

# Dear Teacher: Lessons from Two Generations of Future Teachers

*A pandemic-inspired letter-writing collaboration enabled high school students to communicate with future teachers, offering valuable lessons for the profession.*

*I wish my teachers knew I have run away three times and wish I had never been found.*

—MAYA, ELEVENTH GRADER

*Growing up, I wish I had been brave enough to tell all of these things to my teachers.*

—KELSEY, FUTURE TEACHER

Letters. Love letters, breakup letters, letters to our children, letters to our future selves. There is something about the genre that feels easy, true, intimate. In a digital era, could something so seemingly archaic be powerful? Give students a voice? Prepare future teachers? As teachers of language and lovers of the written word, we know the power of letters to deepen relationships, support writers, and shape lives. From Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* to Gwendolyn Brooks's encouragement of Black writers and poets, letters have a potency that is belied by their simple form. When COVID disruptions threatened our students' opportunities, we, with our long-standing friendship born of mutual professional involvements, decided to collaborate on a virtual project that harnesses the power of letters.

## OUR PROJECT'S BEGINNINGS

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, most student teaching placements were on hold as schools worked through social distancing, hybrid schedules, and the logistics of schooling. Mary and Christine, who co-teach a seminar for student teachers in the final semester of their English grades 7–12 certification

program, were told to substitute student teaching with analysis of videos of classroom practices, such as those provided by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards *ATLAS* (*Accomplished Teaching, Learning and Schools*) library. Though *ATLAS* videos have the distinct benefits of being indexed to core teaching strategies, the future teachers (FTs) had already examined many classroom videos due to pandemic-related disruptions in earlier fieldwork. They needed the critical student teaching experience: building relationships with actual teenagers and developing an understanding of their lives. This focus on learners and their needs—the root of student-centered instruction—is vital for new teachers who might otherwise lose sight of students, given the demands of lesson planning, curriculum development, and classroom management (Athanasos).

Our student teaching seminar has a long history of supporting inquiry-based approaches within a carefully cultivated professional development community, designed as “a ‘first’ introduction to inquiry-oriented professional development rather than as a last class on the way to certification” (Meyer and Sawyer 46). Numerous graduates become teacher leaders and activists through the Hudson Valley Writing Project (our local affiliate of the National Writing Project) and/or through the New York State English Council (our state affiliate of NCTE). Our program is also grounded in the belief that literacy learning is heightened when teachers position students as “agentive readers, writers, speakers, listeners, creators, and thinkers” (Johnston 29) and when

teachers regularly seek feedback from students on their experiences. When teachers seek students' feedback, "students develop a heightened sense of their own agency and acquire new language with which to talk about learning. Teachers develop a curiosity about students' points of view and come to trust in their capacity to contribute to both curricular content and pedagogical process" (Rodgers 88). We also knew that this moment demanded an unflinching focus on students and their lives: the pandemic's deepening of the crisis in adolescent mental health and the continuing incidents of race-based violence called for trauma-informed pedagogy (Craig) and for literacy teachers to develop curriculum that was culturally and historically responsive and that cultivated genius and joy (Muhammad).

We reached out to high school English teacher leader and writer Michelle, who was in the process of soliciting *I Wish My Teacher Knew* letters in an elective course introducing the teaching profession. These letters give students an opportunity to voice their learning needs and confide details about their personal lives that they believe are important in building student-teacher relationships. The letter assignment preceded Michelle's discovery of *I Wish My Teacher Knew: How One Question Can Change Everything for Our Kids* by Kyle Schwartz, which she later read.

When we proposed that this year's letters could be forwarded to, and answered by, student teachers in our seminar, Michelle saw the collaboration as an opportunity for students in her class to have an authentic audience as well as much-needed socioemotional support. In addition, since all parties were aspiring educators, the letters provided a place to develop their professional voice. The high school students wrote. The college students responded. Everyone reflected. We did not anticipate that our collaboration would generate an exciting and timely vision for the teaching profession and for teacher education programs.

