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**NWP Speaks: 30 Years of Writing Project Voices**

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**Composing Our Professional Lives Alongside Beginning Teachers**

by Ralph Cordova

*To look is one thing.*

*To see what you look at is another.*

*To learn from what you understand is still something else.*

*But to act on what you learn is all that really matters.*

—The Talmud

These lines from the Talmud have helped me navigate my professional journey as a teacher and teacher-researcher. A colleague introduced me to them as a way to help me understand the conceptual nature of teaching for social justice, but for me they have also come to illustrate the recursive nature of learning and teaching. Lately I have begun to draw on this Talmudic expression to understand and navigate the various journeys I am taking as a teacher. In this process, I have come to understand that I am—as all of us are—actively composing a professional life.

I have learned from researching my own teaching practices in the context of third grade and then in the setting of a teacher preparation program that the decisions we make as teachers—intentional or not—have far-reaching consequences for student learning and for our own professional learning. I have learned to see that I am co-researching with my students, not doing research on them. It is never a singular, one-sided journey. When I see again, revise, and re-search, then I must poke around at where I have been in order to see that the kind of teacher-researcher I am today and am becoming, has been and is being shaped and influenced by my colleagues and all the experiences I have had.

My experience in many National Writing Project settings has shown me that

colleagues also grapple with similar experiences. My unfolding work as a member of the New-Teacher Initiative Leadership Team has helped me learn from members' individual and collective brilliance. These experiences, when examined, teach us about how we can support beginning teachers beyond teaching them a bag of tricks. By researching our professional lives in relationship to our work in the larger professional development "classroom" that is the National Writing Project, we might get a chance to revise and re-see as we begin to research the phenomenon of becoming teachers.

As a member of the New-Teacher Initiative Leadership Team, I was given the opportunity to become a member of an evolving community of practice whose mission is to support beginning teachers. In the process, however, I began to ask questions about whether it is only beginning teachers who need to learn how to reflect on and inquire into their practices. My colleagues encouraged me to draw on my own inquiry stance toward my practice in order to make visible my developing ideas on this subject. NWP has provided us with the resources and opportunities for dialogue that enrich us as we go about composing our professional lives. This has supported me in my thinking about the nature of professional development and its role in both reflecting on and developing an inquiry stance to our practice. Working together, my colleagues and I consider different views of what beginning teachers need and how we can provide them with the space, time, and skills to engage in the reflection and inquiry so necessary to our practice.