NO TEACHING MORE FULFILLING: AN INTERVIEW WITH PAM JONES

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- What prompts and sustains an ardent commitment to urban teaching?
- How can we help the next generation of teachers acquire such a commitment?
- How can a teacher educator's compelling stories and images, drawn from her own classroom experiences, lead aspiring educators to embrace the challenges of working in high-needs schools?

I was moved to a deeper consideration of these issues over dinner with a Bank Street colleague, Pam Jones. A midwesterner by birth and a Princeton graduate, this young African-American woman was originally interested in pursuing a career in public policy. She credited her mother and other mentors for helping her forge an enduring commitment to quality education for all.

In a semistructured interview I conducted with Pam a month later, she elaborated on her thinking, shared personal memories of impressive and oppressive teachers, and recounted key aspects of her journey to a career

in urban teaching and teacher education. What follows is a transcript of that interview.

Pam is an advisor and instructor in the Dual Language/Bilingual and Special Education Department at Bank Street College. She is currently in a doctoral program in curriculum and teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University.

LL: Pam, what led you to where you are today?

PJ: First and most important: My mom's passion for education affected me as a child in ways she didn't realize. When she received a brochure from the Cincinnati public school system about a relatively new K-12 bilingual program, she had the choice of Spanish, German, or French—and chose Spanish—for which I am ever grateful. From first to twelfth grade, I was in a bilingual program. Spanish is a part of my life.

I was taught by some amazing educators—and others who were less than supportive. Even in second grade I would say to myself, "If I am ever a teacher, I am going to do things differently from Mrs. M." Conversely, I had an amazing first-grade teacher, Mrs. Hall, who understood me as a person and a learner and recognized my potential. She really saw me and pushed me in ways I needed to be pushed.

I didn't plan to go into education. I was always on the political path because my mom was also very passionate about politics. I was probably one of the few seven-year-old

kids in 1977 sitting near the TV watching Menachem Begin, Anwar Sadat, and Jimmy Carter. I was excited because my mom was excited. I watched my own little shows, but I also watched the news every day since I was five.

In l992 I was accepted into a program called Princeton Project '55, created by Ralph Nader and some of his 1955 classmates to give Princeton students the chance to go into nonprofit and public sector careers. I worked at a community center with a wonderful director, Lois Broerman. I started at their thrift store. I worked briefly with the senior citizens' outreach program, which I enjoyed, then spent the bulk of my time with the preschool and daycare.

There I had a feeling that I'd never had in my life—self-fulfilled in a way I had never been before. When I walked into the classroom and all the kids yelled, "Miss Pam!" even if I were dog-tired and hadn't slept for what seemed to be days, I would be ready to get up and go. That said something to me. I was still on the political path, still doing work in the policy/political arena, but that left an impression on me. What sealed the deal was working for Jumpstart as a researcher. As I sat there doing my job, observing children over time, I kept wanting to jump that fence from being the observer to being the person who was actually with them. Kids would come and ask me, "What are you doing? Can you come and play with me? I want to build blocks." Of course, being a trained researcher, I knew I couldn't engage with them and would just say, "It's OK. I just want to watch YOU play. Go ahead." But inside I kept thinking, "I really do want to read books with them. I really want to sit down with them at lunch. Why do I have to stay on this side of the table?"

When I focused on that question, I realized I should do something about it, that maybe instead of being an educational policy researcher I really wanted to be an educator. I had those same feelings when I worked in policy at another organization. I was sitting there reading, doing research, and writing, which I do love. But as I traveled to Colorado Springs, to Puerto Rico, and to Upper Manhattan to evaluate programs, I wished, as I was talking to the teachers, the program evaluators, the kids and parents, that I was the one being interviewed instead of the one interviewing. I tried to listen to that. I enjoyed that work but felt I would prefer being a part of it instead of being the person talking about it.

And I chose public education because that's where I lived as a child and where I received an amazing education. I wanted to see if I could be the Mrs. Hall for someone (as opposed to the Mrs. M). I wanted to provide a counterpoint for students who've had or would likely have a negative school experience.

LL: Pam, let's talk about teaching in underserved urban schools.

PJ: Everyone has the right to pursue whatever type of teaching they believe is best for them. But for me, there's no more fulfilling teaching than in high-needs settings.