## OUR PROCESS

This project begins in Michelle's Exploring Teaching as a Profession semester-long course, which she teaches to a heterogeneous group of tenth through twelfth graders in her large suburban school district. As a teacher who prioritizes the development

of community and connection in her classroom, Michelle uses the opening weeks to have students share who they are, their learning goals, and their ideals. She focuses on what's needed for a transformative experience: facing and leaning into vulnerability as a human and as a learner. So, while writing this letter is the first assignment, it is not the first endeavor. She opens with a sequence of activities to build connections to create community, which we share here.

## BUILDING CONNECTIONS

**Activity 1: Opening Day—Who Are We?** After sharing a collage of her personal and professional life, Michelle asks the students if there is someone in the room they don't know or don't know very well. To start getting to know each other, the students pair off and discuss why they're taking this course. They become "Bulla Buddies" and support each other's learning journey throughout the semester.

**Activity 2: What Makes a Great Learning Environment?** Next, Michelle introduces the idea that *visions lead to missions* with a graphic she created, explaining how this concept captures what she prioritizes: student and teacher voice and choice (see Figure 1). A crowdsourcing tactic then generates answers and discussion on two questions: "What

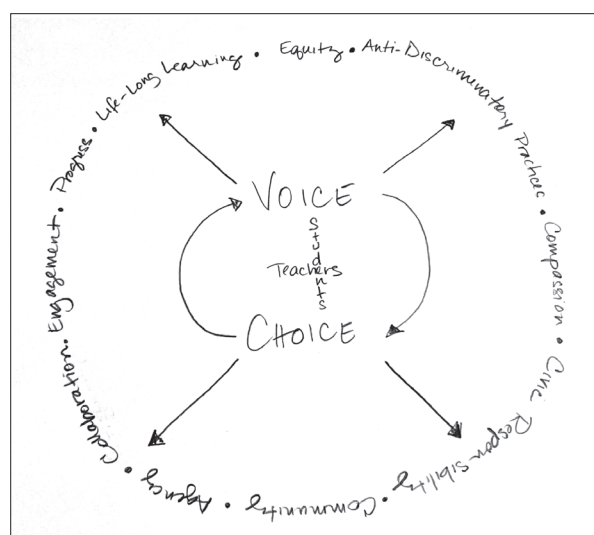


FIGURE 1  
The graphic Michelle created offers a visual representation that reflects her priorities about teaching and learning.

does a great learning environment feel like?” and “What does a great teacher sound like?”

**Activity 3: Vulnerability Matters.** Inevitably, the concept of vulnerability comes up, though not all students can name it; Michelle shares this word as the class explores how it relates to learning and school. Next, students watch a 2017 South by Southwest (SXSW) keynote speech by researcher, social worker, and author Brené Brown. Students take notes and discuss connections to their learning and schooling experiences. Most appreciate having language to name complex feelings.

### DEVELOPING COMMUNITY

To apply the idea they’ve been discussing, Michelle invites students to write letters to their teachers from a hypothetical stance, without sending them to actual teachers (unless they choose to).

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The letters are not formally assessed, and the assignment’s language underscores its purpose: “This is your chance to

think about what would help your teachers be more effective in their work, helping you grow, learn, and engage with the world.” She offers the students a prompt to assist them as they draft their letters.

Think about yourself as a human, as a learner, in all the ways you might identify: as an experienced “consumer” of teachers and teaching, as a representative of your age group, and as a dreamer of a future. (What does that future hold? It’s OK not to know!) Think about yourself not only as a voice for your personal journey as a learner (what do you hope to / want to / need to learn?), but also as a representative of those who cannot or will not speak. With all this in mind, what do you wish your teachers knew?

When Michelle explained the assignment this year, she told the students that their letters would be read and responded to by college students studying to be English teachers who were in their final semester.

Meanwhile, Mary and Christine introduced the project to the future teachers as an opportunity to make up for lost field hours, learn about students’

lives, and practice relationship-building skills. After previewing the letters, they assigned them to pairs of responders; most assignments were random, but a few letters were assigned to FTs with prior experience in the issues raised in the letters. Support was provided through peer collaboration. The pairs were instructed to either jointly compose a response or support each other’s individual responses. Mary and Christine reviewed the responses to ensure that they were positive and supportive.

