed the principal might see some of the problems around him and she wondered if he would be interested in taking on some of the many issues at school—from poor teaching practices to improved race relations. On other days, she was certain that he, like the rest of the faculty, was blind, distanced, and even unmotivated to make change. After all, she theorized, he did hire each faculty member from a large pool of applicants, a glaringly all white faculty working in a school that was predominantly (if unexpectedly?) black. He played a key role in refusing to associate MCHS with the Gates Foundation Early College consortium, an organization that provides resources to small Middle College-type collaborations in return for a
dedicated focus on students who might drop out of high school or during the first year of college. He regularly interrupted her classes, once even asking her to abandon them to a babysitter (the administrative assistant) in the middle of a highly successful and difficult lesson in order to assist him in fabricating a set of late faculty Professional Development Plans (PDPs). The work took over 40 minutes. Sullivan lost the class completely.

Xavier did invite his faculty to attend professional development opportunities offered in the three associated districts as often as possible. All of the staff attended a two-day AVID workshop which, according to Sullivan, everyone enjoyed but immediately forgot. Another conference showcased schools that concentrated on ending student disengagement, a shift in teaching and organizational philosophy that had revitalized and re-motivated both students and teachers. “If you really believed that no matter who was in front of you, your job was to get that kid plugged in, then everything about what you did—grading, procedures, school culture—would be different.” Sullivan recalled how positive Xavier was about the results presented in these workshops, telling her emphatically, “This is great! We already have this!” She was amazed to hear MCHS described as similarly successful. “I had to be, like, well, we may have the possibility for it. But we don’t have it.” He quickly agreed with her, noting that the size of the school and the small staff did indeed have great potential for collaboration.

“But can you teach somebody that doesn’t see the value in collaboration—or even being civil—that?” Sullivan wondered afterward. “Or can you teach somebody who doesn’t believe

---

32 Xavier had missed a deadline for submitting PDPs and wanted her advice on setting pseudo-goals for the other teachers. “I should have said no,” she said, “but I didn’t.” When they got to her plan, his suggestions for professional development included reviewing the Standard Course of Study and looking at RiverDeep (a standard course of study tracking software used by Highgate Public Schools), both pointless activities for real improvement but acceptable on a PDP. “And for some reason, even though it’s funny as hell, I burst into tears in front of this guy,” she told me. “It was like all the stuff I couldn’t express about how awful this felt to me [just overwhelmed me]. Everything from just the fact that—what the hell does he do all day that he can’t do these? And this is partly my fault because I just can’t get the words to say it.” (Notably, she had looked through RiverDeep previously, horrified at the rigid chronological organization of traditional textbook topics. “Spend a day on Ben Franklin’s Poor Richard’s Almanac? Hell no. No!”)
that all kids can learn? Can you teach that?” Although Xavier hinted to her that he might slowly replace the other faculty members, year by year, Sullivan worried for the students in their classrooms now. “He’s not that kind of leader,” she sighed. “He would never tell someone ‘you must change what you’re doing’ . . . It’s one thing to have rough spots when you have a visionary leader. Every first year anywhere’s going to be rough. But when you know that someone’s got it going on and you can trust them, [it’s tolerable.] But I have none of that.”

I used to say, and I still hear my colleagues saying, that “I do everything I can for students.” Or “what do you want me to do?” Or “I’m a good teacher.” And I used to say that myself, so I understand that attitude. It’s that belief that underlies people’s comments about whether [students] have cell phones. It’s symbolic of exactly what you believe about students. [If] you can’t see past your own cultural sense or values or whatever, then there’s nothing you can do in the classroom in terms of methodology that will make one iota of difference. Because it comes through, in every way, in everything that you do. And it influences how you deal with classroom management, how you deal with not doing homework, how you deal with the idea of concept mastery and whether someone’s mastered or not mastered. I mean, it’s just a pervasive teaching attitude.

For Sullivan, this “pervasive teaching attitude” floods MCHS. “[People say] if you could just get classes smaller. If you could just take [these kids] out of their old neighborhood environment. These are supposed to be solutions. And yet, we have 38 students in a totally removed environment. We’re doing it, but not making it.”

* * * *

Late in the fall semester, the superintendents of all three associated systems decided to host a student forum, soliciting student feedback about the school. “A lot of the teachers were asking Dr. Xavier to shut down the forum, not because they’re afraid of losing control over it, but because of the superintendents who are bringing representatives.” Threatened by the students voicing their opinions, the faculty resisted the possibility that their professionalism
(their identities as Good Teachers) might be questioned publicly by such bad students. For Sullivan, however, “It’s not threatening because, you know what? They’re right. These kids are right. And maybe they’ll say something in a way that changes things.”

The feedback forum continued despite faculty wishes. “They hated everything about the school but English,” Sullivan reported, her expression serious. “The kids said they were planning to bring Middle College High down. ‘But not you, Ms. S. We’re taking you back to [a local historically black high school] with us!’” When I reacted, unsurprised, she cut me off abruptly, clearly disturbed by the concrete evidence of student disaffection with MCHS despite their positive reviews of her. “But that’s not enough. The teachers don’t care about them. It’s not personal . . . Which says to me that they’re not being—that it’s not working for them. Yet again.” For her, the problem was larger than her classroom and she felt the weight of responsibility and the familiar sense that her personal agency was limited in this bitter and unconcerned context.

At the time of this writing, the impact of the student forum in November 2005 was still unknown. In the nine weeks I spent in and out of the school, nothing seemed to change despite Sullivan’s hope. “These kids are right,” but no one seemed to be listening.

Coda: The Search for “Better Students”

Sullivan came to MCHS searching for students who better fit with her growing sense of who she wanted to be as a teacher, who would both need and respond to a more culturally relevant, personalized, critically aware mode of teaching. She did not expect these students to necessarily outperform on standard measures, did not go in search of “better students” but of “whole students,” unique individuals who represented a wide swath of humanity.
But she found herself unexpectedly immersed in an environment dedicated to serving only Better Students, a monolithic, automatically-capable, largely white population that did not exist in the Middle College setting. From the principal, tasked with making the school fit smoothly and successfully into the community college day while increasing numbers in general, to the faculty who envisioned themselves as ivory-tower college professors handing down knowledge to blank slate students, MCHS was continually preparing itself for the Better Students that it might never actually serve. “It all stems from somebody not wanting to work with the kids in front of them, not thinking they have to,” Sullivan said.

In response, Sullivan felt continually frustrated, occasionally angered, and always isolated and disappointed in her hopes for this new school. Longing for a sense of communal responsibility, for the possibility of interdisciplinary collaboration, and sometimes even just for civility, Sullivan despaired for her colleagues. When I asked her how many times she heard someone arrive excited about a lesson, her response was immediate and definite. “Never. And I need that . . . When you think of all the things you want in a professional environment, I know that what I thrive on is when someone comes in and is like ‘I read the most amazing article last night on—whatever! What do you think about this? Let’s try it!’” The estrangement she felt

33 Friere (1970) describes the “banking” theory of education as the antithesis of democratic, problem-posing education. In it, teachers treat students as empty vessels to be filled with the authoritative knowledge that is possessed exclusively by the teacher. “The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are” (p. 72). Students become objects, not subjects; knowledge becomes dehistoricized and static; intention is separated from the world of action. As teachers “deposit” knowledge, they also sacrifice student agency and possibilities for transforming the world beyond the classroom. For Friere, the point of departure must always be with men and women in the ‘here and now,’ which constitutes the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they can intervene . . . . To do this authentically they must perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting—and therefore challenging. Whereas the banking method directly or indirectly reinforces men’s fatalistic perception of their situation, the problem-posing method presents this very situation to them as a problem . . . [and] a historical reality susceptible to transformation. (p. 85)

The search for Better Students is likewise a negation of possibility, not only for students but also for a teacher interested in transformation. By perceiving themselves as bankers, fixed and finished, Sullivan’s colleagues are able to claim a comfortable, stable Good Teacher identity. But this runs counter to everything Sullivan believes about teacher responsibility, about the possibility of serving as an agent in the larger social reality, and about maintaining and acting upon a vision of equitable change.
among the faculty was intense, more alienating than at North Oakwood where at least the rhetoric of equity provided a hint that change might be possible. As a friend and researcher, I became increasingly aware that our conversations for this dissertation might have been her only outlet for professional support. “I love meeting you here. I love having you here,” she told me more than once. “I am so lonely, you know?”

Facing the immense negativity in the shared teacher offices every morning began to sap her energy and her passion for arriving at work. “I am the kind of person who would support a colleague to the hilt. But I can’t do that here. Not when they’re not even good colleagues. I don’t want to sit down and plan a lesson with them, because I don’t even gel with anything that they believe, or do, or think about kids.” She continued to feel a strong need to critique and reform the place, but struggled to find a voice that could speak in advocacy of student achievement and teacher improvement. Never one to invite conflict, she neither wanted to become the only critic among the faculty nor felt that her colleagues were capable of hearing her. “This is a really bad flaw in me,” she pointed out, couching her fears in self-critique, a move that she made increasingly often as our time together lengthened. “If I don’t feel as if the place itself is interested, I don’t say anything. What can I say?”

After seven months of frustration and silence, she confessed that she had begun to “dread going into that place everyday . . . Like, on Monday, it took everything in me to go back to that office after Spring Break. But once I get there, and Ebony comes in, and Kendra comes in, [other students] come in, and I’m fine. I’m happy.” Finding solace in the presence of the real students, rather than searching for mythic versions of kids, gave her focus and strength. She dragged her rattling plastic cart down the hallway and into her classroom to do the work, to teach these real, “whole” students however she could.
CHAPTER 4
THE POWER AND PROBLEMATIC OF CARE

Nieto (1999) writes that “what happens in classrooms is first and foremost about the personal and collective connections that exist among the individuals who inhabit those spaces” (p. 130). Although teaching continues to be framed as a technical activity, with a language of input, output, and measurable, standardized-testable results, such definitions neglect crucial affective, emotional, interpersonal aspects of the schooling experience. When I ask a classroom of pre-service teachers to write about a significant moment from their own experiences as a student, they invariably write about people, about passion and cruelty, shattered hopes and unfounded fears. It is an activity with which I often begin pre-service classes.34 After they write for a few minutes, absorbed in memory, I ask them to summarize their thoughts in a few words and we list these on the board. Never does the list include content knowledge, subjects and coverage, skills and drills. Instead it is inevitably emotional—the teacher who inspired them by recognizing a talent, the moment of praise or criticism that moved them to success, the sense of horror at being caught out or left out, the feeling of lightness when a difficult task had been completed to satisfaction. Most common are teacher stories that never mention the subject or topic they taught, but which provide images of personality, interaction and reaction.

In the end, these shared stories make my point for me quite powerfully. At its heart, teaching is not and has never been about subject matter. It is about relationships with people,

34 ...and which I borrowed with permission from Dr. Mary Stone Hanley.
between students and teachers, in a series of affective moments that have impact and resonance across hours, days, and years. It is why everyone seems to have a story of a good teacher or a bad one. They linger in our minds, tied indelibly to emotion, occasionally surfacing again to remind us of the greatest lessons we learned from them—personal lessons about others and ourselves that remain even when the mathematical formulas, the details of the Krebs cycle, and the thousands of diagrammed sentences have faded.

It is arguable that MCHS already had a form of “relationship” with students—hostile, disconnected relations that stemmed from traditional notions of Good Teaching and mythic visions of Better Students. For Sullivan, however, teacher-student relationships needed to be based in a particular moral ethic—in an overt sense of care.35 “You are teaching a way of being in the world,” she insisted. “A way of living. That modeling is valuable.”

In a myriad of small and large ways, she invited students to trust that she could care about them as individuals and as students, proving and re-proving that she would listen to their stories, recognize and respect their performed identities, and advocate for them in personal and academic ways. In doing so, she hoped to create a space in which students could take personal and pedagogical risks in an atmosphere of support, acceptance, and expectation. She felt that only upon such relationships could a transformative, empowering pedagogy for “whole students” be built.

35 Care in education is a topic that has received substantial examination over the years, from philosophical treatises on caring as a feminist ethic (Noddings, 1984) to essays about African American womanist perspectives of care and racial relations (Thompson, 2004), from historical explorations of care in segregated schools (Walker & Tompkins, 2004) to ethnographies about the absence of care in contemporary schools (Valenzuela, 1999). According to Gay (2000), a pedagogy of care is one of the hallmarks of effective, culturally responsive teaching.

Caring interpersonal relationships are characterized by patience, persistence, facilitation, validation, and empowerment for the participants. Uncaring ones are distinguished by impatience, intolerance, dictations, and control. The power of these kinds of relationships in instructional effectiveness is expressed in a variety of ways by educators, but invariably the message is the same. Teachers who genuinely care about students generate higher levels of all kinds of success than those who do not. They have high performance expectations and will settle for nothing less than high achievement. Failure is simply unacceptable to them, so they work diligently to see that success for students happens. (p. 47)
While the faculty dreamed of Better Students, the actual student body of MCHS grew increasingly disaffected, distracted, and hostile toward a school that made little effort to see them as people with complicated lives and abilities. Their harsh reviews of the school indicated their inability to identify with a place that denigrated who they were, that challenged their personal sense of agency, capability, or even belonging. In more ways that one, students felt betrayed and abandoned, the promise of a new way of schooling growing more and more distant and unreal. To students, it seemed the promise of collegiate freedoms had already been restricted when most were not allowed to attend college classes during the first semester. The promise of “close relationships with faculty” in promotional materials seemed an outright lie.

On top of unstable school relations lay the tense and sometimes oppositional peer relations among students themselves. Sullivan described the growing tension between two groups of African American girls during the fall semester. “They are very feisty, very strong-willed,” she recalled. “I really enjoy all of them, but I haven’t been blind to the fact that there are opposing cliques.” For these girls, as for many teenagers, their immediate peer groups were particularly critical in how they defined themselves both individually and collectively while at school. Because both groups attended the same English class, Sullivan had a front-row view of aggressions as they simmered over the weeks, played out in small but increasingly disruptive ways during class. “Remember how I showed you the circle we used to sit in? We can’t do that anymore because they’re too busy ‘throwing subliminals’—that’s their term—staring each other down across the circle, muttering under their breath.”
The inevitable eruption happened one Thursday afternoon in the main hallway when two of the girls, considered clique leaders, began shouting obscenities and threats at each other, cheered on by their posses. Sullivan called it an “enormous, screaming, puffed up, ‘I’m gonna cut you, you b---!’” attack. With no MCHS teachers immediately available to step in, the appalled HCC personnel called campus security. The ringleaders responded to security with furious back-talk and were summarily suspended.

In response, both groups of feuding girls began a campaign to bring their friends back to school, designing signs and making t-shirts with “Free Tramaine!” and other slogans, posting signs in the halls and elsewhere on school property without proper permission. The anger between cliques continued as well, finding its way further into classes and expressing itself in short bursts outside. Finally, the principal decided to stop it by orchestrating a group meeting to mediate between the girls. He asked teachers to attend in a show of Middle College faculty solidarity, a physical expression of the school’s determination that this kind of violence and disruption would not ruin their school.

“Now, I liked the solidarity idea, you know.” A show of staff cohesion (and the relationships it implied) appealed to Sullivan and might have helped re-establish behavioral boundaries that could improve the instructional situation. But the barren relationships between the faculty and the students, individually and collectively, lacked an important element for effective dialogue—genuine respect. “If the kids respected the faculty or [the principal],” she pointed out, “it might even work.” In a school that defined most of the students as deficient, always falling short of their Better Student ideals, the pre-requisite respectful relations between

---

36 According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (2000), in her case studies of six professionals whose lives help to define aspects of the term, respect is a personal mission, a "way to create symmetry, empathy, and connection" (p. x). It builds relationships, nurtures self-esteem, and is established through and continually revived by meaningful dialogue. Instead of associating respect with hierarchies and unequal power relations, she situates it in personal and fluid relationships.
principal and students did not exist. Although the “meeting” suggested an intention to invite
dialogue, the girls had no expectations of or interest in being heard by those who had shown no
interest in them before. Going into the session, Sullivan remembered a gut-sense that the
meeting would prove “ineffective.” What follows is a recreation of her vivid recollection of the
event, including my interpretation of those memories; it is necessarily partial—like all
recollections—and as a representation of “truth” (lowercase “t”) does more to explain Sullivan’s
view of her students and colleagues than to adequately portray the complex motivations of any
other characters.

That afternoon, Xavier interrupted classes to hand out notes that demanded to see
students during the break. Each of the girls who received notes were well-known by everyone in
the class for having been involved in the trouble; everyone knew precisely why they were being
summoned by the principal. Embarrassed to be called out and still angry, the girls rolled their
eyes and made comments to each other, their edginess building over the remainder of the period
so that by the time they got to the meeting, they were “truly heated,” defensive, ready to battle
to protect themselves and their friends. They stalked into the empty classroom to slump into
seats against the far walls with their respective cliques, glaring.

Sullivan’s sense that the meeting might go awry was only compounded when she realized
that the principal “had nothing planned,” no idea of how he intended to approach the issues
between the two student cliques. Given the powder keg situation, she felt the faculty needed “to
be totally on top of your game. You’ve got to decide what kind of tactic you’re going to take.
The ‘Let’s hold hands and work this out’ tactic? The “This is my school. I don’t do violence.
That will not be happening here’ tactic? You have to go in prepared.”
The principal opened the meeting mildly. But instead of addressing the vast split between the students, their feelings or concerns, he invited them to create list of “what we’d like our school to look like.”

None of the girls responded.

Seeming unsure where to go from there, Xavier called on the teachers instead. They offered a few things for him to add to the board—“stability,” “honesty,” “safety.” The students sat in sullen, angry silence, ignoring the proceedings and the principal’s continued pleas for cooperation in his scheme for some minutes. When one girl finally had enough and began to speak, it was like opening floodgates.

“Excuse me—excuse me!”

“This meeting is bullshit!”

“You don’t even know nothing about what’s going down.”

“You’re never here. You don’t—know—us!”

Furious voices poured from both sides of the room, students gesturing harshly, backing each other, speaking over each other. Their words pinpointed part of the problem—that the principal who was requesting calm conversation had very rarely been a part of their school day. They might see him in passing, but he did know “know” them in any meaningful ways; from their perspective, he had made no attempt to understand where they were coming from or what the issues were between them. His haphazard handling of the meeting itself was seen as an act of disrespect, a “bullshit” session which embarrassed and offended them. Therefore, he had no right to meddle in posse affairs, to waste their time talking about “ideal schools,” as if their thoughts would change any of the many things they disliked about MCHS. Instead, student hostilities were being reframed as school business and school problems once again became a reason to blame students without looking at underlying complexities. In response, the girls’
attacks went directly at him, rude, hostile, utterly dominating the classroom. “It was unbelievably awful . . . It got so ugly,” Sullivan recalled. Any legitimate concerns were quickly lost in the ire.

Xavier tried other tactics, but was overpowered. To Sullivan, “he allowed treatment of him that communicated to them that they were totally the boss of both him and the school.” Finally, when other faculty seemed neither inclined nor capable of challenging the students’ increasingly out-of-line behavior, Sullivan stepped forward into the room. She knew these girls, she felt, and knew they were capable of rational, intelligent, moral choices. Someone had to establish what those would be in this context, had to cut across the righteous and bogus anger with expectations for how one human being interacted respectfully with another. “Excuse me. I need to say something,” she began, pitching her voice so it rose above the turmoil. Eyes turned to her, voices paused. “You may not speak to the principal of your school like that,” she said firmly, meeting the eyes of each girl, direct and serious. “You just may not.”

The girls looked down and away, settling back uncomfortably into their seats. “No offense meant,” rose in a small chorus around the room. “No offense meant.”

Xavier cleared his throat in the sudden quiet, perhaps slightly embarrassed. “Well, I think this has been really productive,” he closed and let the students go back to the last few minutes of break.

Having established respectful relationships between herself and the students involved, Sullivan was able to call on those relationships in a moment of crisis, unlike the school principal. Students did not hear her rebuke as an assault on their identities or as an attempt to shut down legitimate concerns; instead they took it for what it was, rightful recognition of their rudeness, presented in a way that was direct, honest, and real. Although the meeting solved nothing about the girls’ conflict and gained no promises of improved behavior, Sullivan nevertheless had sent an indirect but clear message about her beliefs about students.
“My colleagues say that this kind of behavior is just black girl behavior,” she told me.

“[They say] we don’t understand it, nor are we ever going to fix it. This is the way that these girls end up being. And I have a lot of mixed feelings about that.” Sullivan’s “mixed feelings” included the recognition that such beliefs stemmed from latent racism and the faculty’s determination to avoid “whole students.” But she also acknowledged its descriptive (if partial) truth—many of her African American students, particularly the girls, utilized communication styles different from the accepted norm of schools and “pretending that is not there is stupid.” Several of the African American girls were often loud, forceful, and dramatic. They danced into the classroom, dominated conversations, called out, exhibited attitude. Whereas her colleagues saw such behaviors as unacceptable and even disrespectful, Sullivan saw them frequently as evidence of engagement, enlivening and making the classroom more personally and culturally relevant.

Because she took the time to look more closely at her students, she also knew that other African American students did not share these behaviors. They sat quietly, responded

---

37 According to Gay (2000), students of color who most strongly identify with traditional communication styles for their cultural group are most likely to clash with the norms of school-valued communication. One such variation involves the “participatory-interactive” style of African American speech known as “call-response” (p. 90). Attention and interest are signaled by “listeners giving encouragement, commentary, compliments, and even criticism to speakers as they are talking. . . . [It is the responsibility of the listener] to respond in some expressive, and often auditory, way.” For example, in traditional African American churches, members of the congregation support the pastor by a constant litany of “amens” and other comments. In schools, however, such vocalizations run the risk of seeming disruptive. Smitherman (1977) and Dandy (1991) both detail a number of ethnic speech style variations in black vernacular. Gay also points to communication variants in other racial and ethnic identifications—including the “talk-story” of Native Hawaiian students (Au, 1985) and the overlapping, cooperative nature of “rapport-talk” in white females (Tannen, 1990).

38 In Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap, Orenstein’s (1994) ethnographic portrayal of two groups of girls showcases a strong distinction between black urban ways of being in classrooms and white suburban ways of being. Whereas the white girls often performed their expected position as docile, quiet, only semi-intelligent students, the African American girls showed a more dramatic resistance to the inequities of their classrooms. When white girls “spoke up” to challenge the male dominance in their classes, they were seen as taking charge in positive ways. When black girls did the same, they were labeled as disruptive, pathological. She also cites statistics from Sadker and Sadker’s Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America that indicate that black girls maintained a higher level of self-esteem than white girls, felt more entitled to voice, and seemed more satisfied with themselves in all areas—except in their academic performance.
thoughtfully, and seemed to check attitude at the doorway. The white students, male and female, were likewise complex. Some were boisterous and attention-seeking; some were silent and docile. Some students worked well amidst their own chaos, others needed stability and direction to concentrate on class tasks. Docility might signal engrossment or lack of interest. Silence might indicate respect or boredom. Although her colleagues’ description did hold a kernel of truth about black student behavior, it also made a gross and essentialized\(^{39}\) assumption that only provided support for their prevailing deficit mentality. Instead of trying to see difference as strength, whether cultural or idiosyncratic, student behaviors were easily written off as the product of inadequate homes, cultures, and individual identities.

Unlike her colleagues, Sullivan did not believe that “we don’t understand” student culture.\(^{40}\) As someone outside of their worlds, she acknowledged that she had much to learn about the selves of her students, and part of her mission in redefining her teaching self was to discover a new “way of being” in the classroom that learned from students and celebrated their identities. Although she could never cease to be a white, middle class female, she could redesign her ways of enacting whiteness, class, and gender with students. Although she would always wield authority in the classroom as the teacher, she could choose to allow students to empower

\(^{39}\) Essentializing, or assuming that all members of a social group equally identify with and perform the characteristics of that group, is one of dangers of seeing race. While people may indeed “affirm their group identity(ies) as a source of nurturance, pride, and meaning” they will not do so in the same way as all group members. A person’s group identity may be central, as religious identity is to a traditionally observant Jew. Or it may be mainly background, only becoming salient in certain interactional contexts, as Jewish identity may become for an assimilated Jew when confronted with anti-Semitism. In both cases they share the burden of the social conditions facing them as targets in an unequal society” [but this does not equate to shared, fixed, or stereotypical behaviors]. (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 1997, p.9)

\(^{40}\) She also questioned the blanket need to “fix” seemingly aberrant student behavior (although there were limits, as her reaction to student aggressions in the meeting attest).
themselves and maintain self and dignity in that classroom. But finding the effective path was neither easy nor always intuitive. Sullivan often felt like she was flying blind, “feeling my way.”

On the day following the fight and the meeting, Sullivan worried about how to deal with the continued feud in her classroom. “These kids don’t respond to ‘I know you don’t like so-and-so, but I am asking you to just work with them.’ They just say ‘No disrespect, but I ain’t sittin’ there.’ But God help me if I wasn’t going to have one day when they could deal with each other.” Sensitive to the underlying tension, she nevertheless decided to move forward, taking a proactive step toward at least momentary peace. Choosing a game she knew the class enjoyed, she set up the “vocabulary baseball” diamond and announced that they were playing as their vocabulary test review. In the game, one team pitches vocabulary words to the other, and batters hit them by knowing appropriate definitions and uses. She placed every student’s name in a basket and drew teams randomly. Although she was nervous about the team make-up, which invariably mixed both groups of girls, this deliberate action continued to show her faith in their ability to manage their in-class behavior. Once again, they did not let her down.

I think it was a combination of it being the last day before the exam, so they needed the review, and [the fact that] they love being up and moving. They love being able to be like “Strike! Battabattabatta!” So for some reason it was totally, absolutely, completely good. To the point where this girl in one of the posses, Marlo, says as everybody’s clearing the room: “I would like to say, I rightly enjoyed myself today.” And she’s one of the ones who causes a lot of the tension, very intimidating, will get into people’s face. So that felt very good.

Sullivan credited the pending test and the student’s enjoyment for the sudden cessation of hostilities, but I tend to believe that her two acts of faith played an equally significant role. By rejecting the myth of both Good Teaching and Better Students, she was able to offer them a

---

41 Intuition, like common sense, may very well stem from ingrained and unexamined social and cultural expectation. Teacher intuition might easily dictate a course of action that favors traditional Good Teaching ways of approaching students and/or subject matter.
different sort of relationship, one based in an ethic of personal caring, supported by her naturally generous and warm personality, and showing a determination to see them not only as they were but as they could be.

Complex Identities: The Students of Room 64

Caring relationships with “whole students” walk a tightrope of shifting identities, require emotional and material investment, and may even be more challenging than rewarding in the end. This dissertation does not provide enough space to describe each student in the depth and complexity that he or she deserves, but I would like to paint a few brief portraits of the figures that populate Sullivan’s thoughts and who gave me a proper re-introduction to the messiness of real world schooling after my years in the Academy. “When you just spend 15 minutes with these kids,” Sullivan says, “you find that they have so much going on, such rich lives.” This section hopes to give you a “15 minute” snapshot of some of these remarkable young people, high-achievers and low, black and white, men and women. Sullivan would be the first to say that “we’re not talking about your regular, average, everyday teenager. I mean, teens have it hard enough, but these kids have serious stuff going on. And for some reason nobody is interested in that side of them, their humanness, their life outside.” This “humanness” became the foundation on which she built her teaching, a constant effort to understand exactly who was in her classroom and how that supported and conflicted with her teacherly vision of what needed to happen there.

Among the kids who rambled into English III and IV each day were former honor roll students and would-be intelligentsia, creative writers and musicians, future actors and casual

42 While it is impossible to determine precisely how much the school milieu impacted Sullivan’s ability to establish relationships with students, I have little doubt that the atmosphere of negativity toward students made her attempts to enact a different “way of being” all the more appealing to students. Ironically, the school inadvertently supported her by serving as a contrasting model.
athletes, hopeful poets and nurses and cosmetologists. They were anime fans, iPod junkies, guitar players, and people who lived for the weekend. They were also near drop-outs, illegal immigrants, alcoholics, drug addicts, dealers, cutters, and attempted suicides. At least two of girls had children of their own, as did some of the boys. In less than two decades of life, they had faced the murder of a sister, abandonment, abuse, obsessive parents, life as a run-away, and growing up disfigured. They had suffered rape, survived abortions, spent months in rehabilitation centers, and dealt daily with parents with mental illness. Some worked full-time as fast food cashiers, a mall security guard, or other jobs. They were younger than they seemed and, at the same time, older than their years. They were friends and enemies, cliques and loners, young people with “street cred” and others living the latchkey lives of privilege.

Many of them came to MCHS because family members had attended the community college and they could imagine themselves taking a few classes here, but only a few had future four-year college aspirations. Among their many identities, only a few would identify as willing “students” or as recipients of an education they believed would launch them into better things. On any given day, there might be from seven to eighteen in English class, bringing with them identities every bit as indeterminate as Sullivan’s teacher self, carrying baggage from the world outside MCHS and long histories of schools before this one. To Sullivan, they were “so lovable, but so misfitty,” “real students,” “whole students” complete with the need to continue creating and reinforcing who they were, and who they wanted to be inside and outside of school.

What follows is a series of short profiles of these students. I hope they provide at least a marginal sense of the complex identities they carried, hid, and performed inside classrooms, as well as a more profound understanding of Sullivan’s world, her intention and her vision of change. These are the bodies and personalities and identities that incited Sullivan’s desire to find a better way of teaching, inspired her to advocacy, and elicited her complicated but intense care.
Erika Johnson

Erika was a small, fine-featured black girl, somewhat introverted, especially around strangers. When I first took up residence in the back of English IV, she was the first student to arrive that morning. She didn’t look at me at all, the only other person in the room, but kept her eyes on the book in her hands, the desk she placed it upon, or straight ahead. I waited for a glance, intending to say hello, but she turned her back to me quickly to situate her small lavender backpack on the floor. Taking her bottle of fruit punch with her, but leaving the bright pink and white purse, she departed back out the door without a word. Later, she would give me quiet, welcoming smiles; almost always she was the first person in the quiet afternoon room.

Erika seemed poised but never supremely confident although she excelled in class. She had been in honors classes before, but never enjoyed them or liked her teachers. Sullivan described her as an avid reader and a very intelligent, mature young woman. During each “Independent Book Chat” cycle, she often completed four or five novels while some of her classmates struggled with a single book. Her writing also showed skill and a gift for a poignant turn of phrase. One of her essays began: “On May 4th, 1989, my life made a drastic turn. My birth mother signed the adoption papers and legally terminated her rights as my parent. At twenty-one years old my mother did the best thing she could have ever done for my twin sister and I. She gave us up.”

Dale Randall

Dale was a moderately heavyset white male, with thin dark hair and a square, freckled face. He found it difficult to concentrate in school, often resisting even the most straightforward individual assignments with simple non-compliance. Affable and chatty, his seemingly
greatest desire was to draw Sullivan or his small group of in-class friends into off-topic
discussions. “This is the stereo equipment I want to get,” he would say, flashing a catalogue at
Sullivan. As she pointed him back to his class work, he repeatedly insisted, “But I’m really, really
good at this stuff.” When he did apply himself, he proved quite capable. He claimed to be an
avid reader and usually found a book to talk about when required, but refused to read silently in
class with an almost phobic determination. Instead, with all avenues to disruption cut off, he
would sit quietly and stare around him, book closed on the corner of his desk.

Sullivan admitted that Dale was “the kind of kid that I’m not good with, which is not fair
of me because he’s got serious problems at home. It’s not like he’s some privileged jerk.” Dale
coped daily with an alcoholic father who beat his mother. After Dale missed a day of school,
Sullivan discovered that he had finally “put his dad in the hospital by beating the shit out of
him” the night before. She suspected that he might be trying to cope with feelings of
homosexuality and severe attention deficit disorder, as well. “He’s coping the best way he knows
how,” she acknowledged. “It’s just that it causes a pain in the ass in my classroom.” For all his
resistance, he managed to do some work and seemed to enjoy the creativity and interactivity of
the English class. His attendance was almost flawless.

Lakethia Brown

A lanky black girl often dressed in vivid colors, Lakethia was similarly bold without
arrogance, forward and personable and clever. On my first visit, she wore a red-striped sweater
that I would see on her multiple times, and seemed to briefly war with herself over whether to
avoid the stranger in the back of the empty room or address me. She chose to walk over and
shake hands, introducing herself and expecting me to follow her lead. I had to ask her to say her
name twice, and she told me that if it was too hard I could just call her “Skittles.” She carried a
scuffed yellow binder with the words “YOU KNOW” written on the spine in black marker beside a smiley face. As other students arrived, she became my official introducer.

As part of an introduction to the Canterbury Tales, Sullivan asked students to take a four-humors personality quiz. Lakethia ended up with “headstrong” as one of her characteristics, a word she wasn’t familiar with. When the teacher told her it meant “stubborn,” she readily agreed and approved. “That fits,” she nodded. For all her strength, Lakethia admits to being a little afraid of homeless people, having been chased by one when she lived in New York City. She was home-schooled before MCHS, chewed her fingernails when distracted, and enjoyed her sociology class through HCC (except for their class visit to the homeless shelter). During the spring semester, she was negotiating the possibility that she was gay, a personal realization that threw her closest friends into a tailspin.