Last week, at a school where I taught just a couple of years ago, I saw all my former students who were kindergartners then…at least 50 of the kids I'd taught and worked with. I'd just placed a student teacher there and hoped to be working with them again on other projects. As I left that Bronx school, I thought, *"There's no better place in the world."*

Consider the following example from the same South Bronx school I mentioned a moment ago. At this school, administrators supported teachers on a daily basis. The

kindergarten teachers wanted to revamp the writing program, which was lacking in substance. We suggested to the administration that we research other programs that could benefit our students more. Not only did they allow us to use a new program, but one administrator provided us with three to four full days out of the classroom to learn the program—and she accompanied us! Support did not stop at the training phase but continued with close monitoring of the new program's implementation.

There's just something about being able to help level the playing field. There's something powerful about being able to go into a place that in many ways has been written off and provide what every child deserves. There's something about seeing great things happening in a building that for many reasons could be condemned. But great things are happening! And they should happen there just as they should happen anywhere. There are so many possibilities in urban education that just aren't realized.

LL: When you talk about this, you close your eyes. You swallow hard.

PJ: Yeah! Most of my time teaching was in the Bronx and in Hunts Point, specifically. This is an area that makes many people, when they hear the name, shudder and mutter, "Oh, sorry" or "Good luck" or "Whoo! Good for you. You must be made of strong stuff" or "You must be fearless." Yeah, it's a tough place. No second guessing about that. At the same time, it's a rich neighborhood, emblematic of what is happening in others often characterized as tough. Like so many of those other places, it is ripe with opportunities!

I know things are happening in urban education that are really unfortunate. Not enough has been done to engage the people who live in urban centers in the conversation about education. So much richness there has been overlooked. Too often people come into the

community and say, “Excuse me. OK, we’re gonna do this, this is what’s best for you.” There’s a lot of imposing of curriculum that doesn’t really connect with or enrich children’s lives. This type of instruction goes just so far.

There’s too much teaching to the test. When I go into many urban schools, this is what I see. There’s this misperception that what it’s going to take to pull the school and the kids out of this perceived abyss is the testing. This model of so-called instruction is antithetical to what good educators know should be happening.

I see schools that fight against this trend, schools that approach education in a more holistic and honorable way—where they actually educate everyone. It’s not: Just send your kids to school; we’ll go over the multiplication tables; we’ll drill, drill, drill, drill for the test and then they’ll graduate and be able to go on to the next grade. When I see better things happening, it really warms my heart. By better things, I mean instruction that is concept-rich and truly differentiated to meet kids’ distinctive strengths and needs.

When I see public schools like Hyde that require parents and families to be involved, staff that is competent and committed, students engaged in work and on themselves as people, I want *everyone* to see the best that can happen in urban public schools!

LL: In this era of test-driven instruction, how do you encourage aspiring teachers to go into school settings where it’s increasingly difficult to provide what children deserve? What do you say to them?

PJ: One thing I do is appeal to their sense of justice; children in every setting, urban settings included, deserve the best and the brightest teachers. And I draw on my own experience as an urban educator, emphasizing that tremendous professional growth can

occur for young teachers in places where so much work needs to be done. For someone who's committed, who's hungry, who's determined to help make a difference, this is a great place to be.

LL: Suppose one of these candidates says, "I hear what you're saying about personal growth and that is really important to me, but wouldn't I get that teaching anywhere, you know…first being a novice and just learning more about the kids and the curriculum over time? Why is teaching in high-needs schools so different?"

PJ: I have had people say or at least hint at that. What I think, being honest, is that there are some people who just won't want to go there. I've had students e-mail me and say, "Oh my goodness, I've found myself in a bit of a pickle. I don't have a job right now—I've got to find a place. Do you know of a place?" And I'll give them three to four of what I think are really great leads. When they see the address, some of them say, "Oh, um, yeah, I was thinking more of...you know..."

Not everyone is meant to teach in every place. It's about knowing where you could serve children best. Some people are best suited to teaching in another environment. That's totally fine. But for the students who are pondering, "Maybe I could teach there," I really do try to encourage them. I think what's often standing in the way of going into urban education are the stories in their heads, things that they've heard, possibly even a negative experience they've had at some random PS, IS, or MS.

Look, I've had horrific experiences in urban public schools that didn't turn me off teaching there because I was well aware of the possibilities and openings that do exist. And so when a grad student says, "I'm at PS Awful. I'm at PS The Worst Place on Earth,

and I think it's all gonna be like that," I share my own stories with them and then say, "I've been there. I've taught in my own less-than-ideal school. And here's what you need to know: There are other less-than-ideal schools out there but there are many PS Oh Yes's out there. There are so many places where you're needed, places that require so much work but you'd get support, be given guidance, where you'd get experience that I believe you'd be really happy and fortunate to have."

