An Interview with Heidi Mills and Tim O’Keefe, NCTE’s 2014 Outstanding Educators of the Year

Conducted at a time when teaching is publicly disparaged and de-skilled, this interview with Tim O’Keefe and Heidi Mills, recipients of NCTE’s Outstanding Educators in the English Language Arts Award, about their years of teaching and nurturing relationships, inquiry, growth, and change was a hopeful experience, an intellectual challenge, and a call to action. Colleagues, friends, and life partners, Heidi and Tim have devoted their energies and finely-tuned expertise to co-constructing teaching and learning with each other and legions of inspired pre- and inservice teachers, literacy coaches, friends, colleagues, children, and families. In Heidi and Tim’s words, “teachers tall and small” have both learned with them and taught them. Humble and assured, Heidi and Tim reflect deeply about their beliefs and theory, putting both into practice in collaboration with others as they enrich the fields of teacher education, education, and literacy. The profession has learned much from them and continues to do so in a never-ending inquiry process.

Transforming the Way They Thought

When Heidi and Tim spoke about early influences, they described notable teachers and children. Tim spoke of his admiration for his mother, a teacher who cared deeply about her students. Tim also remembered working in the classroom of a wonderful teacher and his preschoolers for a course he was taking at Indiana University. “I loved the way he interacted with kids,” Tim noted, “and I loved being in the atmosphere where there was teaching and learning going on all the time.” For Heidi, it was also experiences with children that inspired her to become a teacher. “I vividly remember watching young children and wondering how they were making connections. I was fascinated by their words and actions.”

For both, it was Dr. Jerome C. Harste, a professor at Indiana University, who “transformed the way we thought about teaching and learning and kids.” They explain:

Heidi: Jerry really helped us begin to question the status quo and to start imagining a better world . . . . He led us down this path . . . . he really launched our careers.

Tim: Harste had this effect on me in that he . . . . spoiled me for other classes. I had him for language arts methods, so in every other language arts course I took, I was the squeaky wheel because of what I learned from Harste. Because he seemed so practical and so real . . . . He had writing samples up on the overhead projector . . . . real stories from real kids. So as
I went into other language arts courses, I’d say “But wait! . . . Doesn’t that fly in the face of what we know about how kids really learn?” I’m sure those professors thought, “Oh, another Harste kid.”

**Heidi:** He was into raising radicals . . . . We don’t consider ourselves radical so much as we just care deeply about what we think, what we do, and how we impact the world, and help kids do so to make the world a better place. But it really was in those days such a different way of thinking.

According to Heidi, Dr. Carolyn Burke was also an influence on their thinking. She “thought so carefully about everything, and lived her model so consistently. I wanted to think and act and impact others in the ways that Carolyn did.” And, falling in love, they influenced each other as they became a team, marrying in 1987. “We’re better together and . . . complement each other in so many ways,” Heidi noted. “[Tim] sets the standard for teaching at the Center for Inquiry (CFI) and . . . represents the essence of it.” Tim added, “I am who I am as a teacher because of the influence of Heidi.”

“. . . To show what was possible”

In 1996, Heidi and Tim founded a K–5 university–public partnership, The Center for Inquiry (CFI), in collaboration with Richland School District Two in Columbia, South Carolina, and with Amy Donnelly, a colleague of Heidi’s at the University of South Carolina where she was a faculty member, along with several teachers. CFI grew out of their study and inquiry group as members asked, “What is?” and “What might be?” Then they asked each other:

“Can you imagine what it would be like if we could “think up” regularly and push each other and continue to grow and change? And can you imagine what it would be like if kids had ongoing opportunities to live and learn in ways that were theoretically consistent from kindergarten through fifth grade?” So we started dreaming about making public education a better place.

Living their model, they began to inquire. Influenced by Jerome C. Harste’s work at the Center for Inquiry in Indianapolis, Deborah Meier’s *The Power of Their Ideas* (1995), and the work of Shelley Harwayne and the Manhattan New School, they began a collaborative project that continues to be vital to this day. (For descriptions of the school, its philosophy, and its practices, see *From the Ground Up: Creating a Culture of Inquiry* by Mills and Donnelly [2001], and *Learning for Real: Teaching Content and Literacy across the Curriculum* by Mills [2014].) Their aim was “to show what was possible” by founding a public professional development school that was racially and economically diverse and was grounded in inquiry that would “foster academic growth within strong, productive, democratic learning communities” (Mills & Jennings, 2011, p. 590). From the beginning, Tim has been looping as a 2nd- and 3rd-grade teacher, and Heidi has been the Curriculum, Research, and Development Specialist while also working as faculty at the University of South Carolina.

**Curricular Conversations**

Central to the school’s longevity has been the teaching and learning in which they all engage—children, parents, teachers, and teacher educators. “We all move into and out of mentor and apprentice roles,” Heidi noted. Consistent with this understanding of inquiry as the motor of change, Heidi described the school’s rich history in relation to challenges that generated growth.

