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A Lesson Before Prying: Invitation to Inquiry within a Collaborative Community of Literacy Educators

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A university-school collaborative, responding to the many challenges of urban educators, including high-stakes testing, invited the authors to improve literacy instruction. The authors chronicle their initial steps of this action research. Their lesson before prying into the teaching and learning lives of the stakeholders of the learning community indicated that the teachers a) used professional vocabulary that often conflicted with classroom practices, b) expressed interest in improving instruction, and c) highly value their students.

IN THE NOVEL, *A Lesson Before Dying* (Gaines, 1993), Grant Wiggins, an elementary school teacher, is faced with despair and frustration about his role in life, and the roles of those in his community in Post World War II rural Louisiana. He views the cycle of poverty, discrimination, and power of others as one that can not be broken, and doubts that he can influence the children to live better lives and acknowledge that learning to read and write is critical to their success as citizens in a changing world. He is tempted to run away from the community, to turn his back on teaching and to go to a bigger city or a different state where it would not be so hard to teach.

Before he can escape this overwhelming frustration to what he visions as an easier life, the community presents Grant with a challenge. One of the members of the community, a young man named Jefferson, is falsely accused of murder and sentenced to death, a conviction that could not and would not be overturned in that climate of social injustice. It is the wish of the community and Jefferson's immediate family that due to the humiliating way in which the court treated him during the trial, Grant would teach him to recognize the value of his own life, allowing him to face death with dignity. As Grant confronts the challenge of racism, poverty, and an unjust system while he helps this innocent man during the remaining days of his life, he becomes aware of the power of knowledge, especially when coupled with pride. Above all, he learns that a teacher has to believe in not only his students, but in the contexts beyond classroom walls, beyond the immediate segregated community, and so, discovers the compelling impact of one's own actions and non-actions. This reciprocal lesson allows both men to face their future with intrepidity, despite the apparent and overwhelming despair that envelops them in attempts of compliance to this unjust system. The lesson empowers them to accept what cannot be changed, but to do so with conviction and self-confidence, laying the foundation for future change-agents.

This powerful story provides educators with a guiding and encouraging lesson on how to continue the struggle that has crossed the bridge with us to the twenty-first century. The fictional setting of fifty years ago sadly parallels the reality of the frustrations of teaching in general, and teaching children of poverty in particular. Through our

experiences as educators as elementary school teachers, administrators, and current college professors in literacy education, we are familiar with challenges and opportunities that influence the academy and its stakeholders, *A Lesson Before Dying*, evoked responses that inspired reflection and preparation for beginning action research with teachers at a charter school established to meet the needs of a highly transient and poor community near the university. The purpose of this paper is to chronicle our initiation into the collaborative community of teachers and students at this small charter school.

The overarching goal of this action research is to improve literacy at the school; however, given the enormity of this task, we believed that we must first learn about the school and the stakeholders. The question guiding this phase of the study is: How do we establish a collaborative community of literacy educators? We began our lesson with revisiting and reflecting upon the external influences on schools and teachers within urban settings. We believed that this research-based structure would assist us in establishing an authentic framework necessary to support our initial findings of the literacy events that occur within the school. We hoped to learn about the teaching lives of stakeholders in this community before we began to “pry” and make suggestions and recommendations for the teaching and learning of literacy competencies.

Teaching the Urban Poor in the Twenty-First Century

Although poverty remains a dirty thread woven into the tapestry of our society, our educational fabric now includes a nexus of research, philosophies and praxis that have created an interesting but controversial design. Among these influences on education in the twenty-first century are:

- the paradox of uniqueness and challenges of urban education
- accountability and testing for both the learner and the public institutions of learning, and,
- collaborative efforts between universities and public schools.

