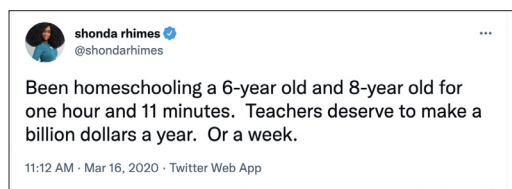


# Takes One to Teach One: Embracing Your Inner Genius

CINDY O'DONNELL-ALLEN ■ MOLLY ROBBINS

When is the last time you heard someone call a teacher a genius? Shonda Rhimes came *this close* when the world shut down in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She tweeted the following: “Been homeschooling a 6-year old and 8-year old for one hour and 11 minutes. Teachers deserve to make a billion dollars a year. Or a week.”



But we all know what happened next. In July of the same year, the White House formally designated teachers as “essential workers” and demanded the reopening of schools (Will, 2020). At a subsequent White House press conference, then press secretary Kayleigh McEnany described schools as “places of business” comparable to meatpacking plants and medical facilities. Warring images emerged in the media. A quick Google image search that we did while writing this column, using the term “school reopenings,” revealed signs with disparate messages, including “SCHOOLS NOT SCREENS!,” “NO INSIDE SCHOOL UNTIL IT’S SAFE,” and “I CAN’T TEACH FROM A CASKET.” Then came demands for anti-masking, then anti-CRT legislation, then surveilling of classroom libraries, and here we are.

Suffice it to say that another Google image search we did while writing this column revealed zero signage proclaiming that “TEACHERS ARE GENIUSES!,” though it did turn up a “Teachers Pay Teachers” blogpost entitled “10 Reasons Teachers Are Awesome” that includes messages like

“TEACHERS ARE SMART,” and “they do things with a laminator that are out of this world!” (Samantha, n.d.).

According to Gholdy Muhammad, however, the identity of teacher as genius isn’t far-fetched. In fact, in the introduction of *Cultivating Genius*, she argues, “If teachers do not recognize their own genius, they need to be striving each day for it. Mediocrity is not an option” (p. 15). She points out that identity, by nature, is fluid and multilayered, being “composed of notions of who we are, who others say we are (in both positive and negative ways), and whom we desire to be” (p. 67). If Gholdy Muhammad believes that genius is a legitimate teacher identity, far be it from us to disagree!

Thus, we challenge you to consider these questions along with us throughout this journal year: *What would it take for us as teachers to take on the identity of genius as a matter of course? What practices might help us enact this identity? What would have to change in ourselves, our own classrooms, our schools, and the profession?*

To explore these questions, we’ve chosen to call this column “Genius Moves” for a couple of reasons. The first is that in each column, we will refer to specific, practical mindsets and practices you and your colleagues can take to surface, foster, and enact your inherent genius; you can think of these as Genius Moves in a noun sense. Second, we also want you to think of “move” in a verb sense. That is, the mindsets and practices we’ll be exploring can help you “move genius” (yours and your students’) out into the world. At the end of this and future columns, you’ll also find a link to a time-friendly “micro-practice” (Magee) that you can use to integrate the genius moves at hand into your daily life.

mediocrity

In short, we're taking Gholdy Muhammad's admonition that "[to] teach geniuses . . . charges teachers to cultivate their own genius that lies within them" (p. 14).

## Genius Move #1: Embracing the Mindset of Sustainable Teaching

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In reference to youth in Black communities, Muhammad describes genius as "the brilliance, intellect, ability, cleverness, and artistry that have been flowing through their minds and spirits across the generations" (p. 13). If we extrapolate this definition to teachers, that means we are also expected to be brilliant, clever, artist-intellectuals. This is a tall order indeed.

You wouldn't be faulted for thinking that it also sounds like a recipe for exhaustion. According to Steiner and Woo (2021), the 2021 State of the U.S. Teacher Survey revealed that exhaustion is but one of several familiar items on the list of reasons teachers have left, or have contemplated leaving, the profession in droves since the pandemic began. The survey authors even coined the term "pandemic leavers" to describe the 25% of teachers considering resignation or retirement by the end of the school year (Steiner & Woo). A different survey in January 2022 found that close to 50% of the teachers participating reported that they had considered leaving the profession in the last 30 days (Modan). But by virtue of the fact that you're reading this column, we're going to make the assumption that in this present moment, you still love the profession deep down enough that you have decided to stay. So how do you reconcile Muhammad's challenge to be a genius with the everyday exhaustion brought on by teaching?

