information, to see if any students are being missed, and to assess success. They provide the necessary signposts for each child's unique passage.

Herb Zimiles (1987) argues that standardized achievement tests are problematic, in part because of their "exaggerated importance, the false validity that is imputed to evaluation data, the aura of definitiveness that they cast (even when evaluators are modest in their claims), and the tangled web of comparisons and wrong inferences they invite" (p. 207). He further highlights:

[the] serious limitations associated with the low validity of the findings of educational evaluation (and when I speak of low validity I refer to both inaccuracy in measurement and, to a greater extent, irrelevance of measurement) and the pressures that evaluation programs implicitly bring to bear on teachers, pressures that impel them to use methods and to teach content that may not fit in with their vision of what would most benefit the children in their class (or worse, materials that discourage them from ever having a vision of the educational process that differs from that which is implicitly stated in evaluation programs), [and that] thereby impair the depth, coherence, and power of their work. (p. 209)

Zimiles believes that "since we are unable to accurately assess the main lines of school influence, we should instead direct our evaluation efforts to assessing the quality of the school environment" (p. 210). Providing thick descriptions of the character and kinds of environments children are exposed to provides a reasonable basis to "estimate the quality of school impact" (p. 210).

In all of this, we are in pursuit of the child's pathway to knowledge and power. The more recognizable and well defined our standards—our values—the more manifest and discernible can be student progress. There are all kinds of ways to keep track, but the most hopeful approaches are those that encourage multiple routes to a goal and a diversity of powerful voices and choices.

The work of a teacher—exhausting, complex, idiosyncratic, never twice the same—is, at its heart, an intellectual and ethical enterprise. Teaching is the vocation of vocations, a calling that shepherds a multitude of other callings. It is an activity that is intensely practical and yet transcendent, brutally matter-of-fact, and yet fundamentally a creative act. Teaching begins in challenge and is never far from mystery.

Teaching is a highly personal and intensely intimate encounter. The pathway into teaching is always a complex journey of discovery and wonder, disappointment and fulfillment. A first step is becoming the student to your students, uncovering the fellow creatures who must be partners to the enterprise. Another is creating an environment for learning, a nurturing and challenging space in which to travel. And finally, the teacher must begin work on the intricate, many-tiered bridges that will fill up the space, connecting all the dreams, hopes, skills, experiences, and knowledge students bring to class with deeper and wider ways of knowing. Teaching requires a vast range of knowledge, ability, skill, judgment, and understanding—and it requires a thoughtful, caring person at its center.
Teaching is not something one learns to do, once and for all, and then practices, problem-free, for a lifetime, anymore than one knows how to have friends and follows a static set of directions called “friendships” through each encounter. Teaching depends on growth and development, and it is practiced in dynamic situations that are never twice the same. Wonderful teachers, young and old, will tell of fascinating insights, new understandings, unique encounters with youngsters, the intellectual puzzle and the ethical dilemmas that provide the unpredictable challenges and the daily grind. Teachers, above all, must stay alive and engaged with all of this.

We are in a sense back at the beginning. It is perhaps even clearer that teaching involves a dazzling array of activities and experiences, a blizzard of actions and reactions, an attic full of knowledge and skill. This is in part why I marvel at academics and policy makers who so glibly prescribe for teachers, who provide tidy summaries on how to teach, who offer the “magic wand” for instant classroom success, or who pursue projects that will finally capture and tame teaching into a set of neat propositions. I wish I knew only one thing about teaching as well as some of them seem to know everything. There are, in fact, a range of important skills and experiences needed to become an outstanding teacher—skills rarely acknowledged in colleges of education and never mentioned in schools. These are the subversive core of excellent teaching.

Stanislavsky (1936), the renowned Russian director and the father of method acting, argues that there are three widespread, common beliefs about acting that stand in the way of greatness. One is the belief that acting is a set of techniques and directions to be mastered. In other words, if you say your lines, move to the appointed spot on the stage, complete a specified gesture, then you are acting. Stanislavsky dismissed this as mechanical nonsense. Plenty of people can memorize lines and move around a stage, but great actors engage an audience, interact with them, and draw energy and rhythm and insight from the relationship. Acting is dynamic.

