No Rhyme without Reason: 
Teachers’ Voices on Learner Differences Through Poetic Inquiry

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Context

This inquiry started with a conversation with our sistah Beulah, a fellow teacher. Who with Dennis shared ideals and frustrations of teachers as learners. Conversations that quickly became stories about education; And how we, as teachers who care, survived as we sought to become teacher-liberators.

Beulah shared that she’s still writing poetry, That this inspires and sustains her Her spirit soars as she recalls her students finding voice as composers. And Dennis asked her—How about sharing with others your story, my story, we story of teacher and culture And the hope found in poetry?

Then they two made it three By inviting Theresa for verifiability.

But who are we?

Beulah . . . aka Beuls Blossomed from urban poor Quiet but no mouse Cool as cucumber In air conditioned house. 39 years 6 months of serving As poet and as teacher Using poetry and poetic forms like rapso As a lyrical liberator Standing too for literacy Not compromising the role of education You mess with her “children” You best run to the station.

And Dennis Blessed and from the rural poor A friend - - a ‘brother’ – Fellow teacher Poetry-lover

Co-researcher Co-auto ethnographer Story teller Self-study messenger.

And Theresa? As Critical Friend To question To critique, to even commend Not knowing beyond her professing she writes poetry too.

Dennis and Beulah first consider With our differing lens What might be wheat, what might be fodder? Critiquing as good friends Collaboratively reviewing Working closely from a distance Exploring technology in communicating To determine the story and our stance.

Encouraging reflexivity These narratives emerging As we seek to identify the lessons, how these improve the self and the teaching.

We share our journeys Through glimpses of our teaching career The narratives as personal poetry Aiming to paint a sense of identity. Beuls starts with memories From her early exposure to the genre. Enjoyment, frustrations, love, rebellion, revolutionary Poetic expressions that ever lead to reflection and then to action. “I come from the nigger yard of yesterday” She quotes from Martin Carter1, “leaping from the oppressors’ hate and the scorn of myself, from the agony of the dark hut in the shadow and the hurt of things; from the long days of cruelty and the long nights of pain down to the wide streets of tomorrow
of the next day
leaping I come, who cannot see will hear”.

Yes, I came from just over there

To be a teacher who cares
Enough to show how to fan the flames
Not of despair—but warfare
Educational or spiritual
No matter where
Stop . . .
you so called administrator . . . teacher
playing educator,
while you . . .
Refuse new paradigms in education
Still believe in the pedagogy of “licks.”
As one of us said to me as young neophyte
“You need to beat it out of them
That’s the way to get results.”

So

#1

**Educational Mutilation**

*Go Ahead*

*Cut out the tongue*

*So that he cannot speak*

*Cut off the hands*

*So that he can no longer write*

*Cut off the feet*

*So that she cannot walk the distance*

*It takes to complete the journey*

*To freedom.*

*Squeeze him into submission*

*Then press him into the mold*

*Of the acceptable child.*

*Chain her mind*

*Let her not explore nor analyze*

*Nor think higher thoughts.*

*Tell her to shut up!*

*Keep them even as you are*

*Silent in the face of ills*

*Rejoice then that you have made them*

*Into images of yourself.*

And Beulah continues . . .

To all of us educators
We really need to contemplate

Why she came so late?
Why is he so angry, so silent?
Why are the assignments not done?
And other why, why, why, why, whys?
Let’s pause then for
A moment of reflection
Before we can move on
Before the pedagogy of licks and shame
Before we retire with regrets.

#2

**Last Night World . . .**

*Sitting before you day after day*

*Fixed stares, seeming to hear words you say*

*But their tired minds can’t comprehend*

*The utopic world you paint for them.*

*For last night, Daddy beat up Mammy*

*And Mammy, she was cussing Daddy*

*Telling him he did not father the baby.*

*Last night Uncle stole into her bed*

*Then warned ‘What I did you cannot tell*

*It’s our little secret guard it well.’*

*Last night the frightful wail of sirens*

*And the blinding glare of flashing lights*

*Kept him awake, cold and shivering*

*Afraid of the banging and the crashing*

*As the police came and stayed too long*

*Terrified that they’d ask him to inform*

*And that come the dawn he’d be alone.*

*Last night there happened so many things*

*They do not dare speak of to you.*

*So they sit before you staring*

*And you fool yourself that they’re hearing*

*And that you finally have breakthrough*

*You do not have the smallest clue*

*They are lost in their last night worlds.*

Thus true reflection
Help us understand and share the pain
Wrought by the societal effects
That enter the space
Where learning should take place
Still think you know them?
Let’s reflect some more.