Digital tools eased collaboration logistics. The high school students used *Google Docs* to compose the letters; copies were then dropped into an electronic folder and shared with Mary and Christine. FT partners read each other’s drafts, written in the same letter documents the high school students had submitted, and Michelle then shared the responses with the letter writers.

### OUR ANALYSIS OF THE LETTERS

Because of the differences in age, capacity, and personality, the letters ranged widely in length and detailed a variety of issues that affect learning. In the following sections, we offer themes from the letters and share notes about our observations. All student names are pseudonyms.

### STRESS AND SLEEP DEPRIVATION

In most letters, the high school students described feeling stressed and overwhelmed with school and outside responsibilities; many teens felt as if time was the enemy. Aubrey wrote, “It’s hard to balance school, homework, sports and a job.” Additionally, many had family responsibilities such as helping younger siblings while parents were working or translating for parents because English was not their first language.

Parents often increased students’ academic pressure and stress levels. Greg revealed, “Even if I do get high grades, it isn’t enough to satisfy them,” and “I am afraid to own up to my mistakes because my parents seem to highlight them over my successes.” Mariela wrote, “Me and my mom are not that close at all. Almost every time I wanna hang out with her she never wants to because she’s always tired.” Melissa eloquently said, “It’s difficult to please parents, I

know they want the best for me but I have my own thoughts and opinions. I have grown in the way their eyes are incapable of seeing.”

### RACISM

One letter raised the issue of racism, describing the visceral nature of the student’s experience. Ava began, “I wish you knew how hard it is to be a black girl in a predominantly white school” and wrote that every day she heard “people saying racist things and using words they shouldn’t be using.” She recalled that when she would confront them, they would say, “It’s just a word. Stop acting like it’s something serious.” She wrote about being stereotyped by teachers and classmates who she wished “would see more than color,” and described “being stared at any time slavery was mentioned.”

### MOTIVATION STRUGGLES AND MENTAL/PHYSICAL CHALLENGES

Only a handful of students specifically mentioned the pandemic, but the struggle to stay motivated was a common theme. Alexa explained she was “not the easiest pupil to mentor” as her “best friend is procrastination” and “he’s a bad influence.” After apologies, she acknowledged, “I’m an unadulterated mess as a student.” Ivy admitted, “Completing homework is difficult for me to focus on. I take a long time to do my assignments because I have to read everything twice.” Many wrote about serious mental and physical difficulties. Amelia revealed she “gets overstressed from school and the homework which causes me to have seizures.” Molly said she was paralyzed at school by massive anxiety, to the point that she was “left spending the period in the bathroom trying to calm down.” She described it as “feeling suffocated in your own thoughts” and closed with a plea: “Anxiety . . . takes an impact not only mentally, but physically. It leaves scars just like when you fall and get a cut, only this time, on the soul. So if you got anything out of my story, have courage and be kind.”

### TRAUMA AND LOSS

A few students wrote about severe trauma, including physical violence, sexual assault, and

suicidal ideations. After consulting school counselors, Michelle responded to those letters herself. Less urgent, but still important, were two letters about recent deaths of students’ loved ones. Amelia said she had “a broken heart because my brother passed away,” while Ava wrote about losing her best friend in ninth grade and that she felt “the pain of his death behind closed doors on a daily basis.”

### TEACHING METHODS

Many students addressed teaching methods, often with remedies for approaches that had negatively affected their learning. Alexa wrote that she didn’t appreciate “lectures and mindless busywork,” but rather wanted to be engaged with current events and discussions. Mariah suggested, “I wish you knew that reading off a slide show won’t help anyone learn the material.” Some wrote about their discomfort in class. Mia pleaded, “I wish my teachers knew not to call on me if I am not raising my hand, because it may mean that I am uneasy about my answer,” and Aubrey wrote, “‘Pick a partner’ can be awkward and embarrassing when you know nobody in the class.”

