

📅 *40th Anniversary*

Putting Creativity Back in Learning and Teaching

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IN THE SUMMER OF 2003, I joined the New York City Teaching Fellows and was hired to be a full-time classroom teacher at P.S. 36, a self-contained school for kids with emotional and behavioral disorders in Brooklyn. I came to classroom teaching and the New York City public schools by way of Teachers & Writers Collaborative, where I started out as an administrative assistant and grew to program coordinator and teaching artist during my tenure with the program. T&W introduced me to classrooms with students who had never had the opportunity to write creatively before, and as I traveled through New York City public school classrooms as a teaching artist and administrator I realized that I wanted to see what teaching would be like from inside the system.

As a new classroom teacher, with only one summer of formal training under my belt, I walked into a virtual vacuum of curriculum and resources. The mayor and schools chancellor were in the process of overhauling New York City's public school system, both rearranging the structural bureaucracy and mandating a uniform curriculum in math and language arts for all but a handful of schools in the city. While the mayor's new curriculum was mandated, I was given no supplies or instructions on how to teach it. Yet the old curricula were obsolete. With a few tattered texts dug out of the resource closet by the veteran assistant principal and by searching the Internet, I did my best to cobble together an appropriate curriculum that would, at the minimum, keep my students from killing each other and, at best, would actually advance their reading, writing, and math skills.

First-year teaching is all about survival and I was hanging on by my fingernails: up at 5 a.m. every morning combing the Internet for lesson plans before school, limping home at the end of the day covered in actual and emotional bruises. Each day was a battle, trying to fit five precious moments of learning into a forty-five-minute period broken up by loudspeaker announcements, fist fights, and verbal assaults. Needless to say, when I was told that mine would be one of three classrooms to have a T&W residency I was elated.

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fights. And a day was successful if none of my students left the building bleeding. I had not abandoned my ideals, but I had come to feel that many of my ideals had abandoned me. Fighting day in and day out for every tiny success had left me exhausted, my creative resources drying up.

Gia began each class with a breathing exercise and meditation that helped the students find the space they so desperately needed in order to respond to the world rather than react to it. And, as I stood at the back of the room, watching my students breathe, I realized that I needed to draw this space around myself as well. As any good teacher of writing would, Gia taught the students to think and write descriptively. But with recognition of the challenges that faced them (all of the students performed well below grade level in reading and writing, and a couple could barely write a sentence), she created exercises in which each student could be successful. The beauty of creative writing, particularly for students with special needs, is that rules and conventions can be secondary to fluency and spontaneity. The students didn't have to follow the rules of grammar and sentence structure when Gia asked them to write what they sensed from a selection of pictures of nature. With Gia there, the classroom assistants and I were able to individually assist each student to get their ideas down on paper. At the end of each lesson, the students almost always had written something that they could be proud of.

Programs like T&W give students and teachers access to a world beyond their classrooms. This kind of authentic learning experience transcends the day-to-day grind that too often takes the creativity out of learning and teaching alike. The T&W residency helped me remember why I was teaching in the first place. Rather than trying to create a curriculum that would in some way resemble a mandate that was never made clear to me, I was able to find my way back into the creative process of teaching. Towards the end of the residency, Gia organized a field trip to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and for the first time, I was able to see my students outside of the classroom, interacting with a new landscape, and not surprisingly, there were no fights to break up that day.



Jenny Robinson Hartley worked in New York City public schools as a classroom teacher, teaching artist, and nonprofit arts-in-education administrator from 1999 until 2006. A graduate of Sarah Lawrence College, she was also a member of the 2003–04 NYC Teaching Fellows Cohort and served one year teaching children with behavioral and emotional disorders in District 75. She currently resides in Decatur, Georgia, where she is raising an eighteen-month-old baby.