

EDUCATION WEEK

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COMMENTARY

Teachers, Don't Forget Joy

By **Judy Wallis**

As another school year moves into high gear, I would like to offer a few thoughts.

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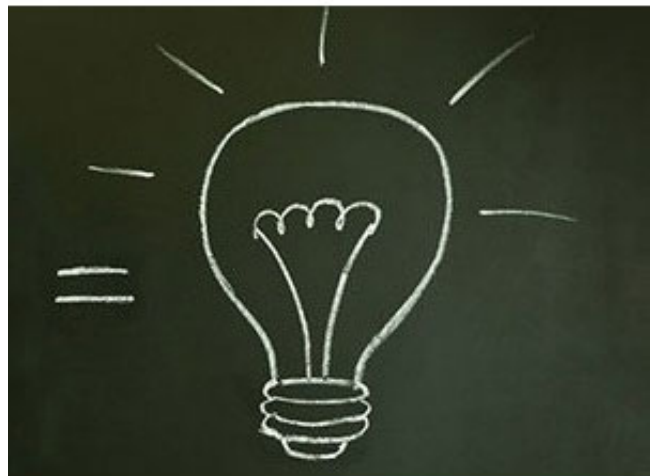
Not long ago, the room where classmates and I met for our 50th high school reunion buzzed with all the conversations you'd expect: children, grandchildren, retirement, travels, and where we lived. But there was also another equally important conversation—about our teachers and why we remembered them. "She told me I was a writer," one former classmate said. "I loved math because of him." "I wish he'd only lived a little longer; I had so hoped to tell him of the impact he had on my life." "I became a teacher because of her." I wondered as I listened and shared similar musings what my former students might say about me when they think of our time together. Would joy come to their minds?

Shortly after the reunion, a group of colleagues gathered in my den to spend a day with a noted literacy expert. We talked of all the rich research we have to help our students grow smarter as readers, writers, and thinkers. We talked of programs and the promises they make, and what they can't and don't deliver. We lamented the squeeze on educational funding. And we pondered the role that poverty and the absence of books in homes plays in children's lives. As I sat with some of the smartest and most dedicated educators I know, I couldn't help but sense that we had overlooked something in our discussion.

And then suddenly it hit me as I was sitting there, learning among my friends and colleagues. It was joy. A simple, three-letter word we take for granted. Struck by its simplicity, I wondered if joy is what we've been missing in the recent conversations about education that we've been having as a country.

Amid the cacophony of school reformers, teacher-evaluation discussions, and test scores, have we simply overlooked it? Has school become sanitized from the very emotion that fuels learning? I thought about the teachers my classmates and I talked about at our reunion and those teachers I've been fortunate enough to have in my own educational journey. Yes, there it was, right in the midst of those memories: joy. Before you dismiss this as the overly sentimental journey of an

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aging educator, allow me to continue.

In my own classroom and later as a district leader, I often stayed late, preparing for meetings with colleagues because I knew the joy we'd find in studying together. In those evening hours, I could feel the presence of other educators across the country. I felt a joyful connectedness to them. In graduate school, I wrote out of a sense of joy when I recorded my thoughts—every word mattered to me. I experienced joy when I spoke with others following a conference I attended several weeks ago. I knew joy when a colleague asked me to write the foreword of her new book. I took delight in reading and then writing about it. I found joy with colleagues when we sat around my dining table dreaming about what committed educators do when they connect their minds, hearts, and actions. And I feel uncontainable joy when I step into a classroom and learn alongside teachers and kids.

The dictionary defines joy as "a feeling of great pleasure and happiness." I wonder why it's missing far too often in today's classrooms and schools. I suppose we could find dozens of reasons and a good number of people to blame. But I also wonder why we don't start a joy revolution. Isn't it possible to feel joy and still care about student test performance, teacher-evaluation instruments, and the demands of our curricula? I believe it is. Joy isn't about a carefree life. It is about a deep-felt sense of wonder, of expectation, of delight, of engagement.

In *A Place Called School*, **John Goodlad** asks why joy is missing from our schools. I wonder if our students would list joy if they were to describe their schools and classrooms? Humans are born learners. Learning is enjoyable *and* joy-filled. I think of inspirational moments when I've been inside the classrooms of great teachers. Oh, how I longed to be like them. I was willing to inquire and study and ponder what and how they were teaching because it seemed to bring them such pleasure.

"Has school become sanitized from the very emotion that fuels learning?"

The psychologist **Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi** defines "flow" as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it at even great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it." There's that word "joy" again, tucked inside "enjoyable." There's a message not to miss: "for the sheer sake of doing it." How different school would be if joy fueled each day's experience of learning. Perhaps the key to why so many teachers have left the profession is the joyless space we have created for students and ourselves.

So this school year, let's take time to reflect on the difference joy could make. Let's consider classrooms where everyone is both teacher and learner. Let's dream of places where expertness and smartness grow out of inquiry and talk and wonder. Let's find energy and hope. Let's express joy and name it what it is: a feeling of great pleasure and happiness.

Judy Wallis works as a literacy consultant in the Houston-area schools and nationally. She has been an educator for the past four decades.