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## (Why) Haven't We Figured It Out by Now? Cultivating Joyful Teaching and Learning in ELA

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You took my joy, I want it back.  
–Lucinda Williams, “Joy”

We've got no time for crying/We've got work to do. –Mavis Staples “We've Got Work to Do”

Despite our years of learning and teaching, our dedication to students, and our commitment to professional growth, there are still disagreements on how to define literacy, much less how to teach it. We could talk about multiple and conflicting literacy theories, and how each has priorities according to their research, goals, and subjectivities. Some contend that literacy is a social practice, multimodal, and embodied. Other educators want to keep literacy more narrowly defined to reading, writing, language, listening, and speaking skills. Old discussions regarding the efficacy of balanced literacy versus the science of reading have arisen again. The newest issue is the place of artificial intelligence (AI) in literacy learning, but since we don't know yet what AI will be, or even what it is right now, it's impossible to figure out what impact it will have.

We are increasingly aware of how economic, social, and political forces impact our schools, students, and ourselves. #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and COVID revealed historical flaws in American institutions and thinking. Our awareness of and attendance to the myriad factors that impact our students' learning and well-being has grown, and yet many literacy curricula are homogenized even as our student

population is increasingly diverse. Powerful forces are at work to limit students' access to contributions from culturally and sexually diverse authors through book bans and changes in state and district policies about what can and cannot be taught. Does this make literacy teaching an amorphous endeavor, subject only to the whims of politics, culture, and digital technology? It may seem like that to wary educators who have years of experience with curricula foisted on them by politically and financially motivated leaders. This creates confusion and disheartenment.

And yet there is, as always, hope. In her groundbreaking book *Unearthing Joy: A Guide to Culturally and Historically Responsive Teaching and Learning*, Gholdy Muhammad (2023) describes five pursuits in education, intentionally using the word “pursuit” to move beyond the limitations and endpoints of standards or goals (17). These pursuits are identity, skills, intellect, criticality, and joy. They are nonlinear, iterative practices and are part of a humanizing education, and the basis of her culturally and historically responsive framework. There is joy for teachers and students in recognizing students as brilliant (Christensen 2009) or as geniuses (Muhammad 2023). Bettina Love (2019) notes that joy does not spring from some make-believe land of perfection, but from facing the realities of colonialism, sexism, racism, poverty, and homophobia head on: “While we do not forget injustice, we are focused instead on love, well-being, and joy and refuse to be oppressed any longer” (12).

## Joy and Absence

Maybe we will never figure out how to teach literacy in ways that are effective for all students, and maybe it's not even an appropriate or reasonable goal. Poet and conflict mediator Pádraig Ó Tuama (2021) asks us to undo some of our conditioned ideas and internalized rules about what it means to teach and learn. Instead of rules, there are stories. Our students' stories about who they are as literate beings blend and/or conflict with the stories projected onto them by families, teachers, friends, and governments. These stories can foreclose possibilities instead of creating openings. To address this, Ó Tuama notes that absence can be as important as presence. We need containers and we need vastness. These are not binaries but contain both/and: a deep focus on the interconnectedness within and amongst our inner selves, communities, and nature. There are spaces in between our heartbeats and in authentic dialogue, where listening is as necessary as talking. The spaces or absences create rhythm and energy. The same goes for teaching. To create, learn, and/or practice something new or challenging, time, practice, and failure are necessary. Ó Tuama (2021) offers the questions: "How does it fail? Does it fail well?" For teachers, this may evolve into panic: If we don't teach X now, the students won't know it for the test/won't be ready for the next unit/WILL NEVER LEARN TO READ (WELL). We have been taught that our job is to fix the flaws or address the learning gaps in and for our students, whether those came from families, friends, trauma, culture, or last year's teacher. Discomfort with failure means we don't get to celebrate growth and progress, only lament imperfection. Teaching and learning require risk-taking. There is joy in these risks. Fear of disapproval, of being wrong, robs us of joy. What if we celebrated our students' and our failures? Maybe one

reason we haven't figured out literacy teaching is because of our fear of failure.

The lack of comfort with absence and failure is deeply embedded in the perception of not-enough-time. In the neoliberal capitalist economy of today's United States, we are all concerned with the value of time. Numerous self-help gurus offer us opportunities to save time, maximize time, time-share, mark time, find time, control time. We are to avoid wasting time or losing time, all in the name of productivity. What happens, though, if we step back and away, or pull ourselves out of this peculiar and particular perspective? What if we question and reclaim how time works? Perhaps the push to be present (to be perfect) is the opposite of what is needed. What would change if we saw literacy as a repertoire instead of a tool, as something containing both absence and presence, as something "...hard to see and describe and take the measure of, and also what's immeasurable, irreducible, non-quantifiable, limitless and expansive" (Restler 2023, 3)?

## Joy and Art

According to architect Frank Lloyd Wright, symmetry is created through the relationship between repose and motion (Shoaff 2020). In music, the spaces between notes/strums/beats are necessary to create rhythm. This is also true of poetry. Ó Tuama suggests that time is a character in any poem or story and shows up in the blank spaces in poems: caesura, spacing between letters and words, silence. Skilled writers vary sentence structure to keep reader attention through presence and absence. There's more than just telling a story or relating facts. Sentences and words have rhythm and energy in and of themselves. Of knowing what to expect, but also having some surprises along the way. This is true of teaching as well.

We are all embedded in this culture, but that does not mean we have to accept it on its own terms. Muhammad writes, “Joy encompasses happiness/smiles, truth, beauty, aesthetics, art, wonder, personal fulfillment, and solutions to the social problems of the world” (70). Maybe it is enough to keep our eyes open and minds curious about what seems to be working in our specific communities and classrooms. But we must also be alert to how science evolves within the constraints of our communal intelligence, culture, and values. This allows us to see the unfolding drama of symmetry, gravity, time, and motion Lloyd Wright spoke of: “It is the resonance between our inner laws and the laws governing the greater universe that makes art a pathway to deep and meaningful experience” (Shoaff iv). Perhaps this is the way to restore, reclaim, and reinvigorate joy in our teaching. Mysteries of the world exist alongside observational data, and curiosity draws open new vistas of thought, wonder, and experience.

### **Awareness of Joy**

Lama Rod Owens (2023) writes, “Joy is an expression of our natural mind and is felt as fluidity and potential. It is the experience of realizing that there are always alternatives, always different paths to take” (102). It is our responsibility to find, create, and cultivate joy for ourselves and for our students. For Ross Gay (2019), the practice of writing about delight builds up the muscle of recognizing joy, and then noticing the feeling that comes with it. It’s not a trivial thing, this paying attention to joy and its attending thoughts and emotions. Perhaps that is our work. It’s motivating, nourishing, and brings about ease, appreciation, and gratitude. It’s also about sustainability and stamina, and the necessity of yin and yang, rest and play, presence and absence.

Perhaps the reason that joy is elusive in school is because school was not built for joy. It was built for diligence, competition, either/or thinking, and individualism. Despite that, we literacy educators have chosen to remain in schools and share the joys we find there. There are no universal ways of teaching and learning, but there are ways to make these practices more joyful: Seeing the brilliance of our students. Working for a more just world. Getting comfortable with the discomfort that comes with risk-taking. Finding and celebrating absence as well as presence. Tuning in to our “inner laws and the laws that govern the greater universe.” If we see those universal laws as based in love, then joy is a practice and pursuit of human flourishing.

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