A second obstacle is the notion that acting is mainly external. That is, you can act angry without ever having felt anger, or you can play a broken-hearted lover without ever having known pain or loss. For Stanislavsky, actors must reach inside themselves and summon up particular aspects of their own knowledge and experience in order to act. Actors must be autobiographers, must in some sense play themselves, must find somewhere a seed of authenticity to build upon. Only then can they move away from simple caricatures and learn to portray the complexities of living, human beings.

Finally, a barrier to great acting is the view that actors should, or even could, learn their roles in any finished or final sense. In other words, once an actor’s got Lady Macbeth, it is “hers.” Stanislavsky argues that as soon as an actor believes she or he is master of the part, rigor mortis is already setting in. Being finished denies the uniqueness of each encounter with the character, destroys the dynamic and the creative core of acting. Any part must be learned anew, day by day, moment by moment, and year by year. It is never done. In essence, great acting is always in search of better acting, always beginning again.

Stanislavsky could well be advising teachers. Greatness in teaching, too, requires a serious encounter with autobiography: Who are you? How did you come to take on your views and outlooks? What forces helped to shape you? What was it like for you to be ten? What have you made of yourself? Where are you heading? An encounter with these kinds of questions is critical to outstanding teaching because teachers, whatever else they teach, teach themselves. Of all the knowledge teachers need to draw upon, self-knowledge is most important (and least attended to). In this regard Rilke’s (1954) advice to a young poet is fitting:

You are looking outward and that above all you should not do now. . . . There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write [or teach], find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart. (p. 18–19)

Greatness in teaching also requires getting over the notion that teaching is a set of techniques or disconnected methods. There are lots of people who write adequate lesson plans, keep order and quiet in their classrooms, deliver competent instruction in algebra or phonics, and are lousy teachers. Outstanding teachers engage youngsters, interact with them, draw energy and direction from them, and find ways to give them a reason to follow along. This is the difficult and serious work of teaching.

Greatness in teaching, as in acting or writing, is always in pursuit of the next utterance, the next performance, the next encounter. It is not—can never be—finished or summed up. Keeping track is in service of what is yet to come. Great teaching demands a radical openness to something new, something unique, something dynamic. In teaching it must always be, “Here I go again.”

To become a great teacher, one must learn to work the gap, that often elusive and sometimes enormous space between what is and what could be. On one side of the gap lies hard reality—too many kids, not enough time,
few resources, and, in too many cases, a harsh and almost-obsessive focus on teaching as nothing above or beyond drill and skill. On the other side lies your own vision of teaching as a calling that can transform and empower, enlighten and awaken and energize all of your students. Working the gap means staying mindful of and living within that excruciating contradiction and refusing to collapse it for the sake of comfort or convenience. To live only in hard reality, abandoning your ideals, your hopes, and your principles, is to lose your compass and your bearings, and then to lose your way; to live in your ideals alone, to stay in your head without one foot in the muck and mud of the world as it is, is to burn out quickly and to leave teaching entirely behind. Working the gap is to choose a path more difficult, but somehow simultaneously truer, more hopeful, more open to the new. You are grounded in classroom life and in the lives of your students, and at the same time you are searching the cracks for spaces to enact something more.

The gap is visible in daily life in classrooms as well as in policy and educational politics. Education in a democracy—at least theoretically—is distinct from education under an authoritarian regime, a dictatorship, or a monarchy in that life is geared toward and powered by a particularly precious and fragile ideal: Every human being is of infinite and incalculable value, each a unique intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual, moral, and creative force; each born free and equal in dignity and rights, endowed with reason and conscience, and deserving, then, a community of solidarity, a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, recognition and respect. This core value is the heart of the matter, and it must express itself explicitly and implicitly in schools and classrooms as it is the distinct character and unique signature of education in a democracy—education is precisely concerned with equity, access, and full recognition of the humanity of everyone.