The Paradox of Uniqueness and Challenges of Urban Education

Teaching children of poverty, especially those living within an urban setting, is a paradox of experiences, allowing educators opportunities for success, or excuses to permit failure. City dwellers speak multiple languages, and hail from multiple cultures and/or countries. Students in schools serving these diverse communities come to school with a vast array of experiences that could contribute to the framework of a lesson, add to student understanding, or open new educational doorways. Additionally, urban schools are often close to museums, libraries, theatres and other institutions that provide optimal learning opportunities. Yet the prospect for quality education is marred with the harsh reality of public education within the center cities of our country. Conditions of urban education have been well documented by many researchers including Jonathan Kozol, who has chronicled the continued disgrace of crumbling buildings, inadequate curriculum, and unconcerned teachers for well over thirty years. These deplorable physical attributes raise issues of the safety of buildings and threaten the health and well being of students on a daily basis (McClafferty, Torres, & Mitchell, 2000). Schools that service the urban poor often suffer from inadequate funding and are micromanaged by too much bureaucracy within the school system, along with inadequate funding at the building level (Weiner, 1999). Finally, many of the students enrolled in urban schools speak little English, may not be proficient in the discourse of schools (Gee, 1996), and are typically not members of the dominant culture. This lack of cultural capital as described by Delpit (1995) can create academic roadblocks that inhibit success in the school setting, including both academics and classroom behavior.

Accountability and Testing

The complexity of teaching in the twenty-first century in general, and specifically teaching children in poverty is further compounded by growing trends and consequences of a national focus on accountability in education. This trend includes the establishment of standards in all content areas at the national, state, and local levels, and testing both for teachers and students alike. The inclination towards a unified calculation of student and teacher success has evolved into a Byzantine system that

reduces learners and institutions of learning to numbers, which can be manipulated and presented for rankings, grading, and/or other labels that oversimplify the complex process of determining educational success. Within the past few years, the progress of colleges of education and public schools, as measured by the outcomes of standardized tests, has been under close examination by politicians, the media, and the public at large. Included in campaign speeches, editorials, and comments on talk radio are concerns about the reading ability of American children, and the woeful teaching abilities of American teachers (Goodman, 1998); statements that are substantiated by seemingly lower test scores that insinuate that the United States of America is inferior to other countries in reading (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). This hysteria has given impetus to many state legislative bodies to initiate mandates to school districts regarding the nature of reading instruction (Patterson, 1998), often resulting in a prescriptive, scripted, and typically myopic approach to literacy.

The mandated addition of such a narrow focus on reading has frustrated many educators already faced with the fostering a love of literacy as well as building a foundation of skills necessary to be successful both within the boundaries of the school walls and life beyond the classroom doors. This program driven agenda, coupled with the growing accountability movement further adds to the burden that teachers throughout this state bear. The pressure that has been placed on classroom teachers to achieve high test scores for their students has been steadily increasing as these highly publicized test scores are the major component of the formula to grade schools A-F, a practice that determines school funding as well as contributes to the status of the school within the overall community.

Tragically, these governmental controls placed on professional educators by non-educators often result in the deprofessionalization, deskilling, and the demoralization of teachers (Giroux, 1992; Shannon, 1992). Though most educators emerge from teacher preparation programs filled with energy and excitement, eager to put theory into practice, they soon become weary with the over emphasis on high stakes testing and other rules established by those outside the academic community. The lack of confidence this engenders in educators can result in inappropriate instruction and increasing frustration with their

own practice, and in the relegation from professional prepared educators to clerks (Giroux, 1992). That is, teachers slowly evolve from making professional decisions regarding the use of curriculum and methodology in relation to the needs of their students, to disseminating lessons written by those far beyond the classroom walls.

Collaboration

An intersection of this growing trend of accountability with reflective praxis as advocated by Schon (1983) has cascaded into renewed interest in collaboration between public schools and colleges of education. Efforts initiated by reform movements in the eighties have assisted in the establishment of partnerships, including collaboration with teachers in their classrooms (Goodlad, 1990), resulting in emergence of professional development schools, strengthening existing partnerships between colleges of education and public schools, and providing an ecologically valid laboratory for examining classroom practices and preservice teacher internships. The evolution of these relationships has been slow, hampered by traditional roles of the university (Goodlad, 1994; Greenwood & Levin, 2000) and often taking on the roles of colonizer and colonized (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Villenas, 2000), a process often leaving teachers feeling marginalized.