Jack Blackburn

“Walden is your inner cool, your peace, your inner god.” Also previously home-schooled, Jack was a wannabe Kerouac, beat poet, artsy philosopher-in-training. A tall white male with a goatee and longish brown hair that curled over his collar, he typically wore consignment shop odds-and-ends, crafting his own deliberate and eclectic style. Most days, he favored a knitted, multi-colored tam or a beaten grey-black fedora, pushed forward rakishly over his eyes. Loose blue velvet pants. Ancient, split sneakers with fluorescent pink laces or flip-flops. His favorite pose was slumped deeply into the one freestanding classroom chair with his feet propped up on a desk next to him. Occasionally his clipped and precise voice seemed to affect a slight British accent. “Do your bloody work,” he would say smugly to a friend.

“Traditional high schools such as North Oakwood aren’t going to do it for you, if you’re Jack,” Sullivan acknowledged. “It’s all conformity. He doesn’t want that. [And unlike most
students, he is actually happy to be] sitting and talking and thinking. That’s fulfilling to him.”

Given a sheet of writing prompts, Jack was not above telling her simply, without rancor, “These are stupid. I’m not doing this.” She turned his paper over and invented a few new topics for him. (“An idea I’ve been thinking about is . . .” “The song I wish I’d written . . .”) After that small extra attention, he grudgingly wrote. He appeared to thrive in classes which invited conversation about big ideas and themes, and enjoyed sharing long passages from books read outside of class. He considered himself an aspiring writer, willingly showing his stories to both Sullivan and I, inviting feedback, and even making plans to attend a writing camp. His mother, however, phoned Sullivan to explain that her son had “the wrong idea of writing.” She disapproved of freewriting and poetry, more concerned that he concentrate on improving his SAT writing scores. She was particularly disturbed when he wrote a poem about real art being beyond criticism, a thought that seemed to be “far too dangerous for a fifteen year old.”

Despite his occasional grouchiness, he shared his enjoyment of English III readily with Sullivan. “You’re a goddess,” he once told her seriously, giving her a manly one-armed hug after class. “Yours in the only class I’m actually alive for.” He took Chemistry as an independent study after being expelled from Goforth’s class for rudeness.

Kendra Barber

Kendra first came to my attention as “the girl who walked to school.” One day after classes, Sullivan noticed one of the black girls packing up unusually slowly. When asked if she was okay, the girl claimed to be fine, just dreading the walk back home. “Where do you live?” Sullivan asked. “I can take you home.” At first Kendra refused the lift, not wanting the teacher to go out of her way. “You have no idea where I live. I’ll be okay.” Sullivan pushed and was eventually told: she lived in Buckland, a small town nearly thirty miles away from the school.
When she missed the public bus early that morning, Kendra had walked to school and expected to walk back. Instead, Sullivan took her home to her run-down neighborhood. The family car sat broken down in the scrubby yard. The house window screens hung from dingy windows. Discarded furniture littered the street. The entire area had a feel of neglect and impoverishment. Sullivan recounted her trip to me with despair about the lack of transportation to MCHS.

Kendra was a heavyset, mild-tempered girl, very concerned and serious about her performance in school. She often wore a pair of too-snug black polyester pants that she had decorated with beads strung on fishing line, hanging from safety pins in short horizontal stripes of color down the legs—pink, red, green, white/blue/clear, lavender. Sometimes the tight-fitting pants rode down slightly as she walked, revealing a broad stretch of red satin underwear before she could tug her t-shirt down. Kendra struggled with clinical depression. She had trouble writing one of Sullivan’s required personal essays because it asked for a narrative of a “life-changing” event. The two most important events in her life were too painful to write about: her abortion last summer and the recent murder of her sister. According to Kendra, the murderer (her sister’s boyfriend) remains free, and the case is considered currently unsolved.

Chelsey Grant

Chelsey was the most boisterous white female in all of Sullivan’s classes, her sharp voice a constant punctuation throughout any lesson. She was painfully thin, her emaciated waist and bony wrists seeming at odds with her D-sized breasts, all clearly visible in her body-hugging pastel shirts. Fashionably torn and faded jeans rode low under a stud-decorated belt. A heart shaped pendant swung on a thin gold chain around her throat. Her straight blonde hair was often dragged up into a barely 3-inch wannabe ponytail. Sullivan described her as “a freaking mess. She’s tried to kill herself. She cuts. She got a family of chaos. Although she’s privileged
and can get everything she wants, materially, she still has serious problems.” Her mother was a high-ranking Highgate Public Schools employee, and made certain Sullivan knew how badly Chelsey’s SAT writing score had been. Severely ADHD, Chelsey fidgets, bounces, and shouts her way through all of her classes. It was difficult to tell if her medication had any effect and most of her classmates seemed to think of her as “a total ditz.” Her random off-topic comments (“My boyfriend smacked me last night! No, I’m kidding. I’ve never been smacked in my entire life!”) kept both Sullivan and I blinking in confusion. On the few days she was not “wired for sound,” she appeared sickly, complaining of abdominal pains, upset stomach, or other ailments.

Chelsey’s wide-open approach to the classroom, as well as life in general, sometimes irritated her classmates. When Sullivan mentioned the dragon in Beowulf, a role that Chelsey would play in their amateur film, she sang out “Me! Me! That’s me! I’m the dragon! Arrrrrrhhhh!” in a regular and continuing litany. Trying to organize costumes and props, Sullivan asked over her, “What should we do with the dragon?” The dry response came immediately from another student: “Put her in the hall.” Sullivan hid behind her script to stop herself from laughing. Chelsey never noticed.

Chandra Harris

Chandra was a sweet, quiet but easily-distractible African American girl who had been allowed to enroll in only a single course, English IV, at the demand of her mother who feared Chandra would not capable of managing a normal student load. “She was sabotaged before she ever started,” Sullivan said, wondering if Chandra’s preternatural slowness in completing any assignments was a product of her years of home-schooling. Like several of the other black girls, she often wore a dusky brown anorak with fake coyote fur around the hood. Her hair was in long, narrow braids, woven close to scalp and spilling down over her shoulders. She frequently
approached Sullivan for a hug and a kind word and almost always solicited another hug whenever she entered or left the classroom. Her grades remained poor, but she was one of Sullivan’s staunchest admirers.

Omar Williams

New to MCHS this Spring, Omar was a silent figure that roamed up and down the hall before classes. Barely 5’3”, he was a stocky, muscular black male, his head usually hidden under a hoodie or a black doorag and a Yankee’s cap. Beneath it, his hair was cornrowed in straight, tight rows running back over his skull, and his chin usually showed a few days growth of stubble. One of his black t-shirts read: “HOOD” on the front, and on the back: “My neighborhood; ghetto; project. Where I’m from and always respected. It’s part of who I am.” A transfer student from one of Highgate’s more suburban high schools, Omar looked every inch a thug but often proved to be a remarkable student. Other students would occasionally comment that “there’s no way Omar read that book,” but Sullivan knew that he enjoyed reading, stayed focused in class, and wrote both lyrics and poetry.

Trina Robinson

Shy and quiet, Trina seemed stern and forbidding when she arrived as a new student early in Spring semester, but in time proved to have a ready smile. Previously, she has done very poorly in school and had “lots of issues” outside of school. Mother to a four year old, she had missed so much in school when she was pregnant that catching up had been nearly impossible. One of her personal essays talked candidly about the terror of experiencing a Caesarian section at age thirteen. Trina was also severely overweight and forced to squeeze into the tiny, fixed desk-chair combinations of the college classroom (which I knew from experience was
uncomfortable), but she never complained. Several times, I noticed her sucking her thumb during silent reading.

Sullivan pointed out that, despite her schooling history, “she’s soooo smart. It’s wonderful when she’s willing to show that and the other kids are totally blown away.” Trina was “totally excelling” in English IV and found her success clearly exciting, her own pride in her accomplishments palpable. Although she began as a student who would barely speak or look up in class, she soon became a student who regularly volunteered answers and interpretations. During one recent review of *Macbeth*, she pulled quotes off the top of her head that even Sullivan would not have remembered, but which were accurate and insightful and even made connections that had not been explicitly statement in class previously.

*Ebony Taylor*

Ebony was a slim, energetic, light-skinned black girl, her round, apple-cheeked face often bundled in the hood her brown anorak. “I’m going to be an actress,” she told me. “I’m always practicing!” Practice often took the form of sing-song, melodramatic short monologues (“My dear Ms. Pyne! How I miss her!”) and a passion for reading aloud in class despite the fact that her reading skills were somewhat limited. During a series of theatre-based activities one afternoon, a classmate could not decide how to perform the concept of “desperation.” When Sullivan asked for others to try, Ebony rushed forward from her seat, pleading with the teacher to give her an “A” in the class. She clasped her hands together, her face a rictus of fear and agony, begging, groveling. Everyone, including Sullivan and I, were momentarily taken in by the tearful, panicked earnestness. Sullivan’s eyes widened in shock until Ebony started to giggle. “Oh my god,” Sullivan gasped. “I thought you were serious! Oh my god, that was so good. Desperation.” Even though she was a weak reader, Sullivan suggested that she read the lead part
in *Death of a Salesman*. The guidance counselor told me that Ebony was thrilled to “have the lead in the play,” and Ebony defended her right to remain Willy Loman for most of the unit.

*Tony Bosco*

Tony was hard to miss, a middle-class white male with a messy, fall-in-the-face mop of red hair, heavy-lidded eyes, and a slight lop to his long-legged walk. Like Jack, his clothes were “consignment fashion eclectic”—a black blazer with its sleeves in long tatters, pinned together with safety pins, or a black pleather overcoat with upturned collar, grubby red sneakers, ripped jeans or baggy grey sweatpants. Oversized Sony earphones hung around his neck almost every day, blasting music that could be heard across the classroom. Some days he seemed wild, wired, unable to sit still; others he dragged and moped, clearly stoned. One afternoon, he was unable to remember talking to Chelsey on the phone the previous night, despite being the one to initiate the half-hour call. Despite his dazedness, he still found ways to demand Sullivan’s attention with jokes, continual garbled conversation, or—more rarely—his somewhat spurious work. “Does it have a male body part in it?” Sullivan asked once when he tried to show her a vocabulary sentence. “Well, in that case, I’ll let you keep that to yourself.”

Tony owed his parents $2800 for blowing up a truck and for a plane ticket. Last year, he ran away from home by hitchhiking to Canada where he stayed for some time. Later, they flew him back and tacked the price of the ticket to his mounting bill. Before coming to MCHS, he lived at a drug rehabilitation boarding house, where he appeared to have temporarily beaten his cocaine addiction but not his severe alcoholism. “Alcoholic” and “former addict” were significant pieces of his performed school identities, casually mentioned in class and used as lenses on literature and ideas. He groused about one independent reading book being too “unrealistic” in its portrayal of crack addicts. “It’s so stupid and unrealistic. She puts the crack in
a joint and then suddenly she’s addicted to crack. It’s stupid. It’s not like that.” He rattled randomly to Sullivan while she tried to get organized before class about how some people act like “recovering crackheads—which I am,” about music, about the craziest thing Sullivan had ever done, all the while spinning a drumstick inexpertly and dropping it with a loud, nerve-wracking clatters. He was suspended for drinking bourbon on campus twice and smuggled liquor into class in water bottles, adding it to his Coca-cola during the breaks (and once in the middle of class). His friends considered him amusing but occasionally worrying enough to ask Sullivan for help. “I don’t know how to say this,” one girl told her in the hallway during a break. “But I’m really worried about Tony. I have a lot of substance abuse issues in my own life and I know if someone’s drinking in school—well, everybody gets drunk—but someone doing it like he does is asking for help.” The second time Tony was suspended for having booze on campus, Sullivan noticed that his father, also a raging alcoholic, was the one who picked him up out front. Before Christmas, Tony went in search of cocaine in downtown Highgate, but only found dealers for crack. He described his first experience smoking crack in a rundown house with a ten year old child, her mother, and her grandmother. Sullivan shuddered as she retold the vision he had painted to her. “Can you see it? Three generations of women and this nineteen year old boy, smoking crack together.”

In late February, Tony claimed that he was breaking his habit and had been totally clean of both drinking and drugs for a few days. His replacement substance of choice? Red Bull energy drinks, caffeine in a can. During one of my last days in class, he confessed to chugging ten Red Bulls every day—six of them before English III. While he worked, one leg bounced frenetically at all times, a nervous vibration that shook his whole body and kept his head nodding in erratic rhythm.
Nikki Garmon

Nikki was eating puffed corn cereal out of a baggie when she asked me my name. When I told her, she pursed her lips and shook her head. “I don’t like it.” I was surprised by the response and she smirked at me before wandering away. After a minute, she hollered across the room at me. “I got me a white girl name, too. One day I’ll change it to Gwentae. Or Winter. Or Sunday. Somethin’ like dat.” Her voice was slurred, soft and thick, and her “broken” black dialect43 strong. Thick-bodied and dark-skinned, she strutted around the classroom as if on a private runway, her orange, yellow, and pink floral shoes clomping and scuffing on the tile floor. She always seemed to be talking, a soft commentary that Sullivan and the rest of the class had largely learned to ignore. She reacted to everything with an empathetic “mmmmmmm-hmm” or a muttered “I gotta question,” even though she rarely actually had one to ask. She often brought me into class activities and conversations. “Why don’ you come on up here and sit wit’ us? You can sit here by me,” she said during a seminar, patting the desk beside hers in the circle. Or, as my visits grew more sporadic over the weeks, “Girl, you jus’ come see us any ol’ time you want to, now don’cha?”

Nikki has a plan for her life. “What I want to do don’t require a college degree,” she told Sullivan. “I’m gonna be an FBI agent.” She intends to work as a prison guard for three years, then get accepted into an FBI academy somewhere. Sullivan worries about the realism of this future identity. “The dream of being an FBI agent is not unrealistic. That’s a possibility out there. The disconnect between the reality and the journey to get to that is the problem.”

Nikki’s grandmother told her that, when her mother was pregnant with her, her dad wanted her to have an abortion. Today, Sullivan believes her mom is an addict or perhaps

43 Black Vernacular English, considered by many teachers to be “broken English,” has been a point of contention in schools for decades, and came into the general public gaze during a media blitz around the use of “Ebonics” in schools in Oakland, CA. Despite the Linguistic Society of America’s 1998 proclamation that Ebonics was “systematic and rule-governed like all natural speech varieties,” the debate continues (Thompson, 2000, p. 433).
mentally ill based on her distracted and confused communications. The family is exceptionally poor.

[Nikki] wrote this very powerful story of how she tried to kill herself in eighth grade, and it’s true. And I’ve known this about her for three years, because I taught her at North her freshman year. She has some kind of skin disease, eczema or psoriasis, and she takes heavy steroids to control it, but before anyone ever diagnosed it, it was rampant. She would go to school everyday with all these sores on her face.

Because of lack of knowledge and funds, no one had ever taken Nikki to the doctor about her condition or even recognized it as a medical issue. Tired of living as the ugly girl, she swallowed a bottle of pills at home one day after school. Only after she was hospitalized for her suicide attempt was the skin condition recognized and treated.

Just like that. It was so powerful how she learned how something so superficial was something so deeply felt. Anyway, it turned into a very beautiful essay and it broke my heart and I couldn’t believe it happened to her. Look at how race and class and gender intersected there. If I had been born with that skin disease, I would have been 6 months old and it would have been taken care of. She lived with it until she was in 8th grade.

Nikki participated in class avidly, but rarely seemed invested in anything academic. Her survey to me was scrawled in huge green crayon, offering just a few words but filling the space—a tactic I saw her use on quizzes, as well. She gave the “anonymous” survey to me proudly, thrusting it into my hands with a laugh. “There ya are! I know you want to know what I think.”

_Luna Jeffers_

Tall, with long, straight brown hair, Luna inevitably dressed in black t-shirts purchased from the Hot Topic store in the local mall. A variety of pithy statements ran across the front: “Stupidity is not a crime. You’re free to go” or “I’m a Ninja (you can’t see me),” among others. A silver lightning bolt-shaped pendant hung around her neck, a proud icon of her rather rabid obsession with J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books. Once she discovered that I shared her passion for the series, she often found me before or after classes to share bits of fandom related
trivia or thoughts about the latest book. (As Sullivan said, “You always did attract ‘Weird.’”) She had casual aspirations to learn graphic design and photography, often sharing amateur photographs of the stuffed animals on her bed or friends posing outside, and photo-manipulations of these images created in a pirated version of Adobe PhotoShop, a major graphics design application.

Luna’s greatest joy in English class was writing vocabulary sentences, all of which had to do with the world of Harry Potter. (“The Death Eaters burned an effigy of Harry in the graveyard at night.”) In order to cover system-mandated weekly vocabulary in semi-meaningful ways, Sullivan asked students to do a variety of activities with each word, including drawing pictures that paired the unfamiliar vocabulary word with familiar “sounds sorta like” words of the students’ choosing and writing sentences. For part of the fall, she even asked to them write sentences with certain structures and punctuation, in order to give them practice using more complicated sentences in their writing. According to Sullivan, “Luna has never had a grammar lesson in her life, but has picture perfect punctuation. She started coming into me with these Harry Potter sentences, totally invested in them. She cared about the sentences, therefore she cared about the punctuation.”

Luna also wrote her own fiction and poetry, including fan-based pieces that she published online with friends. (The first chapter of her very own Harry Potter novel, which she asked me to read, was scattered and structurally flawed, but showed a good eye for detail and world-weaving.) When Sullivan encouraged them to submit poetry to online competitions, Luna’s was accepted by one of the student poets anthologies, organizations that run competitions and print massive tomes of student work, then sell the students a book that may run $20-80. In some sense, these are scams; in another, they are valuable places for students to truly publish and many are relatively selective in choosing the poems they print in each volume.
Luna was elated, but “her parents flipped out because she got a letter from an anthology the parents think is a scam. They sent me a ferocious email, saying ‘Luna’s going to be heartbroken! We can’t tell her. You do it.” Sullivan did, but refused to downplay the (minor) honor of the small publication even as she encouraged her not to necessarily purchase the expensive anthology.

Many other students also entered room 64 daily, each body replete with stories, selves, performances, dreams. Vanessa, the would-be cosmetologist with a traumatic sexual history. Marlo, her nose and lip pierced, rhyming and singing and talking to herself. Rashad, the light-skinned black boy who baked and shared chocolate chip cookies. Jesse, expelled (“made an example of”) for smoking pot at a local private school. Yolanda, one of the only students to test into HCC’s first level English class only to find it dull and repetitive. Cliff, with his monster hands. Tramaine, with her frozen dinners. Lita’s shy smile. Moments and memories, identities performed and shaped and in flux. These were students whose lives made them both a challenge for teachers to care for and most in need of such care. Their very complexity motivated Sullivan to constantly re-discover the identities of her “whole students” and negotiate how she could invite them into relationship with both her and her subject.44

“Miss Joy:” Inviting Caring Relationships

Before class on my second day with Sullivan and her students, Chandra slid into the desk in front of me and looked at me quietly for a few moments. Her round, dark face and soft black

44 Caring theory points to the need for pedagogy to work through the relationships established between teachers and students. In Nodding’s (1985; 1992) definition, the teacher serves as the one caring and is predisposed and possessed of attitudes that accept and confirm the cared-for, the student. The teacher actively searches for connection with students, concerning him or herself with their welfare. Caring is not exclusively or even immediately focused on academic achievement, but on the emotional selves of students. However, strong relationships with teachers tend to “make schooling worthwhile and manageable. In so doing, the potential for higher academic achievement increases” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 30). (Note that Valenzuela does acknowledge that caring relationships and higher achievement may not translate neatly into long-term mobility in the rigid economic and class-based American system.)
eyes seemed expressionless, thinking without sharing her thoughts with the outside world, with me. I looked back at her over the top of my laptop and smiled. She tilted her head. “Are you a teacher here?” Her voice was quiet, smooth, touched with curiosity and caution. Although I had been introduced (repeatedly) on my previous visit, Chandra’s beginning-of-class absences meant that she missed the introductions.

How to answer honestly without placing myself completely outside of her experience with a language of doctoral students and dissertation research? “No,” I replied carefully. “I used to be an English teacher. Now I try to teach new English teachers to be better at what they do.”

She tipped her chin in Sullivan’s direction. “Are you teaching her?”

“Oh, no,” I said, surprised by the interpretation. “I guess the best way to think about why I’m here is that—I’m—well, I’m trying to pick up some tips from her to pass along to other people who want to teach English.”

Chandra seemed satisfied with that answer and her face broke into a huge smile. It’s pure light. “Well, she’s goooooood. She’s real good.”

I knew I was smiling back at her, her own sudden warmth and delight reflecting off of me. I got the sense that I had won brownie points by appreciating her English teacher. “One of these days, maybe I’ll ask you to tell me why you think so.”

She looked away for a second, considering.

Another of the black girls, Lakethia, had been listening from her nearby desk. She swung around to look at me directly. “It’s cause she so goofy.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Goofy?” It’s not a word I would have chosen to describe Sullivan, conjuring up flop-eared cartoon dogs in suspenders. Her deliberate movements, gentle yet firm persona, and passionate love for everything they did seemed at odds with the image.
“Yeah.” Lakethia raised the pitch of her voice and mimicked, “Oh, sweeeetie! Listen up, my first period friends!” Then she and Chandra giggled, giving each other a quick high five. “She just so nice,” Lakethia finally interpreted for me.

“It’s the happiness inside her,” the first girl continued, once again turning to make sure she had my full attention. She leaned forward, dropping her voice to a whisper. “Her nickname is ‘Miss Joy.’”

At the time, this name seemed remarkably appropriate to me. “Oh yeah?”

“Miss Joy,” Chandra repeated, nodding sagely.

In Chandra and Lakethia’s view, part of what makes Sullivan “goood” was the sense that she wants to be there. The fact that she was excited and happy to be working with them takes precedence. Her legendary terms of affection, lavished casually on the class as a whole, her “first period friends,” as well as on individuals, were signals that said she wanted them there, that they were welcome in English class and were invited to learn comfortably, secure in her favor. In this way, Sullivan initiated relation simply through her demeanor.

Before I left the classroom at the end of my observations, Sullivan and I decided to invite students to share their thoughts about the class. The informal, optional survey had two purposes—1) to satisfy our mutual curiosity and 2) to provide Sullivan with a record of student interests for the remainder of the semester. Students wrote about their previous experiences in English classes and their feelings about their current class. “My other English classes were just all about memorization,” wrote one girl. “I felt that I was there just to pass, not to learn anything from it. But I like everything about this class, the style of teaching and the way she makes you

---

45 Noddings (1984) writes that a caring teacher must accept the role of initiating relationships with students because the asymmetrical power relations innate to schools make it too difficult and risky for students to invite such relationships with teachers. Adults must take the responsibility for inviting a care-based orientation between themselves and their charges.
feel like you matter and she cares to help you succeed.” Over and over in these half-anonymous
surveys, Sullivan was pictured as “willing to work with you if you have problems,” as someone
who “wants to be in school teaching.” Words such as “friendly,” “active,” “happy,” “caring,”
and “warm” littered their evaluations. She valued “one-on-one relationships with her students,”
another wrote. “I can’t tell you how much a relationship with your teacher makes the learning
speck (sic) for itself.” Her demeanor invariably showed kindness and respect to students, even
when they strayed out of bounds. “She even smiles when she gets mad,” Kendra told me.

“I’ve Got You”: Respecting Student Lives

During my first tour of MCHS, Sullivan marched me into the cafeteria to show me
where some of the kids ate and congregated before and between classes. Four African American
females sat in the front booth, a vivid orange plastic affair. One had a textbook open on the
table and alternately glanced at it and joined in the conversation. Another was pressed tightly
back in the seat, making room for a curly-haired infant, bounced fondly in her lap. As we
approached, eyes turned to Sullivan and all four young women smiled; the one with the baby
sang out, “Hey, Ms. S! Look what I got.” She swung the baby around to face us. Large dark eyes
roved around the new vista, a tiny fist stuffed into her mouth.

Sullivan dropped down in front of the baby, utterly engrossed, cooing and murmuring.
“She’s so beautiful. Is she Juelle’s?” She held out her hands toward the child invitingly and the
girl passed her into the teacher’s hands.

“Yeah. She’s got a math test right now. Odum won’t let her bring her to class and she
couldn’t get a sitter. So we watching her.” It seemed like old news, spoken matter-of-factly. No
one was surprised by Sullivan’s accurate guess about who the mother must be, and Sullivan
seemed unsurprised at the conflict between after-hours math tests and sitters.
The girls’ glanced briefly me and Sullivan, dancing in circles with the baby and still making all sorts of noises, looked over her shoulder. “Oh, that’s Ms. Pyne. She’s going to be visiting us a while.” And then her attention was back on the baby, who seemed content to be swirling around the cafeteria, rocked against this strange white woman.

The girls offered shy hellos to me, then refocused on Sullivan and the baby. “Hey, Ms. S, we got to do something before class today. Would you mind watching her a little bit later?”

Sullivan’s response was enthusiastic. “Of course I’ll watch her!” It was clear that she considered this a boon, not an imposition, even though she needed to prepare for first period herself. Reluctantly, she handed the baby back to the girls and we continued our tour.

Shortly before classes began, the sound of a baby wailing in the hallway beyond the classroom grew louder and three girls hurried in. “She won’t stop cryin’,” one said, flustered, with an apologetic half-smile. “She been cryin’ forever!”

“That’s okay,” Sullivan assured her, taking the child gently and lifting her up to look into the tear-streaked face. “I’ve got you,” she began in soft, affectionate tones. “There, there. It’s okay.” The little girl fell against her shoulder, still sobbing, and Sullivan walked her up and down the classroom, talking softly, rubbing her back in small circles. Relieved of the infant, the three girls waved and fled to the halls. The baby stayed with Sullivan and, as students trickled in for class, they seemed unsurprised to see their teacher bobbing up and down between the desks, singing softly, a tiny black baby nestled against her.

“That yours?” one of the guys wanted to know.

Sullivan shook her head and kept singing. “You can pick up the week’s syllabus on the desk by the door,” she added quietly. Just before first period, Juelle arrived from her math test, flanked by her friends. It seemed that Sullivan would have been perfectly content to teach the
class with the baby in her arms. “She’s been so good,” she told the young mother. “She’s so beautiful.” One mother to another, a moment between equals.

My field notes for the day contain my immediate reaction to the event: THIS is why the kids work for her.

I didn’t define “THIS” in those notes, but I knew what it was. For Sullivan, teaching the “whole student” required caring about the students both inside and outside of class, an authentic caring\(^\text{46}\) that looked beyond grades and achievement to see the real lives of kids. It pervaded every decision she made—pedagogically and interpersonally. Her relationship with them encompassed every time she met them in the hallways, every time they answered a question or hinted they might like to share her lunch. It meant she knew them as one mother-to-another, one woman-to-another, one human-to-another.

\(^{46}\) Noddings (1984) distinguishes between two forms of care—*aesthetic* care which is committed to abstract ideas and practices, and *authentic* care, which is characterized by a focus on student welfare and emotional selves. According to Noddings, authentic caring involves the one-caring and the cared-for. To act as one-caring means “to act with special regard for the particular person in a concrete situation. We act not to achieve for ourselves a commendation but to protect or enhance the welfare of the cared-for” (p. 24). Caring is framed as contextualized, affective, deliberate, an “inclination,” “engrossment,” or “motivational shift” that incites action and leads to personal support or improvement for the cared-for. The one-caring does not abdicate self, but allows his or her “motive energy to be shared [and put] at the service of the other” (p. 33). She contrasts authentic caring with aesthetic caring, the care for ideas and things which is often seen in teachers who prefer subject matter and coverage to students.

Adding a practical understanding to Noddings’ ideological framework, Valenzuela (1999), in her study of Mexican American students at Seguin High School, found that teachers and students defined their duty to care in two separate and conflicting ways. Teachers expected students to demonstrate a care for schooling in aesthetic ways, however found it challenging to offer an authentic care to students whom they saw as deficient and outside of accepted social and academic standards. Students, on the other hand, expected teachers to demonstrate care for them as individuals, an “authentic form of caring that emphasizes relations of reciprocity between teachers and students…[in which] caring teachers are seized by their students and energy flows toward their projects and needs” (p. 61). The Mexican American students in her study needed to be cared for as humans before they could progress to caring about their achievement in the school.

Aesthetic caring also formed the backbone for the rigorous Good Teaching Sullivan experienced at North Oakwood. Although it is difficult to frame the MCHS faculty in terms of care, they, too, seem to have a sense that by caring for their subject, by protecting their instructional practice from the ruin of inappropriate and unconcerned students, that they, too, exude a type of aesthetic care. For Valenzuela, this sort of pseudo-care comes to shape and sustain a subtractive logic. That is, the demand that students embrace their teachers’ view of caring is tantamount to requiring their active participation in a process of cultural and linguistic eradication since the curriculum they are asked to value and support is one that dismisses or derogates their language, culture, and community (p. 62).

At Seguin, aesthetic care also hid racist and elitist undertones, just as it does at MCHS.
When Chelsey felt sick, Sullivan offered the Pepto Bismol in her car, handing over her keys without a second thought. While it may seem unwise to provide an often troubled teenager with your car keys, it was both practical and made a statement. Sullivan could not stop class to get the medicine for Chelsey, but was compassionate enough to let her go on her own. She showed her faith in the girl by entrusting her with the errand, treating her like the adult so many students desired to be. Students often left the classroom to plunder her bookshelf in the teacher's office in search of a good book. From fond nicknames\textsuperscript{47} to sharing her lunch,\textsuperscript{48} these small interactions spoke volumes about how much she cared for students.

Her casual conversations with students were a particularly rich source of relationship-in-action, showcasing the warm humor that characterized most of her interactions with them, as well as their apparent desire for her light-hearted and always positive attention. One afternoon, Sullivan and I stayed in the classroom during break. A handful of kids came and went around us, including Chase, a scruffy, dark-haired white male in oversized Fubu clothes. As she answered email on her laptop (and I fleshed out notes about the previous class on mine several seats away), Chase peered over her shoulder to comment, “Don’t you have a life?” It was light, teasing, vying for a reaction.

Her response was sung out immediately. “But you \textit{are} my life, Chase!”

He grinned. “Well, then, can I borrow five dollars?”

She and I both laughed and another student shouted, “You know better that to ask that of somebody on a teacher salary!”

A third student propped himself up on her table, asking, “Why \textit{do} you teach, anyway?”

\textsuperscript{47} Nikki sat in gum and left to scrape it off her pants. When she returned to class, Sullivan cheerily greeted her as “Gumbutt.” Nikki seemed amused; I certainly was.

\textsuperscript{48} See chapter 3.
“Yeah,” added Chase, less serious. “Why ain’t you a hustler? You’d make a good hustler.”

She ignored him with a tolerant smile and reached for the tin foil-wrapped burrito that another student had brought her as a “peace offering” when he was late to class. (“You can’t get mad. I brought you fooood!”) So far that day, her breaks had all been flooded by students and technical matters and she hadn’t eaten since breakfast.

“Heh,” Chase mock-grumbled. “Put that away! No food in classrooms!” (Not that the rule ever stopped students from eating lunch in the classroom.)

She grinned and ate with more gusto. He pretended to storm away. Other students ebbed out of the classroom to find food or friends. Chase sat down to play solitaire until they returned and, after a moment, Sullivan broke off part of the burrito and offered it to him.

“For real?!” he shouted, throwing down the cards and eagerly leaping over desks to get to her. She nodded and they shared the burrito happily.

My observational notes are flooded with small moments like this one, images of Sullivan’s arms around a student while the girl mock-struggled and giggled, shouting “Teacher brutality! Teacher brutality!” Or bantering voices that often ended with a quick, “You know I’m jus’ kiddin’ with you,” as if the student wanted to be absolutely certain that Sullivan felt no offense, protecting the warm and affectionate relationship. In class and out of class, they solicited personal attention and professional attention, asking questions, offering ideas. “Ms. Sullivan, this is my last question,” one of the only Latina females told her once, after calling her over several times. Sullivan was smiling as she returned to her side. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Caring meant paying attention, being sensitive to student wants and needs. It meant looking for them as much as at them, searching for needs when students might not directly request her intervention or her help, being genuinely interested and engrossed in the student’s
welfare. As she left the building each evening, Sullivan looked for lone students who might be lingering around the doors, sitting on the steps waiting for a ride that never came. “Is someone coming for you? Are you good to get home?” Often they had contacted friends, but once in a while, someone would be stranded. Sullivan cheerfully taxied them home, enjoying the opportunity to talk with them during the ride and to get an unobtrusive glimpse of where they lived.

