



Tutoring Down the Rabbit Hole

The Inner-City Classroom, and What I Found There

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Abstract: When it comes to educating inner-city students, we, as teachers, are obligated to consider their lives holistically. Urban students should feel empowered by the knowledge presented in the classroom, rather than intimidated by its inaccessibility to their own personal experiences. In order to provide a fair education that reflects our students, and yet equips them with the knowledge they will require to succeed beyond the streets, we need to accept and embrace their unique urban culture and integrate it into the classroom by creating a sense of validation and community. This study follows one teacher's experience in an inner-city middle school classroom, suggesting a method of active learning to engage these students, whose lives beyond the classroom are an altogether invaluable source of education in action.

Prior to fulfilling the tutoring requirement for Dimensions of Secondary Education, my only experience with Providence inner city schools was limited to driving past them, feeling awed by their size and intimidated by the volume of students I had often witnessed spilling into the street. While I had worked with Providence students on a smaller scale at the Met (an alternative high school containing many minicampuses with intimate class sizes and a lax atmosphere), the encounter was wholly unique and not at all representative of the public school system. The Met students embraced and reflected their school's creative philosophy, and genuinely enjoyed the educational experience. Basing my judgment of the public school system strictly on hear-

say and what I had observed from behind the wheel, I was terrified to begin tutoring *those* kids—the ones with heavy bass blaring from their cars, with stony stares and baggy clothes—kids half my age who had already lived through and seen more in life than I would ever have to.

Initially, I was afraid of everything. I was terrified of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, of overstepping my bounds or—worse—circumventing them entirely. I saw myself as the Bumbling White Girl awash in a lively sea of students whose faces and experiences did not reflect my own, struggling to maintain a transparently politically-correct vocabulary. Most of all, I was afraid of being “outnumbered.”

I entered the situation preoccupied

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with my own anxiety without considering the converse: what I had perceived as my “minority status,” the students understood as a lack of representation, their own faces and experiences not reflected in the faculty (Takaki 18). I was afraid of validating my xenophobia simply by acknowledging it, unaware that awareness is the first, and most crucial, step toward dismantling prejudice. This assignment forced me to counter my apprehensions and habitual preconceptions with reality. From the first time I walked into the classroom at Nathaniel Greene Middle School, an exhilarating combination of acceptance, confidence and symbiotic enthusiasm overwhelmed any trepidation.

I worked in a seventh and eighth grade Special Education classroom with a literacy focus. The students did not have profound disabilities, and most demonstrated no other disability than requiring a more active education than they had previously received. These were not your desk-bound, worksheet-educated kids. While their reading levels were significantly below grade (the teacher copied most of the worksheets from third- to sixth-grade level workbooks), the students demonstrated keen interpersonal skills, far superior to any suburban students (or adults, for that matter) I had observed. They seemed at their most insightful and engaged when they interacted as a whole class, in a sort of pinball method: the teacher introduces an idea, and each student takes what he or she can from it and adds his or her own spin before another student latches on, and so forth.

During these occasions, the students’ enthusiasm would reach peaks of absolute flow; if unguided, however, chaos tended to reign. The teacher proactively sought to avoid these outbursts, apparently anticipating insubordination, and would punish the students by forcing them to work independently on worksheets. But often the nearly comical cycle would begin again when a student would ask a question, en-

gaging the whole class once more—before meeting, inevitably, with punishment.

The students were frequently chastised in this manner. It’s not my intention to slander Mrs. Smith¹ or offend with any personal attack. I believe Mrs. Smith felt exasperated by the incompatibility of her square-peg students and her round-hole curriculum and felt jaded by, and in some ways responsible for, their failure. After class, she would frequently tell me that these students were impossible to teach and that her job had become more like babysitting. She seemed threatened by their enthusiasm, and on my very first day, actually told them with exasperation, “You are *never* going to make it to ninth grade! I don’t even know how you got *this* far! You’ll be lucky to even *see* high school.”

Now, I hated school. I felt alienated by its social hierarchy and academic demands, preferring to concentrate on what I enjoyed, and try to scrape by as best as I could on what subjects remained (and there were *plenty*). I knew I had to go to college, but I wasn’t sure if my interests and skills lent themselves to any career potential. I liked reading, I liked writing, but from elementary school on up I was deemed lazy, unmotivated, and distracted in every other subject, and had even served some time in Special Education (an experience that seemed to have little to do with either). I was very much like the students I was working with who were receiving similar threats and “advice” about higher education.

When I finally struggled through senior year, we were all required to meet with our guidance counselors individually to discuss our post-school options and begin the arduous application process. I had missed my scheduled time and ended up sharing an appointment with an A-track student ranked third in our class. My counselor saw this as an opportunity to contrast

¹ Actual name not used.

our academic careers, pointing out that she had her pick of any college or university of her choice. He then turned to me, and offered glibly, "College...probably isn't for *you*."