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Angry small faces
Lives out of control
They cuss and they steal
And fabricate lies.
They look straight at us
Even see through us...
Then we label them
As wicked or weird.
Or we ignore them
To our detriment.
Listen well, teacher!
These are the faces
That we will soon find
Behind the aimed guns
Snatching out precious lives.

So I sit in this staff meeting
And they are discussing this criminal
Criminal you say
Wait did I hear right?
An eleven-year old girl
Prepubescent child?
Let’s just admit
We can’t “handle” her.
We don’t have the knowledge
We don’t have the help
From the other parts of
The System.
But can’t we come together
For positive solutions?
Must we simply shun her?
And declare her to be unreachable?
So now I am at home
But still in the meeting
And I am not sleeping
Cause I am reflecting and crying
Because you seem to be saying that
She is Just

Another Damned Child
Speaking of this child who lashes out in rage
At vicious ills perpetrated against her
Infuriated, remembering
Her aggressor violating, and hurting

And no one trying to stop him.
Now empowered with premature maturity
She vows to take no more, no more
From anyone who dares to stand in her way
Revolting at even a look
That suggests that some harm could be done to her.
So you… in your ignorance… open your mouth
To speak condemnation, damnation.
She, demonised child, past redemption you say,
Let’s cast her out to some deserted island
She should not be in society...
She’s one of the damned of the earth.
She, once helpless victim, now the rabid dog
To be shot down or else shut up
Unwanted, unaccepted, and unloved by all.
I feel that anger, her anger
As I hear the vicious voices of the mob
Those who refused help when she screamed
With little hands reaching out, pleading, crying
Now stand accusing, rejecting
Generalising, not personalising,
Negating her hurt and her pain.
Teachers of the young and tender
So set in their dogmas and creeds
Preferring to believe in fallacies.
Refusing to open minds to new ideas
Unwilling to even try to understand
How to help her control the anger
That threatens to consume her
instead of those she’s marked out
Knitted into her Madam Defarge’s scarf.
Unwilling to admit mistakes and inefficacy
You now suggest pushing her away
Remove her from our sight
Oh...
She’s just another damned child!

So yes I am mad as hell
But the angry reflection is the impetus
Pushing me to do well
To stop the out of control
Cycle of poverty
Crime, Discrimination Societal injustice and repression. So I look for another solution Now I add this advice to the child And to the other children

So I said, I cannot dance, I cannot dance, Leave me alone, I hate to dance”

The writing helped me to re-direct gently The thinking of Those who were shaming classmates Less fortunate Unable to follow the brand names trend. So new term start and I overhear this teasing Serious taunting about cheap school bags. Let’s learn this poem as a choral piece We’ll share it with our peers Best performing group will win a prize Fun for them I hope this message is received!

#5

My advice
Write When you are happy, Write When you are sad, write When you are angry, write When you feel that no one loves you, write. When you feel that you hate everybody, write. When you feel that the whole world is against you, write. For every feeling that you feel, write. Write a poem, Write a song, Write an essay, Short or long It doesn’t matter. It will make you feel much better, So write, write, write! ©BFJ

And this leads us to the Poetry Project And the ‘We think, we speak, we write’ collection is born. The writing helps them in many aspects Encourages them to reflect Gives them the courage to share Without being afraid Like ten year old Renee who now feels She has a voice poetically declares

“When I went to dance class yesterday, All I did was just play. My dance teacher said, Jump and dance, Sing and prance, Like you were in a great, big trance."

“Child, listen to me carefully, And never mind what the others said. Success rests not in brand-named bags, It’s what’s inside your head.”

This morning, when test results were read, I was not at all ashamed, For I was far ahead of them, With a nearly perfect score. And when Miss said, That I had won the prize,
For coming first of all in class,
I very proudly raised my head,
And gave a big broad smile.
You see, it’s true what my teacher said,
“Success rests not in Jan Sports bags,
It’s what inside your head!”