LL: How essential is it for a teacher educator to be able to say, "I've been there. I've *taught* at PS Awful. "

PJ: Of course it matters. If the person advising a prospective urban teacher can't say that, then they need to put them in touch with someone who can. It's vital to have had the actual experience or bring in someone who's had that experience. I've had the hope and faith there was something better out there because I had seen that, too. I had visited schools where I saw great things happening, so even on the darkest days, I was able to draw on those images of "there's something else." Kind of like Dorothy, clicking my heels: "There's no place like…I KNOW there's something else, I KNOW there's something else. And it's a place where I can work, where I can actually help, and where I can grow."

LL: So what kinds of images do you recall at those really daunting moments? When things are not going right for you or for students or for aspiring teachers, you seem to draw on those images. Could you elaborate?

PJ: At PS The Worst Place in the World, let's say it would be an average day or a worse than average day, where you would have violence, no administrative support—in fact the

opposite of administrative support: a lot of sabotage, a lot of threats, letters to file if you don't do this, reminders to "close your door, take care of your business, but don't bother us with this." You're an island unto yourself and if you can't do that, then you're not a good teacher—and good teachers scream all day because kids need to be yelled at. And people come to believe it. One day, for example, two third-grade students said to me, "Ms. Jones, you know, this weekend our moms got together because they're friends—we've been in school together since kindergarten—and they were saying you don't yell enough. You really need to yell. That's why the kids don't really listen all the time when you talk because you don't yell. You have to start screaming."

That was a powerful moment. I didn't say to myself, "OK, note to self: Monday, YELL!" I said, "Note to self: Finish the year out and find a place where you can be who you are, that matches who you are, a place that resonates with you, a place with which you are philosophically in sync." And, thank goodness, at that time I was studying at Bank Street. I had my advisor here, other faculty and students who assured me that there were high-needs schools that weren't like PS The Worst Place in the World.

My decision to leave that situation was one of strength, not weakness. I saw my departure as standing for two different yet equally important things: (l) a necessity for my future as a teacher and for my future students and (2) a message that needed to be sent to the administration and to any and all who believed untenable situations should be tolerated.

I could not fathom the thought of staying in a hostile, negative, and unsupportive environment. Why? Because it was an environment that demanded that I morph into something that I was not and never would be. I wasn't—and am not—a screamer. I

wasn't—and am not—a punisher. I didn't—and don't—believe in teaching to the test at the expense of real learning. When teachers stay in untenable situations, it sends the message that these circumstances are tolerable and should be continued. The nature of this situation was so dire, in my opinion, that I knew staying was not an option for me. I wanted the administration to realize that *this* teacher understood the difference between acceptable and unacceptable, viable and unviable teaching environments. This is *not* a rallying cry for teachers in tough schools to flee. On the contrary, I always hope that teachers can make beneficial change. There are some schools, however, where the current conditions are not conducive to growth or meaningful change—and this is where I advocate an exit.

I also held the image in my head of Head Start centers very close to Bank Street that were serving the same population of kids I saw at the school I left, but it was a world of difference. Great stuff was happening! So I was able to say, "I've seen it. I saw it for months on end. I took copious notes on it, wrote reports on it, I know that it exists. I've seen teachers working with their students in quality, substantive ways and seen administrators support their teachers."

LL: Is this a good place to discuss school leadership?

PJ: I was talking to one of the best ones the other day, one of my former administrators. She leads by example. She walks the walk. She doesn't yell. She believes in being clear about what she expects people to do, but she really has an open door policy. It's not lip service—her door *is* always open. And then you come to the opposite: "I don't have time

for this. You got my memo. Do it." The first one practices what I call "responsive and supportive leadership." She encourages teachers' ideas.

LL: Many teachers and school leaders are very frightened and discouraged these days because of the test-driven climate. If things don't move fast enough according to external mandates, they're in danger. What are you seeing?

PJ: It makes everyone frantic, like the hamster on the wheel. People feel as if they're going, going, going. You don't have time to stop or do the stuff that really means something. You have to keep on pushing the same buttons, pushing the same test prep skills at the expense of teaching things that are really lasting. Last year in my advisement group, I had almost all TFA [Teacher for America] students. A few of them were and still are in schools like that and, in the sanctity of our group, we refer to them as PS Test Prep. They are required to instruct a specific test prep strategy at a certain day and time. If they're not and someone walks in, there's going to be hell to pay.

LL: How do you keep these folks from getting burnt out and walking away because they can't use what they've got?

