

*City Kids,
City Teachers*

REPORTS FROM THE FRONT ROW

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Urban Pedagogy

*You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.*
—MAYA ANGELOU

*Chance has never yet satisfied
Hope of a suffering people, action,
self-reliance, the vision of self and the
future have been the only means by
which the oppressed have seen and
realized the light of their own freedom.
Yes, yes, you mighty race! You can
accomplish what you will.*
—MARCUS GARVEY

*One feels his two-nees—an
American, a Negro, two souls, two
thoughts, two unreconciled
strivings; two warring ideals in one
dark body, whose dogged strength
alone keeps it from being torn, asunder.*
—W. E. B. DUBOIS

*The so called modern education,
with all its defects, however, does
others so much more good than it
does the Negro because it has been
worked out in conforming to the
needs of those who have enslaved and
oppressed weaker peoples.*
—CARTER G. WOODSON

Is there a distinctly urban pedagogy?

In the front row of a celebrity press conference announcing a major grant to the Chicago school reform effort sat five young men: Cornell Faust, Antwoine Conaway, Kelly Floyd, Derthun Whitten, and Darnell Faust. Wearing starter jackets and gold chains with elaborate designs etched into their short-cropped hair, they draped their long bodies casually over the folding chairs. City kids. "I'll bet that's Farragut's fabulous five," whispered a reporter. "They're a cinch to be state basketball champs this year."

When the young men were introduced fifteen minutes later, and stood with awkward smiles and waves, there was an audible gasp throughout the auditorium, followed by sustained applause—these were state champions all right, 1994 Illinois state chess champions from Orr High School. Orr is a Chicago Public School, eighty-five percent low-income, ninety-five percent African-American. The chess team defeated New Trier High School from the wealthy gold coast suburbs to advance to the nationals, where they came in second by half a point to New York's famous Peter Stuyvesant High School. Something in the contrast between the stereotype of young black men and the actual accomplishment of these students made the applause warmer and more moving.

The chess program at Orr began in 1986 under the leadership of math teacher Tom Larson. "I love chess," Larson said, "And I believe in these kids. I thought chess could be a way to get them to sit still and begin using their thinking skills. So far it's worked." Larson is a big bearded man on a mission. "My job is to guide them to independence, to guide them through the process of maturing... I'm trying to build the dream. Faith, hope, and love."

Tom Larson has qualities all good teachers need: a passion for something (in his case, chess, but it could as easily be literature, music, art, politics, geometry, history, algebra, quilts, or quarks),

and an unshakable belief in the capacities of his students. In other words, he loves the kids and he's engaged in life. He brings to his teaching a passion for the world and an abiding regard for his students. Faith, hope, and love.

The city is a place, a big and growing place. On September 20, 1994, the *Chicago Tribune* wire service reported that according to a World Bank Study, the world's big cities together are growing by a million people a week. Within a decade, the study predicts, more than half the earth's people will live in cities. It is a geographic location for billions.

But the city is more than geography. It is bright lights, big chances, a place for new experiences and bold experiments. It is also a metaphor for corruption and degeneracy. And increasingly it is a code for the poor, the nonwhite, the immigrant, the economically marginal. The city as seething.

The problem for teachers is to figure out what and how much to take into account when inventing teaching in city schools. There is the danger of not taking enough into account—poverty is significant for kids who are unable to acquire the basic sustenance for a healthy life; race matters in a society that structures rewards and privileges in part on the hierarchies of color and background. Hungry children can't learn; hurt children can't learn; frightened or distraught children can't learn; upset children can't learn. There is a lot that city teachers need to take into account.

On the other hand, there is the danger of taking too much into account or of making stereotypical generalizations about children and their families that can destroy teaching efforts. For example, when a group of new city teachers met for orientation with their principal, he was kind enough, and complimentary: "I'm so glad you will be with us for the coming year," he began. "You're just what we need—energetic, fresh, filled with youthful idealism." When anyone applauds youthful idealism, duck! He went on to explain to them that even though they thought these kids would become great students under their tutelage, they had to understand the real world. "These kids come from homes where there is

too much noise and chaos," he explained. "Just learning to listen is hard enough. Don't expect them to be good readers."