Comments about positive teaching methods included ways teachers help students feel welcome. Aubrey wrote, “Some of the small stuff like ‘Good Morning sunshine!’ actually brightens up my day,” and “The high-fives, fist-bumps and laughs are what makes me want to come to class.” Mallory explained, “I really enjoy being able to talk to my teachers not just about topics related to their class, but other conversations that are relevant in a teenager’s life,” and Ivy wanted her teachers to know “how badly I want to be understood by you.” Anthony shared, “One of the most important things we want is to know what the future . . . holds so just giving us a few of your experiences is really nice to hear even though we act like we don’t care.”

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## OUR ANALYSIS OF THE FUTURE TEACHERS' RESPONSES

The FTs' sympathetic and carefully crafted responses to even the shortest of letters reflected a deep respect for the high schoolers. In our analysis, we identified the college students' rhetorical moves rather than the content of responses since these relationship-building moves are transferable and teachable.

### EMPATHY

The FTs wrote some version of “we feel your pain” in every response, often disclosing their own identities, histories, and struggles. In response to Ava's complaints about racism, Roxanne wrote: “As a future black educator, well, a black woman in general, I know exactly how you are feeling. . . . I've been in your shoes, and quite frankly I am still there depending on the situation and setting.” In response to struggles with anxiety, Abby wrote, “I know how much . . . anxiety . . . can impede your ability to perform as a student and how much it can harm your self-esteem, and it was only . . . after receiving an ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder] diagnosis that I realized that these challenges don't mean that I'm a lazy person . . . or that I don't love learning.”

The FTs empathized with the high school students' stressors and feelings of being overworked. As busy college students—most with jobs and virtual student-teaching in addition to their college courses—they noted that the high school students' complaints mirrored their reality: “As two preservice teachers, we both wake up at 5am every morning. . . . Sometimes it feels there is no time to breathe.” Many recalled their adolescence and empathized with students' plights, writing, “I also took dance in high school. I more than understand the stress and the feeling you get after you're done with dance—it's like everything crashes down on you again” and “When I was your age, I felt like I couldn't do anything right for my parents, too. They were always quick to point out the bad, and slow to praise me.”

### NAMING AND REFRAMING

The future teachers often (re)named problems, providing new concepts to understand experiences; in many cases they also reframed them, offering

an alternate perspective. One FT renamed having one's hair touched, which Ava mentioned as something that happened to her at school, as “invasion.” Another reframed the experience of dark skin being seen as a threat: “I hope you know your dark skin is not a weapon. You are not a threat, but you are a force to be reckoned with. Your melanin is enameled with grace, determination, and beauty.” FTs reframed painful experiences as ones to be treasured: “Whatever you find in your experience to be lacking, use it. Store it in a box we all keep under our beds and save it for when the day comes that it is your turn.” Another wrote: “Take all the mistakes you make . . . and even the nasty comments that cut you and use their sharpness as a tool to build the masterpiece that is you.”

### ADVICE-GIVING

Explicit advice was prefaced by empathy. To address challenges of feeling overworked, many FTs mentioned the benefits of lists and planners. To help manage stress, many advised the high school students to do what they enjoyed: “It is natural to want to take a breather and take a break, and honestly, it's healthy to do so!” The FTs advised students to talk with teachers “if you feel they have put too much pressure on you or if you need an extension,” and many encouraged students to use their voice: “You will make great changes by speaking up. Oftentimes as teachers we tell students what we expect from them, but I challenge you to let your teachers know that you have expectations too.”

Occasionally, an FT used a “tough love” approach: “You're telling me you're always seen with your bad friend, procrastination. Don't apologize. Ask him why he's really there and fix it, so you never need to apologize for him again. Then look around you after he's gone and ask yourself why you think *you're* here, what it is you want all your passion to go towards in life. Then go for it with greatness.” In the same vein, FTs also advised students not to use mundane teaching as an excuse for lack of effort: “Show [teachers] that when *their* best isn't good enough, when they're so *boring*, you're going to take the extra step and care anyway.”

### VALIDATION

Almost every letter affirmed students' worthiness, strength, and value: “You are a strong young lady, and

I know that your teachers see that in you because I do.” One of the most poetic affirmations was in response to the student facing racism: “I hope you know that you are a gift carefully wrapped in the strength of your ancestors with royalty flowing through your blood. . . . You are a piece of art, someone to marvel at!”