That question brings us to Genius Move #1, which will inform all the Genius Moves we will share with you from this issue forward. This move asks you to embrace the mindset associated with a grassroots theory called "sustainable teaching" (ST). Since 2017, we've collaborated with other educators to develop the theory, which is in constant refinement as new teaching conditions unfold. Currently, we define *sustainable teaching* as

the process of fostering self-compassion and renewal in educators who support the growth and development of students in turn. Sustainable teaching puts *educators first*, with the goal of creating an inclusive, collaborative community. Animated by a commitment to equity, advocacy, and hope, sustainable teaching offers an integrated approach to education where all participants can thrive.

This overarching definition frames several additional ST components that we'll unpack over the course of our next columns, but if you want a preview, you can read about them on the Colorado State University Writing Project website: <https://tinyurl.com/342sz88z>. In the meantime, we'd like to point out some features in the definition that align well with Gholdy Muhammad's expectations.

The first is that *teachers are models*, a role we imagine you're already comfortable with because you model the language arts with your students every day. Referring to the ST definition above, however, how often do students also see you modeling "self-compassion and renewal"? This begs the question, how often do you allow *yourself* to actually engage in these two practices? You'll notice that we italicize the words "educators first" in the ST definition. We do this on purpose because it's the lynchpin of the theory and because it tends to be so hard for us as teachers to wrap our heads around.

After all, teachers wouldn't enter the profession in the first place if they didn't have a bias toward service. However, of the many synonyms listed for "service" on thesaurus.com, "self-effacement" is not among them; nor is "selfishness" listed as an antonym. On this count, we find the self-described "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet" Audre Lorde's observation to be instructive when she wrote, "Overextending myself is not stretching myself. I had to accept how difficult it is to monitor the difference. . . . Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (epilogue). As you consider Lorde's thoughts on self-compassion, we discourage you from trotting out the timeworn oxygen-mask metaphor; instead, observe the profound importance she accords to self-compassion as a mindset that enables social action rather than a one-and-done bubble bath.

The second thing we'd like to point out in the ST definition is that ST is *enacted in community*. During ST professional development workshops, participants embody self-compassion together through practices that allow us to slow down and listen to our inner wisdom, such as breathwork, gentle movement, guided meditations, exploratory writing and sharing, poetry reading, and accessible art-making. While many of these practices are linked to mindfulness work, we like to say that ST is about "more than mindfulness," partially because Westernized renditions of mindfulness often privilege the individual.

To be sure, the mindset and methods of ST shore up the individual stores of energy we need to withstand the daily challenges of teaching. At the same time, however, they also equip us to "keep growing and rowing" with

colleagues, as Rhonda Magee puts it in *The Inner Work of Racial Justice: Healing Ourselves and Transforming Our Communities through Mindfulness* (p. 8). A law professor, social activist, and mindfulness practitioner, Magee insists that dismantling racial inequities entails both self-work and solidarity with others who share a similar commitment; in her view, “[working] toward justice for all” requires “grounded, public-facing, radical compassion—the kind that touches everyone and all things, leaving no one and nothing out” (p. 8).

Toward this end, the final thing we’d like for you to notice is that the ST definition centers *equity-based teaching*. As white, cisgender teachers, we are intent on acting as co-conspirators with colleagues from underrepresented populations. Along with these colleagues, we share the experience that engaging in equity work can exhaust us to the point of burnout. But the language of the ST definition and its elaborated components, along with ST practices like those mentioned above, have helped all of us build our capacity to stay the course as we work with one another and our students to heed the call toward justice.

In sum, we hope you’ll see embracing sustainable teaching as the ultimate Genius Move because it aligns with the goal of building schools that are grounded in the humanity of all people who walk through the doors, teachers included.

## Genius Move #2: Disrupting the Myth of Martyrdom

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This Genius Move focuses on changing the prevailing narrative that teachers must martyr themselves to allow for growth in their students. The ubiquitous goal for “work-life balance” has only deepened the myth. When we hear the teachers we work with in ST professional development use this term, and we ask why it’s a desirable goal, they often voice a need to get back in touch with themselves or to create more simplicity in their lives so they don’t lose themselves in the profession. We’d be hypocritical if we didn’t admit that we also sometimes feel lured by the siren call that says in order to be dedicated educators, we must give up our personal lives.

This norm goes all the way back to the one-room schoolhouse era when the teaching population was made up primarily of young, unmarried women who were expected to devote themselves fully to

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their young charges (Goldstein). Despite the fact that teaching demographics have changed since that era, the expectation of intense self-sacrifice remains. In fact, in the “10 Reasons Teachers Are Awesome” blogpost we mentioned earlier, item number three is that “TEACHERS ARE SELFLESS.” The caption reads, “On weekends, they’re lesson planning and grading. They spend money out of their own pockets to benefit the kiddos.” Unsurprisingly, there is zero acknowledgement in the blogpost that teachers deserve to enjoy rich lives with family and friends and to thrive outside of school. If you refer back to the ST definition in Genius Move #1, however, you’ll see that thriving in our professional *and* personal lives should be more than a pipe dream.

