

“Why Are You a Teacher?” and Other Questions My Students Dared to Ask

Nicole Sieben

Adelphi University, New York
Sieben@adelphi.edu

As a person raised by a family of educators, I always considered teaching a desirable profession. My mother, a literacy specialist, and my father, a history teacher turned business executive, showed my sister and me, by example, the reciprocally beneficial nature of the teaching profession. Though both of my parents were teachers, they always encouraged me to find my own voice. I was taught to believe if I had something to contribute, I should share it, and if I wanted to spread hope, I should create it. Thus, I have made choices in my life that reflect my personal history and my teaching and learning experiences. By the same token, I realize students' histories may be different from mine.

Many of my high school students were from a long line of Ivy League legacies. Most of them did not perceive teaching to be a profession that was an option upon graduation—law, medicine, architecture, and business were among those fields that offered acceptable careers to which my students aspired. While all of those careers add value to society, I wanted to make sure that my students knew they had choices, that the voices they spoke each day were their own, and that they were sharing their unique talents with the world.

In my first year teaching high school English language arts, I entered the classroom with pride in my profession and passion for my content area. However, during one midyear class, I remember a student saying to me, “Ms. Sieben, you’re too good to be a teacher. Why are you a teacher?” In the few seconds I had to plan my response, I thought about the implications of this inquiry. I knew this student had intended to compliment me; however, I became disheartened that my extremely impres-

sionable and intelligent students were being acculturated to devalue the teaching profession.

Countless reasons came to mind when I considered my motivations for becoming a teacher—most rooted in social justice. As a high school student, I wanted to be a civil rights attorney. I wanted to effect policies that improve the human experience and protect people whose voices are underrepresented in society. *I was going to change the world.* As an undergraduate, I was registered as a prelaw student and majored in communications and writing. I saw writing as a means of disrupting systems of inequality and restructuring hierarchies of power and privilege. During my studies as a college student, I realized that law was not the avenue I was most interested in pursuing. From internships and other learning experiences, I determined that I wanted to be part of the solutions to social issues earlier in the process of change by working to disrupt normative assumptions in youth culture. I saw teaching ELA as a way of educating students about options for self-expression and self-discovery and as a means of inspiring young people through the examination of powerful stories and purposeful writers, such as Alice Walker, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sandra Cisneros, Sherman Alexie, and Maya Angelou, who have blazed trails for many of us.

For these reasons and so many more, I knew I wanted to be a teacher; *I was going to change the world.* As a social justice educator, I encourage students to look at the way things are and make plans for creating a better what-will-be. Regardless of what profession my students choose, I want them to respect the process of education, not because it

is my profession but because it belongs to a prestigious group of people who work to improve the lives of not only their students but also entire communities that learn from the selfless, courageous examples that educators set. Teachers are often the change agents in systems that influence human life and culture; together, *teachers and students change the world*. It is with this sentiment that I structure my classroom and my lessons, giving each of my students the chance to lead discussions and raise inquiries. Student-centered heuristics influence the malleable structure of my classroom, allowing students' interests and examinations of self and the world to sculpt my curricular choices.

"So, why are you a teacher?"

As I sat beside my students in our usual dialogue circle, I looked around at each of them awaiting my response. Some students appeared to be holding their breath, perhaps anticipating a forthcoming defense of my personal choices and life goals. Some students looked at me smugly as if to say, *We're going to grow up to be better than you*. Still, others appeared to be simply curious about my reasons for choosing to teach when a student had previously noted that I "clearly could have done anything else."

In response to this question about my career choice and the inquisition of eyes placed on me, I began, "I am a teacher because I love working with young people who have unique interests and talents. I believe it is important as an adult to keep questioning, reflecting, and learning about the world and the people in it. Being a teacher allows me to do that every day when I engage in conversations with all of you. I enjoy helping others reach their full potentials, and I also love reading, writing, and analyzing. Hopefully, I've shared some of that passion for the written word with you." Then I paused to invite conversation since it is through discussion and debate that we often acquire knowledge.

The student who had originally asked the question pushed me further. "Yeah, you've taught us a lot. But I want more for you; you'll never be rich or famous as a teacher. Make a difference when you're rich by volunteering in your free time."

"How are you defining *rich*?" I posited. "This is a subjective term."

"Yes, I know definitions are all relative," my student responded in a singsong voice as if to parrot one of my previous lessons. "The signifier and the

signified work together in that system of signs we learned about, but you know what I mean."

"Maybe I do, but I can't be sure. It's important that we hear *your* interpretation of the term. Perhaps we define *rich* differently."

My student responded bluntly, "You won't be rich in *funds*. You'll be *broke*."

I smiled. This conversation really was all about perception, but for most of us our perception often becomes our reality. So, I shared my own definition. "For me, being rich is more about the experiences that shape the person I become. It's about finding those moments of pause during which I am able to reflect on my actions and my lessons and relearn or resee a concept or a circumstance. Richness of life is more about *how* I help and *whom* I help and is less about what amount of money I make. And, FYI," I joked, "I'm far from lacking in funds. Most teachers can still afford to live a comfortable, 'rich' life."

As I watched my students nod their heads and chuckle at my closing comment, the inquiring student responded, "Fine, I'll buy that. We can get back to our lesson on authorship now."

I thanked my student for permission to proceed, and we continued our discussion of Roland Barthes' piece, "The Death of the Author." Our conversation was about the importance or lack of importance of knowing who authored a piece of writing. Based on the value many of my students placed on fame and wealth, it was no surprise that initially most of my students thought it was necessary to know who wrote a text, mostly because they thought the author deserved to get credit. Then, some students pointed out that since we often spoke about the importance of context, it was necessary to know who wrote the piece to understand the context of the text and, thus, the author's intended meaning. My students shared many valid points about why knowing the name and circumstance of an author could be important, but I wanted them to consider other possibilities. I asked my class, "Whose interpretation of the text is *more* important, the author's or the reader's?"

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Almost all of them responded in unison, “The author’s.”

“Is it?”

“Of course.”

“Why?” Silence. “Who says that the author’s view is more important than the reader’s interpretation of the view?”

“The publishing company says!” a student yelled out.

“But how can we be sure the publishing company isn’t more concerned about what the piece of writing will make *readers* think rather than what the *author* is thinking?”

“Well, why would anyone want to be an author then if no one cares about what *they* think?” a student argued.

“Good question. What do you think?”

“To be famous? I don’t know. You write, Ms. Sieben, so you tell us. Why do *you* write?”

I had many answers to that question, but I really wanted to hear what my students thought. Unfortunately, the bell was about to ring; therefore, I had to wrap up my lesson for the day. I wanted to leave the students thinking about this topic as they walked out the door, and I wanted them to come into class the next day ready to write and author their own lives. I left them with this last thought about writing and teaching: “I *write* because *I* have something to say. I *teach* because *you* have something to say, and the world needs to hear it.” 

Work Cited

Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” *Image Music Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill, 1977. 142–48. Print.

Nicole Sieben is a recent graduate of Hofstra University’s Learning and Teaching doctoral program in the Department of Teaching, Literacy and Leadership; an adjunct professor at Adelphi University in General Studies and the School of Education; and a former public high school ELA teacher in New York. Her research focuses on intersections of social justice, positive psychology, human development, composition studies, and teacher education.

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