

“The academy is not a paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The Classroom, with all of its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.”

- bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*

Do we all share a common theory of action or a common philosophy about teaching and learning? I wonder. Do we all believe that we need to educate our urban youth to view education as – to use bell hook’s phrase “the practice of freedom”? What does that mean and what would that practice look like and sound like in our newly formed small urban high schools?

For the last three years I have been an external coach in schools and school districts engaged in a variety of transformational initiatives mostly in urban areas and mostly in high schools. The Gates High School Transformation initiative in urban areas stresses personalization and establishment of relationships in small schools and small classrooms. Given the opportunity to create a

new paradigm of teaching and learning, I have been disheartened when I have visited newly established small urban high schools. More often than not I have observed not the practice of freedom but the practice of continued domination and control of the students by the adults. The discipline that I have observed is a discipline that grows out of oppression-external control of those with power (adults) over those who ostensibly have no power (the high school students). Something is amiss here. This oppressive discipline is metered out to students by mainstream and non-mainstream educators alike.

Very few adult educators in urban educational settings seem to know how to transform the behavior and will of those students least served by the education system without resorting to external control and discipline. This knowing how to teach to transform does not occur over night rather it is a journey you take over time as a teacher. It is a journey informed and shaped by an unshakable belief in the humanity and dignity of each urban high school student. It is a journey that requires that we as adults suspend and examine our previously held assumptions and expectations about students who are “other” than ourselves because of their racial or national heritage, historical oppression, or their socioeconomic status. Your job, should you decide to accept it, is to touch the spirit and the humanness

of each urban teenager and channel that spirit to engage in positive ways with learning and academic excellence. The challenge is to engage the urban student in meaningful curriculum and learning experiences that center him or her and help him or her make sense of his or her current condition in life. The content and the process of education should enlighten the learner to see how to shape another reality, through receiving an education, without compromising what he or she value as members of the non-dominant culture whether that culture be Haitian, Vietnamese, African, Caribbean, or Latino.

As a teacher of English in urban high schools for many years, I found that my ability to reach and work with urban teenagers disengaged from the educational process depended on developing relationships with them. Getting to know my students as unique individuals was one of the many joys of teaching. Using what I gained from getting to know each one of my students well helped me to develop a lot of strategies that helped me in my journey to empower them to become more authentic learners. In order to get to know each one of my students well it became essential that I co-construct with the student a sense of community. In our learning community the notion that we could learn from each other and the notion that we all brought our strengths and weaknesses to our community was

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NSRF Mission Statement

The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone.

CONNECTIONS

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The Practice of Freedom

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established early on in the school year. This became the foundation for all of our learning.

Crucial to developing a sense of community in my English classroom or in my advisory was the power of the circle. We become a community when we sit in a circle breaking the hierarchy of desks and rows; who is sitting in the back or the front of the room is no longer an issue. In our circle we are all facing one another and we are all equal. We began to view the circle as a necessary format and platform for the establishment of an emotionally safe and nurturing climate. In our discussions we talked a lot about metacognition. We regularly debriefed and evaluated our learning performances and our learning together. We learned to ask questions of ourselves, each other and the curriculum. Often those questions were similar to the ones used by Debbie Meier and the Central Park East learning environment. For Whom is this important? Who benefits? And on the metacognitive level we asked: How will I know when I know? It was also crucial that my students learn how to give me feedback about my performances and interactions with them.

Early on I figured out that professional learning communities were not only valuable communities to establish with other educators, I also needed to establish a reciprocal learning community in my classroom before I could engage urban youth most of whom were reluctant readers and reluctant learners. My students and I established rituals and routines that we used when we needed to establish, maintain and expand our learning community. In order for me to engage each student in learning, I had to help him or her find his or her voice in a supportive community focused on learning. In each learning situation we struggled with how we were going to treat each other and how we each wanted to be treated. We took time to resolve conflicts and learn from each conflict.

My students taught me how to

challenge the genius within each one of them. They taught me how to channel their oftentimes negative energy into the positive energy we used to advance our learning community. Students began to not want to miss class because they felt their presence to be an integral part of the learning environment. Students did not want to be late to class because something that mattered to them was going to occur. Students wanted to develop their genius. I taught myself and them how to ask essential questions, probing questions. We grappled with formulating high order thinking questions and used those questions to engage in Socratic Seminars, to do text based discussions, construct projects, and explore the world of possibilities and develop action plans for learning and for expanding our horizons.

I expected to find an expansion of horizons in the new schools I visited, but lately I have been disheartened by the practices of discipline used by educators who have all the resources and opportunities to change their relationships with urban youth. Whether or not these educators are aware of it, they are practicing a discipline that grows out of oppression. The discipline is top down discipline; handed down discipline not the co-constructed discipline that helps to instill in each participant in the learning community the will to choose to do the right thing. Instead, there seems to be an assumption operating that “these” kids can’t handle democratic participation.

My urban high school students and I figured out how to craft a mutually respectful learning community that respected our differences, did not shy away from disagreements and confronted issues. The journeys and the co-construction of learning and discipline practices were not always easy. Often I was confronted with the harsh realities of their lives, or I was confronted with the harsh reality that I had said or done something that was not perceived by a student or students as the right thing. But it was through open, honest

dialogue that we became a community of learners willing to take on and try to resolve our conflicts and disagreements with each other that then connected to our willingness to take on rigorous standards based academic challenges.

This journey is not for the faint of heart. But if we truly want to teach those for whom the current public system has not served, we must go to the places of discomfort. I realized in my journey with urban teens that it is possible to take the most hostile, belligerent, recalcitrant teen, and by giving individuals a voice, by teaching them how to speak their truth without fear of put-downs, ridicule, or retribution we could grow together as learners. That was the most important lesson for me as an educator of urban youth. I had to learn with their help and permission how to transform them from teens who would set fires in the bathrooms to teens who would use education as a means, a tool to confront, address and resolve their issues using nonviolent means.

So where does this leave us as we transform large urban high schools into autonomous small high schools? It leaves us with a choice. Either we unconsciously replicate school as we now know it to be, or we consciously take on the challenge and together with our students co-construct “the paradise” of possibilities in a small school in small classrooms where the teachers, parents, communities, and the students mutually thrive. The academy, the small school and the classrooms can be the places of paradise where learning is the practice of freedom and possibilities if we as adults are willing to take the individual and collective journeys with our students to forge a different reality of teaching and learning.

I refer to the discipline as an individual choice to do the right thing for the sake of the whole and for the sake of the individual learner developing as a critical thinker. ■

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