In many schools, the focus is on implementing programs with fidelity. Since CFI is organized around a shared philosophy rather than a program, I am constantly exploring the question, “How do you institutionalize a philosophy or way of being with integrity so that we don’t create cookie cutter classrooms? How might we maintain unity while making space for teachers to make the theory their own in their own ways?” So we’ve done that by really working around beliefs. We’ve started with a set of shared beliefs, and through our weekly curricular conversations, I’ve come to understand that we best promote growth and change when we can help teachers reflect on their beliefs, make what’s implicit explicit, and then, by sharing with one another each week, help teachers grow new beliefs. When they develop new beliefs, then we can begin to say “How can we grow new practices that reflect those beliefs?” That was a huge epiphany for me when I realized it’s not just...
about having teachers reflect on and stay true to beliefs that we already hold. If you’re really inquiring, you’re growing and changing, you’re developing new beliefs, and then you have to say, “All right, how can I live into those? How can I change my practices so that they reflect new beliefs?”

In order to illustrate the process of “living into their beliefs,” Heidi noted that a belief in culturally responsive teaching—as well as the importance of voice and agency—might lead teachers to ask whether children can see themselves in classroom books. Their response would then lead them to ask questions about their practice: “So how am I going to make sure that happens? Where are the curricular structures? What kinds of materials? How will I use those texts?”

Heidi, Tim, CFI teachers, and principal Lyn Mueller engage in weekly curricular conversations that are grounded in the idea that “knowledgeable teachers make the difference” as they “adopt an inquiry stance.” Teachers raise questions from their practice, and then Heidi shares recordings, observation notes, children’s work, or asks a teacher to provide an illustration of his/her work so they can “think up” together in response to the questions. These conversations are about “theorizing from practice.” Based upon an observation made by scholar Karen Smith, Heidi noted, “It’s a lot harder to imagine practice from theory than to theorize from practice.” She continued:

When you start with theory, you run the risk of excluding teachers. Teachers might feel intimidated if they don’t know a person or the academic language or theoretical perspective. But if you start with practice, everybody can make an observation, interpret it, theorize about it, and then generate new questions. A really important part is the take-aways or taking new action. Our vision is that after curricular conversations, teachers take insights and strategies back to their own rooms and make them their own in their own ways.

Critically, they have learned that what happens in professional conversations mirrors classroom conversations. Tim and Heidi noted that they often quote Julie Waugh, a CFI teacher, who said, “We live with each other in the same ways we live with the kids.” For example, after Heidi explained how she might feature a teacher’s insights during a curricular conversation, Tim explained, “That’s what we do in our writing workshop. . . . Someone has a strategy . . . or a way of . . . figuring out a math problem. I’ll say, ‘Would you mind coming to the front and share what you know . . .?’”

In another example, Heidi explained that she had learned from her work with literacy coaches at the South Carolina Reading Initiative that “the substance of growth and change really took place not in teaching a new practice or strategy, but in developing a new belief that they really cared about and embraced and then wanted to develop; they were intentional about developing that practice.” Heidi then went on to share another insight:

[Tim and the other teachers] are not just teaching [children] to read [but] developing beliefs about readers. That’s the edge of my learning right now. What are the beliefs that we want kids to embrace as readers, writers, mathematicians, scientists, and so forth? Then, how can we help them grow new beliefs? A lot of that has to do with identity and agency as well as content and strategies.

### Kidwatching Squared

Another important element of the school’s life is kidwatching, a strategy first articulated by Yetta Goodman (1996) and described in her book with Gretchen Owocki entitled *Kidwatching: Documenting Children’s Literacy Development* (2002). In Tim and Heidi’s book with Louise Jennings, *Looking Closely and Listening Carefully: Learning Literacy through Inquiry* (2004), they deconstruct Tim’s kidwatching from the perspectives of teacher and observer. Kidwatching, according to Tim, is about “taking what you have learned from kids and transforming that into meaningful curriculum.” Then going a step further, Tim talked about “kidwatching squared” and the centrality of meaningful relationships in which “teachers and children love each other.” “It’s not just me knowing kids, it’s kids knowing me and their friends as readers, writers, and learners as well.”

Tim went on to explain that meaningful relationships with parents and among children are vital in a community grounded in caring and respect for everyone’s voice. For example, in the
“Everyone learns from everyone . . .”

In the Foreword to Looking Closely and Listening Carefully (Mills, O’Keefe, & Jennings, 2004), Karen Smith and Ralph Peterson reference Tim when they write that in this book, “[W]e observe firsthand a teacher who has developed his craft to a level that inspires yet makes visible the complexities that confront even the most experienced teacher” (p. ix). When asked about these complexities, Tim humbly characterized their statement as “over the top” and zeroed in on the challenge of “trying to strike a balance between what you have to teach and what you should teach. It’s about navigating the relationship between standards, the kids’ passions and needs, and a curriculum of caring. . . . It’s a balance of how high your expectations should be and inspiring kids to do their best while accepting approximations.”

