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"STUDENT TEACHERS"

What I Learned From Students in a High-Poverty Urban High School

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After 11 years of teaching in Title I schools in Brooklyn, New York, I left my high school with great heaviness in my heart to teach at a community college. Throughout my career the job had gotten increasingly harder. A struggling school, we were victim to a bevy of new reform measures; each year we scraped to make Adequate Yearly Progress for No Child Left Behind until eventually we were put into a transformation model for Race to the Top money. Because of these stresses, the administration and teaching staff constantly shifted, and this hurt the student body, which was becoming increasingly poor and lower skilled (in regard to what was measured by the high-stakes tests). My teacher friends, some of whom had taught with me but left our school for one less "high needs," would ask passively insulting questions like "Why are you still *there*?" or "Why don't you go teach at a *real* school?" I never knew how to answer their questions at the moment, but I do know this: I walked into that building one person and left a different, better one.

My school was attended almost exclusively by students of color, and by the time I left our student population included more than 80% living in poverty. We had all the problems that are portrayed in Hollywood movies about inner-city schools, but, to me, we were rich in the beauty and complexity of what makes us all human.

So why did I stay there? I *chose* to stay at my school for 10 years because teaching there allowed me to engage in social justice work every day. It allowed me to be on the ground, knee-deep in the muck of life and its challenges in low-income communities, and to grow with the students. My work was not solely about teaching students many of my teacher colleagues would not dare to teach but about the learning that made me a better, more compassionate, more understanding citizen of this world.

As much as I enjoy teaching, I might enjoy learning from the students even more. My students taught *me* during my career. They were the student teachers, and they gave me an education I could not have gotten anywhere else. No, they didn't walk in with a Learning Objective that matched the Common Core

Standards for College and Career Readiness, complete with a Do Now, a lesson with multiple entry points for differentiated learning, a structured format for me to share out my findings, and an informal assessment at the end of the period to gauge whether I had grasped the material of their lives. The beauty of the students teaching the teacher (and the rest of the class) was that these lessons were organic and spontaneous. There were many moments in my classes when I found myself at a crossroad: Either I could move on with the lesson plan or I could pause, step aside, and give the students the floor. It wasn't until the middle of my second year of teaching that I began to recognize what, exactly, was happening in those moments, but after that first lesson from my students (one I will never forget on the code of the streets), I embraced the moments when their ideas supplemented mine. This open exchange of knowledge made us an authentic community of learners.

Recently I attended a colleague's wedding, and she seated me at a table of teachers who all worked at one of the most respected high schools in Chicago. After a few minutes of polite dinner conversation, the man next to me, a fellow English teacher, came to the quick conclusion that our student populations and teaching experiences were starkly different. He was correct. But then he asked me, earnestly, "After your years in the classroom, what conclusions did you take away about that student population?" (Of course, I took issue with his use of the word *that*, but, as we were at a wedding, I politely ignored the term. Plus, he seemed honestly curious.) Great question, I thought. As I navigate this transition in my professional life from high school teacher to community college professor, I find myself asking, What did I learn after almost a dozen years in a low-income urban classroom, surrounded by students defined as "at risk" because of their poverty and race? What did I learn about my students? What did I learn about myself?

We all are and we all aren't our stereotypes. During my first years teaching, I was continuously perplexed by how easily my students and I constructed and categorized each other along stereotypical racial lines. They saw me as a typical White girl, and I saw them as typical urban kids. We were flat characters in each other's eyes.

"What? I don't sound like *that*!" I'd exclaim when I heard them mocking my voice; they made me sound like a Valley girl from the movie *Clueless* each time they parroted my directions or lectures in class. As much as they mocked me, they were equally curious. I blatantly and shyly was asked questions about White people. Why do White people eat so much salad? Why do White people dance badly? Why are White people all rich? Why are White people racist? At first I was slightly frustrated with their questions, but eventually I began to realize I *was* a lot of those stereotypes, and I began to see myself as White. Yes, it might sound ridiculous, but I never had to think deeply about what it meant to

be White before I became a teacher at age 26. And yes, I *do* sound like a stereotypical White girl when I talk, and I *do* eat a lot of salad.

