

Portrait of the Artist as a Full-Time Teacher

ZOE RYDER WHITE

8:15, room K-219. I am taking tiny chairs down from tiny octagonal tables. The windows are open: a steady jack-hammering drifts up from the street below. My room is on the second floor, and sometimes it seems as if all of Manhattan is waiting just outside the windows—yippy dogs and laughing workmen and perpetually-beeping, backing-up delivery trucks. As I take down the last chair, I hear Clara banging on the classroom door, hollering “I know you’re in there, Zoë!” Technically, I’ve still got five minutes.

8:20. I turn on the fan, turn off the music, spit out my gum. I open and latch the door, and then stand aside as David shoots in, sprinting the room’s circumference, making his daily examination to see if I’ve forgotten a detail. “You forgot to put morning meeting on the schedule! And what’s that new book on the easel? And did you know that one time, one time, one time I was in my aunt’s garden and I *stepped on a bee?*!”

Ana arrives, hands me a limp pink blossom she’s picked from the bush in front of her house in Queens and cupped in her palm the whole way to school: one train, two busses, three blocks walked. We fill a Dixie cup with water and float the flower in it.

"I'm going to Jamika's for a playdate!" says Karla as she skips in. Ruby has quietly shaken her dad's hand goodbye and now she stands with her sunhat and her backpack still on, leaning against her chair, blinking slowly, making no move. I talk to Sam's mom briefly about his recent illness and to Cindy's mom about some trouble on the playground that ended in a skinned elbow. I walk over to Ruby and wish her a good morning. She blinks. "You awake, Rube?" She nods slowly, eyes unfocused. "You sleepy?" Another nod, another blink. Slowly she slips her arms free of the hot-pink backpack straps.

Sylvie practices twirling her new skirt. Bianca is crouched by the writing center, drawing a treasure map. Ana's two-year-old sister has escaped from her dad's arms and made a beeline to the fish tank. She smacks the glass with the flat of her sticky hand, leaving a juice handprint. "Hi, fish!" she bellows.

"Can I share my life-size Rapunzel doll today, Zoë?" asks Nicola, clutching a garbage bag with two long yellow braids hanging out the top. "Can I, can I, CAN I??"

"Okay," I sigh, walking over to flick the lights three times and give our usual morning call. I sing "Bum ba-da-dum-dum!" and the kids (theoretically) sing back "Bum bum!" (to the tune of "shave and a haircut"). They race, dawdle, and skip to the rug for morning meeting. Within a minute, I've got 24 small cross-legged people looking up at me as I sit in what they call my "teacher chair," but which is actually the tiniest of the fleet of tiny chairs that fill our room.

As I sit, Clara says, "Look, foot-space, Zoë!" She is referring to the fact that she has in fact scooted back far enough away from my seat to allow my feet to rest comfortably on the floor, and not under her. It has taken a week of discussion of "personal space," but she's got it now! I look out over them, these children: the people in whose magnificent company I spend my days.

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Used to be, I'd wake up after the sun. Used to be I'd make coffee at home, read the paper, maybe work on a poem. I used to sit on my Brooklyn stoop and watch the commuters scramble towards the Q-train, feeling vaguely sorry and vaguely smug. That was back when people asked "What do you do?" and I would always answer *writer* first and *teacher* second.

There is an ebb and flow to energy output whether one works as a classroom teacher or as a teaching writer. As a teaching writer, my ebb during slow times was utter stillness: no schools, no students, no work. Flow, at its highest volume, meant simultaneous relationships with up to eight different schools, with children ranging in age from 5 to 15, in every borough in the city. I loved this life, with its dramatic tides of activity.

I loved having a reason to see parts of the city that I might never have visited otherwise. I loved seeing store signs written in Spanish, Arabic, or Russian. I loved the smells I walked in and out of. Glimpses into so many classrooms. I loved the warm, complicated, smart teachers I met. I loved, most of all, the varied, bright-faced, open-hearted children: whether it was the school in Forest Hills or the school on the Lower East Side.