More than simple awareness, teacher caring meant taking action.⁴⁹ Because teachers hold the power in the relationship, because they are the one-caring, they possess the duty to perform in the best interest of the cared-for. When Chase hangs around, Sullivan offered him some burrito. When Kendra had a 30 mile walk ahead of her, Sullivan drove her home. When Tony complained of feeling “like ass,” Sullivan offered ginger ale and saltines. When Tramaine reluctantly confessed that she was hungry, Sullivan took her through the drive-through at Chick-fil-a on the way home. (More than merely providing food or nurture, Sullivan allowed the young woman to accept it with dignity by ordering for herself, as well. Instead of a teacher giving a student a hand-out, they could be two friends grabbing a bite to eat at that moment.) Over and over again, Sullivan acted, and even more, acted with a deep awareness of student needs. Sharing a sandwich did not solve Tramaine’s poverty. A handful of saltines could not end Tony’s substance abuse. But the teacher’s action sent a message. Poverty and poor choices were outside Sullivan’s grasp; however, caring—in one moment, for one person—was very much within her power.

Events that required action were often acts of trust on the part of the student. Sullivan defined trust as “supported risk,” the willingness to step out into new territory with a measure of confidence that failure would not destroy you utterly, that there was always a hand outreached to

⁴⁹ According to Gay (2000), “caring in education has dimensions of emotion, intellect, faith, ethics, action, and accountability” (p. 48).
Yesterday, I saw Nikki standing outside the cafeteria. Apparently, she’d gone to the bathroom and everyone else hadn’t waited to walk into the cafeteria. And she’s standing there beside the door. She’s actually shaking. I ask her what’s wrong.

“I can’t walk into there by myself. Everybody’s already in there.”

I look in and they’re right there, close by the door. “They’re right there.”

“No. I don’t want people to look at me. And if I walk in there by myself, everybody’s attention will be on me.”

“Well, y’know, I need to go get a cup of ice. And believe me, everybody’s attention will be on me, a teacher, walking in. So let’s go.”

And then she was back to her usual brash self, like “All right, Ms. S!” So what is it with that? And it’s so interesting because I’ve had it with her [behavior in class lately], but seeing that dynamic with her was just a reminder.50

Sullivan suspected Nikki’s behavior was the legacy of her fourteen-year battle with her severe skin condition, but only in retrospect. In the moment, all that mattered was that the student had taken a risk, had shared her fear with her. That act of risk-taking deserved a response and Sullivan provided one, able to temporarily repair the current problem as well as show her respect for Nikki’s dilemma.

Most of these students had a long history of needing to protect themselves in school relationships, particularly those with sociocultural identities outside the white, middle class norm of schooling. They understood not-caring and even accepted it as the standard mode of

50 Care shapes her reactions to students, even those who frustrate her most. “Miss Joy” may seem innate to her, but this positive face is only one possible piece of Sullivan’s teaching persona. All is not always light and laughter. The ethic of caring for students, however, reminds her to monitor her emotional responses to situations. Even when someone has tramped on her very last nerve, care reframes her gut-reaction to them and asks that she consider it as more of an indicator of herself in the moment than the student. For example, one student who regularly irritates her in class is Dale, a center point around which a handful of white boys gravitate. He appears frequently in our early interviews and is impossible to overlook in my observational notes. “He’s an idiot,” Sullivan griped irately during one of our interview sessions. But as soon as soon she claimed to be “so over him,” she immediately recanted, pulling away from the blanket criticism that stemmed from her frustration with his behavior. “I’m just in a very unloving space right now,” she admitted, turning the critique back on herself. “And that’s not fair [to him].”

Sullivan struggles with emotional reactions, unable to justify them in view of student realities. As a teacher, her caring complicates the classroom but also creates a resiliency that allows her to continue her work. Dale’s resistance and distraction seem moderate in comparison to his personal story of troubled family life and history of academic failure. While these things do not excuse his sloppy work, disruptive behavior, or spotty engagement, they help Sullivan maintain a level-headed perspective and a willingness to cope with him in the classroom.
operation for schools. Teachers who invited them into relationships, who encouraged them to take supported emotional (and pedagogical) risks, were a rarity. Given this, it is perhaps significant that the African American girls seemed to flock to Sullivan after class hours, basking in her company and soliciting her feedback and advice. In some ways, they were the most direct and open with her, trusting her with very personal decisions and life stories. They shared artifacts from their outside lives, confident that she respected who they were.

When Kendra shared a video of her dance performance at church over spring break with Sullivan and some of the other girls from her classes, Sullivan privately admitted that it was the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen. But she was obviously very proud of it. It was an interpretive dance of a very religiously, gospelly song. It’s a full-packed church. She’s wearing this very interesting costume with black and white panels flowing out on it. She gets up there with this song swelling and she dances to it. And, I mean, feeling it. Showing emotion on her face. Crouching down. When they talk about nailing Jesus to the cross, she’s like (an agonized gesture). It was bizarre [to me]. But obviously a cultural thing I’ve never experienced.

So when it was over, I said: “That’s like nothing I’ve ever seen in church” (in a stunned, somewhat confused voice) and the girls bust out laughing! … And so, what was so neat was—and there’s a couple different neat things about this story, but when I made that comment about church, the girls bust out laughing and said, “Well, do you go to a black church?”

And I’m like “nope.”

And Tyson, who was in there, says, “Where do you go to church?”

“I don’t go to church.”

And like a chorus, everyone together, “You don’t go to CHURCH?!”

And the very next word was Lakethia. “Do you believe in hell?”

And I was like, “Ummmm. I’m not sure. I don’t know.”

“Well, what do you think happens to people when they die?”

The group of students interrogated Sullivan for some time, exploring her belief (or lack thereof) and fitting their own beliefs against them. Often Sullivan had to simply admit that she “didn’t know” how to answer them, an honest and thoughtful reaction that only seemed to encourage them further. It became an exploration of faiths, of racial cultures, of ways people choose to live in the world, of difference and similarity. Just as their lives intrigued her, her differences became
central to their inquisitiveness; she was surprising, amusing, shocking, and desperately in need of recruiting to church. They recognized her open-mindedness and responded in kind.

On another day, Kendra, who was clearly quite devout, was shocked and dismayed to discover that one of her closest friends and classmates was gay. (Neither she nor her teacher realized it at the time, but three of the African American girls were.) Sullivan was an immediate port in the storm. “Ms. Sullivan,” she began, climbing onto the table at the front of the room beside the teacher. “I just had the weirdest conversation of my life. This girl who’s a friend of mine—she’s a student of yours, too—she just told me she was a lesbian.” Her face was drawn into a troubled frown and she shook her head. “And I’m not down with that. That’s disgusting.” She hesitated, struggling. “But she’s my friend. I don’t know what to do.”

Sullivan listened quietly, letting her talk, aware that Kendra simply needed to be heard and was taking a calculated risk that her teacher would listen without critique.

“What should I do?” the girl asked, as much to herself as Sullivan. “I don’t know how to relate to her anymore. Why would she tell me that? I don’t want to know that!”

Afterward, Sullivan related the incident to me. “It was right before class, so I couldn’t have a conversation but promised to write her something.” Previous incidents with students suddenly took on more meaning for her and she suspected which of her students had finally decided to come out to her friends. “Lakethia and Chandra have had a big falling out,” she told me. “They’re best friends. Lakethia actually lives at Chandra’s house. Chandra was hysterical on Monday and sullen yesterday. When I asked if they could talk out their problems, she was like ‘No way.’ She’s very religious.” In contrast, Lakethia seemed fine, if more isolated, still currently reading a book about black gay experience for her independent reading. Sullivan’s concern
extended to all three students, including Lakethia. “I know from my own experience, it’s hard to present [a gay] view when people’s religious views are [so strong]. It’s hard to work around that. They feel, as strongly as I feel about knowing who I am and what I believe, they feel the same exact way. So it’s very hard to negotiate that.” Sullivan wrote Kendra a long letter, encouraging her to remember how she felt about her friend before the news and asking her to think about her friend’s level of risk and hope. “If she was your friend before this news, does it really change that or change the dynamic between you as people?” The letter explored the complexity of Kendra’s reaction, the conflict between her faith and her friend. The girls continued to work out this issue among themselves during the semester.

For Sullivan, a woman of writing and language, care was often expressed through written dialogue with students. Indeed, her little notes and letters were legendary among her students. Sometimes, they were personal, just a folded sticky note that read “I’m worried about you. What’s going on?” Sometimes they had a more pedagogical purpose, such as one directed at a boy whose passing remark about “lazy Mexicans” troubled her. While the guidance counselor led a mandatory information session with the class, Sullivan and the boy silently passed notes back and forth. “I couldn’t help but overhear what you said about Mexicans a minute ago. Do you really think all Mexicans are lazy?” Over the course of the penned silent conversation, she began to tease out attitudes he had picked up from his family, unsupported by real experience. “I

---

51 As a gay woman herself, Sullivan is very aware of the challenges facing students who struggle with a homosexual identity. She is still exploring its juxtaposition with her own identities as a mother, a former wife, a partner in a sometimes trying romantic relationship, and as a teacher. “It’s hard,” she tells me. Although she has not come out to her students, her care for Lakethia, Chandra, and Kendra makes that decision a more weighty one in her mind. “If I ever did want to change anything about my students, like a lifelong lesson forever,” she says, “this would be the one thing I could do. Now, I can’t do it. I’m not saying I will or I can, I’m just saying it would be life-changing, more than anything else I’ve ever done with them.”
don’t know if I changed his mind about anything [in that conversation],” she told me, but at least she felt she honestly engaged the student about his attitudes.52

These small acts of engagement allowed students to feel seen, heard, and even individually provoked to be more than they have been. Her use of note and letter writing also gave them easy, immediate, and private access to her, a personal move that invited them to ask questions and explore who she was in response. It respected them as thinkers, as writers, and as people with ideas to share. And they often engaged with her in this way, trusting that they could do so without being blamed for their responses. One such conversation began with a small note of concern about Tony, who had looked extremely ill for a few days. He responded in large, sprawling block letters:

**I CAN CALL HOME. BUT NOBODY WILL PICK UP. I HAVE NO RIDE UNTIL AFTER SCHOOL. I DON’T NEED MEDICAL ATTENTION EITHER. I HAD A LOT OF STUFF HAPPEN LAST NIGHT SO I DRANK TOO MUCH AND THAT IS WHY I AM NOT FEELING WELL TODAY. I APPRECIATE YOUR CONCERN. I REALLY WILL BE OKAY, THOUGH. I WILL DRINK MORE WATER AND MAKE IT THROUGH THE LAST HALF OF CLASS.**

In the middle of teaching, Sullivan still found time to write him back. She circled the bit about drinking and passed the folded sheet of notebook paper back to him. Her neat script filled several lines, its tone concerned yet forceful:

**But my point is that you aren’t doing well. This should not be happening. Replacing one set of avoidance mechanisms or substances with another is not a fix at all. Are you talking to somebody professionally who knows your background?**

Tony returned more spiky black print:

**YES, I AM MEETING WITH SOMEBODY EVERY FRIDAY. HE RECOMMENDED THE REHAB FOR ME. AND I SEE THIS OTHER GUY EVERY SUNDAY…I UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE SAYING AND I AGREE WITH SOME OF IT. I, TOO, THINK THAT I HAVE BEEN DRINKING**

---

52 I have a share of these dialogic notes in my data, too, little scraps in which she poses questions about things she’s seeing that day, bits of information she doesn’t want me to miss, etc. The students are not the only ones who benefit from these samples of written dialogic relationship.
TOO MUCH AND FOR THE WRONG REASONS. FOR SOME REASON I ENJOY THE SELF-DEPRECIATION. IT IS A COMFORT ZONE AND ALTHOUGH DAMAGING, IT IS FAMILIAR TERRITORY THAT I GUESS I AM NOT READY TO LEAVE.

While engaging students about semi-colons and rhetorical strategies in writing, Sullivan also created a space to express concern for a struggling student and, in response, learned a few things about Tony, his life, his fears, and his future intentions. “The reason I went to this school was because of this very idea,” she told me. “I know all of the kids and can take responsibility for every kid. There’s just no excuse. With 38 kids, there’s no excuse.” In Sullivan’s mind, caring relationships were simply her “responsibility” as a teacher.

Sullivan’s ethic of caring created a classroom where students felt heard and valued. In anonymous surveys, students wrote repeatedly about being invited and encouraged to speak. “Everyone has a chance to voice their thoughts, interact … and improve,” wrote one student. “I enjoy the freedom—verbally, especially,” wrote another. “There are no ‘taboo’ subjects here, no restriction of the tongue, no thought or idea looked down upon.” Over and over, their reviews echoed this confident access to voice in the presence of a caring teacher. “All opinions are valuable.” One of the few Latinas in the class wrote about her work to improve her English in past classes:

I had very good teachers in the past but not as good as Ms. Sullivan. I never felt I was part of the class with them . . . I felt akward (sic). I’ve always been quiet and shy, but Ms. Sullivan made me talk and participate in her class without me feeling bad. My other teachers didn’t do that.

Because she cared for them, Sullivan was able to see “whole students”—young adults with complex lives and identities and needs. She also saw academic potential where others did

---

53 “If dialogue is to occur in schools,” writes Noddings (1984), “it must be legitimate to discuss whatever is of intellectual interest to the students who are invited into dialogue. God, sex, killing, loving, fear, hope, and hate must all be open to discussion . . . . The attempt to separate that which may be spoken into legitimate domains strengthens those who would control our children and wrench them away from lives of attachment and caring” (p. 183). Open dialogue is itself a form of nurturance.
not, sometimes even the students themselves. My interview transcripts were filled with descriptions of students that stood in stark contrast to even the students’ own performances of identity. For example, Clarence, a huge black male, intimidating, a drug-dealer, became “a very sweet kid and a genius at writing lyrics, gentle-tempered and very, very smart.” Not only did her understandings of kids run contrary to those of her colleagues, but also to some of the students themselves. Because Chad “acts like a total loon” some days, his classmates established him as the clowny, distracted, off-target guy, a guise that Sullivan believed to be only one part of his real identity. “He has very insightful things to say,” she pointed out, “but one would never be able to get to those because the minute he opens his mouth everybody in class expects him to be Chad. It wouldn’t matter if he said the most brilliant thing on the planet. They couldn’t hear it.” Even from my limited work with Chad one-on-one, I was convinced that he had absorbed this scatter-brained identity, believed and performed his own press much of the time. Sullivan leapt to praise him when he was on target, trying to prove to both the class and to Chad himself that he was capable of intelligent work. “Woo! Chad, you are hot today! That’s such a complex idea!”

The process of developing caring relations with students is an ever-evolving one. Because student selves are always fluid, changing rapidly and without warning like ocean squalls, Sullivan must continually re-invite them into her care with affection and humor, praise and thoughtful dialogue, and regular action that signals her sincere wish to know, respect, and improve their lives. It is a major undertaking, consuming time and energy and emotion, but one that has become integral to her new way of being in classrooms.

“Not Enough”:
Reciprocity in Caring Teacher-Student Relationships

There is an old teacher adage that claims “If all of your students like you, you’re not doing your job.” It was something Sullivan and I talked about more than once over the months.
we spent together for this project. From Tony to Lakethia, all of her students liked her, felt
connected to her, respected her as teacher and as person. They regularly went out of their way to
tell me how “gooooood” she really was and their class reviews were filled with nothing but
praise. (Even the few flecks of critique were couched in a language of hope, certain that Sullivan
could provide whatever they needed once she knew what they wanted. “I wish I could spend
more time improving my writing.” It was a suggestion, waiting to be heard.) They trusted her to
care for them and shared their fondness for her in jokes and stories, shy smiles and exuberant
hugs. “I feel such warmth,” she said. It would be hard not to.

Despite feeling deeply moved by their loyalty and very pleased with the strong sense of
rapport inside and outside the classroom, Sullivan found herself increasingly disturbed by the
mixed academic performance of these fond and cared-for students. For every student who was
truly excelling, for every success story, there seemed to be an equal number whose achievement
was weak, at best. For every Trina, there was a Nikki. For every Jack, there was a Dale. High
and low achievement crossed racial, gendered, and classed boundaries, with only a few outright
failures but with many who staunchly refused to approach their potential. She saw it when Nikki
“zoned” during a challenging lesson, verbally present but mentally not trying to understand. She
saw it when Omar closed his eyes during film clips, disengaging from what she needed him to
see. She saw it when Martin used his laptop to surf and download music instead of work on his
essay and when Chelsey could not even remember what they studied the previous week.

Their future as community college students loomed large in her mind. “This is their last
time in [high school] English,” she worried. Having taken a semester of English III and a
semester of English IV, their next year would no longer include her. Instead, they would be
asked to test into HCC freshman writing classes (Developmental English). In the previous
semester, very few of those who attempted the test actually succeeded. The test asks detailed comprehension questions about disconnected reading passages. But in order to comprehend, “you have to care,” Sullivan sighed. “The test requires that you sit for two or three hours and care.” Such tests guard the gates to a future as an HCC student, just as the SAT, ACT, and other requirements of grade point average guard other higher education institutions. The transition between high school student and middle college/community college student may still be denied to these students. (Indeed, at the end of the year, several students were “re-assigned” back to their representative high schools, in part because MCHS felt it could not serve them—including Nikki, Marlo, and Vanessa. The documentation cited absences as the reason. It was perhaps significant that most students dropped or failed their HCC classes in the spring semester. Sullivan attributed the problem to a lack of support from MCHS, not to any inability in the students.) Although they practiced reading texts that mirror the difficulty of those on the test, Sullivan always presented them within the logical context of a larger unit. The HCC test does not do so and Sullivan feared very few of them would pass it.

Despite her efforts at caring relationships with students, about half of the students continued to resist learning the strange norms of the community college. They continued not to

54 Labaree (1997) points out that the possibility of failure is built in to schooling; the very nature of grades and standards mean that some students are expected to fail or, in this case, be denied a transition that is at the very heart of the Middle College educational process. Labaree’s interest is in the promotion strategies, which in U.S. education are based both on meritocratic and social (age) criteria. Although students at MCHS are not barred from classes for age reasons, their potential is still measured based on “individual demonstrations of academic competence at a given level . . . which therefore makes nonpromotion a distinct possibility that frequently occurs” (p. 54). Like the system for graded schools, the classification of students by levels of academic competence has historically been a “mechanism for acquiring [and restricting] social advantage” (p. 59). Even the community college, whose mission purports to be more egalitarian and vocational than other types of colleges (and whose status is resulting low), maintains such prerequisite guards on classes, including the mandatory Developmental English.

55 Jack, Chase, and Jesse also returned to their former high schools, by choice.

56 Many other middle and early colleges have support courses, similar to those offered by the AVID program, in recognition that the student they serve has never experienced education on a level community colleges will demand. In an effort to scaffold them into such classes successfully, they require support classes which help students conceptually and functionally with this new educational world.
care about English itself. No amount of authentic care from Sullivan could provide them with the currency to succeed when success was measured exclusively in aesthetic care. Perhaps the most glaring case was Ebony, the hopeful actress who may possess the performative talent to make it, but whose shaky reading skills will inevitably injure her during auditions and rehearsals. Because it encouraged her and kept her focused, Sullivan often allowed her to read aloud to the class, but acknowledged that the experience was sometimes grating for her and the other students. Ebony stumbled, backtracked, read slowly and stopped often to ask for clarification. She was remarkably comfortable doing so and, inevitably, her reading will improve over time and practice. But for this semester, Sullivan watched the clock and contrived ways to take over the role (or share it to another student) occasionally. What Ebony wanted, and perhaps needed, conflicted with the needs of the class as a functioning unit, something Ebony herself did not see but which her teacher dealt with on a daily basis.57

Sullivan made such decisions carefully, aware that Ebony had a history of poor success in school and determined to capitalize on her new-found desire to participate by performing. Even in Sullivan’s class, Ebony had not always been this way. I observed during her first few days in class. A mid-year transfer student, she wandered into the class with an icy expression, sitting in a seat and immediately burying her head in her arms. During her first class, she was sullen, borderline hostile, and refused to participate in any activities. Sullivan repeatedly paused to speak quietly to her, crouching beside her, gently but firmly enforcing the class “no sleeping” rule. Eventually, as members of the class took turns reading short segments of a speech aloud, Ebony was asked to read. After her antagonistic silence, her voice was surprising—a low

57 Noddings (1984) points out that “conflict arises when our engrossment is divided, and several cared-fors demand incompatible decisions from us. Another sort of conflict occurs when what the cared-for wants is not what we think if best for him” (p. 18). Both of these conflicts exist in Sullivan’s relationship with Ebony and, as Noddings predicted, the relationship becomes increasingly afflicted with guilt on Sullivan’s part.
contralto, rich, strong, and firm, even though several of the words in the text were unfamiliar to her. Sullivan reacted immediately: “You’re a strong reader! I like your voice.”

The next day, Ebony volunteered her thoughts about a passage by Martin Luther King, Jr., and earned another bit of praise for her “critical mind” and a high five from another student (Nikki). By the end of the third class, she was a regular participant, sitting close to Sullivan when she could, a vivacious, eager voice in class discussions, confident and even demanding in the classroom. She seemed to live for discussions, seminars, and opportunities to read aloud. She found a distinct pride in these things, and Sullivan worked to protect that fragile pride.

Ebony spent every morning hanging around the teachers’ offices with Sullivan, volunteering to copy papers, staple, organize, and generally help out. After spring break, she had a long monologue about how deeply she missed Sullivan and how thrilled she was to be back at school. Like Chandra, she often solicited hugs and small words of praise. She stopped in during breaks and talked non-stop about random things: her ruptured appendix from last summer, her aspirations in theatre, and most significantly, her good intentions to not fall asleep in class again. “Like yesterday. That was bad.” When Sullivan was directly engaged in instruction, leading interesting discussions that required free-thought, Ebony was every inch a star student, her engagement and energy palpable in the classroom. When discussions required in-depth knowledge of a text or the class turned to silent reading or individual seat work, Ebony’s focus waned. She would try to doze until Sullivan woke her, fidgeted and whispered to anyone nearby, wrote notes to Omar while proclaiming “What notes? I’m totally with ya, Ms. S!,” or even turned in a quiz completely blank with no sign of effort. When I asked her about her these

---

58 Ebony’s playful verbalizations, that are often as much story as excuse, seem to draw from the communication patterns Heath (1983) notes in *Ways with Words* among the children of the Trackton community. When accused of misbehavior, children could either quietly accept the impending scolding or could “respond verbally with a story or some other type of verbal rejoinder clever enough to draw the adult’s attention away from their misdeeds” (p. 110). On more than one occasion, Heath saw children sidle out of activities they did not want to do by impressing adults with their verbal adroitness.
behaviors one day after school, she told me “That’s not the way I communicate best. I have it up here,” pointing to her temple, “I really do. But I don’t put stuff on paper well.”

Recently, she wrote Sullivan a letter: “Miss Sullavan (sic) I’m going to start doing all my work and not going to sleep and make up all my work no ifs ands or buts about it. Truly yours, Ebony.” Sullivan told her “that’s great,” gave her a supportive hug, but continued to wait for any change in her in-class performance.

Noddings (1984) and Valenzuela (1999) define caring relationships as reciprocal.59 “When the cared-for individual responds by demonstrating a willingness to reveal his/her individual self, the reciprocal relation is complete” (p. 21). Sullivan certainly felt that Ebony engaged in the relationship and that she shared her self in return. However, this kind of “rapport is not enough,” she insisted. For her, there was a penultimate goal that had only partially been reached. For her, real reciprocity in a teacher-student relationship was not warmth, affection, trust, or even emotional risk-taking alone—it was classroom performance that led to improved achievement. Because the system of school success is based on an aesthetic vision of care, Sullivan felt that her relationships based on authentic care invariably fell short in their hope to create academic capital. Instead, authentic care must somehow be transformed, transitioned back to an aesthetic form of care of valued by the system. In the end, a truly reciprocal relationship should, in her mind, lead students back to the performance that characterizes aesthetic care.

When a workshop on un/successful schools pinpointed one of the fallacies of supposedly “caring” relationships with students, Sullivan found herself wondering if she had fallen into a similar trap.

59 Noddings (1984) writes:
Clearly, the cared-for depends upon the one-caring. But the one caring is also oddly dependent upon the cared-for. If the demands of the cared-for become too great or if they are delivered ungraciously, the one-caring may become resentful and, pushed hard enough, may withdraw her caring. Each of us is dependent upon the other in caring and moral relationships. (p. 48)
He talked about the Chicago Cubs type of school, meaning, “We don’t care if we win a game, we just want you to feel loved.” I think this is something I need to start monitoring in myself, which is—okay, I have established a very good rapport with these students. I know it’s key and I’m not underplaying that. But learning to balance that with what used to be a huge strength of mine—when this wasn’t a huge strength—a very rigorous content and expectation. I think to be totally honest with you that I kinda have tilted a little bit toward this because I knew, or I saw how needy people were and I didn’t know what else to do to reach them. Now I need to start stepping back to make sure they’re really stretched . . . . I can have all the relationships I want, but if Ebony can’t learn vocabulary words, if she will not open a book, then it doesn’t mean shit. I’d rather have—well, I wouldn’t rather have because I can’t do it—but for her, I’d rather have . . .

She trailed off, unable to completely reject the primacy of the caring teacher-student relationship she had established, but still clearly searching a way to secure Ebony’s best interests. Facing the seeming “failure” of a caring relationship, Sullivan reflected the problem back onto herself. If Ebony was not performing, then clearly Sullivan must not be performing either. She recognized the need for caring to include high expectations and feared that perhaps she had somehow slipped in her academic demands. Yet, she continued to believe Ebony was capable, continued to craft curriculum that was both doable and challenging. Even while recognizing that most of her students had spent eleven years in low-track classes, establishing anti-critical, worksheet mentalities, she failed to see or celebrate the success of engaging Ebony’s heart and mind for even part of the time. Her high expectations temporarily blinded her to this student’s history and situation, paving the way for a biting self-critique and new levels of frustration as a teacher.

“What kind of relationship is that? Be my mom or be my friend, but don’t be my teacher?”

It is the teacher who asks for supported risk and then blames herself when a cared-for student remains unable to take that risk.61 For Ebony, the risk of putting “stuff on paper” is far

60 This reminds me of her temporary self-critique for not failing Clarence, in chapter 3.

61 Noddings (1984) writes that “if the cared-for does not complete my caring by receiving and acknowledging it, I may examine myself and ask, ‘Do I really care?’” (p. 37). She proffers two possible results from such questioning: 1) that the one-caring realizes that they do truly care and accepts that “the attempt to care will nonetheless go on” despite the lack of reciprocity, or 2) that the one-caring realizes that they do not care and must choose to deny the realization, to continue to perform caringly without actual care, or to cease caring behavior entirely. For Sullivan, the first possibility means abandoning Ebony to her own lackadaisical attitudes, since clearly continuing with her
greater than the risk of reading or talking in class. She believes she doesn’t do that “well” and, additionally, has eleven years of schooling experiences that confirms her belief. This is a risk that is simply not worth it; it does not deliver results. I tend to see Ebony as a child who fears failure, and as such, refuses to try. If she makes an effort and does not succeed, the fault will lay heavily on her own shoulders, possibly marring her own tentative confidence. In the past, she has been able to affix blame in part on teachers who did not care and classes that she “HATED point blank,” but Sullivan is different—she is “interesting,” and “fun,” and “not uptight” like her previous teachers. She is “my favorite teacher ever” and Ebony can find nothing to critique or dislike about her experience in English. She doesn’t even have suggestions for things she might enjoy doing in class, encouraging Sullivan simply do continue doing what she is doing. To Ebony, failure in such an environment must rest squarely on her own self. So she chooses simply to avoid trying. At least if she does not try, she can excuse poor grades as behavioral and not evidence of a failure within herself. Ebony does indeed ask for Sullivan to be motherly and friendly, but she also never forgets that she is primarily her teacher.

When I shared my theory with Sullivan, she agreed to the possibility. “They do need a safety net. They need to know failing is fine,” she told me, but then once again turned a critical eye on herself. “I wish I had communicated that better. I do feel like I communicate this to some people; I don’t know why not to her.”

Sullivan continued to hope these relationships would inspire academic and intellectual risk in the classroom, an aesthetic care built on the spine of her genuine concern for them. Students might still be trying to decide how much of themselves they could risk, trying out new “student” identities in fits and starts, testing the limits of this unique teacher-student relationship.

---

current classroom approaches has not worked for this particular student; and the second possibility (the cessation of care) is not something she feels able to do either as a human or a teacher.
they seemed to enjoy so much. For some of them, however, their relationship with Sullivan invited a level of social and emotional risk, but still allowed them to avoid the transition to academic performance. These were kids who understood what it meant to lose care, to survive in uncaring relationships with family and with schools. They could not comprehend how much Sullivan needed to have care returned\textsuperscript{62} not just in warmth and hugs, but in academic interest. Academic trust did not come easily. And it was academic trust that Sullivan needed to truly feel reciprocity in these relationships.

* * * *

Even in her personal relationships outside of the classroom, Sullivan recognized that she entered care-based relation with an “all or nothing” attitude. It was one of the defining characteristics of her personality, a core element of identity that stretched across relationships with her children, her partner, her friends, and even her relationship with me as friend-colleague-researcher. She explained:

I see trust as meaning risk. Which it is, but it [actually] means supported risk, when you think about life in general. I think part of my problem in the world is the all-or-nothing idea of trust. That trust means I open myself to you one hundred percent, which is the hugest risk in the entire world. And then when you choose—for whatever your own reasons are—to not come through on that... (She stops speaking for a moment, regrouping.) Whereas what it needs to be, in the real world and because we’re all separate human beings, is supported risk. It has to be “I open myself to you, \textit{but—}” But there’s no “but” for me. There never is.

\textsuperscript{62} Teacher-student relationships, like parent-child relationships, are inherently asymmetrical and unequal. “The child may like, even love, the parent or teacher, but he is incapable of the motivational displacement of caring and, usually, incapable of perceiving or understanding what the parent or teacher wants for herself”(Noddings, 1984, p. 70). In fact, if the student attempted to discover a teacher’s motives, he/she might become so distracted from learning as to negate the impact of the caring relationship itself. Hence, the problem of students trying to provide “what the teacher wants” instead of engaging in genuine learning (p. 71).
This “no buts,” all-or-nothing openness, this care without room for self-protection or disclaimers or caveats, also infused her identity in the classroom. It undergirded her instinctive self-critique, provided fodder for her to question the effectiveness of her new “way of being” with students.

You know how in life it’s so much easier, whether it’s your work life or your relationship or whatever, to be closed and not invested. In every realm of your life, it’s so much safer. Part of me thinks that part of my problem in this school is that I’m really invested in the kids . . . It hurts and I don’t want to keep doing it. Whereas I think that I could go to a—back to a safe place and not be as invested. But that wouldn’t satisfy me either.

Sullivan’s all-or-nothing care for her students was her way of taking emotional and professional risks, and it put her in a place of “hurt” as her investment in their well-being opened her to a sense of failure. In this poignant statement, multiple voices and selves emerged and vanished in the space of a few words. Her pain was recognized as a “problem,” one that could perhaps be solved simply by not teaching kids who were so needy. But that solution crashed discordantly into everything she now believed about herself, about kids, about teaching. It grated against the culturally-aware, caring teaching self she had spent years creating and revising. I could hear her momentarily slide toward the simpler time of Good Teaching, which sometimes even felt like a “safe place” emotionally. But almost simultaneously she realized that she could never return to that place, never be blindly “satisfied” again. The combined dissatisfaction in her old self and distress in her new self warred together, sparked by those students who reciprocated her love but could not push themselves as her students.

Well, if I taught at [schools like North], I would at least know what to do for those kids. And here, I don’t know and it’s uncomfortable. I know how to love ‘em. I know how to make them happy. I know how to provide them with mitigating circumstances for the rest of their school day. But I don’t have a clear sense of what they need, or what they’re going to do in life. Whereas North, I know. And I would know how to teach to that.
Although she rejected her former ways of relating to students, she cannot help but second guess herself, looking back at her previous success with “those kids” at North—white, often privileged, traditional “honors” students. Students who did not demand love and joy as part of their education. Students who did not overtly need a caring adult to provide shelter from the hostile schooling environment that made up most of their day. She felt that she “knows” how to teach those students well and all-too-readily faulted herself for not demanding the same performance from her current students. “They’re happy. But happy’s—that’s not enough for me,” she told me.

This was a refrain that appeared with increasing frequency in our conversations, a point of anxiety and frustration that threatened her long-term work towards redefining the Good Teacher.

Reciprocity “contributes to the maintenance of the relation and serves to prevent the caring from turning back on the one-caring in the form of anguish and concern for self” (Noddings, 1984, p. 74). Certainly Sullivan’s anguish is real and she searches her experience and her ideology for solutions, but her motivation continues to be toward Ebony and other students rather than in protection of self.

For Noddings (1984), the one-caring teacher recognizes the students have the free will to choose to learn as they please, to make his/her own choices and create his/her own significance.

This recognition does not reduce either the teacher’s power or her responsibility. As we saw in our earlier discussion of the cared-for, the teacher may indeed coerce the student into choosing against himself. He may be led to diminish his ethical ideal in the pursuit of achievement goals. The teacher’s power is, thus, awesome. (p. 176)

Sullivan searches for this “awesome” power to influence students toward achievement goals, refusing to accept that capable students will choose to perform otherwise. It is a mark of high expectation, yet it may overlook student will and the equally powerful context that often creates it.