A Community Responds

These three influences have the ability to either disenfranchise educators, leaving them with little hope for change, or to provide them with the impetus to search for unique solutions to problems of urban education. One solution to teaching children of abject poverty in our community is the charter school, a partnership with the urban school district and the university, its overall mission to provide a stable educational climate for a highly transient student population. Mirroring the characteristics of uniqueness, issues in accountability within the context of a school/university partnership, The charter school engages with all stakeholders to create optimal learning opportunities for the primary students that the school serves.

The School

We created the school to establish a community of learners that would serve a highly transient, lower socioeconomic population of children. Students in several schools in the immediate area surrounding the university were shuffled from school to school; primarily due to high percentages of low-income housing in the area, and resulting high mobility rate of the families of students these schools serve. Additionally, the mission of the school is to empower teachers to use innovative methodology to not only meet the basic literacy and numeracy skills of the students, but also to expand knowledge in all content areas.

The charter school is located across the street from the university and housed in a science museum. Classrooms for the two kindergartens, a first grade, and a first/second grade combination class, along with the school lunchroom are located on the first floor. Classrooms for the second, second/third, and third grades are on the second floor. The museum also has classrooms on the second floor for lectures and demonstrations for museum visitors. With the exception of the kindergarten classes that shared a large room, the rooms provided for classrooms are smaller than those typically found in most public schools, and the limited space allows for only desks and necessary materials. This left little room for storage or for extended movement activities or extensive learning activity centers.

The office and the teacher lounge/workroom are contained in a portable building across the parking lot from the museum. Space in this area is also cramped. The administrative offices have room for a desk, a few file cabinets, and two chairs for visitors. The teacher lounge/workroom has the usual equipment for preparing curricular materials, and appliances such as a refrigerator and microwave for preparing snacks and lunches. A small table sits inside with approximately six chairs, requiring a search for appropriate seating when a faculty meeting is held there. These temporary facilities have served the school since its inception in 1997, and will remain until a permanent building is built on the university campus.

The Principal

A welcoming retired school administrator and former school board member volunteered to serve as principal for this new school. Active and enthusiastic, she drew upon her years of experience as an educator to encourage teachers to employ best research-based literacy practices and held to the idea that all children could learn. One of her first priorities was that all adults, including volunteers, interacted with the children in a positive, professional manner. Popular with children in the school, parents, faculty, and volunteers, she visited the classrooms on a regular basis and served as an academic leader as well as an administrator.

The Teachers

The eight teachers of the school during the time of the study included two kindergarten teachers, one first grade teacher, one first/second grade teacher, one second-grade teacher, one second/third grade teacher, one third-grade teacher, and one special education teacher. A kaleidoscope of experiences, cultures, and knowledge came with the faculty. First year teachers, seasoned teachers, teachers with master's degrees and teachers recognized by the district as outstanding all participated. They were male and female, African American, European American, and Asian American. They were selected to teach at the school and had been invited to remain, in part due to their dedication to the children and to the academic community. Each classroom also had a teaching assistant who helped the teacher with paperwork, classroom management, and often tutored small groups of children.

The Children

The student population consisted of approximately 140 students in kindergarten through third grade. The children came from homes with an average income of \$6,500 and of primarily African American descent (59 percent). Further, 20 percent came of European American heritage, 13 percent shared a Hispanic background, 6 percent Multiracial, and 2 percent Asian American. Almost the entire school population (75 percent) qualified for free/reduced lunch. Additionally, many of the students were identified as special needs students, including children

with learning disabilities and/or behavioral disorders. Because of these needs, the number of children enrolled in each classroom ranged from approximately 15-20 children, a number smaller than typical classrooms.