Teaching within this ideal encourages students to develop the capacity to name the world for themselves, the ability to identify the obstacles to their full humanity, and the courage to act upon whatever the known demands. This kind of education is characteristically eye-popping and mind-blowing—always about opening doors and opening minds as students forge their own pathways into a wider, shared world.

Much of what we call schooling forecloses or shuts down or walls off meaningful choice-making. Much of it is based on obedience and conformity, the hallmarks of every authoritarian regime throughout history. Much of it banishes the unpopular, squirms in the presence of the unorthodox, hides the unpleasant. There’s little space for skepticism, irreverence, questioning, or doubt. While many of us long for teaching as something transcendent and powerful, we find ourselves too often locked in situations that reduce teaching to a kind of glorified clerking, passing along a curriculum of received wisdom and predigested and often false bits of information. This is a recipe for disaster in the long run.

Education is an arena of struggle as well as hope—struggle because it stirs in us the need to look at the world anew, to question what we have created, to wonder what is worthwhile for human beings to know and experience—and hope because we gesture toward the future, toward the impending, toward the come of the new. Education is where we ask how we might engage, enlarge, and change our lives, and it is, then, where we confront our dreams and fight out notions of the good life, where we try to comprehend, apprehend, or possibly even change the world. Education is contested space, a natural site of conflict—sometimes restrained, other times in full eruption—over fundamental and enduring human questions: What is just and fair? What does it mean to be human? What do I owe my fellow creatures? Teachers are called to resist dogma, to expand inquiry, to raise queer questions. Our vocation is to try to shake ourselves and others free of the anesthetizing effects of the modern predicament, and that includes the seduction of common sense.

The education we are accustomed to is often little more than a caricature—it is not authentically or primarily about full human development. Why, for example, is education thought of as only kindergarten through twelfth grade or kindergarten through university? Why does education occur only early in life? Why is there a point in our lives when we feel we no longer need education? Why is there a hierarchy of teacher over student? Why are there grades and grade levels? Why is there attendance? Why is being on time so valuable? Why is education separate from production?

Schools in a democracy might try to resist the overspecialization of human activity—the separation of the intellectual from the manual; the head from the hand, the heart, and the head; the creative from the functional—as a distortion and build upon the unity of human beings, a unity based upon recognition of differences as well as consciousness of interdependence. People are different—distinct capacities, unique needs—and we are, at the same time, entirely connected. The knowledge we lack includes an acknowledgment of the reality of our wild diversity—something that just is—and at the same time an acceptance of our deep connectedness. The knowledge we desperately need is a knowledge based upon full human recognition, upon unity and solidarity. The goal of democratic schools, then,
is the mobilization of intelligence and creativity and initiative and work of all people in all directions.

Democracies require students to think for themselves, to make judgments based on evidence and argument, to develop minds of their own. Democratic classrooms are places where teachers encourage students to ask those fundamental questions—Who in the world am I? How did I get here and where am I going? What are my choices? How shall I proceed?—and to pursue the answers wherever they might take them. We refuse obedience in favor of teaching initiative, courage, imagination, creativity, and more. These are the qualities to be modeled and nourished in our classrooms, encouraged and defended.

We invite students to ask serious questions: What's the evidence? How do we know? Whose viewpoint is privileged and whose is left out? What are the alternatives, the connections, the resistance, the patterns, the causes? Where are things headed? Why? Who cares?

Teaching is powered by a common faith: When I look out at my students, I assume the full humanity of each. I see hopes and dreams, aspirations and needs, experiences and intentions that must somehow be accounted for and valued. I encounter citizens not consumers, unruly sparks of meaning-making energy and not a mess of deficits. This is the evidence of things not seen, the starting point for teachers in our democratic society.

Education in a democracy challenges and reframes all of that: There is space for a curriculum of questioning; for a curriculum of doing and making; for a curriculum of learning from the world, not simply about the world. Teachers create spaces in classrooms for inquiry, experimentation, invention, and play. Students experience the value of empathy, of openness, of dialogue and conversation, of documentation. Classrooms transform moment to moment into galleries and exhibition halls, stages and studios, laboratories and libraries and performance spaces.