I was devastated. I hadn't even considered colleges rejecting me for my academic and extracurricular shortcomings. And I hadn't considered any future beyond college. Without college, there *was* no future. From his position of authority, my guidance counselor deemed me unfit for higher knowledge. And I doubt I would have made it if I hadn't had the intense urging and support of my family. Earning my second degree and working toward a Master's, I wonder where I would have found the motivation to continue my education if his opinion had not been countered by the encouragement I received at home. So imagine if I'd gotten the same news four years earlier about high school, and I didn't have a family or community role model available to prove and persuade me otherwise? The thought overwhelms me with empathy and frustration when I consider the students in my class. For some of these kids, Mrs. Smith was their only guidance. Without her moral and educational support, what reason was there even to try?

One day after Mrs. Smith's outburst fits perfectly within this example. In their Language Arts class, the students were assigned to work on their memoirs. The majority of the class had not completed the assigned homework, so Mrs. Smith converted the assignment to in-class work without much fuss, which set the students at ease almost immediately. She stood before the class and read aloud different prompts from a list, offering some examples of memoir topics. While the examples might not have been entirely relevant to these students' experiences (most were assorted family vacations, like trips to beaches or amusement parks), it got them actively considering their memories and assessing which were worthy for print. The

class, rarely quiet, was suddenly deep in thought. Eyes focused on the blank sheets before them, they scrawled fiercely across the page, their faces straining with concentration: lip-biting, brow-furrowing, smile-stifling intensity.

At one point, a student in the back of the class laughed out loud. During quiet times in this classroom, a disruption like this typically indicates that a student has been quietly goofing around, testing the silence, trying to get away with as much as possible before the teacher notices. Because each student expressed surprise, we all noted that this was not the case, and when Mrs. Smith asked why he was laughing, he explained, "I was remembering a camping trip I took with my dad and I remember fishing..." and started laughing again before describing the rest of his anecdote. The teacher acknowledged this memory as an excellent candidate for memoir. Bending his head toward his notebook he smiled shyly, and started writing.

But this reaction instigated that ripple-effect. Soon, with every prompt, the students were sharing their stories until it became a student-centered discussion. Each student ran with another's idea until at one point, all of the students were elaborating on one student's particular story. They all knew where his story had happened, they were all familiar with his neighborhood, whose dog he was talking about and—as one student aptly remarked—"damn, is that dog mean!", until the teacher had to raise her voice and tell them to work silently.

Until that moment, it hadn't occurred to me that these students truly share a communal experience beyond the classroom. Unlike the scattered neighborhoods of my rural-suburban community, most of these kids live within blocks of each other. Building a classroom community is enough of a struggle—but students bringing a community *into* the classroom? It's an absolutely invaluable, vital resource, one that should be accessed at the root of nearly every as-

signment. Practicing community involvement such as this not only secures the students' shared cultural bonds, it "affirms the cultural capital that gives meaning to students' lives, [and] can help to establish the pedagogical conditions in which such students display an active voice and presence" (Giroux 263).

Personally, I think the prompt and subsequent interaction could have served as an anticipatory set of sorts, or a rare opportunity to take advantage of the students' collective interest. I would have altered the assignment and introduced a twist: everyone tells his or her version of that student's story, since everyone had his or her own angle, from any point of view (could be the dog's point of view, the student's, the dog's owner, your own as you watched, the article of clothing the dog had latched onto, etc.). Moments of this kind of flow are precious and when they happen, a teacher should swoop in and capture its essence—before their attentions move to something less academically worthwhile, as they are so often tempted.

The students demonstrated a focus on their memoirs that they lacked in other assignments. After several class periods of revising their memoirs, one student, Tomas², was extremely excited about his story and wanted Mrs. Smith to read it. Though he hid his pride under the guise of revision, I could tell he was eager to earn praise for his work. In his composition, he recounted the first time he was introduced to his present best friend. The evident tension between them quickly escalated into a violent rivalry; they saw no other option than to duke it out. A few thrown punches and a bruise or two later, the two became inseparable. Mrs. Smith was horrified by his story, and told him that not only did it sound like a two year-old had written it, it was also a terrible story (I wish I were exaggerating here, but unfortunately, these were her ex-

act words). She saw this as an opportunity to moralize and provide *de facto* discipline: fighting is bad and unnecessary; they should have gotten an adult and talked it out; the story itself is inappropriate. He was told to re-write his memoir entirely.

In his Social Studies class, Tomas was studying ancient Sumer. And what did the Sumerians bring us but the most ancient tale of all—the epic of Gilgamesh. The legend evolves from Gilgamesh's first introduction to Enkidu, whom he despises from the moment he lays eyes on him. This leads the two to a lengthy duel until both realize that neither will give up. They accept one another as worthy opponents, and so began their intense friendship. The similarities between the two stories are probably just coincidental, but the uncanny comparison further illustrated to me the *essentially* universal qualities of the human experience, the collective unconscious at play in an inner-city middle school classroom.