The Researchers

We are university professors who at the beginning of this study were new to the university, to the community, and to each other. Our initial conversations reflected similar belief systems regarding teaching and learning that guided our teaching, our service, and our research. We are student centered and strong advocates for children and for teachers. We have manifested these practices in our own classroom teaching, as we have emphasized social justice, democracy, and encouraged risk taking through our assignments and class activities. Our educational experiences expand three decades within several states both north and south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Because of our stance, we did not wish to engage in research with students and/or teachers as outside colonizers (Villenas, 2000) or as authority figures, possessing all the answers for a "quick fix." We did not wish to pry into the teaching and learning lives of teachers and children, only to give unsolicited, and perhaps unwarranted advice.

The Process

The Invitation

In the fall of 1999, the collaborative circle of educators interested in promoting the success of the school invited us to join them. The principal of the school and a colleague in our department, one instrumental in establishing the charter school, extended this invitation and included the broad request to help to improve reading.

Due to our philosophy, our newcomer status, and the overwhelming charge in our invitation, we recognized the critical need to establish credibility. Although we gained entry through the "known sponsor" approach (Patton, 1990), we thought it important to learn as much about the overall context of the school before we could truly investigate ways

to improve reading. Because of the external influences on urban education, our overall question guiding this phase of the study, how do we establish a collaborative community of literacy educators, became nested in relationship to:

- the paradox of uniqueness and challenges of urban education
- accountability and testing, and
- collaboration.

Specifically, we set out to establish this community so that all stakeholders could “pry” together to create an optimal literacy environment.

Research Design and Data Collection

In planning our research design, the work of Goodlad (1994) and Wagner (1997), who advocate the recognition of all stakeholders as partners, influenced us along with the findings of previous research in the area of school partnerships, the changing nature of schools (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1997), and the influence of implementing best research-based literacy practices (Gambrell, Morrow, Neuman, and Pressley, 1999). In our attempts to answer the questions guiding the study, we anchored our research questions within the framework of action research described by Greenwood and Levin (1998; 2000), as cyclical and scientific with guiding values for equal participation of all stakeholders. This framework focuses on inquiry, and assists in empowering the participants. For this study, we used qualitative procedures such as classroom observations, informal conversations with teachers, students, and staff, and participated in faculty meetings and in-service sessions. These data were collected through ethnographic observation notes, audio-taped discussion sessions with the teachers, samples of classroom reading and writing assessments, and informal interviews. Additionally, we each kept a reflective journal to record our responses to these observations and to raise questions for subsequent interviews and informal conversations. Finally, our data collection included e-mail correspondences that occurred between the researchers. For this phase of the study, data collection occurred between December and April of the 1999-2000 academic school year, a period of five months.

Data Collection

In late fall, 1999, initial meetings established the research agenda. We first met with the principal for a two-hour discussion about the school. The content of this discussion centered upon the history of the partnership and the members of the learning community. The principal shared with us her concerns about the students' progress, particularly in literacy, and her pride about the successes that occurred in many of the classrooms, as well as those opportunities for the implementation of best research-based practices, including phonemic awareness. The principal then took us on a tour of the school, introducing us to volunteers as well as the classroom teachers. Most of the teachers smiled and warmly greeted us and often described the current classroom milieu.

Two weeks later, the teachers, principal, a student teacher, and a graduate student who had been working with the school in the area of speech/language development, met together to discuss plans for collaboration. In attempts to adhere to what Wagner (1997) describes as a co-learning agreement, we stressed our desire to mutually discover promises and possibilities in classroom instruction. We next discussed the literacy progress of the students.