The first full residency I taught was in the South Bronx. I didn't know it then, but the school, already labeled a "failing school," would be closed completely within the year. I wondered if it was normal when I was asked to teach one of the third grade classes in a bathroom due to lack of space elsewhere, but I was new to the city. I was wide-eyed in the mornings walking past junkyards where tireless cars bloomed with rust and skinny dogs sprawled so soundly asleep in the oily dust I thought they might be dead. There were dead rats in the school's cement yard. Half of the students were pulled out of class each day for "asthma management group." One classroom window opened onto a park where crack vials glinted in the sun and lean teenage boys shot basket after basket into the netless hoop. And oh, how those third graders could write!

I remember Joselito with sleep in his eyes and yesterday's breakfast on his shirt. Joselito of the too-small shoes who wanted to change his name, he would write, to Lion. Joselito the studious. Joselito the lion-hearted, sprinting through the park to school.

I remember Joselito and Startisha and Kehinde and Joy. I remember the twins Shaqueena and Shaquanna and their matching lime-green tank tops. I remember Esmeralda and Alma and Grace and Mei. I remember Qutbah and Lionel and Oshinsky and Rahel and Karl. I remember a teacher holding her arms around the boy who tried to stab another boy with a pencil until he set down the pencil and cried, and then picked up the pencil again and sat down at his desk to write.

The more schools I visited, the more brimfull with stories, names, poems, faces I became: there was the school where Lila—blind, deaf, immobile—sat in her chair and smiled all day. In the same school, Nico—also blind, deaf, and immobile—sat in his chair and sobbed all day. There was Louie with Down's Syndrome who loved Shel Silverstein. There was Tayshawn with autism who wrote poems and literally wanted to eat them, so great was his love of words.

More and more often, at the end of each residency, I didn't feel ready to leave. One day a week for ten weeks was enough time to see that important things were happening in classrooms. It was enough time to be stunned by the sometimes brutal lack of supplies, teacher support, safety; and by the willingness of children to gracefully and courageously write down the details of their lives and minds. It was enough time to learn their names and to witness the few (sometimes many) bursts of light that meant kids realized that words could be theirs—that their lives were important, were poetry. But it was not enough time for me: I grew hungry for information, for an

understanding of the macrocosm of the fields of education and literacy to go along with an understanding of the microcosm of the classroom, the universe of each child.

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My final residency as a teaching writer was with a class of 36 fifth graders in Queens who wrote their poems in a richly attentive silence punctuated by rambunctious discussion. We read Whitman, Lorca, Sandburg, Bishop, Stevens, Neruda, Rumi, Bashō. They were funny and engaged, these fifth graders. I looked forward to being with them.

When their teacher went on maternity leave in February, I was astounded (but delighted) to be asked to take the class for the rest of the year. I'll get to be with them all the time!, I thought. How wonderful, we'll discuss long division and the natural resources of New England with as much enthusiasm and vigor as we discuss poems! What luck! What fun! And so, it began....

Those days I woke up at 5:30 to catch the G-train from Williamsburg, where I lived in a square room with no sink and a shared bathroom that resembled the inside of an elephant. Once in Queens I had a 15-minute walk past the clipped shrubbery and deep-red-brick homes of Forest Hills, crisp edges of snow along the snow-blown sidewalks. I felt I was marching into battle. I never left for home before five and was usually asleep by nine. My friends thought I'd moved out of town. I was desperately trying to remember how to multiply fractions. I was trying to keep Bryan from using his desk as a tool for impersonating Tito Puente. I was trying to keep Stephanie and Holly from snapping their gum and flashing their braces and rolling their eyes at me from the back of the room. What happened to the calm, engaged, kind atmosphere of poetry time?! These management issues, I realized, were not really *my* problem when I was teaching poetry.

It didn't take long to learn how little I knew about running a classroom. I was used to planning lessons that I could carry from school to school and class to class, gradually honing and enriching them. It had not occurred to me that as a classroom teacher, six new lessons would need to be taught each day—with some thought given to continuity, with some thought given to content, with some thought given to developmental appropriateness, with some thought given to state and city standards and the school's own curriculum, with some thought given to individual students' needs, with some thought given to making things somewhat, somehow interesting to the students and to me. I did continue to think about how to teach writing with vigor and joy, but it became much more difficult to maintain the level of energy and enthusiasm now that I was the one responsible for test scores and accountability to standards—a sad and disturbing conundrum.