The more I read their memoirs, the more I learned to appreciate their unique style of storytelling, and the more I learned about each student's life and experiences. I had initially struggled with this divergent method of expression in my Met school experience. The students' narratives seemed tangential and disorganized, unable to follow a single thought to sufficient analysis and reflection. Lisa Delpit assesses this unique style in her article, "Ebonics and Culturally Responsive Instruction." Delpit describes the different effects an African American child's story had on both white and African American adult readers. While the white adults found the story to be incoherent and meandering, the African American adults found it engaging and thoughtful. Delpit refers to such narratives as "episodic" versus the more Anglican "topic-centered" narratives (24). This time, I was able to see past the "white mirror" I unconsciously held the students up to, constantly expecting them to reflect my own experience. I assessed the students in terms

² Actual name not used.

of what I *knew* of them, rather than what I expected.

I later had the chance to work with Tomas on another reading assignment. His shyness when we worked one-on-one surprised me after his boisterous classroom persona. He would not speak to me or lift his head from staring at the floor. I began to worry whether he would work with me at all, but I wanted to make sure he understood that his memoir was worthwhile. Not only was his story valid, it was actually very deep and perceptive, so in the silence that fell after asking another question, I broke from the worksheet and said “Hey, Tomas. You wrote that memoir about you and your best friend, right? How you fought?” He began to nod, then lifted his head and looked cautiously at me. I continued to talk about how much I liked the story, and I asked him if I could read it again sometime after we finished this assignment, but if he could tell me the story again quickly, because I couldn’t wait to read it. He came alive as we spoke, but when I addressed the task at hand, he shut down again.

Working with this student sealed for me the urgent need to teach a student as a person with a life, an existence that occurs beyond the classroom, rather than as an empty vessel to be filled with the delights of worksheet knowledge. I learned more about his interests (art, spraypaint tagging) and kept readdressing parts of his assignment as relevant to his life, and we breezed right through the work. I couldn’t believe how readily he was willing to work with me once I expressed interest in him as an individual. He even stayed with me past the lunch bell (which actually happened to me a couple of times, and was the ultimate validation).

On one such occasion, I worked with a student whose memoir I remembered well, and whose two drafts I’d helped edit. When I worked with her in Social Studies, I accessed that information. Working this

way demonstrated to students that knowledge is not limited to a single discipline, that it is constantly enriched by an endless cross-pollination and ultimately validated by the lives they lead.

The class, as a whole, struggled with many visual-aural vocabulary discrepancies, especially with words whose colloquial articulation differs from the textbook pronunciation. As I worked with this particular student in Social Studies on her vocabulary list, I revealed the words syllable-by-syllable and had her read them to me and tell me what the words meant, before asking her to read the word again. I would stop between each word to ask whether she understood and she would nod passively. Her eyes betrayed her acquiescence. I recognized what was behind that guarded gaze all too well, recalling many a frustrating rendezvous between me, my computer, and the university’s I.T. help desk. I then realized that she had probably never actively used these words about ancient Sumer herself (and most likely would never need to, unless she were a participant on *Jeopardy*). Beyond rote definition, she had no contextual understanding for the vocabulary.

Until we reached the word “myths.” Surprising me by her sudden speech, she exclaimed, “I don’t hear that. I don’t hear how you say it. I hear it like this: *mitts*.” I seized the moment to access a concept introduced in our class readings, a particular notion very dear to my heart. I began to explain to her about the “Heritage Language” that we shared, and relayed to her an anecdote about my cousins from the South not understanding particular words in my speech (one very amusing anecdote I couldn’t share with her was a scenario involving my interest in a *pawn* shop). I remembered that her memoir was about her uncle from Florida coming to live with her family, so I asked, “Does he have trouble understanding some words we say?”

Nodding, she laughed, talking about the whole “car” pronunciation that we all

struggle with in Ro'dilan. We linked the rest of the vocabulary to words she knew—"caravan" like the big *kahh* by Dodge, or to mnemonic devices: "It would *irritate* you for someone to *irrigate* you with buckets of water." She became animated, inventing her own creative phrases, and recalled them when it was time to match word to definition.

I marveled at the ease I felt working with these students, and felt ashamed for experiencing any apprehension. But I realize I was working in extremely unique conditions. Rarely does a teacher have the opportunity to work individually with students, never mind *every* class period. However, there must be a compromise. Nancie Atwell describes the methodology behind her workshop approach, which grants each student individualized attention for a portion of the day: "I pull my footstool next to a student's chair and whisper, 'How's it coming?' 'How can I help you?' 'Where did this idea come from?' 'Where are you headed with this?' 'Tell me about your writing.'" (143). Atwell depicts a classroom with a well established sense of community and autonomy—two qualities essential for individual student success. I believe had Mrs. Smith began her class year with this model in mind, the students would have eagerly participated.