Part of teaching is preparing thinking, literate, active, and morally sensitive citizens capable of taking their rightful place in society and carrying out their democratic responsibilities to one another, to their communities, to the earth. Students in a vital democracy must learn the values of self-governance: to care for other people; to accept wild and vast diversity as the norm; to acknowledge that the full development of each is the condition for the full development of all; and to value participation, free thought and speech, civil liberties, and social equality. The foundations of democratic engagement—indeed thinking and critical analysis, for example—are always in contention, generally under attack from some quarter or another. Participatory democracy requires a high level of vigilance and action in its defense and in its enactment.

Central lessons of an education for citizenship, participation, engagement, and democracy include these: Each human being is unique and of incalculable value, and we each have a mind of our own; we are all works-in-progress swimming through a dynamic history in-the-making toward an uncertain and indeterminate shore; we can choose to join with others and act on our own judgments and in our own freedom; human enlightenment and liberation are always the result of thoughtful action. History is always in the making, and we are—each and every one of us—works-in-progress. It's up to us, for nothing is predetermined, and we are acting largely in the dark with our limited consciousness and our contingent capacities. This makes our moment on earth both entirely hopeful—if exquisitely treacherous—and all the more urgent.

Educators, students, and citizens must press now for an education worthy of a democracy, including an end to sorting people into winners and losers through expensive standardized tests that act as pseudo-scientific forms of surveillance; an end to starving schools of needed resources and then blaming teachers and their unions for dismal outcomes; and an end to "savage inequalities" and the rapidly accumulating "educational debt," the resources due to communities historically segregated, underfunded, and underserved. All children and youth in a democracy, regardless of economic circumstance, deserve full access to richly resourced classrooms led by caring, thoughtful, fully qualified, and generously compensated teachers.

Occasions for teaching that tries to get to the root of things, teaching that is more than a kind of trivial pursuit of the obvious, happen all the time. Practically anything, from the lofty to the mundane, can be the object of serious inquiry and provide, then, opportunities for teachers and students to enact a curriculum of democracy and freedom. I read, for example, that in Arkansas—where former governor Huckabee was the poster boy of dramatic weight loss and a leader in the national campaign against obesity—school report cards must now include each child's BMI, his or her body mass index. Obesity is indeed a massive public health problem, and its dimensions have been growing for decades: Obesity is the number-one killer disease in the United States, and today's children will be the first generation in history to fail to outlive their parents' generation, chiefly because of fat. But rather than dully accept that the BMI notation will make students and parents more aware of the scale of the thing, we might hold the initiative up to scrutiny and interrogation.
In the interest of historicizing, we might ask:

- What is the history of obesity as a health problem in the United States and elsewhere? Is it considered an "eating disorder"? If so, how is it like/unlike other "eating disorders"? What part of the problem is genetic predisposition, what part habit or education, what part lack of access to nutritious food?
- What is the history of engaging schools to solve broader social problems? What's been the result of mandating alcohol and drug awareness programs, for example, or suicide prevention and abstinence programs?

In the spirit of further contextualizing, we can go further:

- Who decided to mandate the inclusion of the BMI? Was there broad participation and dialogue by parents, students, teachers, or the broader community?
- Which industries suffer because of obesity, and which ones benefit? What's the relationship of fat and sugar to the problem? What public and economic policies impact the sugar industry, for example?
- Is obesity correlated in any way to income, class, race, or gender? How?
- Are exercise facilities available equally across communities regardless of income or property values? Are parks equitably distributed?
- Are fruits and vegetables equitably accessible regardless of community income?

In the spirit of active inquiry close to home, again more questions:

- How much time is allotted to recess and physical education?
- Are all students equally encouraged or even required to participate in sports and games?
- What is a typical school lunch?
- Does the school sell soda, candy, or fatty foods from vending machines? Does it sell fast food or junk food? Fruits and vegetables? Why?
- Do clubs or teams sell candy or cookies to raise funds?