Sullivan’s fears echo scholars who explore caring in education. Gay (2000) writes, “There is much more to interpersonal caring than teachers merely exhibiting feelings of kindness, gentleness, and benevolence toward students, or expressing some generalized sentiments of concern. In fact, these attitudes without concomitant competence-producing actions constitute a form of academic neglect” (p. 48). However, as the next chapter will show, Sullivan’s active, caring relationships do not merely seek for students to be happy, but provide the foundation for serious and challenging, if not perfect, pedagogy. It is an aspect of her own situation that Sullivan has difficulty seeing in the face of her own worries about student futures.

Noddings (1984) asks, “Where is the teacher to get the strength to go on giving except from the student?”
Coda: The Cost of Care

In a school that defined itself for mythic Better Students, 40 teenagers strove to remain themselves, in all of their complex, tragic, exultant identities. Alone among the faculty, Sullivan offered them a chance at a caring teacher-student relationship, willing to see them as they were, to open real dialogue with them, and to act in their behalf. But although every student seemed appreciative of her kindness, caring did not always translate neatly into academic achievement. Whereas Noddings (1984) argues that a caring relationship must be reciprocal, Sullivan found that the affection and “warmth” of students was not enough to sustain her professionally. For her as teacher, the desired and needed result of a caring relationship was not merely rapport, but genuine performance—an explicit transition from authentic care back to aesthetic care, the currency of school success. For some students, particularly for several of the African American girls, the equation worked beautifully, in line with Valenzuela (1999), Ladson-Billings (1994) and other accounts of caring teachers. She cared for them and they discovered themselves capable of extraordinary academic performance. For others, however, neither a caring relationship nor the unique, non-traditional, exploratory pedagogy that Sullivan provided could motivate academic risk.

Because she instinctively understood caring as an “all or nothing” effort, despite a technical awareness that told her otherwise, Sullivan found it difficult to sustain her own faith in her teaching identity in the face of student failure. Unlike Ebony, who enthusiastically avoided the intellectual risk of relationships, Sullivan suffered from both the emotional and professional risk of caring for students. The supposed “failure” of caring relationships, in her mind, threw her personal agency and efficacy into shadow. She questioned her ability with increasing frequency, her confidence in her new teaching self shaken.
Scholars agree that caring for students is more than simple affection and fellow-feeling; it is a complex mixture of “tough love,” “warm demanding,” belief in potential, and deliberate action. But in spite of many stories in the literature of students who reach for their potential in such an environment, Sullivan was burdened by those who did not. Nevertheless, she continued to build her pedagogy on the basis of care, hoping that the combination of meaningful relationships and meaningful instruction\(^{67}\) would eventually construct a bridge over which students could begin to achieve.

---

\(^{67}\) Her efforts mirror G. W. Noblit’s view of caring in classrooms—care as both essential and yet not comprehensive, as something both required and denied by schooling and society itself:

> I was once asked if caring was everything for a teacher. My answer was teaching is too complex to ever hope for a single concept to encompass all. Caring is essential, but society demands a lot. So caring must be coupled with other things—and these may deny caring itself. This does not denigrate caring—but points out that our society is not ultimately about morality, but about instrumentality. (personal communication, June 21, 2006)
Sullivan’s intention to re-create herself and her classroom in ways that better served students of color brought her to MCHS, but the school itself failed to share her enthusiasm and even seemed to work against her. Nevertheless, each day she stepped into room 64 and let the heavy door swing closed behind her, she continued enact, explore, and re-vision a new pedagogy—a pedagogy for “whole students,” founded on a caring relationship between teacher and students. Isolated among her teaching peers but finding strength and engagement in the students themselves, she strove to actively discard the monolithic Good Teacher of her past in favor of a new and somewhat tentative teaching self and teaching practice, always in flux, redefined in reflective planning and the pedagogical moment, created with and for the specific teenagers who met her there in the fluorescent, cinder-block, bright white tile space. For her, a different and hopefully better pedagogy might exist at the crux where “whole” and cared-for students met the discipline of English Language Arts and, just as she re-visioned teacher-student relationships, she found herself also renegotiating her relationship to classroom knowledge, style, and intended outcome.

This chapter provides a window on the complexities of a practice “in process.” In many ways it is indeterminate and imperfect yet it searches for transformative possibility, only perhaps to lose itself along the way.
Inside Room 64: A Portrait

Sullivan perches on the edge of one of the many empty desks, her feet resting on the grey plastic seat, the current handout half-folded in one gesturing hand. The subdued chaos of the classroom surrounds her, students tossing book bags to the floor before sliding into desks, glancing at the free-writing assignment, asking questions of each other, or trying to finish their pre-class conversations about stereo speakers, lunchtime burritos, and events in other classes. Their voices create a steady hum, punctuated by occasional barks of laughter or half-serious commentary about the work. “Should I just write ‘I’m confused?’ on my paper?” Tyson grouses, giving the teacher an arch look and twisting in her seat to look at her. “Why you want to know how we feel about this?”

“I don’t,” Sullivan replies with a bright smile. “I’m asking how Macbeth feels about the events that just happened to him.”

Tyson laughs, as if at herself for misreading the directions. She thrashes the half-sheet of paper in the air a few times, and begins to write, making occasional side comments to other students beside her.

“Dale, did you notice anything about where people are sitting?” Today, the vast college classroom is arranged in two rows, desks facing each other with a wide aisle between them. Dale, a stocky white boy in a black leather jacket, has settled in one of the many excess desks pushed to the sides of the classroom, conveniently ignoring the waiting assignment. “Here you go, buddy,” Sullivan sings out to him, pointing to a desk at the end of an aisle. “I know you were on your way.” He shakes his head and moves, making a passing attempt to engage her in a conversation about C-SPAN last night. She steers him toward his desk with a light touch on the arm and a shooing gesture.
The low rumble of voices continues. Although most of the class is actively writing, several of the African American girls continue to alternate written lines with verbal commentary, short bursts of song, muttered expressions. With pointedly raised eyebrows, Sullivan tells them, “I wonder you’re still talking. Nobody marks you.” It’s a line from another play, an insult pulled from yesterday’s Shakespearean insults language activity.

The rejoinder comes quickly. “What?! Well, you’re a – you’re a slug licker!” Lakethia, a slim black girl in a vivid rainbow t-shirt, tosses the line out loudly, challengingly, grinning as she tries to recall other insults68 to add to this one. Sullivan laughs, delighted, nodding in appreciation.

From my position atop another desk behind the rows, I lean over to read the assignment sheet, a half piece of paper with “Interior Monologue: Getting Inside Macbeth’s Head” typed in large, casual letters at the top. It asks them to imagine themselves as Macbeth at the end of scene four, shortly after the witches pronounced his coming fortune to be king and his first bit of evidence that the prophesy might come true. “What is he thinking about, worried about, happy about, fearful about, questioning, considering?” It urges them to return to the text if they need a refresher about the material covered in the previous class. It is both a simple review activity and a chance to explore the emotional content of the play, perhaps to empathize or remember times when they had similar feelings. It gets them focused and active at the same time, a bid for engagement.

While the students write and chatter, the teacher hops ups and weaves her way around the desks. As she moves, sudden questions arise and she’s called from one desk to another, as if

68 Yesterday’s mix-and-match Shakespearean insult fest was boisterous and fun, with students cramming together insulting words and phrases from the plays, asking questions about their meaning because they genuinely wanted to know what they were saying to each other. “Thou surly clay-brained strumpet! What’s a strumpet?” Amusingly, the hurled taunts were also peppered with occasional shouts of “Yeah, well, yo mama!”
her proximity reminds them they can solicit assistance, feedback, and praise, all of which she liberally offers. When the noise level begins to escalate, she pulls the class together by asking for volunteers to present their monologues. There are no shortages of students interested in sharing.

Kendra’s mini-monologue is highly detailed although she had not opened the text, using memory only. She reads with confidence, pausing to get the teacher to pronounce a difficult character name, then charging onward. “What amazing recall,” Sullivan says as she finishes, “all those specifics from the play! Love it!”

Cliff, a white male who tries to balance his inner coolness with regular (but not perfect) effort in his classes, jumps in next, his paragraph exploring the balance between curiosity and terror that he thinks Macbeth might have been feeling. “Awesome, Cliff. Perfect. Really getting into how strange the situation is and yet how much fear he might be feeling,” comes the teacher’s response. Cliff nods a ‘you’re welcome’ to her. She has something affirming to say about each volunteer’s writing, often able to use it to clarify a plot point she wants to make certain they remember before moving on. They provide her with the material and the core ideas; she spins them into classroom knowledge.69

Abby, a thin, shy white girl, rushes through hers so fast that Kendra critiques her for reading as if it was one long run-on sentence. “But I got you, though,” she adds hurriedly to take the sting from her comment, reaching her hand toward Abby across the aisle. “That was good.” Although tensions exist between students, particularly in first and second periods, there is still a sense of appropriate and acceptable interpersonal behavior, modeled by Sullivan in every interaction. Although Kendra offers a valid critique, a real suggestion for Abby to improve her

69 Cochran-Smith (2004) writes that a “social justice pedagogy rejects transmission models of teaching and instead assumes that knowledge is socially constructed and that curriculum is co-constructed by teachers and students” (p. 69). One of Sullivan’s particular strengths is her ability to reap knowledge out of the scattered input offered by students. She seems to find merit in even the most struggling comment.
in-class reading, she also is able to perceive how her words might be offensive to someone less outgoing. She wants to encourage her classmate at the same time, making sure she feels heard and understood.

Sullivan builds on that instinct. “But if you think about it, something going on in someone’s head is probably going to be stream-of-consciousness, don’t you think?”

Kendra nods but seems slightly non-committal. “What were we reading when we did that kind of writing?”

“Stream-of-consciousness?” Sullivan thinks a moment. “Catcher in the Rye. Remember you wrote that story about—” And she describes one of Kendra’s creative writing pieces from last semester. The girl nods more agreeably, pleased to be remembered and now surer that she understands what Sullivan meant in tagging Abby’s breathless reading as possibly stream-of-consciousness.

There is a strong sense of the past here in this classroom—not only in the review of previous work, but also in the history that this teacher shares with each individual student and with the group as a whole. A few remember her from North Oakwood. Almost all of them took English III with her during the fall. Everyone seems comfortable here, with her. The antagonisms and idle boredom that inflect their other classes are absent. They like her, their trust a palpable force in the room. And her interest in and affection for them is equally obvious. It may not prevent Dale and his buddy Martin from trying to share stereo component magazines instead of completing their assignments, but it dictates her response to their transgressions. These are the real, “whole students” that she came in search of—complete with their own agendas, baggage, and habitual school behaviors.

Deftly, Sullivan returns to the current lesson by pointing out the strengths of Abby’s take, while the girl ducks her head and tries to avoid everyone’s eyes. Her slight smile is still
visible beneath the sweep of long, blonde hair. “I love what you said about Banquo’s warning. How he’s just hearing what he wants and trying to get over his conscience.” Sullivan reminds them of particular thematic lines read yesterday, quoting them from memory with great expression and making sure their meaning is clear by returning to paraphrase Abby’s freewrite once again.

Lakethia reads next, her strong voice adding verve and spirit. “Wow,” she reads from her paragraph, presenting a very urban Macbeth who speaks with Lakethia’s own dialect and slang. “Oh, snap! I am the stuff right now. Three witches tell me I’m about to blow up!”

“Yes!” cries Sullivan, seemingly in love with each student’s rendition. “And you’re so right. He’s going to use a phrase today in what we read that describes one of his qualities as ‘vaulting ambition.’ And I loved how you said ‘I’m gonna blow up’ because it makes a picture in my mind to help me understand what ‘vaulting’ means.” Again building on student-offered language, she talks with them about possible differences between healthy ambition and ambition that goes beyond all reason, Macbeth’s “vaulting ambition.”

I watch the class as she talks energetically, moving up and down the aisle, physically and vocally magnetic. Almost every eye follows her, and she looks directly at them as she speaks, addressing them, inviting them into her words and ideas. While no one seems concerned about taking notes, there are nods and comments that indicate they understand. Even Dale joins in. So much of what happens here is in dialogue, student-to-student, teacher-to-student, student-to-teacher, played out based on their momentary interest. It is a dance led by a teacher deeply

---

70 “Kids’ emotions and reactions to a text are valuable,” Sullivan pointed out to me during one interview. “And that’s a first step, but if that’s where it stops…” She trailed off significantly. Sullivan sees value in student thought but also accepts her own position as an expert learner, bringing worthwhile knowledge to the table alongside that of her students. She avoids Appleman’s (2000) critique of English teachers who allow simple student response (or navel-gazing) to substitute for critical thought, a common outcome of teachers’ interpretation of Rosenblatt’s (1968) reader response theories.
knowledgeable about the specific subject and myriad connected subjects that might provide the class a handhold in the foreign and intimidating sixteenth century drama.

By the end of the previous class, their general consensus had been that although Shakespeare was moderately readable and maybe even important in English classes, he remained a dated writer who wrote with deliberate obscurity and without obvious purpose. They agreed to read him, but did not have to respect or even enjoy him. Today, Sullivan hopes to revisit and perhaps shake up that conclusion. “I want to show you something.” Her voice cuts across the low chatter of the classroom. The class continues to hum and buzz while she drags the overhead projector into position, turns the room lights off, and flicks the switch. Jay-Z lyrics appear, neatly typed and projected on the white board at the front of the room. Immediately, Kendra, Tyson, and Lakethia begin rapping together, tripping over the rhythm and words, experimenting, giggling uproariously.

Life ain’t a rose bud
A couple of speed bumps
You gotta take your lumps
Off to Bootcamp, the world’s facing terror
Bin Laden been happenin’ in Manhatten
Crack was anthrax back then, back when
Police was Al-Qaeda to black me
While I was out there bustling, sinning with no religion,
He was off the wall killing for a living.

-- From “A Ballad for the Fallen Soldiers”

“Someone want to try reading this with some rhythm?” Sullivan asks the room at large.

“Tyson? Yolanda?”

Yolanda, a sophisticated black female with short, straight hair, sits back in mock outrage.

“Why you got to call on black people?” she huffs, eyes sparkling, only a trace of a grin on her lips. The teasing is deliberate, a signal that she notices and approves of Sullivan’s attempt to bring black music and black experience into what is naturally a very white unit of study. It is

155
comfortable, insults traded between equals and friends, signifying. Sullivan winks at her and shares the laughter rising from all of the black girls.

“If you ask 100 black people, all they gonna know is the chorus. Maybe the beat,” Kendra adds.

Before the laughter has even quieted, Tyson starts up again, strong and loud, only half-familiar with the beat. (Kendra says, “See?”) She stumbles over how to pronounce “Al-Qaeda,” stops, puts her hand on her hip and strikes a pose to finish defiantly. “Yee-aah,” she ends, looking around at the rest of the class and nodding. “Tha’s right. Tha’s right.” Then she sits back in her seat, grinning. This may seem a very different Tyson than the young woman who refused to allow Ms. Goforth to take her newspaper—and yet some of the same behaviors are there. Her defiance is turned against the challenge of reading well and with rhythm, her stubbornness keeps her pushing through to the end even when she makes mistakes, her confidence allows her to speak up, to accept the task when no one else did. What translates into resistance and hostility in one teacher’s presence becomes her shining strength in this moment.

“So, it took Jay-Z nine lines to say what?” Sullivan asks. Her gaze sweeps over the room, taking in the quieter students as well as the energetic black girls bubbling around the front of the class. Everyone listens.

71 According to Smitherman (1977), signifying is the African American verbal art of the insult, which invokes humor, subtle insinuation, and wild exaggeration in an attempt to insult another. Lee (1993) recognized that signifying also involved very complex linguistic skills—use of metaphor, irony, and symbolism, for example. In one classroom study, Lee designed a six week experimental intervention that approached two literary texts (Their Eyes Were Watching God and The Color Purple) from the vantage point of signifying. In the experimental group, students conducted close, detailed readings of the novels and analyzed them for the figurative language, verbal ironies, and complex relationships that were part of signification. Students in the control group studied the novels in more traditional ways. Although both groups improved their literary criticism skills, the experimental group progressed the most. Lee suggested that this was because of the cultural congruency that existed between signifying and students’ own ways of communicating.

72 See chapter 3 for a description of the incident.
“That life ain’t like a rose bud,” Trina begins. Extremely quiet, she always pays rapt attention with her eyes, but rarely speaks. When she does, however, it invariably impresses. Today, she is first out of the gate. “Y’know, like, life ain’t always all sweet and nice. It’s got thorns and hard places and stuff.” I can hear shades of Lanston Hughes’ poem *Mother to Son*\(^73\) in her response and wonder if she’s familiar with it. Her answer is certain, knowing, confidently spoken.

“How would we say that in normal speech?”

Trina’s soft face breaks into a grin. “My day sucks.” More laughter from the African American contingent, agreement. Even Dale nods.

Sullivan points to the Bin Laden references. “What’s he referring to here? What’s he speaking about?”

Various answers fly.

“9-11.”

“The Iraq War.”

---

\(^73\) *Mother to Son* by Langston Hughes

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor.
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps.
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now.
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
“Terrorism.”

Cliff: “He means that when we don’t have these huge problems going on, we don’t think about other things, like drugs.”

Erika: “Politically . . .”

Trina: “The police go after Al-Qaeda, but they go after black people, too.”

Yolanda: “He’s saying that terrorism has always been there. It’s just taken on a new form now. It used to be police against black people, now it’s Al-Qaeda.”

One by one, they begin exploring the complex language of the snatch of lyrics, teasing out the serious political message, offering multiple interpretations of metaphors and imagery. They almost talk over each other, volunteering their thoughts, building up layers of potential meaning as Sullivan encourages them with small words, noises of approval, a quick jot of the overhead pen to circle something important according to them, to underline the language they that draws their focus.

Chelsey, a spastic white female, bounces up and down in her seat, overexcited by the flood of conversation, waving a Sprite bottle by its cap. “Oooo! Ooo!” Her mouth gapes wide open, the rubber bands on her braces stretched to breaking. “Now that something’s actually happened, something like 9-11, we’re all like—” She distracts mid-sentence and I wonder if her mother forgot her Ritalin today. “Like—” She laughs giddily and shrugs.

Yolanda glances at her, a half-suppressed touch of condescension in the arch of her eyebrows. “What do you mean ‘now that’s something’s happened’? It’s BEEN happening. That’s the point. It ain’t nothing new.”

Sullivan pulls the conversation back to make her point. For once, the political message gives way to the style and the structure of language. “So, why can’t I just say—Why not just say it like you’d normally speak it?”
Yolanda snorts. “Because you can’t earn a million dollars by just saying ‘my fucking morning sucks.’” More laughter. Chelsey laughs the loudest of all.


“It just wouldn’t be good.”

“It’s gotta have some rhythm.”

“It makes you think more like that.”

“Yeah, it wouldn’t be as good,” Lakethia repeats. “That’s what rappers are doing now, talking about politics in songs. Without all that [metaphor, etc.] it would be too blunt.”

I can see where this is going and I’m sitting back at my desk, waiting for the punch line. I doubt many of the students see it coming, they’re engrossed in the conversation.

“So, when Macbeth gets the news about being the thane of Cawdor—” Sullivan slides a second overhead on top of the lyrics, projecting four lines from yesterday’s reading. “Why would Shakespeare say it this way, instead of just saying it more casually?” Calling on individuals, she works them through the challenging language, the metaphoric use of words, the stage and playwriting imagery. “Just like Jay-Z,” she finishes, “Shakespeare is using metaphor to make his point. What a cool intellectual entertainment!”

* * * *

Sullivan’s “new way of being in classrooms” was built on close-knit rapport with students, managed behavior and interactions in a non-confrontational manner, invited and

---

74 Sullivan sees profanity in the classroom as something she’s unwilling to police. Since these students are supposed to see themselves as college-capable adults, she treats them as she would other adults. Swearing is rare in the classroom (they seem to take their cue from her own use of language), but it occasionally crops up for emphasis in the language of a few students. No one seems to mind.
extended their pre-existing knowledges, and created a space in which challenging texts became accessible, personal, and even political. It was complex, constructed in hours of reflective consideration and revised in the immediate moment of interacting with kids. It required her to be a master of deep content knowledge, an expert learner among other learners, able to craft learning situations that stimulated their curiosity and involved their ideas. Above all, it was a pedagogy grounded in who the students were and who she hoped they could be, conscious of the politics of identity, achievement, and the world at large, privileging collaborative, dialogic voices over monologic “fact,” and dedicated to a meaningful mastery of literacy skills.

For Sullivan, perhaps the most difficult aspect of this complicated and often exploratory pedagogy was dealing with the mixed results of each new trial. With her all-or-nothing vision of care and instinctive tendency toward reflection and self-critique, partial successes invariably translated into moral dilemmas, self-questioning, and struggle. For her and for me, some the most powerful aspects of her teaching simultaneously raised some of the most overwhelming questions. ⁷⁵

“Keeping It Real”: Relationship, Relevance, and Rigor

Students were the center of Sullivan’s vision of pedagogy. ⁷⁶ The kids lingered in the back of her mind as she prepared for class, either in long sessions at home or in quick, fly-by-night

---

⁷⁵ Like Ladson-Billings (1994), this chapter tries to portray the complex ideology behind Sullivan’s teaching by pointing to elements that are significant in how she envisions daily practice rather than focusing exclusively on curriculum itself. “It is the way that we teach that profoundly affects the way that students perceive the content of that curriculum” (p. 13). The first section explores content decisions, the second focuses on her faith in a dialogic method, and the third examines significant structural choices.

⁷⁶ According to Giroux & Simon (1989), pedagogy is a political action, not just a mere scripting of curriculum, invested with moral choices that impinge on the social construction of knowledge, self, and society. Pedagogy refers to a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among particular sets of social relations. It can be understood as a practice through which people are incited to acquire a particular “moral character.” As both a political and practical activity, it attempts to influence the occurrence and qualities of experiences. When one practices pedagogy, one acts with the intent of creating experiences that will organize and disorganize a variety of understandings of our
curriculum-crafting between classes, and they informed her choices of both what to teach and how to teach it. Her content was a mixture of traditional texts and multicultural voices that mirrored the diverse faces in room 64. Her methods were alternately teacher-focused and student-centered, accepting her authority as an expert without denying the richness of students’ personal expertise. Issues of identity, particularly issues of race, colored everything.

It all started when I was teaching at North. Because from the first year there, I felt like I was a good teacher, but I didn’t feel like I was—I mean, the disparities there are so in-your-face that—There were far and away more exceptions than the feeling like I was doing a good job, you know? That’s the source of my interest in doing better, in doing different. Just that constant nagging dissatisfaction with the fact that my kids of color were always failing. I would say now, I think about that 100% of the time now. I think about those issues all the time, in planning, in interacting with a kid, or grading, or everything.

Part of “doing better, doing different” for her students included the “ability to be straight about race in the classroom.” Her students called it “keeping it real” and always seemed highly engaged by their regular (planned and unplanned) discussions about race, gender, and even sexuality.

In one introductory lesson, Sullivan tapped students’ knowledge of gender stereotypes as an entry-point into examining Fitzgerald’s portrayal of two major female characters. The ensuing conversation was lively, funny, insightful. According to the class, males tended to be classically “athletic,” “strong,” “self-centered,” “dumb jocks with big egos,” and “unemotional.” Females were “airheads,” “over-emotional,” “too sensitive,” “too talkative” and “pretty.” Sullivan pushed for further exploration of stereotypical feminine attractiveness, and Chase shouted, “Nice booty! Biiiiig boo-tay!”

natural and social world in particular ways (p.236).

77 Delpit (1995) critiques white teachers for attempting to downplay their own authority, and in doing so, denying students access to themselves a key source of knowledge and potential advancement.

78 Chase is an enthusiastic white male who co-opts “ghetto” style in his dress, manner of presentation, and music preferences. He never pretends to be black, but he does genuinely share the appeal of popular rap culture.
While everyone laughed, the teacher scribbled *booty* on the board to add to their growing list. “Now, just to make it a little bit complicated,” she continued. “If I was to ask for a stereotypical *white* feminine attractiveness . . .?”

“No ass!” Nikki called out immediately.

Chase agreed with her. “Yeah, white girls want to be skin-ney.”

“No always!” someone else called out.

“Well, mostly,” he replied. “Look at magazine pictures.”

Although cultural perspectives on beauty have very little to do with Fitzgerald as he is traditionally taught, they do have a substantial place in the identities of these students. (They also hinted at material planned for later in the semester, such as Toni Morrison’s *Bluest Eye*.) By including them, Sullivan acknowledged their realities and created a kind of bridge between their lives and the text.79 In that spirit, throughout the semester, *Ellen Foster* gave way to *Flyy Girl*. Thoreau interacted with Martin Luther King, Jr. Morrison was studied alongside Salinger. *Macbeth*’s dark ambition was quickly followed by *Othello*’s race and class consciousness.

Spoken and written language, as well, were taught as culturally-infused communication,80 writing, particularly, was seen as created for specific audiences and crafted in situational codes.

79 In Ladson-Billings’ (1994) study, she describes a similar tactic of one African American teacher, a deliberate search for what students already know about a topic “so that we can make some natural and relevant connections with their lives” (p. 52-53).

80 Language study has been in turmoil ever since Labov discovered that nonstandard languages have a logic and grammatical patterns (Smitherman, 1977, 2002; Stubbs; 2002). Perhaps the most dramatic indication of this was the nationwide furor that erupted when Oakland, CA included Black English (Ebonics) in their classrooms as a means of bridging students from their home dialect to Standard English (Perry & Delpit, 1998; Smith, 2002). Just as literary canons are cultural canons, language laws are also reflections of cultural power. Standard English is a cultural construction, codified originally at a particular time in history by those with the authority of the printing press. Even the now well-entrenched Webster's dictionary began as an attempt to distinguish revolutionary America’s language from that of colonial Britain, an act of deliberate political significance which continues to separate these two major English varieties today (Altenbaugh, 2003).

Culturally-delineated varieties of English are relegated to the status of dialects (or worse, slang) and read as signals of lesser status, triggering a host of assumptions regarding the worth and intelligence of the speakers (Delpit; 2002; Dickar, 2004; Dowdy, 2002; Hilliard, 2002; Purcell-Gates; 2002) Neither superior nor inferior to other forms of English, possession of a non-standard English does not indicate superior intellect but an awareness of socially-
“We talk about how you aren’t going to walk into the cafeteria and ask ‘To whom did you give my lunch money?’ You’ll get the crap beaten out of you. They get that.” When students wrote drafts of college application essays, Sullivan pointed out the need for choosing their language style to fit the circumstances, code-switching.81

Here’s an example of communicating to a particular audience when, at the same time, you don’t want to be losing your identity, which is what they’re interested in. But it’s one of those code-switching times when you have to just think of who you’re talking to and what would be the best way for them to hear you.

As a class, they debated the merits of choosing their own personal voices over a more formal voice in the college application process. An awareness of the social implications of language, however, does not translate neatly into flawless formal English, and as drafts of the essays came in, Sullivan helped students individually to improve.

When Sullivan taught about Chaucer’s landmark use of vernacular in the *Canterbury Tales*, Nikki immediately sang out a comparison: “Ebooooonics!” Yolanda, an African American female who was often quick to analyze events for racial implications, followed up with, “Yeah, and now they shushing us for doing something like that.”

condoned cultural codes. Nevertheless, the teaching of standard English as the only proper way to speak and write continues in practice, despite statements from the NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) about students’ right to their own language. The “culture of power” is woven intricately into language use and part of the literacy dilemma is how to provide access to that power while recognizing the constructed and culturally-inflected nature of such language laws (Delpit, 1995, p. 25). Acknowledging the play of social power and equity issues in literature, language, and other literacy acts makes teaching English an increasingly complicated but important task.

81 Code-switching, the ability to select a language style dependent on the social situation, is often offered as an alternative to stripping students of their home languages entirely. While Delpit (2002) supports students learning standard English as a necessary tool for mobility in the U.S., she also notes that “speak[ing] out against the language that children bring to school means that we are speaking out against their mothers,” their communities, and their support systems (p. 47). The bi-discoursal nature of code-switching allows students to maintain a sense of self while adding skills necessary for academic and professional survival. Although it may not directly challenge the continuation of elitist language standards, it does allow teachers to raise awareness of the politics of language. Perhaps we have in our country’s development reached a stage in which some of the American populace is willing to see beyond skin color to access intellectual competence, but there are as yet few pockets which can “listen beyond” language form. (p. 38)
“That’s a good point,” Sullivan agreed, sitting on the edge of a desk, thoughtful. “If you publish a book in Ebonics, it would be a bold stand because the standard, the money language, isn’t that.\textsuperscript{82} That’s how people saw Chaucer’s work, as well.”

There was no visible penalty for being smart in Sullivan’s class, for making connections, participating in class, or succeeding at academic tasks. Particularly for the African American students, it seemed, achievement (and the desire to succeed) was a norm. Even among peers who were less interested or successful, they were neither pinned as “acting white”\textsuperscript{83} nor invested in “meaning against”\textsuperscript{84} their own identities.

I know that when we were sitting in that circle yesterday and these kids were throwing answers out, that was because they are in an environment where they don’t have to give up one iota of their cultural identity to succeed. It’s respected. But at North, if you decide to be that kid, half of you is going to be totally rejected and probably mocked by your own people.

But in room 64, students of both races proudly shared their good quiz grades, flaunted their new vocabulary, and talked about their reading. They also got off topic, faked their reading, forgot to study, and did all the things students do to work against success. As in any classroom,

\textsuperscript{82} Christensen (1990) writes about a similar approach to language learning in her Oregon high school English class: They write stories. They write poems. They write letters. They write essays. They learn how to switch in and out of the language of the powerful. . . . We ask: Who made the rules that govern how we speak and write? . . . Who already talks and writes like this? Who has to learn how to change the way they talk and write? Why? . . . We read articles, stories, poems written in Standard English and those written in home language. . . . We talk about why it might be necessary to learn Standard English . . . asking my students to memorize the rules without asking who makes the rules, who enforces the rules, who benefits from the rules, who loses from the rules . . . legitimates a social system that devalues my students’ knowledge and language. (p. 38-40)

\textsuperscript{83} Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggest that students of color sabotaged their own school performance in order to avoid the accusation that they were acting like their white peers. Because academic performance has often been delineated as white—witness the demographics of honors classes—students of color felt compelled to choose their cultural identification and cultural peer group over academic success.

\textsuperscript{84} Gee (1986) explains that discourses can conflict, and that such conflicts involve more than discomfort over the unfamiliar:

Rather, the conflict is between who I am summoned to be in this new Discourse and who I am in other Discourses that overtly conflict with—and sometimes have historically contested with—this Discourse. Since Discourses always exist and mean in juxtaposition to each other, performances in one often have meaning in regard to—and repercussions for—others. (p. 135)
“success” was partial, variable across time and personality, but here the active engagement of students who refused to participate in their other MCHS classes remained significant—particularly for African American students. Despite the tensions present in other classes, within these walls, achievement could be celebrated and encouraged. Even those students who might resist individual assignments or activities (such as Ebony when it involved writing anything down, or Tony when he was drunk or high) could usually experience moments of engagement and interest. And because Sullivan’s assessment included a wide variety of skills—from writing to dramatic performance, from discussion to artwork, from projects done at home to collaborative activities in class—by the end of each semester, no one failed.

* * * *

For Sullivan, sociocultural issues were inextricably linked to power and literary study typically included some reading of the world as well as the word.85 During the fall semester, as the English IV class read Orwell’s dystopian 1984, Sullivan searched for a meaningful project that would tap into students’ current worlds as well as the dark, restrictive world of this long, strange novel. Together, she and I explored possibilities during our interview that week, finding a potential parallel in her stories of student dissatisfaction with the Middle College itself. “Ooo,
now I have an idea,” she told me, eyes gleaming with sudden interest. “I need to run home and work this up.”

The next day in class, she invited students to critique not only Orwell’s world but their own. She asked them to think explicitly and critically about sociopolitical power and about change, about their role within systems as victims, participants, and/or agents. In-class discussion led to a writing assignment about “the System” or “the Man”—those taken-for-granted, seemingly-necessary controlling elements of society. At first, students were leery of the conversation, their responses either vague or focused exclusively on frustrations with the local police. When Sullivan encouraged them to think about other factors and institutions, they were hesitant about naming the one that might seem most obvious: schools. She named it for them, directly asking them to write about whether schools could be a part of the System. “They wanted to know if they could really say what they thought,” Sullivan remembered. “You know, who was going to see it? Just me?”

86 Dead white men become much more interesting when updated, their ideas or methods brought into the local moment. In another example during the spring semester, Sullivan’s class studied literary satire, exploring it in classical (Swift’s “A Modest Proposal”) and contemporary forms (a local article satirizing education and several political cartoons). Then, Sullivan asked students to become “satirists” themselves. They were to choose an issue important to them, one that “needed the satirist’s touch,” and write their own satires—a challenging and somewhat abstract application of new knowledge. She provided a handout that outlined how to approach crafting a satire and provided class time to begin brainstorming and writing. Most students were completely lost. Sullivan had expected the work to be challenging, but their almost uniform confusion initially surprised her.

