

## Consider These Potential Prompts

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Yanjie, who also uses the name Jenny,  
reflects on how her high school self shaped  
her growth in her teaching career.

## Introduction

I sighed and said under my breath, “I’ve already told this story before, do I really have to consider the topic again?”

Recently, in a professional development session at my school, we have been reading *Teaching Critical Thinking* by bell hooks. In one of the chapters, hooks discusses the importance of storytelling in the classroom. I enjoyed reading the chapter—in fact, especially as a math teacher, I pride myself on giving space for students to tell stories in class. At the beginning of every year I invite all my students to tell me their math stories, and throughout the year I facilitate community circles where students can continue telling stories of growth. So when reading the chapter, I thought, *I already know how to do this*.

Because one of the best ways to learn is to learn by doing, our instructional coach decided we should experience the power of storytelling by doing it ourselves. Our instructional coach asked us to consider these potential prompts:

Write about a specific student, class, or event that helps to break down the

danger of a single story.

Why did you become a teacher? Why are you still a teacher?

What was one of the most impactful moments in your teaching experience?

What is the story of your classroom?

What is a belief that guides your teaching and how does it show up in your class?

I was a bit weary of having to tell my teacher story to my colleagues. I said, “I’ve already told this story before.”

If you are a teacher reading this article, I think you can understand why that was my immediate reaction. As teachers, we are constantly asked why we do the job we do. It can’t possibly be for the low pay, endless hours, and tedious paperwork that goes into the job. It’s assumed that we all went into teaching for a different reason, a nobler reason, than the typical getting paid reason that other professions are allowed.

So I’ve been asked these prompts a lot, especially: “Why did you become a teacher?” and “Why are you still a teacher?”

## Why I Originally Became a Teacher

This was the first question I considered when I decided to make teaching my profession in 2019. I had just taught for a year at a private school as an associate teacher and I loved working with my mentor teachers and learning how they connected with students and their work. But looking around at the beautiful, fancy private school I worked at, I felt a sense of injustice. Why did the students at this school get to have multiple 3D printing machines when my high school hadn’t even had enough money for ink for black and white printers?

Teachers can make a difference in any setting, but I wanted to give back to students and communities that look like the one that I grew up in. To teach in

public schools, I had to officially get my teaching certification. So I decided to apply to graduate school to earn a master's degree in education. At the time, I thought that my statement of intent in my application was one that would impress the reader with my mathematical prowess and my principled beliefs in education. First starting with some mathematical prowess:

Mathematics is a field that holds the key for future change makers. It is the gateway to understanding technology and contributing to other innovative fields such as biomedical or environmental research. It is also a misunderstood subject, often seen as unattainable or confounding. I don't think any student is inherently bad at mathematics, they simply have not had the correct tools and methods presented to them in order to be successful. Also, because of the stigma surrounding math, students are often turned off by the subject even before stepping into the classroom.

Then sprinkled in with some principled beliefs:

Reflecting on the huge achievement gap at my high school, I realized that even in the same school, the same level of education is not always guaranteed. Therefore, my goal is to provide students of all backgrounds a high level of education, so that they may all have the same opportunities later in life. Unfortunately, we live in a society that is inherently structured to be inequitable, due to large systems of oppression and other sociopolitical factors. Although education is by no means the only solution to this problem, it can help determine whether a person goes on to have a successful career or ends up in the justice system as another statistic.

Now don't get me wrong, I still hold all of this to be true. But when faced with these prompts then, "Why did you become a teacher?" and "Why are you still a teacher?" I didn't answer it for myself. I answered it to *impress* the admissions committee.

## Challenges to My Reason Why

Since I wrote that statement of intent in 2019, so many things have happened. Not just to me as an educator but to our education system at large. Recently, I was listening to a podcast that described the shutdown and pandemic of 2020 as a

“collective trauma.” Each of us in the education system have our own stories of trauma that we experienced over the last few years. Here’s mine:

In spring of 2020, when schools shut down, I was still doing my student teaching. With horror, I realized that I would have to do my teacher certification work while teaching with this new Zoom thing that our district decided to use. I was grateful that I still had a handful of students who would show up to class, which allowed me to get my certification with a video clip from those early days of online teaching. My graduation took place virtually.

