**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.”²
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.

#3

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

#4

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.³
 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

#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.*

*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!

#6

What's inside your head

*First day of term I went to class,
Some of my classmates looked at me,
And then, they loudly laughed.
You see they said with so much glee,
"Your bag is very cheap,
Bought in the ten dollars store.
We saw it hanging at the door."
They pointed at their brand-named ones,
And boasted of the price,
And when I heard what they had paid,
In shame, I hung my head and cried.
My teacher kindly looked at me,
After firmly scolding them,
"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. Julien⁴ shared -
A desire for reading and writing
and of teaching.
Like the indigenous in Squire's⁵ 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
Rosella⁶
Flew over the Piccadilly⁷
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)⁸ 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

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#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 Bois⁹ 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'S¹⁰, 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 necessitations.
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 resilience
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
 betrayer
 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

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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'¹⁵.
 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's¹⁶ claim in 2003,
 that Teacher Identity is a linkage
 Between personal and teaching lives.
 And Goodson¹⁷ and Johnson¹⁸ complaining
 That teachers' voices were missing in the
 conversation
 On this important topic of education.
 The spirit of Freire¹⁹ uniting *with us*
 in the resisting and liberating.
 And Meyer²⁰ sharing how understanding
 makes meaning
 for curricular, student and teacher learning
 leading to professional development.
 Like Marshall & Pahl²¹ and Butler-Kisber²²
 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 . . . lets 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:

¹ Martin Carter's. (1927-1997). I Come from the Nigger yard of Yesterday. Available from: <https://www.poemhunter.com/martin-carter/>

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.

⁸ Freire, P. (1973).

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.

¹⁷ Goodson (1998).

¹⁸ Johnson (2007).

¹⁹ Freire (1973, 1985).

²⁰ Meyer (2008).

²¹ Marshall & Pahl (2015).

²² Butler-Kisber, L. (2018).

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.

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