Once I saw the reaction to [the assignment]—I mean, they were even lost at the first step of it. “Pick something you wish you could change.” Well, they could get that after a lot of coaching, but they can’t get how to present it in a way that’s satirical, almost like an opposite…So when I saw the reaction, I thought “Do I drop this?” (Then, more firmly.) No. I know they all can do it.

With much individualized coaching from both her and occasionally me, most of the class eventually wrote interesting, thoughtful, and at least partially satirical pieces.

87 Shor (1992) describes empowering teachers as “problem-posing,” a characteristic which engages students in learning that is both “critical and mutual.” As a pedagogy and social philosophy, problem-posing focuses on power relations in the classroom, in the institution, in the formation of standard canons of knowledge, and in society at large. It considers the social and cultural context of education, asking how student subjectivity and economic conditions affect the learning process. Student culture as well as inequality and democracy are central issues to problem-posing educators. (p. 31)
Once they were assured that their thoughts would be secure from other MCHS teachers and administration, students wrote about schools with some depth and openness, concentrating on their sense that no real space existed for them to speak out in disagreement with school policies and procedures. The school-wide feedback session,\(^{88}\) for example, allowed students to voice their critique, but changed nothing. One white male student felt this limited agency existed throughout the feeder school systems, not merely at MCHS. He wrote: “My choice to leave Oakwood Schools and begin attending MCHS was fully impacted by the negativity of the school system as a whole…When I speak up my voice is never heard.” Another student, an African American female, echoed his sense of the nullifying power of schools:

> It is without a doubt that for most young people or kids around my age, school is the first visible form of the power of the System that they are exposed to…In some ways, the “system of public schools” did impact my decision for leaving my old school…I had to make the decision on if I wanted to let the system continue to distroy (sic) my future or do I want to stand up for my education and try to expand and excel my learning environment, capabilities, and opportunities.

She closed her paper with advice to the MCHS staff, sharing her frustration with the school’s seemingly empty promise to break the traditional status quo of schooling. “It is not helping us if you letting (sic) people in who create and act as conformists to the public school system. It is hard for me not to look around and wonder what the hell have I got myself into.”

In a similar move, the English III classes’ study of American transcendentalist authors (particularly Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” and Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience”) also became more about personal agency and the choice of non-compliance than about reading nineteenth century philosophers. Sullivan recognized that some key transcendental ideas still resonated in our era of questionable political decisions; she enlivened the somewhat dry reading with ethical discussions about issues of right and wrong, responsibility and consequence, and the more modern multicultural voice of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”— a text which

---

\(^{88}\) See chapter 2.
draws heavily on Thoreau’s writings. The class took turns reading passages aloud, the shared reading bouncing around the room, people occasionally vying for lines, eager to participate. One of the black girls called out her agreement as if in church, a steady chorus of “Mmmm-hmmm” and “Tha’s right” and “Tha’s deep.” King’s powerful “How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust?” became a very real conversation that students could enter even when they found Thoreau difficult. Arguments about civil rights, personal freedoms and individual and collective responsibilities were closer home for many of these students than the quiet solace of Walden Pond.

For Sullivan, this was a major part of the real work of English classrooms—inviting students to engage with powerful and even problematic ideas, to dissent and agree and demythologize intimidating texts while also exploring aspects of social consciousness. English Language Arts became as much a means as it was an end—a way to breach ideas, foster communication, and gain access to both criticality and literacy skills. Good English pedagogy was seen as a function of student awareness and agency in the world rather than a set of texts read. As Chase said of Sullivan’s class, “She really encourages me [to] open up to new ideas. She teaches us not only English but the in’s and out’s of life in general.”

* * * *

“Can I put something on the table with you guys?”

---

89 Even Dr. Seuss’s *The Butter Battle Book*, a fantasy tale about a feud over the best way to butter bread (on the top or on the bottom), became a lesson in interpretation and social critique. For Sullivan, the book satirized “the irony of mutual destruction;” for the black students in her class, the book was an extended analogy for racism, an interpretation that they explored at length before turning to other satirical works, canonical and otherwise, and even to creating their own funny, cynical, and often personal satires.
Sullivan’s dedication to inviting and modeling open and critical inquiry about the world meant occasionally allowing her own moral quandaries to serve as classroom texts, as well. Once in a while, “when the conversation goes there,” Sullivan’s life and experiences might be fair game for class discussion. Often, these moments were unplanned, a spur-of-the-moment decision to invite student input on issues that kept her awake at night.

During a class discussion about racial privilege and white entitlement, Sullivan shared a dilemma that had been plaguing her recently. Over the last several weeks, she had been trying to select a kindergarten for her oldest daughter. The neighborhood school had caught her attention, but had also raised serious questions in her mind, questions she felt to be complicated by her own whiteness. Hughes Elementary was a Title I school with a predominantly minority student body, a completely black teaching staff, a large number of single parents (like Sullivan herself), and a reputation for near-perfect test scores. When she toured the school during an open house for prospective parents, she was thrilled by their focus on achievement but horrified by the militaristic atmosphere of the school. Kindergartners walked in very straight lines, hands by their sides, eyes straight ahead, mouths closed. When one child stopped to tie a loose shoelace, his teacher snapped her fingers and demanded that he stand up straight immediately. Lessons were rote, with each child reading the same list of words aloud while the other students listened attentively to their 20+ peers. Teachers addressed students almost abrasively. “Do you have words on your shirt? Do you know what they say? Why you gonna let your momma put clothes on you when you don’t know what they say? You go home tonight and find out!”

90 Sullivan’s description of the directive comments from African American teachers hints at Heath’s (1983) linguistic study of Trackton and Roadville, two communities in the Piedmont, NC. Sullivan also pointed to connections to Delpit’s portrait of white liberal teachers in “The Silenced Dialogue,” an article she had read as part of the Equity training in OCSS. To her, teachers at Hughes seemed to say “you make your parents talk to you about language,” a good thing, but in a manner that would be alien and perhaps frightening to her daughter. In addition, she worried that a school so dedicated to achievement statistics (i.e. standardized tests), might overlook enrichment and academic depth.

I’m not an idiot. Because I know exactly what “very high test scores” means… You could drill and skill
Despite her reservations, Sullivan was enthused about the possibility that her daughter, who lived in two exclusively white homes and attended an all white preschool, could have a genuinely cross-cultural learning experience at Hughes.

What an awesome opportunity for her! Just to see [non-whites as] leaders of her school and the teachers in her classrooms. I just think it could be life-changing. It could change who she is as a person and how she relates to the world . . . If [she]goes to this school… [could she] learn to value different ways of being, living, expressing? You can’t just talk about needing to respect all people. It’s too abstract. You need to not just respect, you need to revel in the differences. When you think about black English, communication styles, how rich, how much verve, I'm envious of that! So – I almost feel like it would be a big gift to give her . . . . I don’t know. I’m 50/50 split. There’s a part of me that thinks this would be awesome for her. And part of me thinks if she bends down to tie her shoe and she gets yelled at, or talked to in a way like I saw them talking to kids yesterday, that could totally traumatize her. Cause it would me.

It was a point that had arisen several times in our interview conversations. Was she being overprotective? Racist or elitist? Did she feel her child was entitled to a particular style of education? Was she overlooking some of the benefits or dangers of the school? Did the potential for cross-cultural learning experiences overweigh her nagging sense that a less rigid (and also whiter) school might suit her daughter better?

One of the more outspoken black girls responded first, her expression knowing and serious. “You’re gonna send your kid to a school like that? You know if it’s mostly black it’s gonna have all kinds of problems.” Her words were an immediate counterstory to Sullivan’s and entire school population to perform. But here’s a big racial bias – I’m going to say something about my own daughter. What if [she] doesn’t need that drill and skill, for whatever reason? Maybe she does, but maybe she doesn’t. I don’t want that as her education. *(She pauses, sighs.)* But what is more important than teaching a kid how to read, write, and do basic math, right? I mean, when it comes down to it, if you’ve got kids who don’t have any of those skills, what the hell is that?

Regarding her daughter’s cultural horizons:

This girl’s also going to be dealing with the fact that her mother’s gay. I mean, she’s gonna already have experiences that are going to help open her up to the world, I think. So, do I need to? . . . Part of me feels like I could work with her on anything that would arise. I’m trying to go to that place in me, like, not to be so overly protective. In other words, whatever happens, I’m her mom. And I can talk her through anything and help her make sense of it and thrive. I want to believe that. So that’s my area of—that’s why parenting is the hugest journey. It comes right back to you. Am I secure enough in my view of the world, my view of how things can be solved, that I can transmit that to her? I don’t know. We’ll see.
vision of possibility, challenging the perhaps naive hopefulness that her position as a white woman and a teacher allowed.

Another student agreed. “Yeah, I wouldn’t do that. Just look at [the local historically black high school].”

“And if it doesn’t have those problems,” a third added, “I can tell you that that principal has the school on lockdown.”

The class laughed a little at that, but Sullivan thought back to her visit, the rigid structure and behavior she witnessed in classrooms and hallways. “They know the deal,” she told me later. “They know that it’s either chaos or it’s lockdown . . . And they are the kids [who would know] They’ve been there.”

Although the discussion resolved nothing for Sullivan personally (nor was it meant to), it did model an open approach to racial conversation and showed that she respected her students’ perspectives. Rashad, an African American boy, told me with pride that Sullivan involved them in important matters and “treats us like adults.” That alone was a lesson her students found particularly valuable.

* * * *

Sullivan’s new approach to pedagogy was active, founded in student identities and interests, challenging, sociopolitical, multitextual, and open to student inquiry and voice. In many instances, these conversations were public, and students and teachers alike could see the value in open dialogue.

---

91 In the end, she did enroll her daughter at Hughes Elementary, cautiously optimistic about the rich cross-cultural possibilities of the school.

92 In his extensive equity training materials, Singleton (2003) calls this “courageous conversation,” the sort of communication that has the potential to engage, sustain, and deepen interracial dialogue about race. Courageous conversation begins with a commitment to stay engaged, a willingness to experience discomfort, the honesty to speak your own truth, and the openness to expect and cope with unresolved issues. It is “personal, local, and immediate” (p. 5-6).
ways, it personified the teaching practice of Ladson-Billings’ “dreamkeepers”\textsuperscript{93} and Shor’s “empowering” educators.\textsuperscript{94} But, for Sullivan, the experience was both invigorating and exhausting, an uphill struggle against students and herself. Even a well-articulated philosophy of teaching does not always clearly point the way toward choices in practice. Rather than a fixed and perfected vision, hers was “an ever-evolving awareness,” with moments of slippage, mistakes, and unsolved puzzles. Every decision closed off others, including some with excellent rationales.\textsuperscript{95} In the rush of daily classroom life, not every decision could be examined from every angle. All too often, in her mind, she was both right and wrong simultaneously, swimming against the riptide of complexity of this real classroom.\textsuperscript{96} Mistakes happened. Nothing was suitably successful for all students. New habits existed only within uncertainty. Old habits died hard.

In early November, Sullivan began a poetry unit based on student responses to a packet of 28 diverse poems, including several black poets such as Maya Angelou, Countee Cullen,

\textsuperscript{93} Ladson-Billings (1994, 2001) provides a framework for teachers interested in culturally relevant pedagogy, a style of teaching that attempts to improve schooling experiences and long-term achievement for all children, particularly those who are most often marginalized by society and traditionally underperform in schools. Ladson-Billings develops an outline of such teaching based on the practice of teachers considered successful with African American students in \textit{The Dreamkeepers} and later re-presents the framework in \textit{Crossing over to Canaan}. According to these texts, cultural relevance hinges on how teachers view themselves and students, how they develop and facilitate relationships in the classroom, and how they define the knowledge of the classroom. These three categories are also reflected in the writings of Nieto (1992) and Gay (2000), among others, and while scholars may differ in semantics and organization, their aims appear the same. Along with a strong sense of sociopolitical consciousness, practicing teachers need to recognize and involve culture—their own and their students—enact a pedagogy of care, and provide space for empowering and transformative experiences.

\textsuperscript{94} For Shor (1992), all empowering pedagogues have an “agenda of values” at the heart of their practice, which he describes as “participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, desocializing, democratic, researching, interdisciplinary, activist” (p. 17).

\textsuperscript{95} A substantial part of the intellectual work of teachers, according to Cochran-Smith (2004), is “confronting the dilemmas of teaching, a process of identifying and wrestling with educational issues that are characterized by equally strong but incompatible and competing claims to justice” (p. 40). It is indicative of the deeply moral foundation of teaching.

\textsuperscript{96} Despite the power and practicality of cultural relevancy models, they necessarily simplify the conflict of identities and ideas within the lived experience of teaching. There is no clear prescription for teaching that always and inevitably yields engaged students. In \textit{Crossing over to Canaan}, Ladson-Billings (2001) writes that the seeming perfection of models can even undermine young teachers struggling with the intricacies of real classrooms.
Langston Hughes, and even popular rap artists. “Any kid could find a poem in there that spoke to them.” Every night, students chose a poem that they liked and, during class, they read their poems aloud and shared their insights. Sullivan ran with their initial thoughts, using them as a springboard into more technical poetic analysis and discussion. Almost universally, students described the poetry response unit as “banging!” and “the bomb!” They were enjoying poetry, learning about styles and techniques, focused and engaged despite the looming Thanksgiving holidays.

Then I told them that on Wednesday and Thursday of that week we were going to spend a whole period with a poet, really getting to know him or her, going in depth. And those poets are going to be — and I wrote ‘em on the board.

Emily Dickinson.
Robert Frost.
Walt Whitman.

And the minute I wrote Walt Whitman, this little pocket of girls whom I adore—they’re so outspoken, they’re very loud, they’re very smart—and as soon as I write that, this girl Yolanda goes: “Uh! Told ya! You gotta pay up your five bucks!”

And what’s so funny is that I knew exactly what they must have said before I wrote those. But I never would have known that in the past. Now, I didn’t think about it ahead of time, to prevent that scene, but as soon as they said it, I was like (She winces, closing her eyes.) and I turned around and I looked at them and said, “You know, you’re right.”

And they said, “Right about what?”

“No, it’s cool, Ms. Sullivan! (Her voice rises in pitch, as the girls try to lighten their critique.) You know it doesn’t matter. We were just bettin’. (A pause, then more slowly) We were just bettin’ on whether, you know, Langston would be in there.”

It was just very poignant. Not that I don’t think those three poets [are worth in-depth study]. I mean, I had great lesson plans for them and I was excited and I think they deserve it. It’s just the statement that that made. I mean, here’s 28 poems that you can spend some time at home with and then we’ll talk about them. And then here’s three American poets that we’re gonna spend an hour and a half with. It was just a perfect example of something I didn’t intend at all. And that’s unnerving. So, I won’t do that next semester . . . . But the reason I really liked that episode happening—my level of awareness wasn’t enough to prevent it, but it was enough to know it immediately, viscerally, and that as soon as I turned and made eye contact with Yolanda, there was such a mutual respect. Because she knows that I knew right then. And all I could say was “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Her relationship with the African American females in English III allowed Sullivan to hear their critique and respond immediately and openly, showing that she was disturbed by her
own lack of perception and willing to learn from the experience. She was elated that they brought their thoughts up, comfortable enough with her to broach the topic and aware enough of the sociopolitical world of education to see it at all. In a sense, her frequent encouragement to critique their own world rebounded back on her own practice in this scene, but to Sullivan it was evidence of intelligent criticality as well as her own need to be more reflective. “I felt like I hadn’t left out Hughes and others. They’re in there, but it’s a different message.”

Sullivan recognized that the message was a heavily raced one about value and status, about whose voice was worthy to be heard in the Academy, about canons and their cultural capital—issues that inevitably lie at the heart of English Language Arts. But that awareness ran up against one of her most crucial goals for English III/IV—preparing these young people to survive in their classes at HCC and four-year colleges in the future. While she could value rap artists as worthy American poets, she knew that their future professors would not. While she knew Hughes and Cullen were equally important, she also knew that they tended to be less abstract and more engaging to her students than Dickinson and Frost. On a purely practical

97 Slevin and Young (1996) note that the central questions in English have to do with issues of authority—authorized knowledge, authorized language, authorized ideas and literacies. Postcolonial, deconstructionist, new historical, feminist and other critical theories in English studies have destabilized traditional and canonical legacies, throwing such issues of authority into question and prompting scholars to consider reshaping the field itself. The view of literacy itself has shifted from a focus on the structural intricacies of decontextualized practices to a redefinition of literacy as developed through historical forces, embedded in social institutions and cultural ways of knowing, and connected to issues of power and value. Literary canons and literacy events such as writing, speaking, and reading can now be seen as outgrowths of social systems and thus implicated in systems of marginalization, exclusion, and domination (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 1999).

Drawing from Bakhtinian notions that language can only be understood once it is situated within the social context that surrounds it (and not merely through its innate structural properties alone), New Literacy Studies (NLS) “seeks to expand and challenge the prevailing concepts of literacy that underlie much classroom instruction” by creating a new social theory of literacy (Morrell, 2005, p. 315). No longer are reading and writing viewed as apolitical activities, but as acts laden with meaning in themselves. English teachers therefore are recognized as dealing in cultural artifacts and historically-situated ideologies, not static facts and neutral texts. Scholars do not advocate a rejection of English studies, but a new, politicized approach to texts, composition, and even technology and a critique of traditional canons and methods (Carey-Webb, 2001; Graff, 1992; Selfe & Selfe 2002).

These ideas, however, are largely limited to the Academy. Traditional English classrooms have rarely encouraged students (or teachers) to inquire into the world in such ways and the idea of a New Literacy Studies supplanting traditional secondary English Language Arts has not yet trickled down into the public schools or the national standards.
level, this alone made a strong argument for focusing her attention on the less accessible canonical poets. If she did not, would many of the students ever experience these writers? Would they be expected to have a high-schooler’s passing familiarity with them? For Sullivan, such exposure became a question of denying her students a small measure of cultural capital, and with that in mind, she forged ahead with their study after discussing the choice with Yolanda and the other students.

It wasn’t the last time. As Sullivan herself remained torn between providing access to canonical literature and challenging the canon for its historical exclusion of particular styles and voices, she repeatedly returned to issues of literary validity and/or usefulness, encouraging students to critique her curriculum choices. They thought, wrote, and talked about their current English class and their previous experiences in English.

---

98 Despite the increasing representation from non-mainstream authors (authors of color, women, non-heterosexual, etc) in accepted canonical literature, arguments over the canon continue to rage and the high school curriculum, particularly, continues to be moribund (Applebee, 1993).

99 According to Ladson-Billings (1994):

The ability to examine critically and challenge knowledge is not a mere classroom exercise. By drawing on the perspectives of critical theorists, culturally relevant teaching attempts to make knowledge problematic. Students are challenged to view education (and knowledge) as a vehicle for emancipation, to understand the significance of their cultures, and to recognize the power of language. As a matter of course, culturally relevant teaching makes a link between classroom experiences and the students’ everyday lives. These connections are made in spirited discussions and classroom interactions. Teachers are not afraid to assume oppositional viewpoints to foster the students’ confidence in challenging what may be inaccurate or problematic. (p. 94)

Shared dialogue between students and between students and teacher, the freedom to think and to speak about issues and even about the class itself, is a critical piece of this classroom. In another lesson, Sullivan triggered an intense argument about the potential power of poetry, a conversation she admits was quite hard for her. As an English teacher and lover of all kids of literary work, Sullivan had to focus on genuinely and deliberately hearing their very different viewpoints. Whereas she believes poetry can inform, transform, and be meaningful in life, most of her students did not. “When I asked second period if this poem would this speak to someone, of course they say no,” she remembered, adding that only Ebony and Nikki raised their hands to agree that a poem might have power. Nikki talked about poetry as something that can lift you up when you’re down, that tells you about people’s experience with being different and being okay. Ebony added that a poem could express things other people can’t understand about what you’re going through. Other students dissented, and Sullivan kept a tight rein on her own (perhaps obvious) ideas. Slowly, the class conversation that began with a nearly unanimous “no!” worked itself into a more mediated and complex viewpoint. Jack agreed that poems were about being who you are, while Tony vehemently professed that the poet behind the poem mattered more than people wanted to believe. “If someone tries to tell me what to do, but hasn’t been through it, I’m not gonna listen. It’s got nothing to do with blackness or whiteness or being familiar or not. If [an author’s] not writing through experience, it’s not worth it. Don’t tell me how I should feel…[Who the author is] is important stuff to know. That she’s not just a Dr. Phil.”
Sullivan: It’s a constant decision about what to teach, who to teach it to, how to teach it. Say, it’s assumed that a Basic English class couldn’t read [this novel]. Is there anything wrong with somebody making that decision?

Marlo: If you got that far, you should be able to read whatever you want.

April: It ain’t that hard.

Yolanda: But some people don’t have common sense.

Luna: Like the people in the movie [Gulliver’s Travels.] On the floating rock.

Yolanda: Like Shakespeare. It’s not like you have to learn Shakespeare to be anything other than a Fortune 500 company. College is the end of the line for Shakespeare, unless you want to be a teacher.

Sullivan: Do you think—that’s an interesting point—do you think that there’s a bank of cultural knowledge that people might use and expect you to know?

Yolanda: It depends on who you hang around.

Sullivan: It does!

Yolanda: I think it’s weird that there’s stuff we have to do, but there aren’t any requirements for African American and Latino literature. There’s other stuff you could know that [schools] don’t require. We’re missing out.

April: It’s considered an elective to take an African American literature class. But [American Literature’s] not really American. What about the rest of the races who are also American?

Sullivan: You’ve articulated the whole argument over the English canon! Let’s go back to that…

In a free-writing activity during their unit on Shakespeare, almost every student defended the decision to teach Macbeth in English IV. They did not necessarily like the language, but the story had proved interesting, and they felt the challenge would prepare them for their future. In their opinion, Shakespeare was status literature, and readers of Shakespeare were seen as more intelligent and capable. Shakespeare was capital. Despite Yolanda and April’s earlier insights about the silences of the canon, most students defined knowledge and intelligence in traditional ways and believed traditional works could provide a sort of unnamed cultural currency in schools and in life.

Sullivan, on the other hand, continued to question her choices. Did dragging them through Shakespeare actually provide any currency, or was that yet another deeply-ingrained myth of English? In discussions with me, she repeatedly referenced Delpit’s (1995) description of the “culture of power”—the ways of acting, thinking, and knowledges that make up mainstream society. If literacy at MCHS was about providing her students a foundation for
success in college, did that mean a responsibility for teaching Shakespeare? Or was that merely an excuse to reify narrow-minded, monocultural worldviews? She knew that reading *Macbeth* would not bridge the social and economic gulfs that separated these students from middle class configurations of success, but she could not shake the sense that neglecting canons was also not the answer.

Her solution was to teach a mixed bag of canonical and non-canonical texts, ranging from *Pygmalion* and *Catcher in the Rye* to *Invisible Man* and articles out of the local independent newspaper, but to often approach them in non-traditional ways. Literature became both a relic of its age and in invitation to more current socially-conscious critique. When possible, she followed their interests and instincts—exploring whether Shakespeare was a racist, given his portrayal of the Moor, or looking at hidden cultural components to Fitzgerald’s portrayal of women. Literature was not and had never been “universal, excellent, and neutral” (Shor, 1992, 100)

---

100 Although critical literacy exposes the underpinnings of power and status, awareness and thoughtfulness do not equate to social change.

101 During one interview, she talked about her personal sense of wealth based on years of literary knowledge, the ability to pick up on allusions in casual conversation, the sense of access to ideas outside of herself. Something that thrills me in terms of being a thinker is when I hear a connection . . . I mean, I remember somebody referencing “the golden mean” in a [professional development] seminar I went to. It’s such a captivating idea. Now, I’ve never read anything [about it], don’t know anything mathematically about it, but I know the concept. So when somebody mentioned it in an NPR interview last week, it was a way to access what that person was saying. And I would feel very impoverished if I didn’t have that.

102 Shor (1992) notes that problem-posing education includes all types of subject matter; even traditional knowledge proves useful when seen as historical products to be questioned rather than as universal wisdom to be accepted . . . . The teacher is not filling empty minds with official or unofficial knowledge but is posing knowledge in any form as a problem for mutual inquiry. (p. 32-33) (emphasis mine)

The distinction is not always one of avoiding traditional literature, but one of enlivening it with real connections to student lives. Ladson-Billings (1994) describes two teachers’ skill with teaching literacy in this way: Even though both of these teachers select literature for their students, they depend heavily on the experiences of their students to make the literature come alive. They are not writing on blank slates; instead, they are challenging conventional scripts by importing the culture and everyday experiences of the students into the literacy learning. (p. 117)

103 Webb (1999) argues the British canon, particularly, resists infusion from multicultural voices. For too long British literature as been taught as an isolated national tradition. Yet, British literature can also be perceived as a dynamic dialogue between the traditions, history, language, and culture of the world’s most influential imperial power and the enormous diversity of its colonial possessions around the world. (¶ 1)
p. 32), but instead served as a doorway to interesting ideas and necessary skills. “I don’t teach *Beowulf* [just] for the point of knowing *Beowulf,*” she explained. “You also have to use that to teach a transferable skill [or idea].”

Sometimes her approaches worked spectacularly; sometimes they did not. Despite her belief in student potential, Sullivan had to admit that many of them simply were “not going to be able to access” some works without intensive and time-consuming help. Their prior school experiences had seen to that, leaving them with poor reading and writing skills and habits. She could not send most them home with a copy of *Macbeth* and expect them to grasp it. While they were cheerfully invested in creating a movie of *Beowulf,* very few of them could translate the obscure sing-songy language into contemporary casual English. They actively participated in a discussion of love and loss, but some still struggled with the sonnets that came afterward. And the profound romantic struggle of *The Great Gatsby,* particularly, was neither interesting nor remotely comprehensible.

I was watching Omar yesterday as we were watching the video . . . and I’m consciously thinking as he’s there, hood up—he’s such a polite kid—and I’m looking at that film and I’m like, what the hell am I doing? These rich, white, careless, privileged people are having some struggle about god knows what and, to me, I think it’s a very profound struggle. But I’m thinking he’s like “what does this have to do with anything?” I want to be done with this book. I want to figure out what to do before spring break to finish it. I’m going to pull out some scenes, I don’t know how I’m going to do it, but I’m going to finish it.

For *Gatsby* (as for *Beowulf* earlier in the year), Sullivan’s solution was to lead them in a more focused study of several extended passages instead of the entire work. The excerpts provided exposure to the work; the limited focus allowed students to succeed where they might have failed. But while it was a functional solution, driven by the impending Spring Break as much as student apathy, Sullivan felt dispirited and discouraged about it. “I feel like it’s not rigorous enough and, on the other hand, I feel like they’re not . . . .” She trailed off, leaving unspoken the reality that some of her students could not reach the high goal she visualized for them. “They do
need this. It is intellectual work. It is confidence building. . . . They have a right to that.” For Sullivan, mastery of canonical works was about more than mere exposure, but also about supporting students’ belief in their own abilities and about preparing for future courses. Underlying her worry was the concrete question: If they could not—or did not believe they could—read *Gatsby*, could they ever pass the HCC prerequisite tests for English?

* * * *

Cochran-Smith (2004) points out that socially just student teachers (and, by implication, experienced teachers) “assume that all students are makers of meaning and all are capable of dealing with complex ideas . . . . They have high expectations for all of their students and provide opportunities for them to learn academically challenging knowledge and skills” (p. 66). Such statements are a cornerstone of pre-service education and professional development, but despite their intent to solidify empowering teacher attitudes, they are rarely followed with an exploration of exactly how teachers choose expectations and define challenge for particular students. Sullivan believed her students to be capable, but that belief did not provide the tools to easily determine the specifics of practice.

I don’t totally have a handle on what my goals are with them. You know how you constantly have to figure that out. In a North honors classroom, I had a crystal clear sense just because of the culture. I know exactly what I’m supposed to do for them. And I can do my other stuff [including cultural study and sociopolitical inquiry] at the same time, too… But here, I don’t have that clarity. I’m not sure what I’m doing with them, for them. Where are they going? What do they need?

As the semester continued, Sullivan worried that her choices (no matter how socially-aware or critical) might fall short on an external scale of rigor. Although relationships and social relevance provided many students a bridge into difficult course material, they could not substitute in her mind for the rigor she knew might be expected of students coming out of an
“honors” program. Her prior experiences as an honors teacher at North instilled in her a sense of abstract standards that could be met through teacher dedication and student application. And although she could see contextual barriers to student success, she nevertheless instinctively placed the burden of failure on her pedagogical decisions. Torn between the rigor of Good Teaching and the desire to “do differently, do better,” she increasingly found herself prey to guilt, anxiety, and frustration. Her concern for her students’ futures began taking a heavy toll out of her own feelings of efficacy and her sense of teaching self.

Speaking the World: Dialogue and the Elusiveness of Cultural Equity

Perhaps the most substantive shift in her teaching style since North Oakwood was the prevalence and centrality of student voice, raised in dialogue with her and with each other students. Whatever the content, Sullivan laced it with reasons for students to talk and to think beyond a text itself, to evoke their lives and experiences in thoughtful ways. Her intent was to create a space for participatory conversation that encouraged students to recognize possibilities and their own power. It was a philosophy of problem-posing\textsuperscript{104} that, in theory, democratized and supported student growth. Sullivan believed students needed to speak their world, to give voice to their understandings even when those contradicted hers. Beyond this, she also acknowledged that such voices were not monologic, existing in pure, unsupported opinion. Speaking one’s world into a vacuum might be an act of futility, but speaking as a part of an investigative dialogue allowed for challenge, transformation, and education.

\textsuperscript{104} Friere (2002) describes problem-posing pedagogy as an attempt to reframe students as the Subject of education, rather than as Objects that are acted upon by the system around them. The goal of such teaching is to disrupt the notion that the world is fixed and stable, replacing it with a sense of agency and possibility, to provide students with the belief that they can change the world and their position within it. Although teachers cannot empower students directly, such tactics open a space for the taking up of individual empowerment.
In Sullivan’s classroom, students were invited to participate, share their ideas, and encouraged to challenge each other’s apparent truths. She used her own thoughts as a counterpoint, a consideration, another perspective that might provide insight. She often began class with freewriting based on significant quotes or a shared poem, inviting them to play with ideas and bounce them against each other. “Everyone in this classroom has the capacity to understand and write about these quotations,” she told them during one such focusing assignment. When Lakethia asked if there was a wrong answer, Sullivan’s response was simple. “Nope. We’ll use each other to get at the most accurate.”

Unlike Math, History, and Science, this was not a silent classroom, but it was one in which serious, meaningful discussions could take place. It was usually a safe space for even very difficult and ethically-loaded conversations. During one of my visits, Lakethia presented her independent reading book, *Miss Thang: Being Black, Gay, and on the Street*, and described a boy who claimed to enjoy being raped by his uncle. The story sparked giggles from several guys and disgusted scoffs from a few girls. When Lakethia finished, Sullivan invited further thoughts, determined to address their problematic reaction. “Imagine being born homosexual and imagine the agony of keeping it hidden in a world where it’s considered immoral,” she suggested, settling on the front table where she could see everyone. “What if you’ve never been allowed to express that part of your identity? What do you think that’s like?” The class watched her, quiet, perhaps unsure where she intended to go with the question or where they might be allowed to go. Sullivan let them think for a moment, then continued, mild and matter-of-fact.

---

105 According to Shor (1992):

An empowering teacher does not talk knowledge at students, but talks with them . . . . Hopefully students will experience education as something they do rather than as something done to them . . . . Mutual discussion is the heart of the method. Dialogue is simultaneously structured and creative. It is initiated and directed by a critical teacher but is democratically open to student intervention. Co-developed by the teacher and the students, dialogue is neither a freewheeling conversation nor a teacher-dominated exchange. Balancing the teacher’s authority and the students’ input is the key to making the process both critical and democratic. (p. 85)
One thing that it’s still okay to do in a classroom is laugh at someone’s sexual identity. Whereas if you brought up something about gender, or race, or intelligence, you wouldn’t do that. But sexual preference is the one area where everybody feels like it’s okay to mock, and I just wanted to point that out as something we need to be really, really careful about. Because you often never know when you might hurt someone, even people in our lives all the time, in our workplaces, in our schools, in our families.

She got no further, as various students found their voices, marshaled their ideas and experiences, and engaged her. It seemed as familiar as breathing, despite the tense topic; this was how students related in this space, how knowledge was constructed in English class—the class with no “taboo” topics. Kendra argued that children were born children, blank slates who could not biologically be considered homosexual. Chandra quietly challenged her with nature/nurture arguments from a previous psychology class. Chelsey thought homosexuality was an “imbalance,” but Lakethia preferred to think of it as “preference.” Tyson even tried to distinguish American homophobia from her previous experiences in Nigeria, pointing out that there “you just didn’t see gay people.”

“Do you think that was because you didn’t see them, or because they weren’t there?” Sullivan asked, half to Tyson and half to the room at large. Throughout the discussion, she offered suggestions that clarified or problematized their words, non-judgmental and compassionate despite her own strong feelings about the issue.