After graduation, I moved to Texas, where to my surprise and dismay, we taught in a hybrid style. My heart ached for my students as I watched them struggle with balancing the threat of a pandemic, their family economic situations, and trying to succeed as high school students. As a first-year teacher in a new state teaching during the pandemic, I didn’t know how to help them; I felt that I was letting down my students on daily basis. I simply didn’t have the tools to help my students when I needed help to just survive the day. When I reached out for help, I was met with busy administrators who were just trying to manage the never-ending influx of new COVID-19 cases. Over time, I got the message that they were just trying to manage their own day-to-day and didn’t have the bandwidth to come and help me with my day-to-day. By November of 2020, about two months after the beginning of the year (we started late in hopes of staving off the worst parts of COVID-19), I began searching for a way out of my teaching situation. I reached out to everyone I knew in education and quickly realized that I would lose my teaching credential if I quit halfway through the year. So I decided to stick with it. With seemingly no way out, I sunk into a deep depression and was diagnosed with general anxiety disorder as I tried to make it through the remaining seven months of the school year.

## Discovering My New Why

Despite all of this self-work I’ve been able to embark on these past few years, I wouldn’t say that I’m back to being my 2019 self. I don’t think that will ever be possible. But more specifically, because of all of the trauma at the beginning of my teaching career, I felt scared to honestly face my “why” once more. I was reluctant

to rediscover my passion for teaching in the form of these potential prompts, in fear that perhaps it wasn't all the way there anymore.

After a long while of thinking, I decided to just be honest with myself. My instructional coach had made it clear that we could share whatever we wanted, so I decided to see what came out in my writing.

The last time I felt compelled to write honestly with myself was during my freshman English literature class in college. At the time, my professor encouraged us to speak about a formative experience that had shaped who we were. He made it very clear that the grade would be based on our honesty and depth in our writing.

I immediately knew what I would write about. But after several drafts and office hour sessions with my professor, I felt unsatisfied. Having to write in past tense, even in first person, felt like I was writing about someone else in the past instead of processing my story in the present. So my professor suggested that I write to myself in second person as a way of discussing my story with myself more directly. Ultimately, the piece I turned in felt authentic to me in a way that helped me continue to process my story.

So during this professional development experience, I knew that I had to have a frank discussion with myself, again in second person. I needed to sit down and talk to myself, for real, like I do with my students. It only seemed right, therefore, to include a greeting to myself. Quickly, I found my writing taking the form of a personal letter:

*Dear Jenny,*

*You didn't go into teaching purely because of your love for math. You didn't even really do it for the mentorship aspect that you first embraced when you tutored your peers in high school. You went into education because you wanted to listen.*

It was overwhelming, like a tide of realization coming to me. I might've gone into teaching for the beauty of mathematics, sure, but the reason I stayed is much deeper than that. This time, when writing to myself, what poured out from me was not my teaching resume or how useful math would be for the real-world. Instead, I reverted to my high school self and thought about the support I had longed for as a

student who had lost her way:

*You wanted to tell somebody, to be listened to. You wanted somebody, anybody, to notice that something was wrong.*

At first, I was hesitant. Is this really why I chose to stay as a teacher? If you haven't figured it out already, dear reader, I am a wordy person. Growing up, my parents always told me that I would have to find a job where I could talk lots because of how chatty I was. But when I really reflected on my true reason for teaching, I thought about my high school student self. It wasn't about all the times I had felt comfortable taking up space as a student, it was about all the times that I had become small in fear that adults wouldn't listen to me or believe me.

I never want my students to feel small the way I had felt all those years ago. So even in the depths of pandemic teaching survival, even when I was lost as a first-year teacher, I always took the time to listen to my students. I always took them seriously and listened so that they would stop feeling small, at least for a few minutes. Even though I constantly felt small during that dark year of teaching, the fact that my students would let me share in their space for a few moments were some of the most comforting moments of my days.

By 2021, I had lost a lot of my passion for teaching. I went to bed before the sun set everyday because I didn't want to feel the sense of loss I had. I kept asking myself the same question: "Why did you become a teacher? and "Why are you still a teacher?" I honestly didn't know the answer anymore, besides the getting paid reason. I was just surviving day to day.

I couldn't imagine continuing to teach while feeling this way. However, in the last couple of years since then, through Knowles and other amazing, supportive educators, I was able to find a job at a different school with supportive administrators and colleagues and get treatment for my anxiety. I have had the ability to take care of myself because of my job's health insurance and because I found my voice to advocate for myself. Even now, I continue to get mental health treatment through therapy as I continue to process these last few years and find my way back as a person and a teacher.



# How My New Why Shows Up in My Teaching

As I continued to write to myself, I thought about the stories that my students have shared with me over the last few years and how they have influenced me to keep walking my path as a teacher. I've been fortunate enough to share my teaching journey with hundreds of students. Though I could probably write a story for each one of them, as I look back, some students resonated with parts of my high school self deeply. I thought about how I first struggled to let myself be human instead of a perfect representation of what others wanted from me. As I grew to accept myself and my identities, I was able to find my voice as a teacher. Ultimately, this means that now I am able to help my students find their voices and listen to them in turn.