PJ: It's crucial to find ways to make the material come alive for the kids so that it has meaning and applicability to their own lives. I'd call this ethical subversion of the mandated curriculum.

I'll share an example from teaching my former third-grade class: We were required to use a widely accepted math program based on rote memorization of formulas and constant repetition. As a teacher with a conscience, I couldn't go to school day after day and deliver this curriculum "as is." I took the preconstructed lessons and altered them so that

they did not consist solely of worksheets and drills. Rather, kids were up and out of their seats playing math basketball to learn addition, subtraction, and multiplication facts. They also conducted a survey to learn how to plot data on a graph.

I go to great lengths to show my graduate students actual teachers who are in settings like theirs but managing to teach around the test prep. I show them images of other teachers, tell stories about them, keep pretty good records of my own ethical subversion of the mandated curriculum, and I share them. They get a lot out of that and I actually did a whole series of sessions on advocacy with them.

LL: A series?

PJ: I see the weekly advisement group at Bank Street not as a course but an opportunity to build on certain concepts and skills my advisees need. When I saw a number of them being pushed in certain directions and being threatened in one way or another, I decided to include on our agenda an initiative in advocating for yourself in your setting. I'd rather they not be shrinking violets.

I often draw on my own school experiences to help them see how to overcome obstacles. One year, for example, all the teachers on the grade were told to complete the Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System assessment in a very short—and, truthfully, unreasonable—amount of time. We were told that if we did not complete the assessment by the due date, a letter would be placed in our files. In response, we met as a grade-level team and decided to stand strong as a unit, rather than as single individuals challenging the unfair expectations. Ultimately, because every teacher on the grade agreed to fight

this, the administration conceded. We were given the extra time we needed and no letters were placed in our files.

LL: Teachers learning to advocate for themselves! How about advocating for the children?

PJ: We talked about different ways to advocate for the kids: academically, emotionally, socially. One theme that keeps coming up is advocating for kids who are struggling. It's hard when a teacher is told, "You know, I don't see this," or "We'll get to this," while she believes the child needs help. Ultimately, my goal is to enable advisees to use resources that will benefit their students and their overall teaching practice.

LL: What do you tell new teachers about such constraints on their teaching?

PJ: I try to give them tools for those situations. My advisement group is comprised of dual language as well as bilingual and special ed teachers. This year, some of my students were expected to teach in a dual language classroom without a dual language program at the school, so they didn't have the support they needed. Being a first-year teacher is already daunting. But then to have to develop a program from scratch? I try to help them navigate the bureaucratic superhighway, so they are not just out there flailing.

I invited my colleague, Francisco Najera, to come and talk with the group. He was able to provide background on dual language and bilingual programs, especially as they exist in NYC. That definitely helped. Generally, what I've tried to do is connect my students with other professionals who are really close to their respective settings and can support them.

LL: What do you believe all teacher educators need in order to guide the next generation of urban educators?

PJ: I'll speak personally. I don't want ever to be out of touch. I think that for me to be the most responsive teacher educator, I need to draw on recent examples and experiences. Almost two years ago now, I went back and tutored 10 of my students from Hyde for a brief time—not nearly as long as I wanted to—but I wanted that recent experience. I never want to be out of practice and actually have taken some steps to build up my own practice so that I can keep teaching kids of that age.

For me, it's nonnegotiable. It's crucial. I don't say everyone has to return to work with kids but this is how I plan to remain an effective guide for the next generation. And I think everyone should consider ways to stay in touch. When I go out and work with my advisees in their classrooms, yes, that's being in touch—but for me, that's not enough.

Finally, and of course this applies to teaching in *all* settings, it's crucial to appreciate and advocate for the benefits of collaboration. No teacher, no matter how dedicated and competent, especially one in a high-needs setting, can *ever* hope to sustain—or improve—a school by herself. Bank Street's advisement process is designed to build the habit of working together with colleagues and other stakeholders to provide the education everyone's children deserve.

LL: What do you say when you hear, "Oh, I'd like to put my students in a high-needs school, but they first have to learn how to teach from people who are doing a good job. So I'm not sure I can put my students in a setting like that."

PJ: Teacher educators need to examine their assumptions about what they'll find out there and who's doing a good job. You can find great teaching in a high-needs school and abysmal teaching in a high-needs school. You can find great teaching in a private school and abysmal teaching in a private school. I think people have to put their assumptions in check and say, "Let's go and see what's happening here *first* and not rely on taken-for-granted ideas that may well be inaccurate or out of date." People should look at what is really happening in a school so as not to miss out on great teaching opportunities for their students!