Poet David Whyte, in his book *The Three Marriages: Reimagining Work, Self and Relationship*, argues that work–life balance is actually a false equation that requires us to “quantify different parts of life and then set them against one another,” with the result being that one side (usually “life”) gets the shaft (p. 11). Instead, he argues for a focus on an *integration*, or “conversation,” among the three essential commitments all humans hold, which are to our work, ourselves, and our relationships with others. Whyte states,

Work–life balance is a concept that has us simply lashing ourselves on the back and working too hard in each of the three commitments. In the ensuing exhaustion we ultimately give up on one or more of them to gain an easier life.

. . . we should give up the attempt to *balance* [one commitment] against another, of, for instance, taking away from work to give more time to a partner, or vice versa, and start thinking of each [commitment] *conversing* with, questioning or emboldening the other two” (p. 11).

What, just give up? The teachers we know aren’t quitters, so they often resolve to just “work smarter, not harder” at . . . everything. Whyte cautions, however, that this approach only “[weakens] each commitment by separating them from one another” (p. 344). Instead, he advises identifying the conversational thread—that is, the set of values you hold most dear—that binds your work, your interior self, and your personal relationships together. By paying attention to this conversation, these values will “call us out,” so to speak, when we’re turning our backs on one of the conversational partners.

## Genius Move #3: Implementing Your Core Values

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With practice, following Whyte's advice can change everything because we no longer see ourselves as not paying enough attention to our work *or* our relationships *or* ourselves. Rather, when we feel the dreaded pinch of guilt, we can ask, "What's off in this conversation? Which conversational partner isn't being true to my cherished values? How can I bring them back into right relationship with one another?" Then we use those answers to recalibrate.

So what does this look like in practical terms? The first step is to get clear about what your core values actually are. You can find several values inventories online that will help you do this, but our favorites are Elena Aguilar's list of core values (available here: <https://tinyurl.com/4e8e245r>) and Brené Brown's "Dare to Lead List of Values" (available here: <https://tinyurl.com/yp6zra3k>). Both provide instructions for narrowing your values down to a manageable list; Aguilar suggests three, and Brown suggests two.

We've also designed a time-friendly daily practice called the "Sustainable Teaching Integration Exploration" that combines all three of the above Genius Moves (see Fig. 1). You can find it here: <https://tinyurl.com/3edskxpb>.

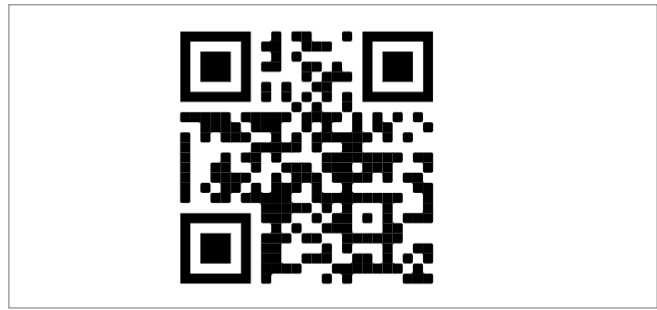
We look forward to exploring more Genius Moves in the next issue, where we'll feature literacy practices *you* can use to keep sustaining your teaching. In the meantime, we close with this call to action from Ghouldy Muhammad: "We need teachers who are on the front lines modeling, guiding students, participating, and doing what we ask of students. Teachers must ask if they will be transformed by the learning as they expect and want students to be transformed" (p. 78).

Sounds like it's time to go get your genius on.

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**Figure 1.** This QR code can be used to access our Sustainable Teaching Integration Exploration daily practice.

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## Early Career Educator of Color Leadership Award 2022

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This award supports early career teachers of color as they build accomplished teaching careers in literacy education. Participants are practicing pre-K through university-level literacy educators of color who are in the first five years of a paid teaching career and who aspire to build a career in literacy education. They receive two years of mentor support, the opportunity to present or co-present at the NCTE Annual Convention in year two of the program, opportunities to collaborate with NCTE leaders, a plaque to recognize their participation, and funding to attend the summer institute in year one and the Annual Convention in year two.

The six members of the cohort are listed below:

Adedoyin Ogunfeyimi, University of Pittsburgh, Bradford, PA  
N'Kengé Robertson, Detroit International Academy, Detroit, MI  
Hiawatha Smith, University of Wisconsin-River Falls  
Kim Tate, International Prep Academy, Champaign, IL  
Karen Tellez-Trujillo, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, CA  
Curtis Wu, Prospect Hill Academy, Cambridge, MA

Learn more on our website: <https://ncte.org/awards/ncte-early-career-educator-teacher-of-color-leadership-award/>