But my lived experiences are what define me beyond these stereotypes. I have a sister who twice was a teenage mom, I have biracial nieces and a nephew, I have a crack dealer in my family, my dad died of diabetes complications when I was a young adult, and I was adopted as a baby because I was accidently created by two curious high school seniors. The realities of my life transcend my stereotype, and the students slowly understood that yes, although I am a White girl, I am also a complex person with a twisted, layered life who is a lot more than she might initially seem. We learned that about each other.

I had the same perception of my students. On the facade, many were every stereotype of the urban "at-risk" student that I had heard of, and that was what struck me first. From their saggy or too-tight clothes to their constant cursing, from their tattoos for friends killed by gang violence to their open allegiance to gangs, they too were the stereotypes I had heard about. But when they talked, wrote, and discussed the complexities of their lives, their choices, and their behaviors, when they schooled me on what it was like to grow up as them, I realized they were so much more than the tough urban student veneer they projected to the world. When I got to know them as people, as individuals, instead of a nameless, faceless group, they became real to me.

Again, that must sound ridiculous, but racism and classism are just that: ridiculous. The most hardened student had a beautiful and deep story full of choices, thoughts, and emotions, and once that story was told—*bam!*—the stereotype of who I thought she or he was split open like a chrysalis revealing the beautiful complex person inside. Amazing. My students, especially because we differed in race and class, taught me to see that in the classroom and beyond. What a gift.

Every student has a story to tell, and often those stories are difficult to hear. Teaching English has to be one of the best and most difficult jobs available, because even within the most stringent test-driven scripted curricula, we can allow students to write about their lives in class. I do a lot of free write exercises in class; it builds writing stamina. Students should connect what they read to their lives through writing; the text-to-self connection is a tenet of literacy. Even the best argument-based paper has an element of narrative in it. There are many opportunities for students to find the power of their voices and their personal stories within an English class, and with pedagogy and curriculum on my side, I encouraged them to write about their lives.

Their words helped me get to know them as individuals, and with that knowledge I was able to be a better teacher. However, I learned over and over that when I gave my students the freedom to write about their own lives, the stories I read often left me breathless. Teachers need to respond to these stories both as teachers and as human beings, and that might be hard for those of us who

never experienced such hardships or who have never come to terms with our own hardships. I found myself in the second category; I was 26 years old and only beginning to reflect on the roller coaster of my own life. But even when I did not know how to respond, I responded to let the students know I heard them. Year after year I realized that my students had harder lives than I could ever imagine.

Many, if not most, of my students lived lives I doubt I could survive. Their resilience amazed me. Truly. How does a 16-year-old boy come to school the day after his sister was shot and participate in a Socratic Seminar? How does a freshman girl, living in a homeless shelter in the Bronx, commute to Brooklyn and get to school on time, every morning, although her clothes haven't been washed and she hasn't eaten? How does a 15-year-old boy show up for English class with a black eye and a split lip and then write about being jumped out of a gang during the class free write?

My students wrote about these obstacles, and in the beginning of my career, I was not sure how to respond. Of course the traditional comments on grammar, spelling, organization, and idea development wouldn't suffice. I did my job as their English teacher, but I also wrote notes back to the students about their personal stories. I acknowledged their pain and how hard their circumstances were, and I told them I was proud of them and respected them for living through it and coming to school. I told them they were brave. I celebrated their resilience. I offered a variety of resources, from books to cookies to counseling. But the most important thing is that I told them I heard them and that I would be there if they ever wanted to talk.

But sometimes written or verbal feedback didn't feel like enough. Take, for instance, the homeless student I mentioned earlier, whom I will call Denise. She lived in a shelter in Brooklyn that became overcrowded. The city's solution was to relocate her family to a shelter deep in the Bronx that was less crowded. The high school near her new shelter was notoriously violent, so Denise chose to commute via three subway trains for two hours back to Brooklyn to continue her education at our school, the only stable home base she had. She came to school every day, on time. Free breakfast closed at our school as first period started. She missed breakfast at the shelter because she left before it was served. Neither institution made their meal times flexible so that Denise, who was trying to get to school, could get breakfast. But still she showed up and engaged every day.