_Sullivan_: How difficult would it be to not see your vision of sexuality?
_Tyson_: I don’t see people saying “Don’t be gay.”
_Trina_: You would if you were in Texas.
_Yolanda_: If you grow up and don’t see—Every guy in here had the nasty face on while Lakethia was talking about her book. That’s not something they’ve been exposed to. If they were from elsewhere, it _might_ be different.
_Chelsey_: Gay and straight people are—it’s the same thing as with white and black. If you grow up isolated you think, “Why are they like that? They’re so strange.” Just because they’re different than you.

This conversation filled the remaining time, pushing other book presentations to the second scheduled day. For Sullivan, the intense dialogue took moral precedence over due dates and
curriculum schedule. After class, students lingered during the break, continuing the conversation on both gay/straight and black/white fronts. Before catching up with his friends, Dale quietly confessed to Sullivan that he used to be friends with a gay guy, but his parents made him avoid his former friend, afraid “it would rub off.”

Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of this dialogic cornerstone of her pedagogical philosophy was their weekly seminar. Seminars are whole class conversations around a (hopefully) meaningful topic, led only loosely by the teacher and privileging student ideas. In English, they usually ran for half of the class, 45 minutes. Sometimes the topic related directly to their current unit, or sometimes Sullivan picked up something in the news that she thought might prove interesting to them. Students dragged their desks into a tight circle and she joined them, everyone an equal participant in a discussion that played out ideas and experiences in an open-ended, thoughtful way, a conversation between people that allowed them to bring more than book knowledge to the table. The seminar was a place where many students shined, especially those who found individual work burdensome, and a space where Sullivan regularly learned about their lives and viewpoints. At the close of each seminar, students were also asked to reflect back over the experience, both to metacognitively assess their own participation and to add any additional thoughts that they were unable to voice in the seminar itself.

---

106 When the classroom finally emptied, she made her way back to my desk, looking distressed. “That didn’t go well,” she worried. “But even if it didn’t go perfectly, I’m glad we’ve put it on the table. They weren’t just allowed to laugh and have that discussion. That would be worse.”

107 According to Nieto (1999):

> Once teachers admit that they do not know everything, they make themselves as vulnerable as their students. It is this attitude of learner on the part of teachers that is needed, first, to convey to students that nobody is above learning; and second, to let students know that they are also knowers and that what they know can be an important source of learning for others as well. It follows from this perspective that teachers need to build on what their students bring with them to the classroom. (p. 144)

108 The seminar reflection worksheet includes a checklist of behaviors and a series of three short questions. The behaviors include things such as “I came prepared by having read the text and any advance questions,” “I listened openly and attentively as other shared their ideas,” “I repeated points that had already been said rather than introducing something new” and “I talked too much, dominating the conversation.” The questions invite further
Usually, Sullivan led the seminars, choosing the topics and texts that seemed most useful to their current work, structuring questions and designing roles that would allow everyone to participate, even students who might have fallen behind in class. For one fall seminar, she remembered:

I spent forever crafting it so that it would be a tiered ability level. And not just ability level, but tiered interest level and [it would include] different things that someone would see ‘cause I can do that, because I know these kids. And the questions were totally open-ended questions, but a very structured discussion. They got a little pass card where the first thing they had to do was assign people to read the questions out loud. Because some of the kids, when they see a long question, they’re like “Oh no! I ain’t readin’ that!” unless someone reads it to them. Someone to ensure that every person in the circle says something about each question. Somebody to record the conversation. And then they moved through the questions. So it was structured, and the questions weren’t right or wrong. And they did beautifully.

During the 1984 unit, Tony asked if he could choose the text and lead the discussion. “I never offered that before,” Sullivan said afterward, somewhat surprised at herself. “Which I should, but I never have. It never even occurred to me that they would want to. So, I’m like—uh, yeah!” Tony told her his idea, inspired by their investigations into the idea of the System. She paraphrased him to me later: “I listen to this band called International Noise Conspiracy and they have two songs that are like totally clued into 1984 and into this paper we’re writing. What if I print out the lyrics and write discussion questions?” On the day of the seminar, Tony appeared in the teacher office with his plan to make certain she approved.

There was some language he wasn’t sure [would be acceptable], but I told him it was fine. And the discussion questions were amazing. It was phenomenal. “Smash it all up in the name of . . .” and then it gave a catalogue list of people.109 “It” was a synonym for comments about their favorite point in the discussion, things they wanted to say but didn’t, and comments that changed the way they thought about an idea.

109 International Noise Conspiracy’s “Smash It Up” lyrics:
I want to smash it up for all the workers who spent hours into nothing
I want to smash it up for all my sisters who got caught up in this funky system
I want to smash it up just like a locust, like a satellite shooting rockets
I want to smash it up in every way I can and right now I think I want to be your man
Smash it up when I’m down
I want to smash it up for all the kids who got fucked up just like their parents did
the System and the way things are. It catalogues all the people whose needs are not met. And the other song was about “Capitalism stole my virginity.” And so, it was about the ways capitalism could steal a person’s innocence. How could it rape a land? Amazing.

The Tony-led seminar proved to be interesting and rich, engaging the other students and giving him the opportunity to express things that were meaningful to him, to take a leadership role in the classroom, to instigate intellectual discussion. With his ever-present addictions, Tony was often easily distracted and even obnoxious in the classroom, but these behaviors did not nullify his intelligence in Sullivan’s eyes, and the lyrics-based seminar only further proved his talent.

Every Monday in February (Black History Month), Sullivan led seminars focused on a local article about race. One explored the white author’s experience with being challenged over a seemingly racist action. Walking down a street in Oakwood, she was accosted by a young black man who thought she had sped up fearfully as she neared him. “Why you white bitches so afraid of me?” he asked her from across the street. Because she considered herself both progressive and non-racist, she stopped to talk with him and, subsequently, wrote the article. All of Sullivan’s black students immediately reacted, pegging the author as subconsciously racist. They pointed particularly to her claim to be married to a South African and the lack of detail about whether he was black or white. In their eyes, she was “playing a race card” in order to portray herself as more open-minded and liberal. “It was the most fascinating discussion ever,” Sullivan recalled later. “And it went on and on.”

Sullivan chose the article for its controversial ideas and for the author’s belief that “sometimes what we can do in the race question is simply bear witness to the other’s truth.”

I want to smash it up - the gods and masters who made us die so much faster
Yeah you know I want to smash it up
Smash it up when I'm down
I want to smash it up for all the people and for our right to be treated equal
I want to smash it up for all my friends I hope you stick around until the very end
Yeah you know we gotta smash it up
Smash it up when I'm down.
What she did not expect was that the black girls in first period would take the charge to heart and turn it back on the classroom situation itself.

But the thing that was so beautiful was not the discussion about the article, but what happened in first period. You know how there were just three white kids sitting, like they do, in their little enclave . . . . And after we talked about the article, all of a sudden the [black] girls turned toward the three white kids and [asked] “How come you never say anything? What do you think about this? Are ya’ll just not interested in us? Do ya’ll not like us?” It just came out. It was on the table, and there was no way to put it back in.

Feeling tensions rise, Sullivan moved to sit near the white students, an act of proximity that she hoped would help them feel supported enough to respond without defensiveness or aggression. “Well, I date a black guy,” Erin said. “We live next to a black family,” Jesse added. But the black students politely challenged those statements, trying to get at the reality of a classroom relationship in which white students always sat together and talked exclusively with each other when allowed to choose. Sullivan felt the conversation was, overall, “healthy,” something that “need[ed] to happen.” She intervened here and there, redirecting comments that could be construed as overly harsh by paraphrasing them, separating key points from any language of attack.

Just as she felt the students had begun listening seriously to each other, Xavier walked in, his presence changing the dynamics of the class and eventually shutting down the conversation. After class, he also warned her about making the white students uncomfortable. Sullivan felt frustrated. “If they’re uncomfortable for 45 minutes out of a year it’s unacceptable [to him],” she exclaimed, irritated. While she admitted the white students were indeed “on the hot seat,” she felt strongly that the black students were “genuinely trying to be very welcoming.” This is the sort of dialogue that could truly prove educational.110

110 During a recent conference presentation, Gay (2006) vehemently announced that she felt it was time to confront the problem of racism directly, without worrying about finding a “safe space” for whites. “Our students need to know how to struggle,” she argued.
Most of the time, classroom conversations were invigorating and engaging, something students looked forward to during the week. However, open-ended dialogue also invited problems. Tensions between students inevitably appeared when they interacted with each other, including deep-seated assumptions and prejudices that effectively blocked communication. Although Sullivan hoped to foster cross-cultural and collaborative conversation, she found that the “best laid plans” could crumble in the face of student realities.

During one seminar, a slow-brewing dynamic began to boil between Jack (a middle class white male) and Ebony (a working class black female):

Ebony, very opinionated, very loud, and abrasive in some ways, has got tons to say about this play, right? Jack has a ton to say about this play . . . . What I saw happening yesterday was two things, and both people were at fault. I think Jack thinks he’s smarter than anyone in the world and that, if you’re a black female or black period, there’s no way that what you’re saying is valid. I swear to god, I saw it happening so quickly. I saw it [also] happening with Rashad, who might come off as a doofus, but is very bright . . . [and] very perceptive about literature . . . I noticed that when [Ebony or Rashad] had the floor, Jack’s body language was very communicative—staring out the window or whatever. And when someone would say something and Ebony would get animated in her response, he’d be like, “God, do you ever shut up?” Literally.

It’s very hard to know—I’m almost kicking myself for not right at that moment when it came out, for not being courageous enough to say, “I see something happening here and I’m just going to lay it out.” But I couldn’t do it. In the 24 hours since then, I’ve been thinking about that. Because I don’t know how to—I would like to be able to say, “Jack, it seems to me you’re discounting anybody’s point other than your own, especially when it’s coming from—” I mean, do I say especially when it’s coming from? I don’t know. And “Ebony I think people are reading your communication style in a way that’s shutting them down.” I wish I could do it.

Differences in student communication styles continued to plague the seminars during spring semester, particularly those focused on topics that black students found easy to enter and which inspired them to speak with vociferous engagement, such as when Sullivan asked them to read a column by a conservative editorialist who felt that parents and schools had gone overboard with concern about kids’ self-esteem. Many of the African American students agreed
vehemently, sharing stories of discipline in their homes, of getting “whoopins” and being “beat down” as punishment for their infractions. They laughed and pointed out that their parents rarely worried about their self-esteem when they were in the wrong. Many of the black girls (Ebony, Nikki, Tyson, and even often-quiet Trina) took the lead in this discussion, their voices assertive and strong, but Sullivan noticed that very few white students joined in. “The white kids were very silenced by this,” she told me afterward. “I noticed that they were silenced by the way in which the communication happened.” She spent the rest of the week speculating about the students’ reactions and her own contradictory sense that the seminar was “great, interesting, and so lively” despite the non-participation of the white students.

We have a whole list of seminar etiquette and you don’t get to not say anything. [So,] what I mean by them not saying anything is that I had to specifically say to the class, “For the next question someone has to throw it directly to Jesse or Martin or [any of the white students]. And they have to do that. Then they would answer it fine, but they weren’t putting themselves out there.

After the seminar, Erin’s post-reflection sheet chronicled her discomfort. Under the question that solicited further things that she wanted to say, she had written: “I wanted to say a ton of stuff, but I didn’t feel comfortable in this class. I feel like if I say something, I’m going to get beat down by these loud girls.” Sullivan was only partly surprised by the comment, but uncertain how to respond.

So I’ve been thinking about that all week . . . . They do—like, I will say—like Tyson, for example. She’s very articulate and her points are great but she has a more aggressive speaking style. So do I address it out in the open? Do I put it on the table?

In one sense, Erin was right. One of the most striking things about Sullivan’s classroom was its intensity—and the noise that accompanied it, particularly from the African American girls. It was a startling contrast to the silence I remember from her classes at North Oakwood.

My classroom has gotten louder over the course of my teaching. I don’t have the nervousness of not being able to get a class back. And even my expectations of what it
meant to be getting work done are very different than they are today. Because if you walk into that second period class with those girls, it is loud.111 And they call out a lot. But it’s not like calling out to each other across the room about your boyfriend, it’s about responding. And they do it. And I’m fine with that. I worry that sometimes someone who doesn’t know will walk in and think [I have] no control. But I do.

Indeed, as a former teacher visiting Sullivan’s class, I could feel myself instinctively wanting to stifle some of the talking that occurred around me, still well-socialized into those modes of classroom management. Sullivan, too, sometimes worried that some of the quieter students such as Abby, a white female who often passively dragged along behind the few white males in the classroom, might find the chaos distracting. She felt responsible for addressing the racial tensions of the classroom and wondered how they might be channeled into a multicultural learning experience for both whites and blacks in English III/IV. She considered directly discussing communication styles, wondering whether the white students could reflectively examine their perceptions of “loudness” and aggression in African American speech patterns. “I just don’t know what to do with that,” she told me.

The situation was complicated by her sense that Erin’s fear (like Jack’s antagonism) came out of a deep-seated dysconscious racism. “Sometimes when [the white students] eat in my room [at break], they are like ‘You know how those black people are so loud in the cafeteria? I can’t be with that!’ So I think that they think, well, that’s just how black people are.”

The seemingly equitable, open dialogic methods of Sullivan’s classroom still ran sharply against the entrenched social attitudes and assumptions that were part of Erin’s (and some of the other white students’) world. By encouraging her African American students to speak out powerfully, Sullivan feared she inadvertently hindered the white students’ access to voice,

111 Sullivan’s words echo Gay (2000), who writes that the energy and exuberance with which highly culturally affiliated African Americans invest their interactions is troublesome to many teachers . . . viewed as impulsive, overemotional, and out of control. Consequently, much of their classroom interaction with these students is of a disciplinary and controlling manner . . . . Students are often reprimanded for undesirable behaviors more than they are instructed on academic learning. High-level achievement is seriously constrained under these conditions. (p. 54)
notwithstanding conversational rules that make certain everyone spoke. No amount of regulation and encouragement convinced Erin to “put herself out there” at the same time as Ebony, Nikki, and Tyson.

* * * *

Sullivan searched for a pedagogical “balance” which supported and valued African American students for their interesting contributions but which did not shut down other students at the same time. While classroom dialogue as a method seemed to hint at an equitable, multivocal approach to ideas, she found that students’ latent beliefs and cultural positions continued to interfere with meaningful interactions. Even though scholars argue that culturally relevant approaches can support success for students from all walks of life, Sullivan’s initial optimism waned. Even when guiding seemingly open class discussions, she knew that she made choices about who to include and exclude. Invariably, some students were privileged over others in ways that felt inherently unfair. From conversational styles to broader ways of being in classrooms, she recognized that teacher choices in classrooms impacted students.

The conditions of [my former teaching style] automatically engaged the white kids . . . . The competition, the pressure, the expectation, the rigidity, the deadlines, the inflexibility—that motivates. Now this is going to get complex. That does not work, generally, for African American students, right? . . . . I feel like changing a lot of those ways that I usually am in the classroom is part of [their] success. But it’s definitely not motivating [all of] the white kids. And it’s not working for all the black kids, either, but it’s definitely a shift . . . . When I put the set of Jay-Z lyrics up . . . . I think that worked as a bridge for a lot of the class. [But not for] those white kids in first period. [They] probably listen to that music, and the hip hop culture is very much co-opted by them. I can do that all I want, but their whole experience in the world tells them that it’s secondary. I can value it by putting it up in the classroom, but . . . to say that that’s working for them as a means of understanding a cognitive concept is not true.

When balance and equality evaded her, she fell back on her current understanding of historical privilege and power, a complicated and uncomfortable vision of fairness.
Here’s my honest, flawed comment to you—and I’m just going to say it—this is where I know that I am on the side of encouraging [the black girls’] contribution in the dialogue even—okay, here’s my ugly teacher comment—even at the expense of an Erin feeling shut down. I’m not saying I’m going to do that. I’m saying I have that [inside me]. I would be okay with that on an impulse level.

Aware that her goal as a teacher was to provide effective, care-based education for all students, she was pained and embarrassed to admit an inclination that privileged marginalized students over mainstream students. Although she wanted to avoid claiming the impulse, she also knew her primary pedagogical concern was for those students with a history of educational marginalization. Forced to make a choice between mediocre education for all, or superior education for one group of students, she acknowledged that she would probably choose her students of color. Equality took a back seat to advocacy for marginalized students, a move toward larger social equity if not strict fairness in the classroom itself. In thinking through such matters, she recalled serving on a hiring committee at North shortly after the beginning of the equity initiative and their decision to hire a teacher of color despite a plethora of excellent white candidates. “Both the black and white faculty were so offended by that,” she admitted. But with the glaring absence of teachers of color, the committee felt that “fairness” to white candidates was less critical than including faces of color on the staff.

The same dilemmas existed at the core of her current pedagogical choices. “Take Susan, for example,” she continued, pointing to one of the more successful white females in first period, a quiet, studious girl.

Susan is a North kid. She is fine. Absolutely. I love her. She’s smart. She deserves, but it wouldn’t kill me [not to teach to her particular strengths] . . . . Do I sit at home—when I’m thinking of a way to introduce something—do I think of how to challenge Susan? No. Do I think of how to have buy-in from Yolanda, Erika, Ebony, Trina, Nikki, [and the other black kids]? Yes. I do.

---

112 Lindsey (2001) writes that “while white people do have pressures to perform, succeed, and survive, such pressures occur for heterosexual white men in a context lacking the additional and insupportable pressures of institutionalized oppression.” The invisibility of how power accrues to members of the mainstream “makes the goal of cultural competence all the more difficult to achieve.” (p. 32).
But, like everything in the messy world of practice, the decision was not as simple as making the needs of African American students central. For Sullivan, the theoretical exercise broke down in the face of knowing these individual kids, caring about their futures.

The flipside is that if we were having this discussion and I was still teaching at North, I would have a way easier time validating what I just said. But these white kids, to me, they’re problematic. They’re not your “you’re-going-to-be-fine-no-matter-what-I-do” kids. They’re not! So, now my argument’s starting to not be so great.

In order to better serve some students, Sullivan saw herself either inadvertently or deliberately disenfranchising others, and yet all of her students were equally deserving and needy in her eyes. It was an untenable situation, a lose-lose ethic that weighed on her compassionate conscience. “The thing that I’m just not figuring out well this year is finding a way of being in the classroom that is good for both groups. I’m really struggling with it . . . . Can you do both? I don’t know.” On those days when doing both proved impossible, she found one more reason to doubt her ability and her excellence as a teacher, further eroding her confidence and shaking her certainty that she could make a difference for students.

Getting Literate: Mastery as Praxis

Unlike many traditional English Language Arts teachers, who make fine literature the heart of their practice, Sullivan was primarily concerned with literacy—reading, writing, speaking, and critiquing in a social space and as a means for personal advancement. At the heart of her work was the question of creating confident readers, skillful writers, and thoughtful orators. Although she personally found beauty and inspiration in literature, she nevertheless saw the novels, poems, and plays of the English curriculum as tools in the service of student mastery. When thinking about possible interdisciplinary collaboration with other teachers, she was quick to sacrifice her chosen curriculum in favor of an applied, critical literacy. “I [can] work with
anything. I [can] weave these skills into other curricula . . . reading to learn *that* knowledge.

Writing for *that.*”

Basic and necessary literacy skills were infused into all corners of the curriculum, depending on the needs to come to her attention.\textsuperscript{113} After realizing that very few students understood the use of semi-colons in their writing (but avidly sprinkled them throughout their papers nevertheless), Sullivan added a mechanics components to their study of Martin Luther King, Jr. She asked pairs of students to justify semi-colons in a passage drawn from the “Letter,” then discussed their choices as a whole class. Jack was quickly able to describe semi-colon usage and Ebony, not to be outdone, offered that “both parts of the sentences are strong, but he’s still got to take a break.” Beyond simply understanding the basic function of the punctuation, Sullivan pushed them to explore writerly choices in specific instances. What was the rhetorical intent signaled by punctuation? “Why might Dr. King have used a semicolon here instead of a stronger period or a weaker comma?” she asked. “Why choose one sentence with semicolons over two or three very short sentences?” These were high level grammatical questions, difficult for many students in the class, but indelibly linked to a more profound view of King and themselves as writers.

Because students brought different strengths to the classroom, Sullivan often designed differentiated\textsuperscript{114} lessons that allowed her to address a wide range of abilities and interests. “I can’t have a Jack and a Gregory and a Tony sitting through a lesson on run-on sentences. I just can’t. They don’t need it.” In most differentiated lessons, she provided small groups of students with tasks that pushed them in ways they need to be pushed. One of the most intense lessons I

\textsuperscript{113} For Delpit (1995), literacy skills are a primary tool in students’ ability to access the culture of power. She defines skills as “useful and usable knowledge which contributes to a student’s ability to communicate effectively in standard, generally acceptable literary forms” (p. 18-19). Such skills should be taught as part of meaningful, critical, and creative communication, however, rather than through rote memorization.

\textsuperscript{114} According to Sullivan, the guru of differentiation is Tomlinson, author of *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classroom.*
witnessed during my visits was a differentiated approach to T.S. Eliot’s poem, “The Hollow Men,” a difficult and abstract text, but one which dovetailed with themes in a play they had been studying. The class was split into three groups. Two groups were heterogeneous, with a variety of reading abilities and interests, and one was a partnership between the two most advanced and philosophical students (Jack and the ever-distractible Tony). The first group explored diction possibilities, playing speculative games with significant words from the poem like “meaningless,” “hollow,” “bang” and “whimper.” The second group explored stages of action, answering somewhat more abstract questions about how an idea becomes reality—or how it doesn’t. Jack and Tony, the third group, were asked to explore nihilism as a philosophy, based on a definition and a few leading questions. I joined their small group while Sullivan moved back and forth between the other two. Jack immediately wanted to talk about the pointlessness of believing life was pointless, but Tony genuinely sympathized with the nihilistic impulse. He insisted quietly that people abuse drugs because of “the nihilist within.” Ever the music fan, he even sang a verse of “Tambourine Man,” which he explained as “the epitome of the nihilism of drug addiction.”

After several minutes of small group brainstorming and writing, each group led the whole class conversation based on their questions. What might it mean for the world to end “not with a bang but a whimper”? How do the denotations and connotations of words work in the poem? What could it mean to be “hollow,” “stuffed with straw”? How do people respond to hollowness in their lives? Before even looking at the Eliot poem for the first time, students were already laying the groundwork for comprehension.

“Why stuffed?” Chad wanted to know. He sprawled across his desk, long legs stuck out carelessly in the aisle. His eyes seemed glassy today, his words slurred and giggly. Both Sullivan and I suspected he was high.
“Stuffed with lies,” Gregory offered.

“With information,” Jack suggested from across the room. “Useless.”

“Like Willie Loman,” Sullivan pointed out, drawing a parallel with their recent reading. “When he talks about feeling dead inside, he’s about to die for real. But he’s been there all the time.”

“The world makes you think you have to have someone, a person, something, to be anything.” Meghan spoke up, referring to her scribbled group notes. “So when you feel down, you turn to other things just to feel good. Once your boyfriend or whatever leaves you, or you sober up, things are just going to be back the way they were.”

Nikki was at her elbow, nodding vehemently. “Like in that movie, that man who slept with everyone.” She talked at length, rambling about the movie. Even Ebony chimed in, momentarily engaged. “Yeah, he was a ho.”

Sullivan listened for a moment, and then slipped in with “That’s so interesting. What I hear you saying is that sometimes we can cover up that we’re ultimately alone, that we’re ultimately going to die. We don’t reflect on that, but it’s the reality. We use sexual comfort, perhaps, to get our minds off it.”

Other students provided their personal spins on this battle against nothingness. “My friend smokes so much he completely forgot where he was once. He took out a blunt in health class.”

“People use the Bible to give the illusion of paradise after death.”

“I got one to add in there, too. Food. People use food to distract themselves.”

“What about people who use adrenaline? The rush?”

Gregory picked up again, summarizing with a shrug. “Everybody clings to at least one of these things.”
And Meghan finished the thought: “Regardless of whether you’re conscious of it or not, you look for something to fill your life. Every single one of these is in your life.”

After several more minutes of speculation, Sullivan brought them to the text of the actual poem, flashing it up against the cinderblock wall with the overhead projector. “So, let’s read.” Jack volunteered, working through about half the poem before stopping and Chad picked up smoothly to finish without anyone asking. When his voice fell off, the class sat completely silent for once.

“That’s deep,” Nikki murmured, breaking the spell.

By the end of the class period, these students had picked apart Eliot’s modernist poem thoroughly, led by the stronger readers but involving almost everyone at some point. They looked at several possibilities for meaning, talked through their favorite interpretations. Jack’s favorite spin included a sense that “the emptiness within us leads to how the world ends. It ends by our not thinking for ourselves. Everybody’s falling into apathy.” As a culminating activity, Sullivan asked everyone to write their final interpretation and turn it in. Significantly, she never provided a final, closed reading. Instead, she privileged their construction of meaning; their activity of interpretation was more important than any outside, disconnected theories that she could provide as an English scholar. The differentiated first stage of the lesson allowed each student to participate in important ways; the whole class discussion capitalized on individual strengths across the class, a collaborative effort that produced a complex understanding of a complex text. By himself, Chad would have never even read such a poem. Without Tony’s input, Meghan would not have been able to grasp the nihilistic ideas within the poem or seen how such an understanding opened the poem in new ways. Without Nikki’s personal connections about life and love, Ebony would have simply tried to sleep. The differentiated practice allowed learning on a scale that many students could or would not achieve alone.
Perhaps more than any other mastery goal, Sullivan wanted to create readers. Despite her interest in exposing students to a varied palette of literature, she also pointed out that analytical literary study rarely created real readers. Readers were not necessarily English scholars. They didn’t choose books for the depth of analysis, the intricate themes, or the immediate social consciousness. They chose books because they enjoyed reading them and because they were confident in their ability to make meaning in interaction with the written word. They chose books that spoke to them in some way. “The lifelong reader thing?” she told me. “That’s not going to be helped by yet another ‘We read for this. We read to do this.’

With that in mind, Sullivan instituted an ongoing “Sustained Silent Reading” assignment. At least twice a week (usually on Tuesdays and Thursdays), she and the students read a book of their own selection quietly for 20 minutes. After four weeks, they presented “Independent Book Chats,” loosely orchestrated individual presentations that are more commercial than book report. Students offered brief summaries of interesting sections of their book and included answers to at least two other structured but open-ended prompts such as “A quote that was significant to me . . .” or “An ethical connection to my life is . . .” or “A song that reminds me of this book is . . .” Book selections ranged from canonical literature to casual beach reading, spanning all genres and a variety of interests. Many were recent movies; many were admittedly only partly-read. Nevertheless, Sullivan continued to persist in the weekly sustained silent reading, re-iterating to me that the value of the assignment was in allowing students to treat
books the way adults treated books outside of schools, allowing them to read freely and talk
about them in ways that appealed to them.115

Do I know damn well some of them don’t read? Of course. Will some of their
presentations be stupid? Yeah. However, just the culture of sitting there and talking
about books that they chose is enough . . . [I] wouldn’t give this up even though it’s got
the major down side of some kids thinking they’re getting one over on the class or on
me. But they could do that with anything, and if I made all my decisions based on that, I
wouldn’t do anything.

Initially, Sullivan brought in boxes of books for them to choose (in addition to selecting
books from home, friends, or the library that no one seemed to ever visit). “They were books
that I thought would be engaging independent reads. Ellen Foster. Of Mice and Men.” The students,
however, were unimpressed by such titles and clearly felt this to be just one more dull
assignment to be tolerated. Determined to interest them, Sullivan searched used book stores for
other books, slowly putting together a remarkably eclectic collection but gaining very little
reaction from the students, especially the African American females.116 Finally, she threw in “a
trashy one,” one book that fell completely outside her personal reading tastes and knowledges, a
dime-store junk paperback from an unrecognizable author about urban girls, love and sexuality.

Over the next few weeks, that book was passed around eagerly from one black girl to
another. They talked about it in class and teased those still waiting for their turn to read it. A

115 During the February books chats, Abby presented on Tuesdays with Morrie and shared a poignant passage about
trust falls. “Sometimes you have to actually believe what you feel,” she explained, struggling to capture why the
moment was meaningful to her. Justin, one of four African American males at MCHS, claimed he “ain’t really got
that far” in Hoops but then offered an engaging description of what “shavers” were, his reluctant voice growing
stronger as he continued to talk. Juelle talked about Waiting to Exhale, a book that’s “goooooood, but a little wordy.”
Lakethia’s book, Miss Thang: Being Black, Gay, and on the Streets, triggered a long and intense discussion about
homosexuality. Some books immediately gained eager and rapt attention from the class, while others appealed only
to a subset of kids. Dale’s Dead Zone earned him some rolled eyes from some the African American girls. Jack’s Fear
and Loathing in Las Vegas seemed to interest Tony and some of the guys. Gregory’s In Our Time (Hemingway) bored
everyone but Sullivan.

116 She searches for books that interest all students, male and female, black, white and Latina, fantasy-junkies and
those who enjoy soap-operaesque semi-realism. Sean, one of second period’s white males, told her that he always
wanted to read Dante’s Inferno and extracted a promise that she would obtain a copy for the collection. She agreed
(but also shouted after him as he left the classroom, “Libraries are our friend!”). The bookshelf space in the
cramped teacher offices are filled to overflowing, but Sullivan hopes to continue to expand her selection.
group of them went to the local library downtown and hunted down fifteen other books in the series and those, too, were quickly shared. Often, a book would be read entirely in one night and then passed along to other hands.

Sullivan smiled as she described their eagerness to me. “They say ‘We’re readers now! We’re readers now!’ And I don’t care what they’re reading. They’re reading.” She still had not read the books herself, but the girls shared regular updates with her. When she brought another similar book to class, Tyree’s *Flyy Girl*, they argued vehemently over who would get to read it first. “They’re actually waiting for a new book,” she said, still slightly amazed. “And now there’s more of a trust that I would find something that they would like. In the past, I wouldn’t have even thought about that issue.”

* * * *

A focus on mastery also led to a variety of other changes in Sullivan’s practice, changes she hinted at during our initial interviews in 2003, but which she tried to perform here at MCHS. “It’s not about lowering expectations,” she told me. “It’s a relaxing of style.” Particularly, she tried to relax her former obsessive focus on grades and deadlines. “I used to be a total freakout about deadlines,” she laughed. When students did not produce assignments on time, they received a quick zero or a reduced grade. The punishment, Sullivan admitted, was as much about teaching obedience as about student mastery of a skill. Zeroes mounted up for particular students (most often African Americans), spelling out a failing grade despite evidence that they were learning in the class.

“If they master a skill in December, but don’t turn in homework in January, then . . . are you penalizing them for being annoying or not meeting a deadline?” Sullivan asked. Now, many
of her deadlines were “rolling,” which allowed students to take extra time when necessary on assignments. All assignments did have distinct deadlines that gave students something to aim for, and some assignments must still be completed on time. (For example, seminar preparation must be done before the seminar.) But other assignments, including most essays and the practice letters for college applications that slowly arrived on Sullivan’s cart over a two week period, had no such limitations. Unsurprisingly, some students took advantage of the policy to put work off, but other students were grateful for the flexibility in their lives. Although “it’s a record keeping nightmare” on her end, Sullivan felt that the practice improved student learning and encouraged more students to submit work in the long run.

“Is it a bad thing for the working world?” she pondered with a shrug. Many of these students already held jobs successfully; their belatedness in turning in an essay for English class told more about their relationship to English than to any career. Of course, Sullivan’s colleagues “celebrate the fact that they don’t take late work” and criticized her policy as promoting laziness. Sullivan, however, was more concerned by the consequence of a string of zeroes than upholding a personal work ethic. The threat of failure or the promise of an “A” rarely motivated MCHS students; many were content to trade zeroes for the opportunity to avoid learning.

But in the real world, if I don’t get something done on time, say taxes, the IRS doesn’t come by and say, “Well, okay. You don’t have to do it, then.” There’s a consequence, but I still have to do the work. So kids who miss the deadline, take a zero, and are done, isn’t real world. No, it’s “You will be turning in this paper. I don’t care that it’s seven days late.”

In Sullivan’s classes, assigned work had weight, not the weight of an extrinsic grade but the weight of its educational value. Learning and mastery took precedence over expected behaviors and obedience.

In her North classes, Sullivan had a strict make-up policy for missed quizzes, but at MCHS she found that she was no longer “willing to push for my little quizzes” if students could
prove that they mastered the material itself. When three girls missed several days of class, including quizzes and minor assignments, Sullivan made a deal with them. If they did well on the exam on the following day, she would adjust the zeroes to reflect their performance on the exam rather than hound them about turning in missed work.

They thought that was dead fair. [And] truly, it’s more a pain for me to get those things, copy them, find the time—for what? To make my point that you need to be in class? If they know it tomorrow, they know it. If they don’t, they don’t. Because my instinct is they do. My instinct is they will pull it out tomorrow. They may not be able to come to class regularly, but I think they have and can demonstrate that they’re learning the material.