While many of us long for teaching as something transcendent and powerful, we find ourselves too often locked in situations that reduce teaching to a kind of glorified clerking, passing along a curriculum of received wisdom and predigested bits of information. A fundamental choice and challenge for teachers, then, is this: To acquiesce to the machinery of control, or to take a stand with our students in a search for meaning and a journey of transformation. To teach obedience and conformity, or to teach its polar opposite: initiative and imagination, curiosity and questioning, the capacity to name the world and to identify the obstacles to your full humanity, and the courage to act upon whatever the known demands. We can at least begin to open those doors.

There are hundreds of other things one needs to know to become an outstanding teacher, many of which teachers will discover as they are needed. The following is a small sample.

**Creative insubordination.** I had been teaching at P.S. 269 for about four hours when the intercom squawked on for the seventh time: "If anyone drives a red station wagon, your lights are on." The seventh mindless interruption (the first had been a scratchy recording of "The Star Spangled Banner"); the seventh assault on our senses; the seventh reminder that our space was not our own and that learning was not respected. I got a screwdriver, pulled a table over to the wall, took apart the intercom, clipped the wires, and reassembled the whole thing. I then sent a student to the office with the bad news that our intercom was dysfunctional. It took three years to repair—three years of liberation from the box.

Every successful teacher I know (and every principal) can tell stories of creative insubordination—of regulations ignored, paperwork "lost," procedures subverted. An enormous number of the existing regulations in schools serve bureaucracy but not youngsters. The guiding principle is simple: Creative insubordination might be necessary to serve student learning.

**Criticism/self-criticism.** In the lunchroom at P.S. 269 a colleague reprimanded a misbehaving seven-year-old girl by brandishing a pair of scissors and threatening to cut off her ponytail. I intervened, comforted the child, and pursued a complaint against him through an incredible wall of pressure to back down. It was unpleasant, but it opened an important conversation about appropriate and inappropriate discipline, about humiliation and abuse versus concern and community.

If teachers are never critical, they never have to test their deepest beliefs and values, and over time those values disappear. Soon they are
acting like the teachers they once despised, they have become the people they once warned others about, and they have forgotten all the things that made them want to teach in the first place.

Similarly, if teachers are never self-critical, they will lose their capacity for renewal and growth. They will become self-justifying and dogmatic. On the other side, if teachers are too self-critical, they become powerless and timid. The tension is to end each day with a strong understanding of what could be improved and to begin the next with forgiveness and hope.

Teachers are taught, in all kinds of ways, lessons in accommodation and conformity when they ought to be learning criticism and self-criticism. Teachers need to be critical because so much of schooling is inadequate or wrong; self-critical because there is always a new challenge, a new demand. Learning to be critical requires taking some risks, and these are neither simple nor easy to take. Again, the guiding principle is to be a resistance fighter on behalf of children, not to take risks simply to stay in shape.

**Finding allies.** Teaching is often isolated and isolating, and an assumption of teacher preparation is that it must always be this way. In fact, outstanding teaching is usually teaching against the grain, and teaching against the grain can best be accomplished with allies. This means supporters, friends, co-conspirators, and comrades. Learning how to find allies and build alliances can be life-saving.

**Learning from your own experience.** When we sent our first child off to school, I experienced a jarring moment, an epiphany. I had been teaching young children for many years, advising parents on a wide range of issues, including the best and most painless ways to separate from their youngsters at school. When my own time came, I found that all my good advice to others was impossible to follow myself. Separation was tough. I felt like a midwife friend of mine who had assisted in the births of hundreds of babies before her own first child was born. In the middle of labor, she cried out, “I’ve told hundreds of women ‘you can do it’, and it can’t be done.”

Teachers are encouraged to develop a professional stance that is outside their own experience. They are expected to assume a distanced superiority and to speak an arcane and inaccessible language. It is stronger and more fruitful to practice humility in the classroom, to have the courage to admit what you don’t know, to invite others to teach you, and to stay close to your own experience. Good teaching requires audacity, but it also demands humility.