And it’s not just issues with the children
And the problem of poverty
Bullying and varying others
Educational spaces being the microcosm of society.
It’s the paucity of ideas sometimes coming from those who are in charge.
So Administrator Teacher, so-called educator . . . you really think . . .
that cutting costs or staff means shutting down the library?
Did you pause to reflect on what this means
To the child whose parents cannot afford
Or those not knowing their value
Do not buy books?
Or do you think that they do not need to read?
Is that what you really think?
It’s true that

#7
They don’t need to read
To sing; to dance
To jump; to play,
To kick a ball,
Throw a javelin,
Climb a pole,
Or hit a ball for six!
But
They need to read
The words of the songs,
The rules of the games,
The directions to the venues,
And what it says
On the trophies
They have won!
They need to read
To sign a contract,
To open a bank account,

To deposit cash,
Make withdrawals,
Understand the statements
That the bank has sent.
So let them
Sing, dance, jump,
Kick, throw, climb,
Hit a ball for six!
But please remember also
That they need to...
READ.
For Goodness’ sake, I plead,
Let the children read!

The Journey for Dennis

#8
It starts with
From the heart of that seed . . .
buried deep so deep
as Teacher Ms. Julien shared -
A desire for reading and writing
and of teaching.
Like the indigenous in Squire’s Discovery
he ‘did not understand’
the implications
of Columbus’ “doom laden caravels” on
our education
until much much later.

So is really a poem
That leads me to realize that the rhythm of the word
Is for enjoyment but is also a powerful teacher
Like Ms. Julien.
Now a very long time after
I am here reflecting
Comparing my teaching from primary to tertiary
Education Systems both homeland and foreign sand
And concluding that education can be liberating and miseducation damning.
And frightening because sometimes we just don’t get it.
I remember Port of Spain and Piccadilly Government School where I resumed my professional journeying from teachers college into that pool Of Teaching and Learning

#9

Birdland
A young teacher as keskidee
Full of optimism and energy
used to teach ‘there is a time for work and a time for joke
When we work we work
and when we joke we joke
Then flying away, brighter as a Cardinal or Rosella
Flew over the Piccadilly
to the Avenue.
He learned education that’s optimal
Includes cognitive, behavioral and social.
Facilitating success must be student central,
For all our learners are special.
Born again as owl and still learning
He sees beyond the training
Where schooling is liberating
teachers are engaging
using materials relevant, eye opening.
You see poetry is an excellent tool for reflection
Bringing Freire’s (1973) concept of ‘conscientisation’
To his mind.
Smiling reminiscently and shaking the head whimsically as he recalls
How he used to try to educate in the tomb
Until he learned about differences
Differentiated teaching and learning
And inclusiveness of students and methods.
And as he contemplates his journey
He wants the same for his student teachers.
He had travelled distances across the waters
Not for him to be slave master.
He does not seek to be a guru
Just a simple fellow learner
So frustratingly he mutters about

#10

This Place
I came to this place to teach teachers
to help with their liberation
to inspire towards a position
where students are not subjects but partners.
I travelled across the sea, over mountains
from a multi-colored to a white world
from the heat to a cold
to share that learning is not a cup but a fountain.
yet you like the forest I flew from
want me to be Papa Bois’ protector . . .
invigilator
assuming that you the learner
can learn the rhythm without beating the drum
But some are listening and learning and sharing
Slowly the fire is igniting and he is hopeful
That Someday there will be a conflagration
Of methodologies that will consume
outdated notion
That only figures, tables, graphs and charts
Can reveal the details of a person’s life.
So he rejoices when student BG chooses this method
To turn in a reflective assignment.

#11

On Student Voices
SPED 505 By BG
Class began on Wednesday afternoon
first day we preview what we’ll explore real soon.
-- seminars, UDL’s, and class participation:
I also learned that poetry was not just recitation
a first seminar was modeled - we listened eagerly.
I was unsure if could do this regularly.
Had to lead discussions, answer questions work, in a group
I was learning by doing, as in a Boy Scout troop.
The weeks flew by, we each had presentations. critiqued songs, film, articles, and such like necessities. Time finally came for my turn at the seminar podium, I knew I would need some serious Imodium. Despite some mistakes, I did my best. Now it was time for the others . . . then a test. Often I yearned for passive learning in class where I could daydream, bluff, and just be an ass. I was challenged, frustrated, sometimes dumbfounded enlightened, excited, and even elated experienced handicap as different from disability alternate settings which offered some fun and liberty Some of the many things that I learned include: IDEA11, LRE12, and how to include IEP13, collaboration with parents not treated as objects. how to advocate so my students will not be made rejects. Learned that the source of the accent one Dr. C while tough, is flexible and caring, who appreciates honesty in his class mistakes are keys to better teaching along with content, you master organizing, presenting SPED 505 is now coming to a close. This is the point that I will end this verse Class may be over but I am NOT done growing. In fact, I have just begun my hunger for learning.