Sullivan’s attitude about late and missed work changed depending on the needs and situations of individual students involved. In this case, the prime question was simply “Do these girls need to repeat English IV?” And the answer? “No.” Her instinct proved correct and the girls (who would have failed English based on that string of zeroes) were able to pass and have continued to succeed in their next courses.

Except for outside reading, essays, and long-range projects, Sullivan also downplayed the familiar institution of homework. “I barely give any,” she said. “If I can’t accomplish enough English in and hour and a half, that’s sad.” The standard “go home and answer these questions” worksheets had no place in her new pedagogy, although they once were standard. In part, the goal of such work was to prove students had read the material, a task she can accomplish as part of everyday class work. “I saw at North Oakwood and Northridge that even [for] the honors kids . . . very rarely did it seem like something worthwhile to them.” In her mind, such instrumental busy-work only inspired students to cheat and copy, often without ever engaging with the text in any genuine or educational way.\(^{117}\) “I’m so not interested in externally motivating that way anymore.”

\(^{117}\) Increasing their homework also means massively increasing her hours on the job. English teachers often struggle to balance their essay-heavy paper load with the students’ need to write. Many “how to survive the English
There were days, however, when Sullivan doubted whether an effective, successful teacher should “relax” about grades, homework, standards, where her vision of mastery was challenged by Ebony’s 69.8 average, Nikki’s crayon-written worksheet, and Tony’s inability to concentrate. Again, the spectre of rigor, half-believed conceptualizations of how things should work in classrooms, haunted her. Her dedication to an exploratory, transformative practice slipped, weakened in the wake her concern for students with varying levels success in learning.

Because of the intensity of her outside rapport, Ebony’s case particularly troubled her. Although she passed English III (barely) this spring, Sullivan was troubled by the fact that a more structured, rigid grading policy might have inspired her to turn in more work. I fact, when I asked about Ebony over the phone one afternoon during the summer, her voice sounded strained. “I can’t start thinking about those kids,” she said sadly. “It just breaks my heart.” Despite continuing to be her “very vivacious, sweet, friendly self” outside of class, Ebony’s achievement during the end of spring semester “just kind of faded.” As her interest in achievement went down, Sullivan pulled out the promissory note from back in February, the classroom” manuals suggest various grading schemes, including simply checking to see that students have completed assignments. For Sullivan, however, even that seems to be too much. I’m not willing to have that be the other half of my life anymore. I’m just not. And it’s ridiculous because there’s only 38 students here, when I’m used to dealing with 138. I could still do all that. I could take up every little thing, check it off, give it five points. Right? [But] I’m not willing to have that intake everyday. I just don’t want to deal with it.

She already wakes before 6am to take her children to daycare and preschool, spends the morning in preparation, and arrives at school by 11am to continue working in the office before classes. When third period hurries out at 5:30pm, she then must pick up her girls, make dinner and be a mother, and somehow get to sleep at a reasonable hour. Very few hours remain in the day for additional work. Although in the past, she put in extraordinary hours, she is no longer willing to let her passion for her job completely overwhelm her life. As part of her move to MCHS, she deliberately tried to “kind of calm down, not be so obsessed, not work all night. That had to happen or else I definitely [could] not be a teacher.” Although it helps her sustain herself in the classroom, she is uncertain about the tradeoff—as a caring teacher, can she trade student success for a saner lifestyle for herself?
scribbled message that swore to do better in English. “But it didn’t mean anything to her,” Sullivan sighed. “Or if it did, it didn’t make her change. She just opted out.”

Although limiting homework means students avoid busywork, she wondered if a student like Ebony might have benefited from regular worksheets, from practicing skills, from a myriad little grades to help her keep focused. Surely, she could only gain from more frequent writing assignments? From some drill and skill practice with semi-colons? From turning in class notes to make certain she would remember what was taught? From more quizzes to inspire—threaten—her into actually reading?

They need it. I can say all I want that this is just something to think about or just for you. I can say that all day long, but if that doesn’t work for that kid, I need to stop doing it. But I’m not going to. Which probably means I shouldn’t be in the high school classroom anymore. So, therein lies the rub.

Although her previous experiences at North suggested that Ebony would opt out even sooner in a tense, threatening, busy-work atmosphere, she could not help but feel like she had neglected a pedagogical possibility. She was stretched between two ethics, two teaching selves, searching for a space between, one that honored the success she saw in many of her African American students and also addressed the guilt that somehow she had not demanded their absolute best. The dilemmas of her new way of being weigh heavily on her mind, opening the door for self-critique and a failing sense of efficacy.

Despite years of creating a new vision of self in classrooms, the Good Teacher of North continued to lurk at the edges of her conscience, bleeding into her ability to see her own successes and value her dedication to “whole students.” Instead, just as her colleagues wanted to “fix” the students, Sullivan agonized about “fixing” herself, retrieving old ways of teaching in the

---

118 Kohl (1995) encourages teachers to look to their own practice as a way of understanding why some kids refuse to learn. His message is a warning about teachers who refuse to respect student’s cultural ways of being, inspiring them to simply turn off, to say, “I won’t learn from you” when you ask me to sacrifice my identity. For a culturally relevant teacher like Sullivan, however, such reflective self-critique actually cannibalizes the very practices that supposedly support culturally different students.
hope of regaining her own sense of excellence. And she castigated herself for her unwillingness to return to those old ways:

I can fix it next year. I can fix it now, but I don’t want to. I don’t feel like getting on top of my game. And [doing all the things I used to do]. And I am totally recognizing that I am part of the problem. In order to stay in the classroom as a classroom teacher, one of the compromises I’m making—and it shouldn’t be mine to make. I should have to do this, this, this, and this, when I know it in some way works. But I’m not willing to.

Sometimes it seemed she genuinely believed she could repair the problems that allowed Ebony to slip away academically, that allowed Dale to disrupt and distract, that allowed students to love her while disengaging from the aesthetics of English. In her mind, the fault rested not in the context in which she taught or the erratic educational histories of students. The fault was hers, in her unwillingness to play by well-worn rules—rules that a part of her knows had failed students over and over again. But because she opted not to “do this, this, this, and this,” problematic student performance could be interpreted as specious, a red flag that announced she was not on top of her pedagogical game. With different choices, different demands for excellence, she imagined that she could reach kids that felt unreachable and somehow recapture her belief that she was a teacher of excellence and rigor and standards—a Good Teacher. A super star.

Yesterday, Jack hugged me and said, “Ms. Sullivan, you’re a goddess.” He’s not being fake. “Yours is the only class I’m actually alive for.” But, Kim, that’s pitiful! It’s not even to my standards of aliveness in there. I’m thinking “What?!” It just doesn’t resonate with me. I don’t see how he could feel that way. I want to say, “You should see how I used to teach. I was a super star. I suck here.” You know? That’s my gut. But were he in that classroom, with how I used to be, I’m not sure he’d be saying “you’re a goddess.” I don’t know, though.

Coda: The Price of Uncertainty

The sometimes radical transformation of pedagogy to support marginalized students does not occur without crisis.119 As I listened to Sullivan’s stories during our interviews and as I

---

119 “Perhaps most importantly, teachers who work against the grain must wrestle with their own doubts, fend off
participated in the storied performances of her classroom, I found myself privy to a quiet ideological battle between two teaching selves, two voices, two systems—one monolithic, powerful, familiar and well-worn, the other newer, tentative, questioning, and in process. Even the most well-articulated pedagogical decisions produced moral dilemmas that, on reflection, challenged the very act of transformation. On a daily basis, Sullivan weighed her “new ways of being” against the Good Teacher of her past as she crafted teaching strategies, made content choices, and reconsidered her beliefs about students. Her ideas and actions spoke of the conflict and self-doubt that accompanied her work, an ever-present sense of confusion and potential failure. As the school year waned, the ongoing war within her own identity slowly took its toll in her confidence and sense of efficacy.

“I don’t think things are bad. I don’t,” she insisted once. "I just know what my differences are in the classroom. Some are good and some wouldn’t be happening. . . .” Her voice faded mid-statement. Despite her occasional protest, it was clear that she did think things were bad. Repeatedly, buried inside stories about students and excitement about teaching, a darker, sadder voice spoke. It talked about dreading work, about feeling sluggish and worn down. It shared a tired and anxious personal story about how a combination of personal life challenges and career frustration kept her on “mega doses of anti-depressants” and forced her

---

120 In her narrative studies of teachers in Israel, Elbaz-Luwisch (2005) draws on Bakhtin’s two forms of discourse to explain that “teachers themselves are often of two minds about their work” and will leave specific linguistic markers inside their narratives to point to moments of tension and struggle between their internal discourses and the grand narratives of authoritative discourse.

121 Sullivan had been on antidepressants for some time. Most of the time, it would be hard to even imagine her suffering from depression or anxiety, but as we spent more and more time together, there were hours before class where her brilliant smile vanished and her sparkling eyes seemed shadowed, troubled. It was a side of her that never entered the classroom, but one she knew must impact that work in more subtle ways.

I feel foggy a lot. And I feel sort of not able to think, but I think [the antidepressants are] definitely doing something for me. Obviously, I think it’s necessary, but the effects are totally there. I just feel kinda out of it a lot. But then, every time I think it’s a good time to come off, it’s not. I’m scared to come off.
to reconsider teaching as a career at all. “All of those things are contributing to this general (she searches for the word) uncertainty,” she confessed.

Sullivan struggled at the junction of relationship and rigor, unable to shake the sense that rigor included the very elements of Good Teaching that she believed needed to be challenged in schools. She blamed herself for being unwilling to meet the pedagogical dilemmas with a clear and familiar demand for excellence. Without realizing it, she held herself to the standard of teaching Better Students even as she reveled in the “wholeness” of her diverse classroom. When her students fell short of expectations, she concurrently recognized the barriers raised by their individual contexts and blamed herself for not performing well enough to surmount them. The framework of Good Teaching haunts her, fragmented and questioned, but still intact enough to give her pause and let her remember a rose-colored past where she felt certain of her skills and her goals.

And now I’m coming back to the other side and figuring out a balance—a sustaining way to be. Because what I’m doing now isn’t sustaining in that I’m telling you I don’t want to go to work because I feel sluggish and I’m not really sure what’s going on there as an end result. That’s not going to sustain me. But the other hyper self isn’t sustaining me either. So, that’s life. Work on that, will ya? Come back to me tomorrow with an answer.
CHAPTER 6
BETTER TEACHING: PUSHING THE LIMITS OF REACH

What if we discover that our present way of life is irreconcilable with our vocation to become fully human? --Paulo Freire

Shortly after spring break, Principal Xavier stopped Sullivan on her way to first period and asked her for a quick comment about how he might improve her experience at MCHS. Perhaps he sensed that all was not well; perhaps the seemingly unprovoked crying spell (see chapter 2) suggested that his “best teacher” was unhappy. Sullivan paused in the doorway to room 64 and thought for a moment, watching her students strolling into class, and then nodded. “I’ll write you a letter,” she promised. When she told me about the incident, she remembered particularly the look of surprise on his face as she turned away. “I don’t know what he expected, but it wasn’t for me to really take his offer seriously, I think.”

On March 15, 2006, sitting at our usual table at Alice’s Café and Bakery up the road, she pushed a single printed sheet of computer paper across to me. “Here it is. It took me all weekend to write. I’ll give it to him today.” The letter captures her voice, her beliefs about teaching and about herself, her wishes and warnings for the school, and lays the groundwork for one further turn that wouldn’t become final until a few days after this writing—her resignation from Middle College High School and from classroom teaching itself.

---

This was a quote sent to me by Sullivan while I was drafting this chapter; it reflected her feelings about the past year and her recent decisions regarding her work at MCHS.

A letter. I couldn’t help but smile. Of course she would write a letter, just as she writes to her students and even occasionally to me. It is simply what she does.
Below, I quote the letter in its entirety. Truly, she speaks her own word and world better than I could ever hope to do.

Dear Dr. Xavier:

I wanted to respond to the inquiry you made before we left for break. I appreciated the question about what you could do to make MCHS a positive and satisfying work environment, and I owe it to you to share some of my concerns because they come from a thoughtful, hopeful, but realistic place.

When I decided to leave North last year, I was hungry for an environment that was personal, warm, student-centered, a school whose very design, in its size and schedule, would be different from the assembly-line, student-as-number model. I was searching for a community that would be interested in the whole student—academic, emotional, and social—a school that knew its students and was designed around who they were and what they needed. I felt confident that this type of high school would be possible with a student body as small as 200 (under 40, as it turned out). I was sure that all the teachers who would even be interested in coming to a new school, especially the unique Middle College environment, would be committed to reform, to shaping a new way of being with both students and colleagues in an intimate, collaborative, creative approach. I took for granted that we would all recognize that the kinds of young people who would be interested in this program would not be the typical student and that we would have an exciting opportunity to “do school” differently.

Unfortunately, the reality is that I work every day next to someone who truly seems not to like students, to see them as an intrusion, and who transmits that attitude to students—and colleagues—every day. I also work across from someone who has difficulty providing warmth or humanity to students and is so concerned about test scores that the students seem merely to be standing in the way of those scores. For example, when a student such as Heath, who is obviously very sick (but very responsible), comes to school and checks in with his teachers before going home but is greeted by his teacher with, “All these student absences! They are going to ruin my test scores,” something feels wrong. When a student such as Ebony arrives an hour early every day, desperate for attention and positive reinforcement and willing to address these needs in productive ways (offering to help teachers, eager to do anything for anybody) but is treated with disdain for stepping foot in the office, something feels wrong. If these incidents were rare examples, they could be explained away, but unfortunately, they are reflective of an almost anti-student attitude and philosophy that seems pervasive enough to make me feel uncomfortable and out-of-place. What makes this feeling problematic for me is that, even if a structure for collaboration and team-building were put into place for next year, the pedagogical and personality differences are so vast that I am not sure that I would be interested in (or that my teaching would be enriched by) that collaboration. I don’t want to feel as if I’m speaking a foreign language or “coddling” my students when I mention teaching for mastery or differentiating instruction, nor do I want to try and convince someone about the value of managing a classroom in a way that shares power and preserves dignity or the benefits of moving away from excessive extrinsic motivation/reward.
It would help me to know if you sense any of this at all; if you, too, long for a friendly, creative, enthusiastic staff and a student-friendly culture in which we spend our time and energies problem-solving and collaborating, not squabbling over territory or complaining about students or about each other. I am having a hard time imagining how this scene is going to change next year, given the realities of our staff and the culture that is already in place. I am not sure that the idea of a professional learning community, staffed by people current in and excited about best practice, interested in professional growth to meet the needs of students, and, perhaps most importantly, able to share a healthy, happy, balanced model of learning and living is possible for our school as it is right now.

I recognize that what I have said may seem unkind and/or judgmental. What complicates things is that, on a personal level, I have had nothing but positive interactions with everyone on our staff, so my comments are not an attack. On a professional level, however, this is the truth as I am experiencing it right now, and I want to share that truth with you to open up some dialogue. I want to be honest that I am struggling (not with the students, the schedule, the teaching load, or the Highgate Community College environment, all of which are a dream), but struggling enough to start looking at other options, including full-time mentoring of teachers, something I have wanted to do for a long time.

Thank you for listening to and considering what I have shared in a spirit of trust and mutual respect.

Robin

In the letter, Sullivan tactfully shares her concerns about school staff and school philosophy, indirectly outlining a clear vision of teaching: personal, warm, student-centered, friendly, enthusiastic, exciting, dialogic, different from the traditional model, interested in a holistic view of students. It needs community in order to foster collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving. It is a pedagogy of humanity and care, intimate and enriching. It fosters mastery learning, differentiation, shared power, intrinsic motivation, and allows both students and teachers to maintain dignity while fostering a sense of agentic self. It is happy, healthy, and balanced. It is everything that she believes about excellent classrooms, a powerful echo of themes that have infused our inquiry together since our very first conversation in 2003.

It is her personal and professional vision, not of Good Teaching, but of better teaching—always improving, exploring, learning, and hoping for a more just school and world.
It is also something that she no longer believes to be possible at MCHS, given the realities of staff, leadership, and underlying philosophy. In fact, she is no longer certain it could really exist anywhere. She walked into the Middle College confident, visionary, experienced, and intent on equity-conscious reform; she walked out with a shaken sense of her worth as a teacher and a measure of despair for education itself. In many ways, she has redefined the Good Teacher, but in so doing, she has lost herself.

Arguably, only a good teacher—a better teacher—could have made the choices she made, leaving a comfortable, tenured teaching position to seek out the challenge of her heart. The tragedy of her story, however, is that in doing so, she also sacrificed the certainty, efficacy, and sense of sustainability that accompanies the myth. The cost to her teaching identity is high and, in the isolated and hostile environment of MCHS, it undermines her determination to fight.

* * * *

Over our last few interviews, Sullivan often talked about her increasing dissatisfaction with MCHS and with herself as a teacher. “What am I possibly going to do with my life if I don’t want to get a Ph.D. and I can’t stomach doing this forever?” she worried. “Honestly, I just always thought I’d want to be a teacher or a teacher leader forever. And now I’m not sure.” At one point, she even speculated about finding a job where she could simply go back to being who she was before—anything to relieve her perpetual disquiet. Oakwood expected to open a new high school for 2007-2008. Highgate Schools had urban high schools in need of teachers. The local area boasted several elite private schools, as well, including one exclusively for gifted mathematics and science students.

If I go back to North or that new high school that’s opening in Oakwood, which will be no different than North, or if I go to a school like [the gifted school], I will go back in
the mode of traditional skills. Being very overprepared. Teaching bell to bell. Knowing what they need to do—lots of multi-paragraph essays, lots of outside reading. I know how to do that . . . . Those kids, most of them, are going to go a route that I know. They’re going to go to college; they’ll be asked to read a shitload on their own and write a hell of a lot of papers. And then they’ll go get some job where they’ll need to be on time, look professional, and follow directions. And I know how to do all that.

She imagined a time where she felt certain, confident, and efficacious, where she understood clearly and immediately the needs of her monocultural students. Where being a quality teacher was straight-forward, where care for her students meant caring only for their aesthetic engagement, where pedagogical decisions held few dilemmas. Where students of color remained outside the schooling process, but teachers had a rhetoric of equity that promised change without the need for “doing the work.” A simpler and happier time before, as she said, “the dangers and necessities of ’seeing.’” In retrospect, teaching was easier when she could “boycott seeing.”

But despite some occasional longing for the Good Teacher of the past, Sullivan knew that she could never be satisfied at North again. Realistically, the eye-and mind-opening work of the last few years, whether right or wrong or in-between, “changes one forever.” There was no putting the blinders back in place, no returning to a colorblind pseudo-security, and no denying her deep-seated passion for the children abandoned by the system. If she was going to continue teaching at all, it would need to be in a place that allowed her to move forward instead of backward, that recognized and supported her ever-evolving vision. “Everything is harder [now],” she wrote in one email, “but that’s the only place from which change is ever possible.”

But her experience at MCHS had also taught her that substantial change was more than a matter of individual teacher will. It also required an empowering and supportive context, a space that invited dialogue and experimentation and collaboration among faculty. Greene (1988) writes that “to become different, of course, is not simply to will oneself to change. There is the question of being able to accomplish what one chooses to do. It is not only a matter of the
capacity to choose; it is a matter of the power to act to attain one’s purposes” (p. 4). If MCHS hired even one new teacher with an interest in reform and an open mind about students, Sullivan would stay and hope. But, given Xavier’s concerned but unproductive reaction to the letter, she was unwilling to maintain for years without any sign of positive change.

Saddened and unnerved by her fading determination to continue teaching, she looked for other sustainable solutions that would keep her active as an educator while pushing her beyond the typical classroom environment. In March, Sullivan applied for a position as a Mentor Teacher for Highgate Public Schools. Mentor Teachers are full-time experienced teachers who travel between schools, observing, evaluating, and assisting initially-licensed (new) teachers. As a Mentor, she would supervise eight teachers from a variety of disciplines, making regular visits in their classrooms, advising them on their problems, and pointing out their strengths. The administrative position required substantial evaluative paperwork, but had the boon of fixed hours since it did not involve curriculum preparation or grading piles of student work. It was the sort of teacher training job that she had thought about for years, toying with the idea that she would enjoy teaching teachers as much as she had enjoyed teaching students. (Indeed, it was something that she and I even talked about back at Northridge when we tossed around the possibility of becoming college professors, English educators who trained other prospective teachers.) In a sense, she saw it as an opportunity to extend her reach—to inspire other teachers to be better than they would have been. Instead of impacting one classroom, she would perhaps impact many.

But although Mentoring seemed like a natural step, a way to care about teachers and students together, she also felt the irony of leaving teaching in order to somehow affect teaching. Such irony was not lost on me, either, here at the end of a graduate program, awaiting my official contract to become a professor of English Education at a small nearby university. I, too,
left the classroom in search of a way to extend my reach by working with pre-service teachers. I teach about culturally relevant pedagogy, but it has been years since a high school student needed my attention. I teach about empowering teaching, about changing our vision of classrooms in order to make schools more equitable, but I do not practice these things in the places where they matter most, in the messy world of diverse secondary classrooms. I sit at my kitchen table now, writing about practice but remain always a step removed. I hope that I will be able to encourage others toward transformation, but am increasingly conscious of the Pandora’s box of that work—an invigorating, challenging burden that sent Sullivan, one of the best teachers I have ever known, in search of a non-teaching career.

For her, the irony was even more dramatic:

Would mentoring teachers within the system be satisfying at all? Because you can’t tell someone—all these things I’m trying to explore on my own are very rocky. I’m not going to advise anybody to do that! So then, I’m going to be simply seeding the system. Because I’m going to observe someone and, if they don’t start class on time, I’m going to mark them down for that. If they don’t get on someone that’s talking out of line, I’m going to work with them on that. But these are the very things that I’m trying to figure out a less—I don’t know—rigid way of doing. So maybe I would just feel hypocritical.

As a Mentor, Sullivan knew she would be expected to serve as an agent of the very system that she had struggled to change, a choice that felt instantly “hypocritical.” After years of attempting to forge a new transformative identity, that very process now pointed her back into the heart of the system itself.124 Her reach might extend only to become more limited.

124 Again, her quandary is also mine, in this peculiar space and time. How often have I critiqued student teachers for falling short of something on the requisite checklist of “good teaching behaviors” that comprise university observation forms? Just like Highgate Mentors, teacher educators/student teaching supervisors serve as occasional outside observers in classrooms, bringing a level of pseudo-objectivity to the busy, complicated teaching world. All too often, the lack of familiarity with teaching situations means feedback is necessarily decontextualized, built out of external expectations and even myths such as our narrow vision of Good Teaching. Indeed, when most school systems expect “rigorous” teaching at the expense of relationships and relevancy, how does a mentor (whether in a local school or in a university) simultaneously demand those standards and urge teachers to explore new, more tentative approaches?
It was a risk she was willing to take. In early June as I was in the middle of drafting chapter four of this dissertation, her voice crackled on my answering machine. “I had my interview for the Mentor position yesterday, and when I got to work today, Xavier called me in his office and he cried, Kim. He cried. It was so messed up. He had got a call from Human Resources checking my references.”

When it was offered a few days later, Sullivan took the job, packed up her cluttered cubicle, and drove away from MCHS with a mixture of heavy heart and tense hope.

The good news of the story is that I am thrilled about the Mentor position. Very excited, and I think I'm going to be working for a great guy. I also think that it’s an example of serendipity; I took the MCHS job, which brought me into Highgate Public Schools, which is the sole district in [the state] with the full-time mentor program.

And in a later email, sent from a regional education conference:

[I’ve been] talking with people here at this conference, people who have been in education for a long time, [and] they are skeptical that this full-time mentor program is anything other than "get those test scores up and keep the masses quiet." GRRRRRRRRR. I’m working on my own sense of things, which is that one person can—does—make a difference and that I’ll sense how to navigate things.

So, Sullivan’s story (and, tangentially, my story) does not end here, but becomes the backdrop for a new, unwritten chapter in which she is both classroom insider and outsider, both part of the machine and a cog that might just find the space to spin in more thoughtful directions. Despite the tragedy of losing her to the classroom, she re-claims some optimism and hope as she moves onward, in search of the edges of reach.

Good Teachers and Better Teaching: Surviving the Shadowland

As Sullivan’s story suggests, the cultural myth of Good Teaching is part of the prevailing discourse of education, a hidden template for how teachers, students, and classrooms should function. It is sustained by the existence of stratified classrooms, such as her classes of North Oakwood and the imagined/remembered classes of her colleagues’ former experiences, those
that defined “honors” behaviors as distinct from those enacted in other, lesser spaces. Good Teachers are protected from the vagaries of students who fall outside a narrow vision of schooling success, and learn that a particular style of education can be done—as long as students live up to the task. Success as a Good Teacher is simply a matter of covering content, maintaining a vision of high expectations (based largely on the success of privileged students), and localizing student failure outside of the myth itself. As such, Good Teachers require Better Students and, by definition, preclude the abilities of a wider expanse of humanity. Teaching is decoupled from learning.\textsuperscript{125} Most insidiously, perhaps, Good Teaching is sedimented in how teachers are created and groomed, part of the tools we use to evaluate them and embedded in expert-approved best practices. It is reified in checklists and standards and federal testing regulations. Pervasive and hidden, it reproduces itself at every turn. In its broadest strokes, Good Teaching allows competent teaching to be defined as clear, uncomplicated, and unconflicted. It invites teachers and students to simplify the complex set of interactions that necessarily comprise teaching and learning.

An “either-or” understanding of teaching cannot capture the rich problematic of that work, the complicated and partial stories that exist when a teacher’s intention and a student’s world bump against each other. As Britzman writes, teachers do not work either

\begin{quote}
in the service of critical pedagogy or the state apparatus . . . . Splitting the world of education into progressive or regressive tendencies, just as splitting education in to success and failure, does not do justice to the surprising forces of uncertainty, discontentment, helplessness, and disorganization that are also education. (Britzman, 2003, p. 5-6)
\end{quote}

Clear-cut and dualistic definitions, a hallmark of Good Teaching, are both unreal and potentially dangerous. Authentically care-based relationships with students and a dialogic, empowerment-

\textsuperscript{125} Ladson-Billings (2001) says that this is a product of the English language itself, which allows different words for different sides of the same coin. In Hebrew, there is only one word for both, but “English has created a dichotomy between teaching and learning that suggests a casual relationship without fully understanding the dynamic that exists between the two” (p. 26).
oriented pedagogy challenge the myth of Good Teaching by recognizing that students and the established curriculum are sometimes contradictory entities existing within a web of cultural and political histories. For Sullivan, such realizations became a new foundation for her work inside classrooms, allowing her to design frameworks of success for students marginalized and abandoned by the traditional systems of schooling. But even as she performed a more culturally relevant and critical vision of teaching—one committed to real students and their individual needs—a part of her continued to search for the mythic classroom of memory. Because her care for students reached beyond the four walls of room 64, she recognized that students would be expected to meet the standards established by Good Teaching. Redefining those standards ran the risk of denying students later achievement even though upholding them failed to recognize the social realities of her very classroom. Her response lay in rejecting the totality of both models and searching for a space between.

As I read and re-read her stories, she seemed to speak about identity crisis, about a teaching self (or selves) forced to exist in the liminal spaces between two overlapping and competing ideologies. Authentic care stumbled as it searched for aesthetic care. Cultural capital and cultural ways of being clashed. Isolation protected moves toward equity and concurrently undermined them with loneliness and lack of collaborative support. Sullivan’s teaching identity seemed increasingly uncertain, contradictory, and multiplicitous, constantly exploring a spectrum between the imagined history of Good Teaching and the inspired desire for equity. She stood simultaneously in both worlds and in the hundred worlds in between, living the immediacy and the contradictions of her daily work, struggling with the moral paradoxes of teaching.

As Jack and other students in English III pointed out when explicating Eliot’s “The Hollow Men,” there is a vast, uncertain space between any vision and its performance, a shadowland where the paths are not always (if ever) clear.
Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow . . .

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow . . .

With the false simplicity of Good Teaching stripped away, transformative teachers must work in the shadowland, ever in process as they search for better ways of teaching and learning. Their practice may be tentative and unstable, but it remains open to students, contexts, and thoughtful negotiation. They recognize significance in rupture and discomfort. The conundrums of race, class, and student identity in all its many forms exist in the shadowland, a trackless, unnamed place where teachers may feel silenced, blinded, confused, uncertain. Britzman (2003) writes that “remorse, self-blame, and vulnerability . . . are not good teachers, unless one wants to learn better how to complain,” yet agrees that the reflection that results from uncertainty is still a critical resource for teachers (p. 14). As Sullivan says, this is “the work” that must be done in order to improve education for all students. Here, in the shadowland, is where teachers may begin to effect change.

* * * *

In her landmark work on pre-service education, *Practice Makes Practice*, critical ethnographer Deborah Britzman (2003) discusses how student teachers, newcomers to this sometimes elegant, absurd world, learn to navigate the awkwardness and uncertainty of teaching. Her narrative portraits of two student teachers highlight teaching’s innate intolerance to mistakes
Despite its massive learning curve, and the mental pressure of discourses that deny the existence of very real contradictions in their practice. She argues that, for young teachers to become successful, the fallacious identity of teacher as expert must yield to the more conjectural and contextualized identity of teacher as inquirer. They must learn to navigate uncertainty and actively work against the cultural myths and discourses of education\(^\text{126}\) that might limit their reach. Likewise, Alsup (2006) recalled her own experience as a young teacher, disillusioned by the mythic “singular identity” of teaching that seemed to exist somewhere outside of her grasp. “Frankly, no one ever told me that such identity work would be hard to accomplish, and all the images of teachers in my cultural landscape appeared to be at ease, whole, and untroubled by inner demons” (p. 7). All-too-easily, such hidden elements of practice and identity can become a mire with the potential to undermine a new teacher’s sense of stability and self.

Arguably, Sullivan’s rejection of her old modes of teaching put her in a similarly fragile position. She, too, was learning to teach as she tried to enact a newly critical, culturally relevant style. Just as student teachers strive to create an original teaching identity (Alsup, 2006; Danielewicz, 1995), experienced teachers interested in transformation must also renegotiate and re-vision established identities in sometimes dramatic and vexatious ways. For in-service teachers, the “apprenticeship of observation” is even more firmly engrained, cemented with the “truth” of experience (Lortie, 1975). The powerful tendency to view practice as finished and certain, as no longer in process or openly experimental, is perhaps one of the greatest barriers to education reform.

“Thinking about practice and developing sensitive practices that can acknowledge difference and partiality, and extend the kinds of knowledge brought to and produced in

---

126 Britzman discusses three key myths that need to be interrupted before teacher education can access “discourses of the real” (p. 175). Her myths are as follows: 1) everything depends on the teacher; 2) the teacher as expert; and 3) the teacher as self-made. Each of these also plays into the trope of the Good Teacher, the controlling, central, all-knowing figure of traditional classrooms.
educational life, is not beyond the reach of teacher education,” says Britzman (2003). As a future teacher educator myself, I agree that pre-service education is an important battlefield rife with potential. But we must also look at the ranks of the in-service teachers who currently fill the majority of classrooms. Just as pre-service teachers need opportunities for inquiry and identity construction, in-service teachers likewise need the space and support to reconsider their perspectives on children and classrooms. But busy schedules, isolated conditions, and increasing external pressures all work against critical reflection and exploratory change. Sullivan herself initially resisted “seeing” the world in radically new ways, only learning to do so after years of involvement with a system-wide equity initiative, one of only a handful of teachers for whom such training would be available.

Nevertheless, I want to argue that change is also not beyond the reach of in-service education. Like Nieto (1999), I believe that:

If we understand teaching as consisting primarily of social relationships and as a political commitment rather than a technical activity, then it is unquestionable that what educators need to pay most attention to are their own growth and transformation and the lives, realities, and dreams of their students. (p. 131)

Simply and terribly, the question that remains is how to invite teachers to “pay attention” and support them when their insights point toward the risky territory of the shadowland. Even the limited success of Oakwood’s *Beyond Diversity*™ workshops hints that change is possible. Programs such as UNC’s M.Ed. for experienced teachers seem to suggest some directions by including a specific intention to shake up established practice in respectful but meaningful ways, an explicit study of culturally relevant pedagogy, and extensive involvement in teacher-led action research projects. Crucially, the program also recognizes that teachers will need collaborative support in order to be successful in such ventures. Organization by cohort invites the familiarity that may lead not only to collaboration during the program but also to long-term support beyond the program. It is not enough to ask teachers to risk their confidence and identity in a
sometimes futile bid to “do different;” instead, we must create situations that allow supported risk by avoiding isolation, establishing norms that are multivocal and open, and capitalizing on a dialogic exploration of their past teaching biographies, current day-to-day practices, and desired future outcomes. It is particularly important that teachers see themselves as agents, active in creating a kind of grounded theory rather than implementing the disconnected ideas of the Academy127 (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Zeichner, 1996).

While I agree with Sleeter (1996) that changing teachers’ will (or more specifically, educating white teachers for awareness) cannot be the complete solution to the deeply entrenched problems of education, it remains a critical and necessary piece of the puzzle. It is the piece that Sullivan in her position as Mentor, and I in my role as teacher educator, will need to continually address.