Last year, when coming back from the pandemic, I decided that it was important for my students to have a place to share their experiences and identities, especially as so much had shifted during the pandemic for all of us. We started having community circles every other Friday to share our challenges and our triumphs together. In these circles and outside of these circles, I've learned so much about my students and I've also had my assumptions challenged.

## Struggles with Expectations and Perfection

As I sat reflecting on my high school self and the struggles I had with my self-expectations and perfectionism, I was reminded of one of my quietest students in Precalculus this year. She was more meticulous than I had been in high school, always turning in her homework before the school day was even over, complete with work written out and sometimes even questions about parts she got stuck on. As a teacher, having a student like this is incredible. She helped me understand what I had taught well and what needed to be reviewed in class the next day. She never asked the questions that she had written on her homework but quietly wrote out corrections as I explained the answers to the class, often to the relief of many of her classmates. One day in late October, something happened. Her older brother had gotten into some trouble and her mom came to campus to talk to our administration about it. When it was all happening, I had some clue as to what was



going on as I was asked to take over an all-school event at the last minute, while administration talked with her mom. After the event got underway, my first thought was to check in on her. We talked in my classroom: she told me everything that was on her mind and I listened. She told me she felt so helpless, she had been feeling so alone and responsible for her older brother all year since she was the good kid.

Immediately, I thought back to my high school self—I was the good, quiet kid too. I didn't have a brother, sure, but I had the hopes of my entire family on my back as a first-generation immigrant. I thought about what I had wanted when I had had a secret that I couldn't handle on my own anymore:

*You wanted to tell somebody, to be listened to. You wanted somebody, anybody, to notice that something was wrong.*

*Nobody did. Your teachers just thought you got sick, but you still had the same grades and the same behavior; you were still the same perfect straight A student. Your friends thought that you were just happy in a relationship and didn't need them anymore. Even when your parents finally noticed the attendance issues, the school counselor told them "it wasn't much of an issue" because of your good grades.*

So I just listened, I gave her the time to finally talk about everything she had been holding in and to cry it all out. After which, I asked her what she needed from me and we talked about what she could do to take care of herself.

## Finding Myself and My Identities

As a student growing up, I didn't know how to be my authentic self. I felt so scared of letting my teachers or my peers into my reality because of my identities:

*When you were a teenager, life was confusing. You're the only daughter of Chinese Christian immigrant parents, who hold traditional values, who took a risk going to the foreign land of Berkeley, California, to build a better life for you. But that means your parents were scared of the foreign land. You wanted to have the same freedom as your peers, you wanted to hang out after school and go to the ice cream store, you wanted to be able to bike to school with your friends instead of getting dropped off by your parents. In fact, your parents didn't even show you*

*how to use the house key until eighth grade because it was unnecessary. You wanted a different life, you wanted to be like your Berkeleyan friends.*

As I wrote this, I thought about all the identities that my students hold and how I relate to them in my own work. Immediately, one student came to mind.

Despite the general success of my community circles in my various classes, I had a student who chose not to share in any of our circles. She would hold the talking piece and think deeply each time but would pass the piece without speaking out loud. I admit, I was giving up hope for her ever sharing out loud with us.

It wasn't until one community circle time when we talked about our identities and how they related to the math classroom that she finally decided to share. What she poured forth were the struggles that she had had with her mental health the whole school year, and which had been affecting her for the entire pandemic.

She felt out of place at school because she felt she didn't fit into a particular group. She also identified as part of the LGBTQ community, an identity which she had suppressed the past few years because her parents had made it clear throughout her childhood that they wouldn't accept her being a part of that community. Our class community circle listened to her pour this out to us. We gave her the space to talk about her identities that she otherwise didn't feel comfortable sharing. And although at that moment we couldn't give her everything she needed, she ended up getting mental health counseling later that school year because she started to open up.

I smiled to myself as I thought about this student. Because she had made her needs known to her parents and found some mental health support, she thrived the following year as a senior. She found a group of friends that she was excited about, one of whom is planning on attending the same college as her, and she did well in Advanced Placement Calculus as she was finally able to stay awake in class and find some motivation to work hard.

As I thought about her, I realized why it took some time for her to open up. She had created a mold of herself so perfect that nobody had noticed that she needed

help ■ I again thought about my high school self. I had worked so hard to try to fit

into a mold as well, so much so that I didn't even realize when I began to slip. Even worse, I had done such a good job fitting into the mold that nobody even realized that I was screaming for help:

*You felt yourself turning into everything you had been raised not to be—a liar, a cheater, and a sinner. You lost everyone close to you, including yourself. You wanted to tell somebody, to be listened to. You wanted somebody, anybody, to notice that something was wrong.*

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## Finding My Voice

Again, I thought about how voiceless I had been in high school. I smiled as I was reminded of one of my loudest students this year, who absolutely loved sharing in the class community circle. At first, I was weary of sharing my space with her because of the amount of auditory space she already took up. One community circle time, after a difficult group task, the students groaned as I said we would be talking about appreciation and gratitude. They weren't feeling particularly grateful or appreciative at that moment because of how difficult the task had been for them to complete. I started by asking students to reflect on when they had felt appreciated in math class or why they had never felt that way.