**Linking consciousness to conduct.** It is important to be both a dreamer and a doer, to hold onto ideals but also to struggle continually to enact those ideals in concrete situations. Many teachers begin with a romanticized idea of a “peaceable kingdom in the classroom,” rather than a robust, interactive, dynamic space. They harbor the illusion that the classroom can be easily walled off from larger issues in the children’s (and all of our) lives and that their own good intentions will be enough to make their classrooms places of sweetness and light. When the classroom proves to be somewhat unpredictable, when issues from “out there” become enacted “in here,” when teaching is more exhausting, demanding, and uncertain than ever imagined, teachers can become frustrated, disillusioned, and burned out.

The way out, I believe, is to expect that teaching in a humane, child-centered way is not easier but requires greater intelligence, reflection, justification, and commitment. It is teaching toward something better, and it requires, therefore, involvement in the wider world of children and families, of communities and neighborhoods, of society. Holding onto ideals is a way to resist acceding to the unacceptable things we find in the world; struggling alongside others to improve society is a way to become more focused and more effective as teachers, and also as citizens.

**Authentic friendship.** The ideal of friendship can be a guide for teaching, or it can be a trap. Teachers who start off desperately wanting to be “friends” with their students often end up being distant, authoritarian, and arbitrary, in part because they thought of friendship as a matter of being likable, popular, or nice. With this somewhat surface notion of friendship, it is easy to become inappropriate with students, to lose your bearings, or to become confused about how to act. Feeling betrayed, friends can turn easily into enemies.

One student teacher I worked with spoke openly about his living arrangements and sex life when talking with middle school students on the first day in their classroom. They had asked, and he was “being their friend.” The incident, needless to say, was a disaster for him and for them. He had failed to really examine what it means to be a friend. Like a new kid on the block, he was prodded and provoked, and his desire to be popular led to his downfall.

A stronger sense of friendship is to think in terms of deep caring and compassion for others. Friendship, then, is a matter of solidarity between subjects, between human beings, and solidarity means criticism as well as
acceptance. We share some intimate matters with certain friends, but not all. We don’t want our friends doing something we take to be wrong, and so we are willing to raise questions and criticisms, even when that can be difficult. We don’t want our friends to be weak or hopeless, and so we are willing to offer guidance and advice. Being popular or being liked every moment is not the point—a real friendship has bumpy and difficult times, too, and that can be the greater part of its strength.

Balance and clarity. There are literally thousands of good ideas floating around for making classrooms more decent and dynamic. The problem is that ideas come at teachers ninety miles an hour, and teachers need to choose what will work for them and their students. Trying to implement a new idea every day is not a particularly hopeful strategy. One problem is that big transformative ideas require sustained attention. “Whole language,” for example, if taken seriously, could completely transform school practice, the shape of the day, the meaning of curriculum, everything. “Character education” could mean an entirely different school culture and ethos. If, on the other hand, they are the latest fads, something to fit into existing classroom practice, techniques and nothing more, then teachers can say things like “We do whole language in ability groups from 9:00 to 9:30” or “We do character education after lunch.”

Teachers are typically trapped in the role of passive recipients rather than of active creators of their teaching. Teachers can resist this by operating out of the principal of “less is more,” deciding what makes sense at the center of their own classroom life, and implementing that central core while resisting a lot of the free-falling, well-meaning ideas. The best staff development, then, is not going to another workshop with an educational guru but, instead, visiting classrooms of other teachers you admire or carving out time and space to reflect seriously on core principles and practices.

Good schools are generally places where a lot of good teachers have been gathered together and allowed to teach. This means school leaders have attracted and recruited good teachers, and then run interference with bureaucratic regulations, state mandates, and the entire apparatus that undermines teaching.

Good schools are always unique: each the creation of particular teachers, administrators, parents, and youngsters working together to bring their vision of a better educational experience to life in classrooms. Good schools do not follow a generic, one-size-fits-all approach to education but rely, instead, on a community of people working together, figuring out how to solve problems and improve their school on a daily basis, and then gathering the freedom to act on their conclusions. Reform must be crafted school by school, from the bottom up, and school improvement is generally a matter for the school community itself.