Another challenge for Tim, especially after teaching for 34 years, is making “something rich happen with my students all the time that I’ve never done before” (see Fig. 2). And that, Tim argued, is about “teachers positioning themselves as learners” who learn from everyone. As Tim noted, “Every year, I grow as a teacher because I’m surrounded by all these different stories and all these people’s lives I’m connected to.” That’s a hallmark of CFI where, Heidi noted, “[E]veryone learns from everyone in ways that are really profound.” For example, she explained that she takes her language arts methods students to observe in Tim’s classroom and to work with one child, positioning her students as learners vis-à-vis the children who become their “small teachers.” On one such visit, Tim explained,

There was one little girl . . . She talked about how if you’re reading about riding a horse you should be on the horse. You should have your fingers in its mane and your hair should be flying back. To her, reading is more of an experience than just a book.

class newsletters that he sends home, Tim weaves together his descriptions of the children’s work, their voices, and their parents’ as he “celebrates what they notice about their own children.”

In addition to Goodman’s influence, Tim highlighted the influence of Bill Ayers, and paraphrased an insight he gained from reading Ayers’ work: “attending to the details of a single child can strengthen our understanding of all children.” At the same time, Tim noted, “[W]hile there are patterns in literacy growth, it’s important to recognize each child’s unique path.” Lucy Calkins’s book (1983), Lessons from a Child, was also transformative. Tim explained, “It’s really helped us understand the power of getting to know one child and honoring what all kids bring to the classroom.”
Inquiring into the reading process with the children, students in Heidi’s class are able to theorize from practice. Louise Rosenblatt’s work came to life for them as it did in the instance above, when they saw the transactive nature of reading and observed reading as an aesthetic or efferent process, depending on a reader’s purpose. In parallel projects created by Tim and Heidi, Heidi’s university students at the CFI learn how to think and grow as readers and writers while conferring reader-to-reader and writer-to-writer with children and with their own peers. After each university student gets to know one child in Tim’s classroom, he or she creates a book for that child as a gift of literacy, moving beyond formulaic notions about “just right” books.

**Inquiry as Democratic Practice**

Tim and Heidi defined inquiry as “intentional learning in school in ways that reflect learning in the world.” Inquiry, they asserted, is a stance, not a strategy, in which teachers continually interrogate their beliefs and practices through questioning. Instead of becoming obstacles, “problems become new inquiries.” Teachers engage in this process with each other and the children to create a “culture of inquiry.” Heidi states:

> It really isn’t something that we do in a particular subject area or time of day. We really think about it as a curriculum of being, rather than a curriculum of doing. A lot of it is getting in touch with the process. What do readers do and how do readers grow and change? What do writers do and how do they grow and change? Taking what we know about that and turning that into curriculum, kids adopt an inquiry stance as readers, as writers, as mathematicians, as scientists, and so forth.

More concretely, Tim provided an example of how he has helped his students take a critical stance and encouraged other teachers to “think about how to help kids ask questions of texts.” During a study of South Carolina history, Tim used materials indicating that the state’s population in the early 1600s was 200 people. Conversations and questions led the children to discover that the Native American population at that time was in the tens of thousands. Offended and fired up by this whitewashing of history, the children took action, writing to the source and suggesting politely that they check their facts. According to Heidi, the curricular conversation that followed provided an opportunity for teachers to think about white privilege and “how we have to always question the messages materials are sending to kids and . . . why it’s so important to create text sets for kids to explore topics from multiple perspectives and learn to pose questions from multiple perspectives.”

This culture of inquiry is inherently democratic in a school where, as Tim noted, “everyone knows that you have a voice” and there are “platforms for this open speaking arrangement so my voice is one of 22 or 23, it’s not the main voice.” For teachers, inquiry involves asking “Whose voice is heard? Whose voice is missing?” They also explore what constitutes “living democratically . . . and helping prepare kids to live in a democracy.” Thus, in morning meeting in his classroom, Tim hands issues over to the kids “to wrestle with and think about,” exploring different perspectives. Illustrating...
the school’s stance, Heidi quoted Rachel Naomi Remen’s (2000) statement: “After all these years I have begun to wonder if the secret of living well is not in having all the answers but in pursuing answerable questions in good company” (p. 338).