During this time, I was also in the process of finishing an M.F.A in poetry at Sarah Lawrence. The world of graduate school (clean, quiet rooms and calm adult conversation) seemed entirely disconnected from the world of my classroom. But then somehow, suddenly, it was the end of June, the month of dance recitals and desk-cleaning. I discovered that as the year was ending I was just beginning to

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feel at home with my outspoken and curious 36 students. I shook my head to clear it, to take stock of the relative damage and gain. I stood very still and thought very hard: should I run towards or away from this field, this endeavor, this life?

That July, a week after school ended, I began working towards an M.A. in elementary education, curriculum and teaching at Columbia University's Teachers College. Thus began the next phase. I studied with knowledgeable, informed, dedicated professors, most closely with Lucy Calkins, founding Director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (a staff-development organization that trains teachers to follow a process-based model of teaching writing). I student-taught in functioning, positive classrooms.

And when I started teaching again, in my own classroom—though things were certainly far from perfect—I felt much better equipped, and was able to spend less attention on management issues and more on teaching. I was able to bring more of my writerly consciousness into the classroom, and to begin to think about the differences between teaching writing as a visiting writer and as a classroom teacher. For one thing, I accepted the fact that it takes a very, very long time to learn how to be a good teacher—that in fact, it is a process with no definite end. There will be new challenges every year, and every year, joy is inevitable.

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As I write from the calm of summer vacation (Time with my husband! Enough sleep! Watching commuters head for the Q-train from my perch on the front stoop!), I think—what an interesting time to be an educator. Now that I answer the question “What do you do?” with *teacher* first (and with great pride), I think, what an interesting, troubling time. And then I think, isn't it always? During this particular time, however—whether working as a teaching writer or a classroom teacher—the effects of decreased funding for education, and the federal legislation of scripted curricula and teaching-to-the-test, are keenly felt.

This summer, New York City educators and administrators are scrambling to learn and to understand the drastic restructuring of the Board (now Department) of Education and the new city-wide curriculum before school starts in September. Within the city's new curriculum, all city schools (except 209 high-scoring schools that are allowed to choose their own programs) will be expected to follow a balanced literacy curriculum. Briefly, this includes a 90-minute block of various literacy components: reading workshop, writing workshop, word study (phonics instruction takes place here), shared reading, read aloud, and interactive writing. While all teachers are expected to follow the curriculum, components allow for and in fact encourage much more teacher freedom and creativity than do many of the more rigid curricula being used in other states (Texas and California come to mind).

PS 116 (while on the mayor's list of exempted schools) already uses a curriculum that is very similar to the new one. Last year, my class of kindergartners studied within the “writing workshop” method. The writing workshop is

designed to teach writing through the authentic replication of techniques and skills practiced by “real writers.” Having had the experience of “teaching like a writer” and already identifying as a writer myself, it was fascinating to study and then implement the structures and methodology of a very specific program that aims for all teachers to teach like writers, and for all students to take on the identities of writers as well.

Within the writing workshop model, teachers use literature and their own writing to model different strategies for their students, which the students are then expected to try out in their own writing—not necessarily that day, but at some point. From the very beginnings of their literate lives in school, children are referred to as *writers*. The kindergarten curriculum begins by encouraging students to draw stories from their own lives, and then to gradually add words as their phonemic awareness and knowledge of sight words and spelling patterns develops. Inventive or temporary spelling is gradually replaced by conventional spelling. Beginning in second grade, children work within “writer’s notebooks,” where they are expected to go through the same writing process as professional writers—gather ideas, draft, revise, edit, publish. Different units of study throughout the year each focus on a particular genre or method, and the children are always responsible for their own topic choices.

The writing workshop method I learned at Teachers College has been tremendously beneficial to my teaching. I have learned how helpful it can be to clarify my teaching goals both in the long term (How will this next few weeks go?) and the short term (How does this lesson build on the previous one?). I have learned how to pay attention to, and keep track of, my students’ strengths and challenges (both as a class and individually), and how to build future lessons around what they are doing, or gesturing towards doing, or not doing at all. I have learned how helpful it can be to clarify a teaching point to myself before I try to make it.

