Opinion

My Year of Discontent

BY RENEE CALLEJS

Lately, I've been thinking—brooding actually—about my career in teaching and writing. I'm questioning everything related to my job as a middle school teacher—my choice of seventh grade, my district's vision, my commitment to writing, my next direction. I find myself in a constant state of discontent, and, in some ways, I blame the National Writing Project. If my experiences with the project hadn't opened my eyes to the excitement of working with like-minded individuals and the satisfaction of moving forward as a teacher of language arts, I might never have known that teaching should and can be a passionate activity.

There was nothing passionate about my early career. When I started teaching high school ten years ago, I muddled through with no curriculum, supplementing a literature book with my own exercises, too busy keeping one step ahead of the students to worry about discontent. I tried to incorporate some of what I had learned in a college course for English education majors. Through that course, the instructor, who happened to be the director of our local writing project site, had opened my eyes to what teaching writing could be. She taught me that, rather than limiting my instruction to a diet of grammar lessons and essays—way I'd learned in high school and the way I was merely headed—I could help my students write with abandon, find their own writing processes and voices, and understand the pleasure and necessity of revision.

At this first job, I tried to incorporate some of these ideas into my teaching. But it didn't work. The students fought me; the parents fought me; some of the teachers fought me. I wasn't teaching the way tenth grade English had always been taught, and because I was just out of college, my skills were suspect. It took me two years of trial and error to find the Third Coast Writing Project (Michigan) and reinvigorate and renew my confidence in what I believed was best practice.

Attending the Third Coast Writing Project Summer Institute, I learned, among other things, that writing should be part of every class, and I came back to my school with research and new information on teaching writing. Our state tests were just being developed, and the principal knew writing was going to be an issue for our students. He asked me to address the staff about writing across the curriculum. When I suggested to the staff that some writing be done for learning purposes, not for grading purposes, and that writing to learn need not focus on spelling, I still love the students ... but it's not enough, and I know it's not fair to them or me to be a teacher that feels this discontent.

punctuation, and grammar, I incurred the wrath of veteran English teachers and never fully recovered much collegial support at that school.

After three years of defending my teaching practices, I changed districts and moved to a middle school. I thought I'd won the lottery. Here was a school where writing across the curriculum was accepted practice, where the emphasis was on innovation and best practice. This school district was small enough—about 3,000 students, K-12—that it seemed possible that the entire district could move toward reform. In January 2001, the school board hired a new superintendent who based decisions on the needs of the students. I believed he would move us in directions that would shape our teaching permanently for the better. I envisioned portfolio-based evaluation and assessment, place-based learning, community interactions that benefited both students and residents, and an integrated curriculum across teams and departments. These were all reforms I had researched and studied through my affiliation with the NWP.

Not much has happened though. When I suggested to our former curriculum director that we look at alternate ways of assessment, he waved off any possibility of change, claiming our parents would never accept anything other than letter grades as they wanted a simple way of comparing their children to others. Assessment, even with a new curriculum director, hasn't been addressed since.

Individual, reform-minded teachers who have the energy to work alone make small changes to their classrooms. My own efforts have taken me in the direction of community-focused learning. For instance, I bring in community members to help in the classroom, and I have my students interview senior residents for story ideas and as a way to make generational connections. Other teachers occasionally bring in experts from the area, but no true bond between our community and our schools has formed.

I'd like to use student-led parent-teacher conferences, so our students can name their accomplishments and share them with parents, but I work with a team of four teachers, and our team does what the other teams in the school do. Unless the majority of teams decide we need to implement a change such as student-led conferences, it won't get done, and because teachers aren't convinced this innovation—or, it seems, any innovation—will work, nothing changes. What we're lacking is a strong leader willing to implement a structure that allows time for teachers to question, research, and discover; that is, to engage in the type of critical inquiry that is at the core of the writing project. Only then will change come.

The time that is set aside for staff meetings is instead typically devoted to discussions of the principal's need for dance chaperones, the setting up of a committee to look at next year's schedule, and other seemingly pressing matters.

More than ever I now understand that the National Writing Project model gives us the avenues to discover and research the best practice that leads to better teaching. When I work with people from NWP, I'm reenergized, honored for my intelligence and professionalism, sought out for my opinions, given opportunities to learn and grow. That's what teachers—good teachers—need in order to stay in education.

I have come to distrust the idea that one teacher

see My Year of Discontent, page 14
can change the world. I’ve been doing things alone for ten years now, and my energy and enthusiasm are drained. No one shows much interest in my ideas. It’s not that anyone fights them. They tell me it’s good I do these things and that education needs people like me, but they don’t offer to help. They don’t come up with their own ideas. They don’t feed me like writing project friends do, so that I can continue to work at a high energy level.

So, I’m searching for something else—something, probably, other than teaching. I still love the students—their energy, their responsiveness, their writing discoveries—but it’s not enough, and I know it’s not fair to them or me to be a teacher that feels this discontent.

Renee Callies is a teacher-consultant with the Third Coast Writing Project, Michigan, and is currently on the leadership team for the National Writing Project’s Rural Voices Radio project. She teaches language arts and digital storytelling at Gull Lake Middle School in Hickory Corners, Michigan, where she has taught for seven years.