We contend that Teacher identity is shaped by and responds to what one shares, hears and sees From all members of the learning crew.

#12
Jim BO and Pam LaSee
Sometimes when the door is closed and chatting students stumble towards classes wrestling with self about knowing and professing at knowing I remember you Jim determined to climb— on that mountain of a treadmill to be stronger I celebrated your efforts and I miss the presence you filled with resiliency and you Pam La See in your ‘Chevy’14, turning around even on a dime laughing again Even through the pain pushing your game Muscles threatening strike on you Still a winner You two---not forgetting the others lighting the shadows of gate keepers you have taught me Breaking the walls down---unlocking chains Rebels and liberators of selves You who diss handicapping jailors you have saved me. Sometimes Dennis finds his encounters painful Disappointing, disconcerting As he recognizes that many so-called educators Are really power players, fakers Less liberators more gatekeepers

#13
Leader as Plantation Owner
And you plantation overseer Serving as Principal Senior Teacher Mentor Teacher Supervisor Guidance Officer Social Worker Special educator
Psychologist
With your BEd MEd MA MSW MSc PhD
Badges of power
Privilege
Yes hard work too.
But who’s fooling who
What do you bring besides the ego
On this plantation called school
where big stick
And conformity rules?
Do you care
Really about all our learners
Who will shapes our future
Or is it strut and image
Playing educator?
Are you liberator or fraud . . . another
betray
Of the people.
Know that we will resist
Whether in strategy or in anger
And we will find our success in ourselves
Not through mimics like you.
It’s heart breaking for true
But some like you are subverting
student potential
With negative gate keeping and power
grabbing:
For while using dispositions and standards
to measure the learner
You’re not modeling the very expected
behavior.

As teachers and teachers of teachers
We acknowledge that professional idealism
Can be elusive, dependent on context and
administrators
Yet we need to dig deep, address the
schisms
Strive to understand why we invest in
education
To protect the nation from damn nation

#14

Four into Four

Madam professor
Inclusion specialist
How could you say

Oh no no no to Diversity and Advocacy?
What are you saying?
no need to add this course to our program’s
listing?
After all, teaching special ed covers this
automatically
And I always teach about disproportionality
Oh no no I thought you knew – online
courses are failing
And Hybrid ones - most unappealing
We must stand our ground and guard these
gates
Quality control is the role of the
professorate.
Oh No - why would you think such a thing
wheel chair bound, not even phd aspiring
I am better, I know all, just do as I say
And we will be best colleagues forever . . .
yay!
Oh Yes My students fear me … I have
respect
So late assignments no excuses - I’m always
correct
I can smile in your face with a knife at your
back
I’m educated, gracious even, and no
‘manjack’145.
Please have a seat you four to one
Thank you for the vent with this verbal gun
Thank you for the opportunity to see beyond
the trees
To remember that education is not just
degrees.
You all professing to know – not realizing
Your fakery and privilege indicators are
flashing
I have had enough of you pretenders
Playing social justice educators.
Listen to the moans of our learning
community
Searching for success oriented, caring,
authenticity
Stop professing to teach, in the monochrome
If you cannot do better, then just go home
Discussion

And from this pool of found poetry
Five themes emerge
A spirit of Resistance
Student and Teacher Advocacy
Valuing education
Building community
And education as Liberation.
Our reflections find connectivity
With Britzman’s\textsuperscript{16} claim in 2003,
that Teacher Identity is a linkage
Between personal and teaching lives.
And Goodson\textsuperscript{17} and Johnson\textsuperscript{18} complaining
That teachers’ voices were missing in the conversation
On this important topic of education.
The spirit of Freire\textsuperscript{19} uniting \textit{with us}
in the resisting and liberating.
And Meyer\textsuperscript{20} sharing how understanding makes meaning
for curricular, student and teacher learning
leading to professional development.
Like Marshall & Pahl\textsuperscript{21} and Butler-Kisber\textsuperscript{22}
We contend that within this artistic medium
Experiences became profoundly alive.
Through our poetic explorations
Our lives and teaching improved
As we sought to speak against injustice and repression.
As we grew from self-acclaimed gurus
To learning facilitators and liberators.
As we sought to light the fire of hope
We were inspired and still aspire
To become life-long learners.
Throughout our practice we came to realise
That the day became more understandable
Even bearable
When we reflected
And then we wrote so that we could
Take action!
We celebrate the poetry!