A common method was to underscore the impact students’ words had: “I’m going to give all my students fist bumps and high fives in honor of your letter!” One FT admitted, “You are helping me become a better teacher . . . because now I understand it is small gestures that will make students happy.” Another assured a letter writer, “It is students like you who inspire me to teach in a way that emphasizes the valuable process of learning rather than just the grade.” Another shared, “I copied your words and taped them to the wall above my desk. . . . While the earliest seeds of my teaching practices are taking root, [your] words will guide me.”

## OUR PARTICIPANTS’ REFLECTIONS

Reading the FTs’ responses, many of Michelle’s students teared up, and as soon as the first outspoken girl started vocalizing her reaction, all chimed in, sharing that they felt overwhelmed emotionally. Many were profoundly touched, which Amelia captured: “I’ve never felt so seen in my life.” The class discussed the kinds of comments they received, and how letter writing created community through personalized connections.

The future teachers reflected on the experience in writing, followed by discussion. They reported that they were moved by students’ letters and valued the project. The letters reminded them that “our students have such complex lives outside of our classrooms.” Many saw the value in shared vulnerability to forge relationships with students: “It’s okay to acknowledge their struggles and be open that I’m not perfect either.” Some, like Andrew, reconnected to their purpose: “This activity allowed me an opportunity to step outside of my rigid role as ‘instructor,’ and to return to the humanity of why I want to teach in the first place.”

This project used *I Wish My Teacher Knew* letters to provide FTs with some of the understandings they needed to “touch the beauty and brilliance” of their students and to practice the student-centered,

culturally responsive methods so vital to their growth (Muhammad 81). Recently NCTE published updated *Standards for the Initial Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts 7–12*, which underscore how issues of justice, equity, and diversity are at the heart of the English language arts curriculum and highlight the necessity of knowing students and their needs. We found that these letters and responses not only reflect the social and emotional benchmarks championed by such organizations as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), but also exemplify the culture of connection necessary for trauma-informed pedagogy: “Opportunities to bond with teachers and peers, as well as the chances to discover their own competency and self-worth, help traumatized youth move beyond their past toward future achievements and success” (Craig 88).

Finally, letter-writing positions students as authorities—literal authors of their lives—enabling the agency that drives literacy. With the ease of the personal *I*, the genre invites authentic analysis, whether it be of self or text. We continue to grow this work and are currently developing partnerships at earlier stages in fieldwork and adding more explicit connections to the English language arts curriculum, such as having students and FTs respond to each other’s memoir writing.

## OUR PROFESSIONAL RE-VISIONING

In our profession, veteran teachers mentor future teachers; yet our project demonstrates that adolescents can play powerful roles, serving as “mentors” to student teachers, flipping the traditional model. We’ve seen that these dialogues can lay the groundwork for the relationships a teacher needs to support each student’s growth and learning.

What started out as a balm for social and emotional isolation for high schoolers and a remedy for FTs’ lost in-person placements turned out to be so much more. In an era of assaults on free speech and democratic values, many educators are working to center students’ voices, positioning them as active agents of democracy. Teens around the world are effecting change in environmental (Greta Thunberg), LGBTQ+ (Jazz Jennings), and legislative (survivors of the school shooting in Parkland, Florida) realms; as our collaboration shows, they can be agents for

change in educational realms, too. We think it's time to listen to them. [EJ](#)

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**READWRITETHINK**CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In this lesson plan, students are inspired to do their best writing by writing for an authentic audience—their future selves. Through a series of brainstorming exercises, students begin to think about their future. They further explore their thoughts by answering a set of prewriting questions. Next, they read and discuss the poem “Ex-basketball Player” by John Updike, analyzing the details and the format of the poem. Students are then introduced to a writing assignment in which they write a poem about themselves in five years. They write their poems and go through a series of peer feedback and revisions. Two copies of the final versions of the poem are given to the teacher—one to grade and one to mail to students in five years. <https://bit.ly/3xxL0iP>