“Goodness” is complex and hard to measure on a simple scale, but there are several themes that, taken together, make a school more likely to be effective. Good schools tend to be organized around and powered by a set of core values. Values may be drawn from long tradition or from the specific needs and orientations of particular communities, but they must be embraced and owned by the community itself. Values cannot simply be tacked on; they must be explicit, obvious, and embodied in the daily life of the school.

Good schools have high expectations for all learners. The school community has straightforward goals that apply to all students and yet are flexible and personalized for each. They find ways to nurture and challenge the wide range of youngsters who actually arrive at school, and they don’t consider the condition of the lives of their students a reasonable excuse for failure.

Good schools are places where teachers are respected and are expected to be responsible decision makers. Teachers are not cogs in a machine, but feel themselves to be valuable, even indispensable. Each teacher feels a sense of authorship of her own teaching text, ownership of her own work.

Good schools are geared to continuous improvement. No school, no teaching, no curriculum is ever perfect; good schools are places where people are neither smug nor complacent. Good schools are always in the making.

I have tried to change, create, or improve schools and classrooms for much of my life. One thing I have learned along the way is that there are no guarantees—you dive into the wreckage with faith and hope and fear. Another is that you must think big, question everything, and not merely tinker around the edges—rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic might make for a more pleasant view, but it does not prevent the inevitable plunge to the ocean floor. At the same time, you must attend to details, to the needs and desires of specific people. You must think globally and act locally, head in the stars and feet on the ground. It’s a stretch.
I once worked with an energetic group of parents and teachers to create a small public school within a large school building. It was called the Imani School, a project that began, as these things do, as more dream than reality, more faith than substance. Imani means “faith” in Swahili—the name was suggested by a teacher who keeps the faith for a brighter future as well as anyone I know.

The community drawn together to build this school was not made up of idle dreamers. Imani School was located in a poor urban neighborhood. Many of the families lived in depressed, dilapidated, and neglected housing projects. Most of the youngsters had witnessed violence firsthand; all were aware of the presence of exploitation and crime. One of the things that made these teachers and parents so inspiring was precisely their willingness and ability to fight for a decent school and future for their children when there were so many reasons to give up.

An initial focus of the Imani School planning group was to “turn weaknesses into strengths.” We organized small teams to tour and map the neighborhood, looking for community assets. The larger challenge was to name the putative problems and to see if they could be transformed into assets.

The park, firehouse, and small commercial district were obvious community strengths. How could the school use them? Classes might take trips, perhaps, or organize a community campaign to keep the park clean. Some classes might “adopt” a restaurant or small business to study and support. These assets are worth naming, and it is valuable to figure out how to bring them more fully into the life of the school.

A deeper challenge was to try to look at problems from the other side. There were several vacant lots near the school, for example—are these potential sites for gardens or play lots? The community had a high rate of unemployment—could some unemployed adults be organized to work in or around the school on specific projects? The planning group wasn’t certain, but attempting to turn weaknesses into strengths expanded people’s imaginative space.

One thing the group did early on was to try to discover our deep, collective, and shared values. We imagined that each of us had the power to magically bestow on all the people of the world three qualities, and we asked ourselves what they would be. These qualities could not be physical attributes like good health, material goods like wealth or a Rolls Royce, or specific religious affiliations. But beyond that, they could be anything at all.

We worked and worked on this activity, individually and in groups, and eventually achieved consensus on five qualities: compassion, curiosity, respect for others and self, creativity, and an ability to participate fully in society. This took a long time, and it represented a lot of conversation, struggle, compromise, and redefinition.

These qualities became for us our core values, a guide to future action. Since these were qualities we wanted for all people, qualities that would in some sense improve the world, we felt that they had to come alive and be readily apparent in school practice. We could not in good conscience teach the rules of grammar and ignore, for example, respect. How could curiosity become evident in the hallways? Would there be respect in the cafeteria? What would it look like? Was compassion going to be a part of every single interaction? How? None of this solved the problem of what to do in school, but it did provide a helpful lens through which to imagine and examine practice.