So we
Invited our friend Theresa A.
To be chief critic and reviewer.
It’s her turn now... let’s hear her.

Critical Friend

And I critical friend - Theresa
see the Advocacy from Dennis and Beulah.
Beulah talks of being a teacher
who cares... enough to show
how to fan the flames
Not of despair – but warfare,
Educational or spiritual,
No matter where....
In her poems,
Beulah is evidently
Recognizing the complexity
of connecting to the whole child
nurturing them to success and knowledge.
For Beulah poetry first was moving
The words soothing; sometimes disturbing
The rhymes and the rhythms remaining
Long after the book or the poets’ eyes were closed
Later, poetry became the medium
For expressing deepest feelings
Joys, sorrow, pain, anger, frustration and rebellion
Just to name a few.
Writing poetry meant reflections on ideas,
issues and philosophy

Similarly, Dennis voices...
Facilitating success must be central,
for all our learners are special,
Born again as owl and still learning,
he sees beyond the training,
he acknowledges the teachers mission
is to facilitate success through passion
Dennis also seems to be referencing
that seeing all learners as special
goes beyond teacher training
and calls for a sense of advocacy
in helping all learners to reach their potential.
Dennis whimsically recalls
How he used to teach in the ‘tomb’ of oppression
Until he recognized himself as learner
Not just instructor... a facilitator of liberation
In summary,
We celebrate confidently
Poetry as an excellent tool for re-education
Helping with Freire’s concept of conscientisation.
As teachers valuing each student’s strengths and needs
We nurture potential and powers of creation.
As life-long learners and teachers,
Differentiating and individualizing instruction
We contemplate as teacher of teachers
How to connect to our charges not as Guru or master instructor but as fellow learners.

Like Marshall & Pahl we contend that artistic enquiry is ‘valid’.
We defend it as a useful way of knowing and understanding
the value of teachers’ experiences in contributing
to improved teacher identity
Through this poetic inquiry
of selected Found poetry
We re-realize
That teaching is still a worthy prize.

We who once were neophytes
Borrowing philosophies
Mimicking practices
From our prior mentors
Looked deep within our being
Reflected on the status quo
And a fire was ignited
A spirit of resistance
It was a spirit to repel that status quo:
Philosophies and paradigms employed
To perpetrate and perpetuate
Societal injustices on the vulnerable.

Instead we sought through our practice
To add voice to the voiceless
Advocating that students and teachers
Build communities of thinkers; of writers
In our educational spaces.
We ask ourselves and other educators
To re-examine the value of education
Is it for domination? Or liberation?
Or liberation. Liberation!
Endnotes:


2 Licks - another word for brutal flogging used by teachers as punishment.

3 Madame Defarge’s scarf - a reference to a character in Charles Dickens’ 1859 ‘A Tale of Two Cities’. Madame Defarge assists the French revolutionaries by stitching the names of their enemies, headed for the guillotine, into her knitting. She wants political liberty for the French people. However, she is even more motivated by a vicious desire for revenge against all French aristocracy and in particular, one aristocratic family that had dealt cruelly with members of her family.

4 Ms. Julien - one of Dennis’ primary school teachers.

5 Squire’s - Sir John Squire (John Collings Squire) (2 April, 1884 - 20 December, 1958) British poet. “There was an Indian” poem about a Native Indian’s first encounter with Columbus.

6 Cardinal or Rosella - colourful parrots.

7 Piccadilly - the name of the primary school where Dennis taught at with Beulah.


9 Papa Bois French patois word for “father wood” or “father of the forest” is a popular fictional folklore character of St. Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago.

10 UDL - universal design for learning.

11 IDEA - individuals with disabilities education act.

12 LRE - least restrictive environment.

13 IEP - individualized education plan.

14 Chevy - Chevrolet, American automobile referred to as Chevy.

15 Manjack - an ordinary person (Caribbean).

16 Britzman’s claim in 2003.


18 Johnson (2007).


Poems #1-7 are written by Beulah Forteau-Jaikaransingh during the reflection phases of her career. Poems #8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14 are written by Dennis A. Conrad during his time of reflections. #11 is written by a student identified as BG.
Bibliography


