

It is like the day before Christmas to me – I can't sleep the night before the first day of school. I wake up with the same anticipation I did when I was seven and would run down the stairs to see what Santa had left for me under the tree. The same feelings of anticipation exist when I think about meeting my students for the first time. I am excited to bring them the gift of learning about art. I bubble with glee at the prospect of discovering new young talent and helping my students appreciate the aesthetics of art.

In August 2002 that anticipation was quickly squashed. I walked into first period and was met by 35 pairs of eyes – staring at me not with anticipation but with skepticism and doubt. In the back of the room one pair of brown eyes came piercing through, almost challenging me to reach him. He sat with a group of young men that looked just like him at the table in the far back corner of the room. I smiled and tried to put on an unfettered expression, but I knew this was going to be a tough crowd.

I called roll and quickly realized the eyes in the back of the room belonged to Edgar, a sophomore. I knew the activities I had planned for the day were useless. If I didn't make a connection with Edgar and the others quickly, I would never make that connection. It would be a long year.

My mind was racing a mile-a-minute and, faster than I can type the following paragraph, it all went through my mind. I thought about John Dewey (1938) and his philosophy of experience and education, specifically, "the belief that all genuine education comes about through experience." I had also recently received a book as a gift and in it one of the teachers talks about her philosophy of "teaching as caring" (Valenzuela, 1999). As a Critical Friends Group (CFG) Coach

and National Facilitator of new CFG Coaches training, I knew that one of the keys to building a successful learning community was establishing relationships. How do we do that in CFG training? One way is to start by using team builders to learn about each other. I had the knowledge. I had the toys.

I took the students outside to the hallway by the gym and we made a large circle. We did the group juggle.



Edgar

While tossing the toys and learning names, we laughed. Everyone participated, yet some like Edgar not very enthusiastically. When we had had enough at 8:00am, we came in and debriefed. The students made immediate connections to their lives and to their multiple roles as teenagers. Many students talked about being a good student, football player, band member, son or daughter, and some on even being employees – all the different roles they have and all the people they have to answer to. The discovery was that they have precious little time for themselves. I noticed during all of this Edgar was silent but attentive.

That night I wrote in my journal

about that class and those brown eyes in the back of the room that challenged me to throw out my normal first day agenda and get to know him.

The next morning we started the boring beginning of school routines: class syllabus, safety in the classroom, and the vocabulary of art. The students who love school were with me. Edgar was being passively attentive, those eyes still looking and waiting. I needed

to continue what I had started the day before. Again, we all tracked out to the hallway by the gym and I had just one ball this time. I had the students participate in warp speed. As the day before, everyone, even Edgar, participated but not all enthusiastically. I kept pushing the group to get a faster time. I was relentless and would not let them settle for quitting. Just as I was about to give up on the group, Edgar stepped up and gave a brilliant suggestion on how to rearrange for the class to achieve a faster speed. His tablemates listened, but no one else did. The traditional high school leaders were in control. Edgar was quiet, but then after two more rounds of disappointing times, He again offered his suggestion. This time he was more forceful and physically

moved to the center of the group. This time the group, desperate for a solution, heard him and made the necessary changes. The group was successful.

At first, during the debriefing of the activity centered on complaints, such as "It was too hot" or "This is not appropriate for art class." I listened and then reflected on what I saw happening during the game and how not all voices were heard or equally valued. I asked the group to state who they thought were the leaders, the innovators and the followers. The conversation took on a whole new dimension and was productive. The class talked about Edgar and his suggestion and how if he had not tried again to be heard, the whole group

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would have failed.

The bell rang and as all the students left I pulled Edgar aside and told him, “You made a big mistake today – I now know how smart you are and what a good leader you can be.” I winked and he smiled and left.

As an art teacher I have worked hard to build-in opportunities to learn more about my students. I move about the room critiquing artwork and giving technique suggestions. I am constantly struggling though to provide each student with individual instruction and personal time in classes that have 35 students. I try during these one-on-one times to learn more about each student and allow space for them to learn about themselves and their strengths and others and their strengths. Edgar, during the 18-week course, became a leader. Sometimes young Hispanic males fall prey to the stereotype that doing well in school is not “cool.” Edgar became a positive example that doing well in class, both academically and artistically, does not diminish your “coolness.” During class we talked and learned more about each other. We found out we had more in common than either of us would have thought. We shared our family experiences, our experiences in school and even our similar religious beliefs and values. He began to exceed expectations rather than just meet them in my art class and in all aspects of his life. For example the state curriculum specifies in a beginning art class the students will have studio experiences in both 2-D and 3-D art production. The sculpture project has proved to be very challenging to most of my students, even students who had previously done well in the class. Edgar, however, immediately understood the 2-D and 3-D concepts and was quickly producing structurally sound and very artistic pieces. At the same time, he noticed he was one of the few. He therefore would spend half the class working on his project

and the other half helping others and teaching them. His grade in class was in the top 10% of all my students and his quiet leadership led me to believe he could be an asset to the art program at our school.

My experiences with Edgar led me to recommend him for the National Art Honor Society. He joined and has

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been an active member for the past three years. In his second year at Eagle High School, he was invited to join the Science National Honor Society and has been an active member in that organization for the past two years. He made a critical choice that semester to focus on learning, a choice he continues to make.

I believe I had a small role to play in spurring Edgar's decision. I also made a mindful choice that semester: to focus on understanding the students in front of me and build relationships with them. I was especially determined to meet the challenge of the pair of brown eyes in the back of the room. The interaction I had with Edgar has made me look at my practice differently. Sergioivanni (2001) states, “Teachers analyze different situations and monitor how situations change as practice unfolds. They craft strategies that combine action with thinking”(p. 253). I still keep a journal and reflect on my teaching practice. I can't say I have found the holy grail for all teachers, but what I have discovered in really looking at the needs of my students, working on building relationships with my

students and continually reflecting on my and their thoughts and actions helps me to be a better teacher tuned to my students' needs. I do get complaints all the time from past and current students, “Why didn't we get to do that?” or “Why aren't we doing what my sister did?” My answer is always, “I don't have the same students as last year or when your sister took my class; why would I teach the same way or the same thing?” Over the past 12 years, teaching strategies, classroom management strategies and various standardized tests have come and gone. Through all of this change, I have maintained the students at the center of my teaching. Striving to be remembered as a teacher, who cared for them, laughed with them, and taught them something about themselves that they didn't even know has always been my passion.

Edgar is now a senior and has enlisted in the United States Marines Corps. Recently, Edgar and I spent some time after school talking about those first days in art class. Edgar talks about how I saw something in him beyond the façade he felt he was compelled to wear as a Mexican-American teenage male. He continued with how all his friends have since dropped out of school or are barely passing, remarking how that could have been him. He laughs and comments that he doesn't understand how they can throw away their lives – he pauses, then reflects and remembers – “I almost did.” ■

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