How to be a Better English Teacher:
Last Words from Room 64

This project started out with the intent to learn something about teaching English Language Arts, to specifically explore not merely content or pedagogy, but pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987), the understandings delimited by this particular subject area, as seen through the lenses of cultural relevancy and teacher identity. And although the end result touches issues specific to English, it also reaches wider, looks more at the underpinnings of praxis and the cost of conscientization. But for the students of room 64, now continuing their journey without Sullivan’s presence, Better Teaching in English was more easily defined, inscribed by their experiences and their wishes and their expectations.

127 I find Danielewicz’s (1995) outline of a “pedagogy for identities construction” compelling as a starting point. She includes: “discourse richness and openness, dialogue and a dialogic curriculum, collaboration, deliberation, reflexivity, theorizing in practice, agency, recursive representation, authority, and enactment” (p. 17).
Sullivan’s students swear that they have been taught by one of the greatest English teachers ever. Whether they are involved in learning or involved in avoiding work, their approval of her methods and attitudes remain the same. As part of their written feedback to Sullivan and me, they offered a list of tips for future English teachers who want to be Better. Below, they speak their final words in this manuscript, critical and crucial voices from the “whole students” that shaped and were shaped by Robin Sullivan. A few are combined for the sake of clarity, but their wording is largely intact.

*Dale:* Make learning more active and interactive. Don’t just give a lot of work and go home.

*Erika:* Have group assignments.

*Kendra:* Actually teach things in different ways. Do projects, games, hands-on activities, discussions, and interact with the students.

*Lakethia:* Get on our level. Make it connect more to life experiences so we can understand better.

*Tony:* Show us we matter. Act like you care about us. Make connections to yourself and your life, too.

*Cliff:* Relax a little bit.

*Abby:* Have us do more involved activities, like reading and acting together, not always learning on our own.

*Chandra:* Be adventurous! Love your job and your students.

*Ebony:* Make it fun, not boring. Kids fail by not wanting to come to class.

*Meghan:* Have a personal relationship with your students.

*Luna:* Be open to ideas. And sometimes be a little transparent and not afraid to admit you’re human and make mistakes, too.

*Rashad:* Listen to the students.

*Chase, Lita, and many others:* Talk to Ms. Sullivan.
Coda: In the Beginning, Once Again

Perhaps more than anything, this dissertation is a call for further narratives. Teachers’ voices are innately discursive, filled with interpretive possibility, deliberately and accidentally portraying the rich contradictions and complications of practice. If we want to genuinely comprehend teaching, we need to both listen to “the wisdom of practice” (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and recognize the multiple conflicting voices that exist therein. Not all practitioners speak from places of deep reflection; not all reflection is dedicated to a vision of socially reconstructive schools.128 But all of those voices are the reality of education and classrooms and may significantly affect how we view our own assumptions about the nature of critical pedagogies in practice. While education research has often investigated the impact of theoretical and practical models on students lives and achievement, we look less frequently at the other half of the equation—the impact on the lives of teachers. How do teachers think about relationships with students? What does it mean to be a caring teacher? How do such relationships impact the teacher herself? What are the challenges of enacting a culturally relevant pedagogy in particular teaching environments, founded upon particular teaching backgrounds? What does the effort mean to teachers and what does it cost them in terms of self, identity, sustainability? Such questions are integral for understanding why teacher-focused reform meets with success or with failure. They are critical to forming a complex, realistic, useful picture of the work both enacted and yet to be done in classrooms.

128 Zeichner (1996) writes that we need to move beyond the uncritical celebration of teacher reflection and teacher empowerment and focus our attention on what kind of reflection teachers are engaging in, what it is teachers are reflecting about, and how they are going about it. Reflective teaching is not necessarily good teaching . . . [and] may actually serve to legitimate and strengthen practices that are harmful to students. (p. 207). He delineates four traditions of reflecting, culminating with the “social-reconstructionist” or “reflection as a political act” in the service of creating a more just society. Teacher educators have a moral obligation to inculcate this type of reflection, despite the many practical challenges that may arise.
Like this vision of Better Teaching, of shadowland and an uncertainty pregnant with possibility, I want to somehow avoid closure. I can give no complete and determinant definition of how English teachers become transformative in the classroom. I can only share a perspective based in the partial apprehension of one life, in one place, framed by one relationship. Given that, I hope this dissertation raises more questions than it answers. It certainly has for Robin Sullivan and for me.

May it do the same for you.
In so many ways, this fragment of poem hints at the challenge of ethnography, the delicate and decidedly moral relationship between participant and researcher, the legacy of “truth” and responsibility and the acceptance that no words or theories will completely re-create the intricacies and passions of the life that sits at the heart of the work. Like all texts, including lives and cultural myths and dissertation manuscripts, the poem echoes with interpretive possibilities, parsed through the lens of the readers’ world and hinting at other worlds with its empty spaces. In the end, it will not be enough to disrupt the foundations of the world, but it will—hopefully—be a textual moment that both respects and sees something of worth.

* * * *

This section offers a rationale for the method behind this dissertation, a participatory qualitative study of the lived experiences, perspectives, and in-the-moment actions of a teacher in-process. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), qualitative research
is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals. (p. 2)

Beginning with a postcritical ethnographic stance, one which not only challenges traditional positivist claims to objective neutrality but which also turns a critical eye back on the researcher herself, I intended to engage in research that both theorized the here-and-now and imagined how things might be otherwise. Indeed, I hoped that the very “politics of undecidability, the unavoidable open-endedness and inherent perspectivity” of teaching narratives (like the inherent uncertainty of Sullivan’s teaching itself) might offer possible directions to rethinking and, perhaps, reinventing schooling (Lather, 1991, p. 41). This vision of research as potentially empowering is derived from Freire’s work with the oppressed and exists at the juncture between research, learning, and social action. McIntyre (1997) questioned whether such methods could (or should) be co-opted for use with the privileged participants in her study of white pre-service teachers. She wrestled with questions of “ownership, coanalysis, [and] power relations” when she chose participatory action research (PAR), a feminist Freirian methodology, for her university-based study.

Unlike many other PAR projects that are aimed at breaking the silence for the oppressed, the silence that needed to be broken was the silence of the oppressor. This was not about liberating the marginalized but about prying open self-criticism among those who occupy the center in ways that challenge . . . inequitable structures. (p. 23)

The goal of both Freire’s and McIntyre’s work, however, was the same—the creation of a more socially just reality. I too see the concept of empowering research as useful when studying teachers, who are both simultaneously power holders in their classrooms and power-limited within the larger world of education. Freire’s emphasis on authentic dialogue, mutual inquiry,
and critically-inspired action match the transformative impulse that underlies Sullivan’s teaching and my reasons for undertaking this particular study. In a word, it fits.

Rationale for a Narrative Design

Ladson-Billings (1994) notes that the valuable “wisdom of practice” possessed and shared by practitioners has long been significantly absent from the research literature on schools and schooling (p. 154). While there are numerous narrative accounts of schools, often marketed to the general public with a simultaneous intention to both expose and sensationalize inequities and problems, few research studies seem to devote their focus specifically to the life experiences of teachers. Ladson-Billings, however, recognizes the potent knowledge constructed by the careful thought and deliberate actions of individual teachers in her work and sees teacher narrative as a critical tool in the struggle to improve student achievement.

According to Carter (1993), “the core knowledge teachers have of teaching comes from their practice, i.e., from taking action as teachers in classrooms. Teachers’ knowledge is, in other words, event structured, and stories, therefore, would seem to provide special access to that knowledge” (p. 7). Narrative, long the domain of literature, has been taken up by psychology, sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines, including education, in an attempt to represent the complexities of life in new ways. Bruner (1991) believes that narrative is a natural impulse, that we live storied lives and walk through storied landscape. We order our world by telling stories of experiences and fantasy; we create significance in narration and express the nature and being of living. Composition research shows that narrative is the first mode of writing most students take up and the one that seems most natural (Moffett, 1983). Never to be taken at face value, narrations “worth telling and worth construing are typically born in trouble” (Bruner, 1996, p. 142). Bruner believes that such stories are motivated by values, beliefs, desires, and
theories both acknowledged and taken-for-granted, and that they reveal intentional states behind action—reasons, not causes.

The popularity of narrative as a research methodology stems from the poststructural sense that all reality is mediated, situated, contextualized, and that universals and objective truth have only been fallacies. In this scheme, narrative becomes a depiction of memories constructed situationally, in tandem with a context that includes the researcher herself, embedded in sociocultural events both large and small and concurrently buffeted by and altering them. The many identities that play into people’s visions of themselves—encompassing elements of race, class, gender, sexuality (the big cultural markers) as well as community memberships, positions in the world, and positions in the moment—will shape and be shaped by the narratives they tell, forever partially “re-presenting” self and perspectives on the world. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) highlight the philosophical differences between formalist narratives and poststructuralist narratives as they define what narratives are capable of capturing (if not absolute reality). For them, narratives encompass the progression of time and reflect ideological and identity shifts within this temporal expanse, rather than enabling us to pin down experience in fixed and delimited moments. They reflect the storyteller’s view of reality as she makes meaning for herself by presenting a narrative for and with an active, even if silent, researcher. Such meaning is necessarily always partial, inflected, unstable, and even contradictory.

Educational research needs the narratives of teachers—flawed, contradictory, and real—to serve as a counterstory to the grand narratives of classrooms today created by legislators, journalists, and others distanced from actual schools (or, as this dissertation argues, even by those working within schools). “Counterstories,” as defined by Delgado & Stefancic (2001), are narratives that possess the intent and potential to undermine the uncritical scripts and habits of society by the very nature of their situated truths. “The hope is that well-told stories describing
the reality of black and brown lives can help readers bridge the gap between their worlds and those of others” (p. 41). Given the state of uncritical complacency regarding privilege and cultural difference among both in-service and pre-service white teachers, there is a substantive need for the voices of white allies among the teaching force to also tell their stories, with complexity, emotion, and a willingness to consider critique. While these voices should not detract from and cannot replace the voices of teachers of color, I believe there are worthwhile counternarratives within white teacher narratives that are also useful for understanding how race, achievement, transformation, and hope are shaped in the contested arena of schools. Ellis (1997) argues that the true goal of narrative research to not to present the world or even to re-present the world, but to evoke a sense of the authentic within the readers themselves. “A story’s validity can be judged by whether it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is authentic and lifelike, believable and possible; the story’s generalization can be judged by whether it speaks to readers about their experience” (p. 133). Telling stories has a habit of inviting stories, as well, in a mutual invitation to speak. In the work of educational reform, such invitations are key.

But it is worth noting that evocative narratives may also run the risk of “narrative seduction” (Bruner, 1996), presenting a world so seemingly real that it becomes closed to questions or interpretations. Because of this, collaborative research which recognizes multiple perspectives (including that of external theory) has particular value. Although teacher narratives are frequently both evocative and meaningful in themselves, thoughtful analysis of these narratives can “reveal cultural and social patterns through the lens of individual experiences . . . offer[ing] translucent windows into cultural and social meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 115-116). By soliciting, capturing, analyzing, and sharing such narratives, we begin to weave a new social discourse—the first step toward achieving new social conditions.
Participatory: Researcher-Teacher and Teacher-Researcher

“An undemocratic hierarchy separates researchers from teachers and students. This professional pecking order is also patriarchal and racial. It places mostly white male scholars at the top and mostly female classroom teachers at the bottom” and engenders a resentful, disconnected silence from the practitioners about whom most research is written (Shor, 1992, p. 170). The voices of teachers are rarely heard in educational research except as subjects for critique (Lampert, 2000). Their unique perspectives seem to have little value in the Academy, which privileges disconnected theory over the messy practicality of life in the classroom. In order to democratize research as a pedagogical tool, Shor conceptualizes “teacher-researchers” and “student-researchers,” advocating for a dialogic classroom where students and teachers engage in “democratic co-research” in order to create a truly student-centered curriculum and connect scholarship to real classroom life.

Similarly, Lather (2003) writes that “the methodological task [of openly ideological research] is to proceed in a reciprocal, dialogic manner, empowering all subjects by turning them into co-researchers. Ideally, such research involves participants in the planning, execution, and dissemination of social research” (p. 199). One of the primary goals of this type of research is to “democratize knowledge and power through the research process” (referring to Hall, 1981). Such empowering research practices attempt to disrupt the traditional authority in the research dyad: participants become active, not passive, able to offer insights, member check interpretations, and provide their own depth of knowledge. Research is done with participants rather than to them. Too often, researchers assume that teachers need our enlightenment or that a theoretical background can provide a clear window on a teacher’s world. Such assumptions
blind us to subtle realities that we may be disinclined to see;129 they silence the important voices of practitioners who, frankly, have rarely seen much value in our theories about their world (Noblit, 1999). By engaging instead in a collaborative, dialogic vision of research, we not only try to re-balance the unequal power relationship between researchers and teachers but also open the work to the rich possible perspectives teachers can provide. Research becomes problem-posing, inviting possibility and transformation in ways that disconnected, formalistic research might not.

In pedagogy, problem-posing returns to the work of Dewey, who advocated an active, inquiry-oriented classroom in which students constructed knowledge from their experiences. Freire contrasts problem-posing with a banking theory of education in which teachers view knowledge as universal wisdom to be deposited in passive students. In research, participants are often configured as passive and static, while researchers are active, collecting the story of the moment to analyze and codify in their interpretations. Such configurations assume that genuine critical work is the venue the researcher and both alienates participants and denies their expertise and agency. I believe that problem posing has a place in research methodology as well as classroom pedagogy, in which the life stories and experiences of participants and, to a lesser

---

129 Let me share something I read at the beginning of my graduate school career and which has informed much of how I envision research with practicing teachers. Co-written by a high school English teacher and a university supervisor who exchanged roles for one academic year, it gives voice to the inappropriate power differential that exists between school and university. While it is meant to address university supervisors of student teachers, it could easily speak to any member of the authoritarian university, especially researchers.

You, or any observer in my classroom, cannot understand what I do until you understand the rules that govern me and my world . . . . I want you to understand the context in which I must make decisions. At the same time, I would welcome your help in examining and changing the constraints imposed on me…I have a right to be who I am, as a person and as a teacher. My experiences, history, career stage, and current life demands make me who I am. And although I don’t always say or believe this, I like who I am. I am unique and proud of my work, but I am fragile. I work in a world where everything is changing, constantly, daily, faster every year. I want to grow and be a better teacher, to be allowed to make the mistakes that come with real change . . . . Recognize that we – university and school folks – have a history that is deep and not at all positive, whether you and I were the specific players or not. Teachers know that university people “got out” of teaching . . . [and] it is my life they seem to reject . . . It's going to take time and patience on your part for me to believe that you are different . . . . Examine your own practice and program, question the research and theory you espouse . . . introduce me to your peers as your friend (not as one of “our” teachers), help me find new ways to grow and become more of a professional, and, most of all, trust me too. (Hudson-Ross & McWhorter, 1999, p. 163-165).

The relationship between researcher and researched must be one of trust, respect, and collaboration, rather than one of authority, an important aspect to Freirian empowering research methods.
degree, researchers, are seen as historical moments than can be questioned and critiqued as part of the interview and collaborative research process. By involving the participant in this way, insights drawn from the research are no longer merely those framed by the researcher, but shared (or at least acknowledged and contested) by those in practice and therefore potentially transformative. It re-configures both parties as active, as co-constructors in the research process, and invites them to view all stories told with a critical and exploratory eye. This, according to Lather (1995) has the potential to yield a new form of validity, “catylytic validity” or the “degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants in what Friere calls ‘conscientisation,’ knowing reality in order to better transform it” (Lather, 1986 in Scheurich, 1997, p. 83). This unspoken intent lay at the core of each interaction between Sullivan and I, created out of our mutual interest in changing classrooms to better support students.

* * * *

With this vision of empowering, participatory research in mind, Sullivan and I met for several initial chats, unrecorded, in which we discussed potential directions for “our” research as well as our own positions within the work. My history of classroom experience and my current work teaching undergraduates positioned me as both researcher and teacher, identities that helped frame the research, informed, and influenced me throughout. Sullivan was likewise both teacher and researcher, deliberately engaged in studying her own practice alone and, through this study, with me. While our positions were not the same, I tried to continually recognize her expertise on her own life by inviting her insights into the study itself, by sharing my working interpretations as we progressed, and by reliving relevant stories of my own as part of our shared dialogue. From the beginning, the study was partially co-conceptualized by both researcher-
teacher and teacher-researcher. Each of us exercised a measure of control over its the structure and direction, blurring the boundaries between us, recognizing the individual and shared funds of knowledge such interactions brought to the table. Interviews became conversations, shared stories, problem-posing talk between practitioners with a larger goal in mind.

Despite the more egalitarian, participatory approach to this study, in the end, the final act of authorizing remains mine. “We cannot eliminate power in research relationships, as much as early feminist methodological literature hoped was possible . . . . We must learn to notice power, analyze it, and name it” (Bloom, 1998, p. 40). As the writer of this manuscript, the power to describe, define, and interpret falls to me. Although I have tried to privilege Sullivan’s voice throughout, my own vested interest in critical theoretical traditions and (as suggested in the introduction) my own historical lenses necessarily color the study and its current representation.

Positionality: Speaking for Myself, in the Here and Now

Because identity is at the core of this research and because the research is undertaken in a collaborative, narrative fashion, it is inappropriate to overlook my position in the work. Ellis (1997), in her article on evocative autoethnography, asks “Do you think I’m being self-indulgent now? Wasn’t it self-indulgent to think we could white out or separate self from our studies, as we did for years?” (p. 122). This small section is an attempt to flesh out the self that enters into this research—raced, gendered, classed, positioned by my beliefs and intentions to conduct research that actively wants to alter the social discourse of white teachers in diverse classrooms. Studying the work of white teachers, for me, is a matter of the ethics of position. I share with Hytten and Warren (2003) the sense that this work is “the most ethical thing we can do . . . . Now that we see whiteness functioning in our lives, we are ‘newly accountable’” (p. 70). Because “white women have long taken up black women’s texts and voices for our own activist
purposes—profiting much more from the comodification of black voices than have the black women invoked in the white texts” (Thompson, 2003, p.11), I have chosen to take up another white woman’s text, acknowledging our mutually constructed story as we attempt to offer a portrait of struggle, collaboration, new understandings, and (hopefully) hope for other teachers of all colors and the students who depend on them.

Like Sullivan, I too speak with multiple tongues, with fragmented, complex, and hard to pin down identities. As I hinted in the introduction, I am former colleague, former supervisor for her student teachers, as well as outside researcher. I am always both alike and “other.” I am English teacher and teacher-of-teachers, and also the one who walked away from the profession entirely for a time. I am white, perpetrator and ally, outsider invited in occasionally, insider who may have always been out, privileged by my race and by my opportunity to hear the stories of others. Such roles emphasize the complexity of our combined story, and of my position as a qualitative researcher exploring the lived experience of teachers. While her stories remain hers, they mirror mine in myriad ways that are both encouraging and disturbing. Because Sullivan and I share similar concerns, as well as a history of teaching English in similar schools (and, at one time, the same school), each interview invariably brushed against my past even as it described hers. Each word our text directly involved my own present quest to better understand the intersection of race, privilege, and classrooms. This unfamiliar familiarity served to both enlighten and caution me, forcing me to acknowledge how my experiences shaped our conversations as well as my own ideas about racial equity in schools and my understanding of myself as a researcher. Like the study itself, I was and am always in progress, seeking connection and dissonance, looking for a narrative of change.
Data Collection

Lather (2003) writes that “openly ideological research” must reconceptualize the notion of validity through the triangulation of multiple data sources, methods, and theories which “seek counterpatterns as well as convergences” (p. 191). My own search for counterpatterns and convergences centered on the narrative accounts of interviews and classroom observations, with additional resources from classroom documents.

Interviews

Because this study was grounded in a teacher’s lived history, the primary source of data was a series of interviews modeled after the “active” interviewing of Holstein and Gubrium (1997), who describe interviews as “unavoidably collaborative” (p. 114). They recognize that the interview is not merely a neutral source of information, but an act of meaning-making, situated in the moment, progressive and relational.

To the extent that we . . . communicate to each other as we become more able to transform our reality, we are able to know that we know, which is something more than just knowing . . . . We human beings know also that we don’t know. Through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don’t know, we can then act critically to transform reality. (Shore & Friere, 1987, p. 98-99)

Bloom (1998) distinguishes between feminist methodology (conversations between friends), and a feminist phenomenology, which includes the exercise of restraint on the part of the researcher, listening carefully, and constructing questions and comments that follow the participant’s line of thought as well as push beyond it. It is this second style of interaction that I wanted to capture in this work as we reflected on all the things we knew and did not know. As the initiator of our research interactions, however, it remained incumbent on me to solicit stories and invited the sort of critical response I wanted from the interactions (Lather, 2003). Chase (1995) makes a useful distinction between “stories” which transmit meaning and possess a
message and “reports” which are dry litanies that merely attempt to answer correctly the questions posed in interviews. It is both the style of questions asked and the relationship constructed between interviewer and participant that determine the quality of response. Our extended collaboration invited increased criticality as our shared stories deepened over time.

I also drew from Seidman’s (1998) description of phenomenological in-depth interview model, a three interview series which works through three stages of conversation. The first establishes a context of life history, the second explores details of key experiences, and the third reflects on the meaning made across these experiences. Although Sullivan and I followed a similar pattern of fluid and progressive stages, our interviews spanned a more long-term relationship. They reflected back to our previous interactions in 2003 in the first stage, solicited her perspective on current practice in during the fall of 2005, unpacked shared stories of her classroom during the observational period in January and February of 2006, and finally concluded with summative, reflective interviews in March. The frequency (as well as the open structure) of these interviews supported our research relationship as well as provided a more detailed portrait of practice. Stories were told, re-told, reflected upon, and unpacked over time (Lather, 1986; Seidman, 1998). As an expert on her own life, Sullivan also participated in creating the evolving interpretation, “member checking” my understandings of our discussions and reflecting on the grounded theories that began to arise in my analysis and writing. Those interpretations became further grist for our more casual conversations that have continued since the official end of data collection, as we kept each other posted about significant events in our now interwoven story (particularly regarding my writing and her career move).

Interviews typically ran for 60-90 minutes and were conducted weekly (occasionally twice a week). They often took place over dinner in Oakwood or over breakfast at Alice’s Café in Highgate, near MCHS. Most conversations were recorded via digital recorder, and I kept more
sporadic notes throughout the interview as well, a running outline of topics under discussion, key quotes, and personal reflections; gaps were later filled-in as I reviewed the interview tape.

After each interview, I listened to the digital file and summarized it, keeping track of themes and patterns that presented themselves as well as particularly salient quotes. This practice allowed me to organize my thoughts between interviews and develop tentative protocols for our next conversations. While there were informal interview protocols for each meeting, developed in response to previous interviews and class observations as well as harking back to the initial framing questions, they served only as a spur for conversation and not a rigid structure. Because I sought to get at the meaning made of lived experience, orienting the conversation to my categories and expected themes could have redirected the camera away from her life and onto my predetermined research agenda. In our conversations, Sullivan regularly took the lead, coming to the table eager to address particular issues or events, moving automatically to topics that were most salient for her. My interview protocols became, largely, evidence of my initial interpretations rather than a framework of her interests.

Each interview was transcribed as quickly as possible and later used in coding. Depending on the topic of conversation, some interviews were simply summarized while others were transcribed in detail. Detailed transcriptions included notes about the flow of speech, intonation, emphasis, and speech patterns. Using italics for emphasis, capitals for loudness, and double lines to show overlapping speech, as well as transcribing pauses, laughter, and other non-speech sounds allowed me to capture additional, submerged meaning in the structure of the discourse itself (Mishler, 1991). In this final manuscript, I have retained the em-dashes that signaled her pauses, reorientations, and a regular tendency to rethink, respeak, and renegotiate language as it happened.
Classroom Observation

According to Patton (2002), “as an outsider an observer will notice things that have become routine to the participants themselves, things which may lead to understanding the context” in new ways (p. 88). In order to obtain a fuller picture of Sullivan’s practice, I spent nine weeks conducting observations in her classroom. Excepting days when employment obligations required my presence elsewhere, I arrived at school before the day began and left alongside Sullivan. Most weeks, I attended at least two (rarely, three) days, and tapered the visits to one toward the end of my observations. Regular attendance on consecutive days provided an opportunity to see the results from various pedagogical strategies as well as her ongoing relationship with the classes as a whole. Unpacking events from these observations made up a significant part of our conversation during weekly interviews of that time, providing in-the-moment examples for critical reflection.

At various times I served as both observer and participant in room 64, slowly getting to know students, assisting Sullivan with activities, even monitoring the class when she needed to step out momentarily. (I do still hold my state teaching license in English.) I read with Chad, talked about satire with Marlo, shared Harry Potter trivia with Luna, critiqued Jack’s fiction-writing, and performed as Macbeth to Sullivan’s Lady Macbeth. (“Oh, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!”) Students regularly accosted me to offer tidbits of information about how they saw MCHS and English, shared their work and their stories without solicitation, and seemed to see me as a bizarre but likable teacher. As long as Sullivan liked me being there, they would do the same. I have since seen a few of them outside of school settings and they respond with that shy energy that so characterized my own high school student responses to teachers outside of their “appropriate” school setting.
Document Review

In addition to interviews and observations, Sullivan provided me with various document sources, including handouts, activities, and syllabi used in classes during my observation. I was allowed access to the student profiles the class wrote for her at the beginning of the semester, a survey asking about their experiences in English, and various papers, essays, and written activities. These served as an additional window on both student and teacher worlds.

Analysis and Writing

My role in this teacher-researcher dyad was not only as catalyst, but as primary interpreter (which also accounts for a methodology section that hides at the end of things, rather than presents itself front and center). Although Sullivan checked behind me via quick summaries of ideas and emailed paragraphs that hinted at direction, for the most part, the interpretive moves have been mine. Although I am uncomfortable with that privilege, I acknowledge it as a reality of this graduate school hoop, the dissertation, and look forward to a more egalitarian experience co-writing with her in the future.

I began with a sense of overarching form, drawing on Noblit’s (1999) discussion of literary genre and my own English teacher roots. Given its end point, Sullivan’s story struck me initially as a tragedy, the potentially flawed hero overpowered by social forces. It seemed “an ideal literary device to represent the power of educational institutions over attempts to reform them” (p. 28). As the text began to take shape, however, evolving in new ways each time I sat down with my laptop and coffee, tragedy became infused with irony, as well, as my interpretation of scenes seemed to indicate “good intentions unintendedly creat[ing] negative consequences” (p. 27).
My initial reading of data produced a set of codes (penciled in on the edges of transcripts and field notes) that were largely descriptive, a search for central themes that crossed and re-crossed a teaching life. The inherent contradictions between codes arose as a matter of course, and subsequently, as I reread the material, I began also searching for the multiple voices that both Sullivan and I performed, the spaces of convergence and conflict. They pinpointed some of the ethical dilemmas of her work and of my interpretation (a point I address in the introduction). Codes became lists, lists grew into diagrams on yellow legal pads as I hunted for a way to organize them into a cogent, comprehensible, meaningful story. Unlike a traditional Aristotelian plot, I found that I had not one story—one problematic situation with a rise, complications, and resolution—but multiple stories, each voiced across time and teaching location. I finally settled on a semi-chronological approach that showcased the tragedy of her awareness and choices (from blindness to criticality to burn-out), and a chapter structure that allowed me to focus on a handful of key stories at a time, complete with dilemmas and ironies.

While external theories and conceptual frameworks served as points of reference alongside our mixed stories, they were used dialectically to provide a language for examining situations that seemed problematic, contradictory, or particularly evocative. Like Noblit (1999), I see theory as historicism rather than truth; it “represents a set of ideas that seem to make sense to people in a specific historical context” and is primarily about sifting through connections (pp. 11-13). Theory is a tool for making complex lived experience apprehendable in some ways that may never approach truth, but nevertheless supply a measure of meaning. Most of the footnotes scattered throughout this manuscript are indicative of connections I felt warranted in drawing as a researcher, but which I also recognized were foreign to the story that Sullivan and I told. I hope they serve to interest those with a penchant for such things, but likewise, I hope that they
do not subsume the story itself, with all its rich uncertainty and suggestions of transformative possibility.

In the writing, even now, it is my wish that this text remain always somewhat indeterminate and open, without clear resolution—partly because both Sullivan and I feel a powerful ambiguity in so much of our teaching stories, and partly because it is how I envision knowledge itself. Bakhtin (1981) called this ambiguous quality in a text “novelness” (as opposed to “epicness,” or the intent to speak a finished and monologic word), and believed that it characterized a text that invited interpretation and further dialogue from the reader. Some of the writing and representation choices here also reflect this wish, including the occasionally literary style (some of which is drawn from my field notes and some from Sullivan’s words) and the subordination of the supporting theoretical literature. The goal is to evoke what Barone and Eisner (1997) call “productive idiosyncracy”—to invite resonance, shared thought, and continued dialogic interaction (p 89).

Adrienne Rich’s poem “Heorines” reads, “you begin speaking out /and a great gust of freedom/rushes in with your words/yet still you speak /in the shattered language/of a partial vision.” This dissertation has been, for Sullivan and for myself, a moment of speaking out, partial. Now it awaits other voices, lifted in resonance and contradiction, searching for our mutual truth.
The core of the curriculum was based heavily on the framework provided by the Pacific Educational Group, Inc. (PEG). This San Francisco-based consulting company offers individualized programs for schools interested in “addressing systemic issues of educational inequity by providing guidance to districts as to how to meet the needs of underserved student of color populations” (online). PEG provides leadership training, coaching, and consulting, but their flagship program is the two-day Beyond Diversity™ workshop. Written and promoted by Glen Singleton, Beyond Diversity™ is an “anti-racism awareness training.” According to handouts provided for participants it is not a “fix-it” workshop, rather it is a safe opportunity for uncomfortable self-examination and reflections about one’s own racial identity and the ways in which each of us views others through our own conscious and sometimes unconscious racial reality . . . . [It] is first and foremost an opportunity for participants to have healthy interracial dialogue about race in our lives . . . [and] is the beginning of an occasion for educators to consider how the policies and practices that we embrace systemically may contribute to strengthening a foundation and perpetuating institutionalized racism that is detrimental to the achievement of all students. (p. 2-3)

Rather than serving as a straightforward “training” regimen, this staff development responds to a situation for which rote answers have little meaning. Instead of imparting discrete methods for pre-defined experiences, it combines a content approach with a process approach, teaching both problem-solving skills as well as fundamental principles in a way that invites participants to apply them to their own personal experiences. Learning objectives focus on areas for developing awareness, such as white privilege and culturally responsive teaching, without dictating specific methodologies or requiring acceptance of particular beliefs. “Anytime you try to teach people, this is what you SHOULD believe,” one OCSS central office administrator explained, “you’re not going to succeed.” Instead the training begins with ideas to be explored and participants are encouraged to voice and hold their own
perspectives. Learning objectives frequently include items such as “encourage personal expression” and [for facilitators] “provide a system of support for staff members who wish to study further.”

Like Singleton’s (2001) preliminary workshops, the OCSS curriculum emphasizes the need for “courageous conversation,” a willingness to become involved with “engaging, sustaining, and deepening interracial dialogue about race” (p. 5) through participant-centered exploration and dialogue. As explained in the core Beyond Diversity™ workshops, it is through this discussion that eventual growth takes place. “The answers already exist inside of the participants’ heads and souls. We need to facilitate their understanding what they know rather than teach them what we have assumed they do not already know!” said the district coordinator for this initiative.

Drawing on prior conceptions of race (or a sense of racelessness for many whites), participants practice communicating about issues that are “the most divisive and the least talked about.” The focus remains on changing attitudes, values and beliefs through personal reflection and new understandings, not merely providing disjointed information or statistics or even pedagogical strategies. According to Singleton, true change can only occur once belief systems come into question. Through various activities, participants examine their own lives for racial impact and identity markers, practice descriptive conversations in small groups that allow multiple voices and perspectives, and explore a variety of small articles that question the social pervasiveness of racism. Beginning with the personal, the workshop moves to the larger picture of institutional and systemic racism. Topics addressed along the way include: race and socioeconomics (as intersecting but separate issues), the social construction of knowledge, understanding how both whites and people of color speak
differently about race, and the pervasiveness of whiteness as a norm in society, among others.

Facilitators from the school system who have already undergone the training assist their colleagues, guiding the small group discussions and activities, answering questions and concerns, and encouraging everyone to share their multiple perspectives respectfully and thoughtfully.
REFERENCES


Frankenberg, R. (1996). “When we are capable of stopping, we begin to see”: Being white, seeing whiteness. In B. Thompson & S. Tyagi (Eds.), *Names we call home: Autobiography on racial identity* (pp. 215-228). New York: Routledge.


Purcell-Gates, V. (2002). “…As soon as she opened her mouth!”: Issues of language, literacy and power. In L. Delpit & J. K. Dowdy (Eds.), The skin that we speak: Thoughts on language and culture in the classroom (pp. 121-144). New York: The New Press.