It took time for Denise to reveal this complicated story to me; it came in pieces through her writing notebook during class free writes. Suddenly I understood why she often put her head down and claimed dizziness in class and why her weight was dropping. Her one reliable meal each day was the free school lunch. I began to pack her whatever I could grab on my way out the door in the morning. A granola bar, a piece of fruit—she was not picky—and I let her eat it in class. Of course, then I had to let the other students eat breakfast during

first period too, which was against school rules. I didn't care. Often her friends would share their bacon, egg, and cheese sandwiches with her, and she would come alive for the next half hour of class, her academic productivity increasing because she had food in her stomach.

Students who live in poverty, however resilient, face obstacles that are layered, like matryoshka dolls, and once one issue is somewhat rectified, another one might reveal itself. These multilayered issues do not make an education or a successful life impossible, but they certainly provide more than a healthy dose of challenges for young people like Denise. This is why I stayed at my "failing" school, with poor students, for years. I could not change the larger circumstances of their lives, but I could do small things within my classroom to ameliorate their situations.

All students are capable of learning. Regardless of their circumstances and regardless of what policy folks say, all students are capable of learning at any age and in any subject. I truly believe this. And I feel it is most evident with high-poverty students who often have had subpar educational experiences due to either the schools zoned for the poor neighborhoods where they live or the circumstances that disrupted their schooling trajectories. The students know that school is a sacred space; they constantly demonstrated this to me. From our regular conversations on school violence during which students repeated that they "keep the street on the street and school in school" to the almost perfect attendance after 9/11, after the election of President Barack Obama, or after the winter or spring breaks, the students demonstrated they wanted to be at our school. And this is good, because they are all capable of learning. But the catch is that they have to be ready to take that leap, to be vulnerable to failure, and to make a go of it. And that can be hard.

I constantly think of one student, Ivan, who came to my class every day, on time, and did nothing. Nothing. I could not get him to put pen to paper. He was congenial and participated in class discussions, but he would not read or write for anything. After a month, I mentioned him to a coworker in passing, a special education teacher in her 30th year of teaching. "I don't get it," I said. "He comes every day, on time, and he doesn't ever sleep, act rude or crazy, or distract others, but he does no work. What is going on?" My colleague replied with a gentle, "Send him to me." This woman was a soothsayer of all issues related to literacy and numeracy, and after one brief meeting she reported back to me, "He can't read. At all." He was in 11th grade. Judy, my coworker, took him out of my class every day and brought him to her office where she brought magnetic ABCs, stuck them on her file cabinet, and taught him how to read. It was not easy, and he resisted at times, but Ivan eventually passed the English Regents (and all of his Regents) and graduated from high school. He wanted to learn, he was capable of learning, but that first step of getting help was too much for him to initiate.

What if that had been you? What if, somehow, you slipped through the cracks for years and found yourself in high school unable to read? Impossible, you say, but it is possible. We all like to think that we would self-advocate if our parents and teachers were not stepping up for us, but I am not sure I would have. In fact, I know at that age I would have hidden my academic difficulties at all costs. It would have been too embarrassing, too humiliating; it would have revealed too much about my life outside of school. No way. But, as evidenced with Ivan, students want to learn and are capable of learning at any age. They just need someone to give them a push toward thinking of themselves as a learner, and they need to be pushed again and again and again until they believe it for themselves. That is the real work of teaching in any setting, but it is a task equal in importance to teaching skills when working with low-income students.

Teaching is a career that has no end. I resist hurting people (with words or physical violence) when they snarkily mention how easy it is to be a teacher, with our many breaks and summers off. Anyone who teaches knows that is a lie because teaching has no end. No. End. This is both a curse and a blessing. It is a curse because my mind is always in teacher mode. When I read a book, I think of how I might teach it. When I see an article in the newspaper, I assess its reading level for my students. I lesson plan in the shower.