Quickly, I became disappointed as each student shared how they never really felt appreciated in my math class or any other math class they had ever been a part of. Once everyone had shared, my loudest student said, "Well, I appreciate all of you" and began to list something she appreciated about every single student in the class. Soon, everyone was going around listing things that they appreciated about their classmates and hugging and crying with each other. Even the toughest

looking kid who never smiled and for some reason enjoyed wearing sunglasses in class, pulled off his sunglasses and shared how much his “bros” meant to him. I was speechless. Never had I seen a group of people, much less students, let their guards down and be so vulnerable with each other. When it came time for me to appreciate someone, I told that student how much I appreciated her. I realized that I had misunderstood her loudness: she was loud because she knew that many of her classmates needed someone else to take up space and be vulnerable first, just like how I had needed it when I was in high school. When I shared this, she burst into tears and we all shared a good cry and hug. After that class, one student told me, “I think we feel closer as a class now Miss. We should do more community circles.” I agreed with her.

## Listening to Student Voices

At the end of the letter to myself, after much reflection about my past and present selves and how they affect my teaching, I finally answered the prompt:

*So here we are now. Sometimes, you still have a hard time asking for help.*

*Sometimes, you still hold on to the want of being the perfect straight-A student.*

*Sometimes, you find yourself pushing others away again.*

*But working with students reminds you that there is nothing wrong with asking for help. There is nothing wrong with making mistakes. There is nothing wrong with reaching out. Practice what you preach, Jenny.*

*So why did you become a teacher? What are your beliefs? To listen. To believe in students. To always check in. To never assume. To always ask. Maybe things would've been different.*

I realized teaching has been about myself as much as it has been about my students. I have become a teacher who is authentic to myself, a quality that I'm proud of. Teachers are often told to think of our students instead of ourselves and in general, of course, students should be our focus. But if we can not be our own authentic selves in our teaching practice, how can we expect students to bring their authentic selves to school?

And so, it is in my own authenticity that I've been able to listen to my students deeply. What I mean is not just listening to their words, but connecting with

students on a personal level and relating to them in their situations. Depth of listening doesn't come from quantity, but from quality. Sometimes this means having a quick chat in the morning, sometimes it means referring students to our school psychologist when they share problems beyond the scope of my work. Sometimes it comes in the form of a disruptive outburst during whole class instruction or group work.

One day this year, one of my students, who usually quickly got to work, put her head down and refused to work. Instead of pushing her, I told her she had two choices, do the work or step outside and share with me what was wrong. She agreed to chat with me in the hallway. Admittedly, I started the conversation annoyed that I had to take time to chat with her. But I knew I had to listen. She shared about her difficulties at home and with her relationship. I was able to help refer her to the help she needed for her home life and work with her to figure out how to navigate the next steps in her relationship. Students are human like all of us. Once we worked through what was on her mind, she worked on her class work without any trouble.

Sometimes, listening has meant understanding non-verbal cues from my students. This year, I had a student who would just shut down whenever he was overwhelmed by the noise or movement in the classroom. Instead of forcing him to re-engage with the class, I would just sit with him, tell him how much time he had before the next activity and wait for him to come back. After a while, he would come back for the next activity, sometimes even a bit before if he was feeling up to it. Later in the day, I would find him and tell him what he missed. He was always open to listening to me because I had listened to him.

## Conclusion

The last few years as a teacher have been difficult. It's been difficult for every educator, but I'm proud that I've stuck to it and become the teacher that I needed as a student. I'm glad that I've realized my role in my job. I'm still a math teacher and I still love instilling a passion for math in my students. But more than that, I love that I have been able to listen to my students, to help my students and myself process our collective trauma.

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Some days are still hard. The radical empathy that listening entails is tiring. To me, listening is more than just putting myself in someone else's shoes, it's walking the path with them. Each student is on their own journey, much like my own, and I am honored to be a part of each of them.

Days can be long when going on these journeys with my students. It can be difficult to set aside a job that involves such a deep connection with my students and with myself. Even now, especially at the end of those long days, I still ask myself, *Why did you become a teacher?* and *Why are you still a teacher?* The difference now is that I'm not scared of my answer anymore. I am willing to look deep into myself and search for my reason why. I know that I have to be honest with myself to be the best teacher I can be for my students. They deserve that, and I deserve that too.

## CITATION

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