**Approaching the “Standards Dilemma”**

When the Center for Inquiry was founded, it was an effort to “show what was possible” within the realities of broader educational and political contexts. That meant that the challenge of standards had to be confronted from an inquiry stance. The bottom line was, “Who are we ultimately accountable to?” and, once they had responded “the kids,” the way forward was clearer, and they were able to maintain their beliefs while addressing the standards. Heidi shared the elements of the principled stance they took:

- What matters most is 1) that teachers make curricular decisions based on careful kidwatching, and 2) that they uncover rather than simply cover standards, and 3) since the original intent of the national standards was to give teachers [more] power and insight, not less, our stand was “Use the standards, don’t be used by them”; 4) Therefore, if we organize curriculum through broad concepts or authentic perspectives—the way learning works in the world for geologists, entomologists, astronomers, and so on—then we can uncover multiple standards simultaneously. Learning in the world is naturally interdisciplinary. Different disciplines ask diverse questions, and they use reading, writing, mathematics, and the arts to investigate them.

Today, Heidi and Tim identify assessment as a greater challenge and worry about the “tensions around how [assessments] will be used” in the lives of teachers and children. The challenge remains being intentional about finding the delicate balance between what you have to teach and what you should teach. As Heidi noted, “We’re strong academically in terms of our test results . . . and yet we also are most committed to living our model.”

To prepare his students to be successful on tests, Tim teaches “testing as a genre.” This short-lived preparation is preceded by multiple experiences over months with genre. For example, children observe an animal, pose questions, conduct research, and study the way authors write in *Ranger Rick*, a children’s nature magazine, as they write their own pieces. Tim then builds on this authentic literacy experience by asking kids to read a segment of nature writing and pose questions for their friends, learning how to problem solve from the inside out. Heidi and Tim explained what Tim says to the children:

**Heidi:** [Tim might say] “We want to show what we know, and there’re lots of ways to show what we know; this is one way. We can show it when we’re publishing. We can show it writing letters to the editor, and the other way to show it is on tests.” Once Tim gets into the testing-as-a-genre season, he’ll say, “How can we transfer what we already know to a testing genre?” Then he’ll use the kinds of engagements that are familiar to [the students] so that they can learn to think that way and then transfer it to the more isolated, which is where it is now.

**Tim:** If you read 4 or 5 fables, each succeeding fable is easier because you get the genre. You know a certain set of expectations that you can have as you go into this, and the more you’re familiar with them, the easier every subsequent one becomes. That’s the conversation we had today about the testing. Without doing that [practicing with test-like exercises], it’s more like Karen Smith’s genre study. My kids did really well.

Tim and Heidi have written that “[Accomplished teachers] don’t simply teach the standards or the texts. In fact, they don’t simply teach reading and writing. Good teachers teach readers and writers” (Mills, O’Keefe, & Jennings, 2004, p. 12). Citing the influences of Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, and Katie Wood Ray, Tim and Heidi explained that “if you want to help kids learn to write, you help them learn what writers do.”

**“We lead wide awake kind of lives”**

Heidi and Tim highlighted the joy that is felt throughout CFI. Tim described “finding joy in [children’s] successes and growth.” He talked about handing out writing samples from the beginning
of the year and “seeing the joy wash over them” as children see themselves “growing toward these adult people that they have this vision of.” They continued at length, key phrases communicating their deep feelings and intense engagement:

**Tim:** I love the immediacy and the intimacy of the relationships that I can establish with my kids.

**Heidi:** It’s all about relationships as well as growing alongside others. We lead wide awake kind of lives when we’re teaching.

**Tim:** What could be cooler than being around this excitement and seeing how these kids have grown, just in literacy? It’s just an amazing thing. It’s just this feeling of tremendous accomplishment to be a part of that.

**Heidi:** To me it’s a privilege. Being paid to grow and change yourself in the company of others, while you’re nurturing others. It’s transformative. That is the beauty of the culture that we’ve created. A culture that not only allows but expects you to be fully present with kids so you can truly be responsive to them and to one another.

At the beginning of the interview, Heidi and Tim remembered Jerry Harste as raising them to be radicals who cared deeply. They noted that “people don’t view inquiry as so radical now.” Nonetheless, they say that “we’re always trying to outgrow ourselves” and are “happy to report that the profession is as well.” “Teaching children how to learn in ways that are authentic, rigorous, and joyful, how to pose and investigate questions from multiple perspectives, and teaching for social justice” is a way that they are “hoping to impact change.” CFI is the “social action project of our dreams,” “illustrating what is possible when teachers, kids, and university partners engage in collaborative inquiry.” This interview was an opportunity to tell the story of that project. As Tim explained, he has learned from Heidi that:

It’s not a good idea to do your best teaching behind a closed door. You get it out there, you invite people in so you can share the good news, not necessarily the news about us and our teaching but the great things that kids are doing.

**References**


**Additional Selected Publications of O’Keefe and Mills**


Dinah Volk | AN INTERVIEW WITH HEIDI MILLS AND TIM O’KEEFE, NCTE’S 2014 OUTSTANDING EDUCATORS OF THE YEAR


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