The teachers shared their frustrations about their teaching and their extreme worry about standardized testing that would rate their school on a low level. Results from the previous year had recently returned, but discouraged the teachers, who believed that the students were making progress, and spent approximately 30 minutes discussing this aspect. One teacher stated the difficulty of putting so much time and effort into teaching and then getting "slapped in the face" with a low test score, plus enduring the punishment and embarrassment that accompanies the standardized measure. Aware of their challenges, and their frustrations about testing, we assured them that their feelings were similar to many teachers throughout the country (Kohn, 2000). We then discussed possible solutions to improve the reading abilities of the students. While the teachers voiced an overall concern to improve reading in general, they specifically had an interest in learning more about phonemic awareness.

Over the next several months, we visited classrooms on a weekly basis. We visited these classrooms individually, allowing for more observations of the children and the teacher. Each classroom observation ranged in time from 45 minutes to an hour, and occurred during the morning hours when the students were engaged in literacy events. We also observed children and teachers during math, physical education, art, music, and social studies. Often we walked with the students to the library, to other areas of the museum, and to special classes. These informal times, as well as in-class time when we were able to work with individual students, allowed us many opportunities to converse with the children and the teachers, who also provided us with explanations of classroom procedures.

Data Analysis

For this study, we analyzed our data using guidelines established by Patton (1990). We reviewed field notes, audiotapes, reflective journals, and other artifacts to determine the content, and then organized everything into data files. This process revealed several trends:

- the differences between teachers' words and actions in the classroom
- the teachers' interest in professional growth, and
- the teachers' appreciation for the students that they teach.

The Differences Between Teachers' Words and Classroom Actions

The teachers and the principal frequently mentioned phonemic awareness as an area of concern. Through our discussions and observations of classroom practices, we realized that not all teachers had the same definition of phonemic awareness, nor did they approach phonemic awareness in the same ways in their classrooms. Not surprisingly, we observed that the greatest focus on phonemic awareness occurred in the kindergarten classrooms. The two kindergarten teachers collaborated on lesson planning and adhered to the same overall goals and objectives, but differed in their teaching styles. One teacher relied more on worksheets and other commercial materials. The other

kindergarten teacher engaged in more child-centered activities including technology, manipulative, group activities, and shared reading.

The students in the first and second grades also had instruction in phonemic awareness. Although these teachers employed more student-centered activities such as journal writing, drama, and other interactive literacy activities, there were more lessons associated with the adopted reading series, including a reliance on worksheets and other scripted materials. Observed lessons revealed less emphasis on phonemic awareness in the third grade, although lessons tended to invite student participation and focused on other types of decoding such as structural analysis.

Teachers' Interest in Professional Growth

One focus of the first faculty meeting was the increased pressure that has been placed on our state's teachers to be accountable for the academic progress of children they teach, through state testing. Classroom observations of these teachers at work indicated that many of the teachers engaged in a variety of teaching practices, ranging from child-centered activities to adherence to scripted lessons. Many students worked in workbooks and on worksheets and read textbooks. Conversations with teachers indicated their interest in meeting instructional objectives through different strategies, but also their fear that this gargantuan task is too overwhelming and time consuming. They explained the degree in comfort in using the basal series and other prepared curriculum material, as they would be "covered" if they were required to explain teaching practices if test scores were low.

Teachers' Appreciation for the Students They Teach

The students face the problems that many urban students encounter, including high mobility and learning and/or behavior problems—two factors that helped provide the impetus for the development of this school. Although the teachers spend time encouraging appropriate school behaviors and practices, and have their share of frustrations when students do not meet these expectations, the teachers treat the students with appreciation. In these classrooms, students are free to move about and to engage in purposeful conversations. In most classrooms, happily

observed confused students comfortably asking questions. In particular, students demanded to know the meanings of words, a practice encouraged across all classrooms.

Other discussions held both in faculty meetings and informal conversations held in classrooms and hallways reinforced this appreciation of the children. One teacher stated during our initial meeting that "the children were wonderful," while another suggested that literacy activities center around the children's interest, and keeping positive, and that reading may be a source of comfort to the students facing a difficult life. We also noted that many of the children appeared to be happy and engaged in learning, and in playful conversations with their teachers, staff, and with each other.