It has been fascinating to give name to processes in the teaching of writing that I felt, as a teaching writer, to be largely intuitive. As a teaching writer, my goal might sometimes simply have been to see what happens when we read something passionate, moving, or strange, and then try to replicate that feeling in our own writing. Even that process can be clarified, however, and made more explicit to the children. I am learning (often through mistakes) to tell my students clearly what exactly it is that I want to teach them—which means, of course, that I have got to have some idea myself!

It can be clarifying to break down a conversation with a child about his or her writing, and to study closely how the resulting elements can best fit together. I do grow concerned, however, when dark lines are drawn around subtleties, and teachers potentially become disconnected from the stories and hearts and imaginations of the actual children sitting before them—even though connection is precisely what these conversations aim for. In order to stand up against unabashedly scripted methods of teaching writing, the process-based approach does well to clarify and define its goals. On the other hand, it should in no way limit the minds of the educators and students it aims to enlighten, stimulate, and teach—and hopefully, it does not.

Personally, I have found that the more I know about differing teaching methods and strategies, the more closely I can tailor my teaching to the needs of my particular, dear students. I want my students to learn to read and write: to decode and to develop phonemic awareness, but also to move through though the world with their senses of wonder intact and perpetually nurtured. It is possible—and crucial to good teaching—to balance skill acquisition and comprehension work with the joy of imagination—especially if we are representing, as clearly and authentically as possible, our own meanderings through the worlds of text.

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I remember one winter morning with my kindergartners: a quiet reading workshop with the children back-to-back in pairs, tucked into nooks and corners all over the room. I was listening to James read. It was not snowing, but it felt like snow was on the way. Suddenly, May and Rosa, who'd been out with the bathroom passes, burst into the classroom announcing, "DON'T go into the bathroom!" Their eyes were round. Of course the temporary calm quickly evolved into a clatter of questions.

"There is no gravity in the girls' bathroom," announced Rosa solemnly. There are signs everywhere in there and I read 'em, and that's what they say!"

Of course we were all incredulous. "Well, what happened when you went in?" I asked. "Did you float?"

"We didn't go in," said May, "We were scared."

"*I'm* not scared," said bold Clara, who grabbed Sylvie's hand and the bathroom passes and marched out the door. I resettled the class, telling them that we would certainly figure the mystery out soon—but of course the calm we'd cultivated was missing for the rest of the morning, as the girls made as many trips to the bathroom as they could get away with. Even the boys were talking about the effects of zero gravity and wondering if the situation had spread down the hall to their bathroom. There was a buzz all through writing workshop and into math workshop. By lunchtime, the girls' bathroom had evolved into a portal to the outer reaches of the universe.

During lunch, word spread. Soon a posse of girls from Julienne's class marched over to me asking, "Is it true? No gravity in the girls' bathroom?!"

"I haven't been in to check it out," I told them, honestly. While I was fairly certain that we had no link to the outer reaches of the universe on the second floor of PS 116, I knew that the kids were on to something, and I wanted to see where it would take them.

On the way back from lunch, we passed by the actual site. There were indeed signs plastered liberally on the door and walls outside. They were signed by a group of fourth graders. "Are these the signs you saw?" I asked the class.

"Yes!" they chorused. "Don't open the door!"

"Do you know this word?" I asked.

"Gravity!" they said.

"Actually, you are so close, guys," I said. "But look—these letters are *f*'s, not *v*'s. This word is actually *graffiti*."

The story became one we told and retold throughout the year, to any visitor who came into our room. We were creating our own mythology and developing our phonemic awareness, at the same time.

When I was a teaching writer, I often felt that it was my job to burst in and give a clean shot of inspiration to each class. I wanted to shock and surprise and astound them with the potential of language. I did love that life. As a classroom teacher, my goals are reached more slowly. It is a deeper, more underground churning—punctuated, most days, by bursts of light—the image of little girls flying around the bathroom, a bloom cupped in a five-year-old's hand all the way from Queens. I think I love this life more.