But on the flip side is a blessing. Once you are a student's teacher, you are his or her teacher forever. In my experience this lifelong relationship is even more pronounced when I teach students from low-income backgrounds, because although teachers are not rich, we might be a student's connection to the middle class. I receive several Facebook messages each month from prior students asking about jobs, college, and graduate schools. They ask for references, for feedback on an admissions essay, and for career guidance.

Just last week I attended my daughter's elementary school's First Friday event. During First Friday parents are allowed in the classroom from 8:30 to 9:00 a.m. to read to their kids and see their children's work. As I sat and read to Alexandra, a young woman caught my eye. We smiled at each other, and my brain flipped through the card catalog of my life as I tried to determine how I knew her. Then she asked, "Are you Ms. Ungemah? You were my English teacher!"

Cassie had been in my English class in the spring of 2002, my first year teaching high school. Our daughters were in the same kindergarten class! We caught up quickly because the groundwork of a relationship was already there. She told me about her kids, her dad's recent passing, her job, and her desire to go to graduate school. I listened, offered my condolences, offered to read her graduate school essay if she wanted me to do so, and suggested the schools in New York City I thought were best for what she wanted to do. I advised her on moving toward a job in elementary education instead of early childhood education because of its stability as a union job, its prospect for greater pay over time,

and the benefits of health insurance and a pension as a city employee. We slid back into the teacher–student relationship 10 years after she left my classroom, and we were able to talk honestly and openly about jobs, income, benefits, and life with kids on a budget with little preamble. Explicit conversations like this help demystify class and one's ability to move between the classes, and I feel they are, again, an essential part of the job of teaching in low-income schools.

My students have shown me, through years of accidental and purposeful reconnecting, that not only can I continue to mentor and teach them, but they also can continue to mentor and teach me. One of my former students, Willia, is presently in the Peace Corps in Cambodia, and she messages me about her experiences and travels in a part of the world I have never seen. Another former student, Shana, is a high school English teacher in downtown Brooklyn. We trade teaching resources and classroom management strategies. Many of my former students are now parents (Rudy! Heeba!), and we talk about the challenges of raising our children. My students, who were so different from me on so many levels, became my community in our classroom, and that community lives beyond the time and space of high school.

I now teach community college. I felt drawn to community college because of the overlap between the students I taught in high school and the students who attend community college. I felt my teaching philosophy could remain the same, but I could put my doctorate to use and try my hand at being a professor. Although I taught in a high school that was all students of color and majority poor, it was the small percentage of students from the burgeoning to solid middle-class families that attended four-year universities upon graduation—about 10 from of our graduating class (of 100+) each year. Most of the students from the school who attended college went to community college. The students here at community college are amazing, and the work we are doing in class is strong, but there is a nagging heaviness in my heart. Why? This is a veritable utopia compared to teaching at my high school; it was such a drastic shift that I literally wept from shock after my first day of teaching Freshman Composition. The facility with which I taught for two straight hours was nothing like the struggle of getting through a 43-minute period at my former high school; it was so easy that it reduced me to tears.

But sadly, the shift from high school to college teaching has only magnified for me that a large number of the students I taught in high school *never* make it to college. The homeless students, the very poor, the largely disenfranchised—where are they now? They are not here at community college. Or very few are here. I think about this as I work with my new students, and it bothers me deeply.

Working in high-poverty secondary schools for over a dozen years woke me up to the educational injustices that are forged by economic injustice and how those injustices trickle up and out of high school and into college. My students

taught me to see them as complex individuals who all wanted an education, and having learned these lessons from my students, I can't close my eyes to the fact that many of them do not attend college—something that is taken for granted by many of their even slightly wealthier peers. Thanks to my years of teaching in low-income schools, and thanks to my student teachers, my eyes are wide open to this disparity.

I am gathering my strength and planning my agenda for the next chapter in my career: Get those truly left behind ready and into college. I have 20+ more years of work until retirement. Wish me luck. Or join me.