I acknowledge the bias I have developed from my limited interaction with these students. My experience was not entirely comparable to working with an entire mass of individuals who bring different attitudes, styles, and needs into the classroom. In a large group, Mrs. Smith seemed overwhelmed by their activity and high levels of interaction, and rather than use these qualities to her advantage, she tried to suppress them, leading the students to resent any assignment that followed as punishment. The students gauged their conduct by her obvious distrust and need to maintain order. They entered a classroom ruled like a police state—perhaps a

"teacher state," in this case. I realize that I'm entering the situation with fresh ideals and very little experience. But helping these students individually, I had the chance to see how excited they get over the information in front of them when that information *applies* to them.

I worry for Mrs. Smith's kids. If her students' learning environment does not evolve, the cycle will perpetuate; worse, it will expand beyond the classroom and into the community. Schools are obligated to create citizens they'd like to see in the world around them, to "teach for tomorrow," so to speak, in keeping with the "evidence [suggesting] that students' level of political tolerance is related to their perception of the classroom and school environment" (Avery 40). They'll eventually define themselves as they have been defined. If these kids do scrape past eighth grade, they will most likely continue to struggle with education and won't be equipped with effective learning strategies. We have to know exactly what they don't understand and why they don't understand it; there's little chance the problem will resolve on its own. Like a broken bone, misinformation will set, holistically affecting the rest of their lives—and as community members, the rest of ours.

These students inspired me with their absolute willingness to learn, as long as the learning is willing to include *them*. Emphasizing a suburban middle-class lifestyle and learning style and chastising anything we deem aberrant sharpens the contrasts between the two, which, in turn, overshadow the likenesses. And I think that within our contrasts lie the most crucial likenesses. These students will recede even farther away from the school system if it continues to reflect ideals and experiences not their own. It seems an overwhelming task, but I feel that its simplicity deceives us into over-complication: you've got to let the kids *talk*. These kids want to be heard, and when they see we're not listening, they

can't find any other way than to shout.

I was ignorant to my ignorance, wanting so badly to embrace a progressively liberal philosophy that I refused to accept my true feelings. Beyond the school setting, or the teachers therein, it's the kids that set you right at ease. Their personalities really win you over. They are smart, active, and absolutely hilarious. There were times I stifled so much laughter that I was in pain; frequently, I'd abandon repression entirely and laugh right along with them. While I've heard this isn't the best idea, I found that it encouraged the students to feel more comfortable with me and more willing to share their thoughts, and vice versa. They're seriously clairvoyant, too. If you have anything against these kids, they know it—they read it and they react. You need to strip yourself of any prejudice before entering *any* classroom, because the students will only try harder to live up to whatever it is. I never realized how crucial the environment is to learning, but I've now realized that it's truly the key. An environment encompasses the class as a whole, not just the physical room or the curriculum itself, but every element...attitudes, ideas, experiences, etc., creating a multidimensional and ever-evolving symphony of community and individuality.

I have read up on teaching experiences from rural to urban. Any pedagogical book can explain the problems in our education system and the threatening prognosis of maintaining the status-quo, or demonstrate theories of effective practice and describe the magic of flow. But once you actually feel it all around you, it's astounding. Forever a "student of life," I experienced for myself the difference between information and *activated* information, engaging every sense to extract the gravity of valid meaning. Over the years, I've learned that I have a difficult time processing new, isolated information. I always have to reach into my brain to try and connect what I don't know to something I know, which I personally

feel is on level with a lot of these students and helps me see concepts from their perspective, helping me commit information to accessible memory. I felt all of those readings come to life as I sat in that classroom, watching the kids try to learn while I learned alongside them.

My experience, as a whole, is an overwhelming load of new information. I left the school in search of a concise definition, a way to express and access the knowledge I had earned; which brings me to my personal student-to-teacher mantra. My journey brought me from fear, to confidence, to faith in the students, equipping me with the essence of what it takes to reach these kids, what it truly means to teach. Borrowed from one of my favorite novels that centers around a female protagonist who is first alienated, then fascinated, by the strange world in which she finds herself, the quote captures the moment Alice (in her Wonderland) meets a unicorn. She is startled, astonished—never having encountered one in real life before, she is unaware how to react, and without such a schema, is rather unwilling to validate his existence.

The unicorn, cautious, yet earnest, bargains for reciprocity; insightfully simple, he states: "If you'll believe in me, I'll believe in *you*."

And I think I can agree to those conditions. In fact, I know I can.

I already have.