These core values led to an emphasis on democracy and active participation in social life. As one of the parents put it, “We should act as if we live in a democracy, and in that way make it become more so.” Respect and fairness would be explicitly emphasized in the school, and teachers would strive to create classrooms where people could think and question freely, speak and write and read critically, work cooperatively, consider the common good and then act accordingly. Every class would need to have community service built into the day—the youngest children would tend the garden, for example, others would help in tutoring projects, the oldest would work in community organizations, and everyone would have to be involved in clean-up and maintenance.

The planning group emphasized the importance of experience as a teacher—hands-on learning, research projects involving first-person encounters and primary sources. There was a commitment from teachers to use the community and its residents as a school resource: Everyone teaches; everyone learns; and knowledge is keyed to action, experimentation, reflection, self-correction, discovery, and surprise. There was an abiding desire to encourage youngsters to write their own stories and plays, to build on what they knew and experienced even when it might be difficult or painful to do so. No student should be silenced.

Of course, developing an education based on experience is just the beginning. John Dewey (1938) noted that experience and education are not the same thing. We are all having experiences all the time, and yet some experiences may be disconnected events leading nowhere, or they may even be uneducative in the sense that they shut down or distort future growth. The challenge for teachers who are building an education based
Frederick Douglass tells a remarkable story of learning to read as a subversive activity. As a slave, Douglass had no rights and meager opportunities. Reading among slaves was strictly forbidden, for it could open worlds and create unimaginable mischief. Besides, according to their overlords, slaves had no need of reading. They could be trained in the necessary menial and backbreaking work, and that was all. Yet his master's wife, believing him to be an intelligent youngster, undertook to teach Douglass how to read the Bible in hopes that he would come closer to God. When the master discovered the crime, he exploded: "It will unfit him to be a slave!"

Education will unfit anyone to be a slave. That is because education is bold, adventurous, creative, vivid, illuminating—in other words, education is for self-activating explorers of life, for those who would challenge fate, for doers and activists, for citizens. Training is for slaves, for loyal subjects, for tractable employees, for willing consumers, for obedient soldiers. Education tears down walls; training is all barbed wire.

What we call education is too often no more than training. We are so busy operating schools that we have lost sight of learning. We participate, then, in certification mills, institutions founded on notions of control and discipline, lifeless and joyless places where people serve time and master a few basic skills on their way to a plain piece of paper that justifies and sanctions the whole affair. Sometimes these places are merely mindless, and sometimes they are expressly malevolent.

A hundred years ago, this country developed a system of schools run out of the Interior Department called Indian Boarding Schools, a few of which survive to this day. The premise of these schools is that Native American children can be educated if they are stripped of everything Indian and taught to be like whites. Taken from their homes, these youngsters were punished severely for speaking their own languages, practicing their own religions, or attempting to contact their families. Everything Native had to be erased as a first step toward official learning. Some students, of course, went along, but many rebelled, refused to learn, and were labeled intractable.

The cost of education at an Indian Boarding School was great—dignity, individuality, humanity, maybe even sanity. The payoff was rather small: a menial job, a marginal place in the social order. Students had to submit to humiliation, degradation, and mutilation simply to learn how to function at the lowest levels of society. No wonder most refused: The price was high, the benefit meager.

It is not much different in many schools today. We claim to be giving students key skills and knowledge, and yet we deny them the one thing that is essential to their survival: something to live for. All the units in drug awareness, gang prevention, and mental health together are not worth that single hopeful thing.

When we as teachers recognize that we are partners with our students in life's long and complex journey, when we begin to treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve for simply being, then we are on the road to becoming worthy teachers. It is just that simple—and just that difficult.

Jane Addams, founder of Hull House, once asked, "How shall we respond to the dreams of youth?" It's a dazzling and elegant question, a question that demands an answer—a range of answers, really, spiraling outward in widening circles. It is a teacher's kind of question. It is a question to take with us as we plunge into teaching, full of dread and hope, alive to both, living a teacher's life, singular and mysterious, helping to create a generation unfit for slavery.