These trends, when compared to the influences on urban education that guided our study, provide additional insight into our lesson before prying. The participants in this study truly cared about the well being of the students in the school, but clearly felt challenged by the frustrations that afflict many teachers at urban schools.

The Paradoxes of Uniqueness and Challenges of Urban Education

One interesting aspect of the charter school is its housing in a science museum. While many teachers took advantage of the close proximity of the exhibits and the IMAX movie, the vast opportunities that could enhance literacy, science skills and knowledge remained untapped at this phase of the study. The facilities, while not mirroring the decaying structures as depicted by Kozal (1991), are temporary, cramped, and often, dirty. Teachers and students walked across the parking lot each time they needed to go to the office. While traffic was not usually heavy, there was always a possibility of cars and trucks in that area. The teachers often voiced frustration about these physical conditions, and tended not to employ learning activity centers or other more innovative teaching strategies due to lack of room and supplies.

The cultures and experiences of the children were celebrated in these teachers' classrooms. However, the teachers found their difficulties in learning and/or behavior challenging, and they openly sought ways to

assist students to be successful, often seeking appropriate children's literature and other culturally relevant curricular materials (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The teachers also voiced that they need more time and assistance in this area, concerned about the overwhelming literacy needs of their students.

Accountability and Testing

Teachers remained frustrated about accountability and testing. They believed that they tried to do their best and wanted their children to do well. However, they recognized that the students did have a lack of cultural capital (Delpit, 1995) that would cause some difficulty on standardized testing. Despite the testing cloud that hung over the teachers, they were aware of the importance of standards, and even more aware of the needs of their students. They actively sought ways to best meet these needs, mindful that test scores would not always reflect their students' growth and interest in reading and writing. Some teachers continued to find comfort in scripted curriculum, and even expressed a need to purchase commercial materials that promised high-standardized test scores.

Collaboration

The teachers had participated in the university/charter school partnership since the inception of the school and welcomed university faculty visiting the school and engaging in research. There had been opportunities for university students to intern at the school, and a few faculty had come to work with the teachers in improving the curricular areas of math and writing. However, they were anxious for some assistance in teaching reading and welcomed us into the learning community. Further, the participants held nothing back in their reflections about teaching and learning, and invited us into their classrooms at all times. They often sought our approval in their teaching and seemed pleased when we affirmed their teaching practices and offered suggestions and strategies.

Our Lesson and Conclusions

We performed this study to examine the establishment of a collaborative community of literacy educators with particular attention to:

- the influences of the paradoxes of uniqueness and challenges of urban education
- accountability and testing, and
- collaboration on the literacy practices of the stakeholders at the charter school.

Results of the study indicate that although teachers felt frustration about the increased amount of pressure placed on them by state mandates, they appreciated the strengths that their students brought with them to the classroom. Their desire to be better teachers and to encourage literacy within their own classroom remained strong, although they sometimes used professional vocabulary in discourse that had different situated meanings (Gee, 1996; 2000) for the members of the collaborative community.

In particular, they voiced the need for assistance in phonemic awareness frequently. Our observations indicated activities that fostered phonemic awareness dominating lessons in the kindergarten and first and second grades. As we perceived an overall balanced approach to literacy with an adequate and respectable emphasis on phonemic awareness, we grew curious about the teachers' concern in this area. The balanced approach to literacy has included instruction in phonemic awareness, although the reading wars still rage (Goodman, 1998). Our discussions with the teachers indicated awareness of this controversy and interest in meeting the needs of the students, but also concern about issues of accountability and the impending state test. Given the popularity of the term "phonemic awareness," we knew that teachers would voice this as an area of concern. We had talked of it during our first visit to the school and there had been articles written in the local newspapers and on television and radio news reports. While many of the teachers voiced this as an area of need, most were actively planning and implementing literacy events that focused on the development of phonemic awareness. We found interesting the way in which the teachers viewed this aspect of

assessments to national assessments. One major concern that these and other educators have raised about standardized testing is the resulting control of the curriculum. Giroux (1992) cautions that indulging in such behavior would result in the establishment of clerks rather than teachers. We share that view and speculate that a teaching life relegated to such mundane practices would result in educators leaving the profession, an occurrence that would not be beneficial to a society concerned with a shortage of teachers, particularly in our state (Darling-Hammond, 2001). It seems reasonable that teachers should not be made to feel as though they have been remiss in their teaching, and that they are not capable of making informed decisions about students they teach. It is reasonable to encourage classroom teachers to move beyond the role of clerks and to strive to be professional educators, teachers who plan for instruction based on informed assessment. These are teachers who do not teach reading programs, but rather teach children to read. The orchestration of such classroom practices is certainly, as Shannon (1992) claims, the deskilling of teachers, a process that reduces the art of teaching to a menial task requiring little thought to individual needs.

Teaching urban, poor children who lack in cultural capital is not a job for clerks. Our observations and discussions with teachers indicate that they did not enjoy that path, and because of their respect for the students, they recognized that this "one-size fits all" curriculum was not appropriate or beneficial to the children. This affirmation and acceptance of the students is helpful for all learners, but especially students in urban schools (Weiner, 1999). The transformation of teachers should consider the cultural/personal situations of the students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Delpit, 1995; Mahiri, 1998), particularly in light of investigations that have revealed the neglected state of urban schools (Kozol, 1991; Ayers, 1996; Mahiri, 1998). The teachers at the charter school absorbed this approach well. But this transformation cannot be achieved alone. It requires the members of the collaborative community to talk, share ideas, and build energy (Graves, 2001).

Our lesson provided a framework for future work within this collaborative community of literacy educators. First, we believe that we established a sense of credibility with the teachers. Through our stance as active-member researchers (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000), we

worked with the teachers, and learned about the literacy routines that occur within the school and the individual classrooms. Secondly, we have learned that the teachers are receptive to professional development, although we need to be explicit in our definition of terms. Educational buzzwords have situated meanings that do vary among teachers and other stakeholders within an academic community. Finally, we have learned that foundation of mutual respect between teachers and students is a strength on which we can easily blaze new literacy paths, allowing for the stakeholders of the school to become change-agents for literacy within the context of urban education.

In A Lesson Before Dying (Gaines, 1993), Jefferson, an uneducated young man, is sentenced to death. At his trial, his own lawyer calls him a "hog," a name that haunts him for most of his incarceration. He is isolated and believes that he has little control over his life and his circumstances. It is not until a group of friends and family, led by teacher Grant Wiggins, meet with him and encourage him that he is able to recognize his own abilities to rise above perceptions and false accusations. It is his lesson before dying.

While no legislator, administrator, or other authority figure has publicly called teachers "hogs," educators have been blamed for many of the perceived failures of our schools. Many teachers feel isolated as they work with children, particularly when high-stakes testing is involved (Kohn, 2000). When these disillusioned teachers lack structure of community, they feel little control over their teaching lives. This frustration often results in flight from teaching and flight from urban schools. Those who stay often find comfort in following the narrow curriculum sanctified by those in authority (Kohn, 2000).

We have discovered that many within the learning community feel discouraged by continuing the struggle that has followed us across the bridge to the twenty-first century. We still teach children immersed in poverty and we still face the frustrations of high-stakes testing. We have discovered that these teachers feel isolated and seek approval and affirmation for classroom practices.

The establishments of learning communities where teachers are able to share ideas, communicate, and most importantly, have ideas and practices affirmed show promise of restoring and generating knowledge and pride. We hope that reflection on our lesson will help to affirm exemplary teaching practices, encourage risk taking in the planning and implementing of literacy events, and help to retain teachers as professional educators. This is the beginning of the transformation from clerks to professional educators and it is our lesson before prying, a lesson that we have all learned as members of a collaborative community of literacy educators.

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