In a single gesture, this principal lowered expectations, encouraged teachers to teach less, and reduced the power of the curriculum—all in a benevolent-sounding talk to new teachers about the "real" world of city kids. He based his advice on assumptions about families he didn't know in any sustained or personal or intimate way. And his beneficence would have a terrible impact on the kids.

For teachers "being nice" can lead to teaching less. "I don't ask much of April," says her teacher. "She's probably got a tough life." Probably? What's the evidence? Be careful. This is no help to April. Caring for kids' lives—*really* caring for them—involves understanding and nurturing them in the present, and also seeing to their futures. It involves knowing them well, knowing their strengths and capacities and abilities. Teachers need to know the world well enough to help kids envision and nurture a future, and they must know kids well enough to know what it will take to advance learning. Families can be important allies and informants in serious attempts to teach—and families must be approached with respect and a sense of solidarity if they are to be a source of knowledge and assistance. No teacher is truly student-centered who is not at the same time family-centered.

Doris Lessing grew up in rural Africa in a strict, highly regimented family. She was not a happy child, and yet by the age of twelve she knew "how to set a hen, look after chickens and rabbits, worm dogs and cats, pan for gold, take samples from reefs, cook, sew, use the milk separator and churn butter, go down a mine shaft in a bucket, make cream cheese and ginger beer, paint stencilled patterns on materials, make paper mache, walk on stilts . . . drive the car, shoot pigeons and guinea-fowl for the pot, preserve eggs—and a lot else . . ."

And so in spite of living in a society she describes as stingy and cold-hearted, and a family that was cruel and abusive, Lessing says of her long list of knowledge and experience at twelve, "That is real happiness, a child's happiness: being enabled to do and to make,

above all to know you are contributing . . . you are valuable and valued."

This lesson from rural Africa has application to urban America. "Being enabled to do and to make"—to find opportunities in our schools for every youngster to create meaning; to construct projects, to invent products, to leave a mark. Every child needs something important to strive for, real work to do, something to belong to and care about. A good school—or a good classroom—provides multiple entry points for students to do and to make, and there is evidence of doing and making in the halls, on the walls, throughout the space.

"To know you are contributing . . . you are valuable and valued"—once again, the message that this place is incomplete without you, cannot function fully without your effort, is not whole until your piece is added.

An urban pedagogy must be built on the strengths of the city, the hope and the promise of city kids and families, on the capacities of city teachers. We must create an enjoyable teaching experience and a classroom life that teachers want to be a part of. The classroom cannot be a place where teachers bite their lips, hold their breath, and endure. Rather, urban classrooms must be places where teachers can pursue their ideas, explore their interests, follow their passions—and be engaged with students in living lives of purpose. This, as opposed to some phony stance of unquestioned authority, is the essence of teacher professionalism.

This is not simple. It requires attention, effort, intelligence. It takes enormous commitments of time and energy. And it takes focus—focus on the child first of all, focus on the student as a learner, focus on the strengths and assets youngsters bring with them to school, and focus on our shared world.

"What do you need to know and experience? Why?" These are good questions to invite into your school or classroom. Embedded in these questions are a wide range of other questions: "Who are you? What do you know? What is the nature of the society we share and the world we inhabit? What is required of each of us

practically, politically, ethically, socially?" In order to answer—collectively or individually—the question "What do you need to know and experience?" we are pushed to focus on children as dynamic, diverse, unique, whole, and real. And we are pushed to know more about an infinitely interesting and ever expanding world. We cannot simply close our doors or put our heads in the sand—we must engage, interact, be involved.

Education is not a commodity, like a car, to be bought and sold. Education is never neutral; it is always toward something, toward some changed condition or situation, or toward maintaining things just as they are. Good city teachers start with the lived experiences of youngsters, with how they think of themselves and their lives, and take as a fundamental stance, "You can change your life." There are, of course, skills needed to change lives, and those skills include the capacity to read the word. But perhaps more fundamental, youngsters need sustained opportunities and open invitations to make sense of the fabric of their lives or, as Paulo Freire puts it, to read the *world*. Students don't simply learn to read and write as a repetitive, meaningless skill; they read and write to make sense of what's happening to them, to join with, participate, and overcome when necessary.

In a sense the basic curriculum becomes an engagement with the question of what ought to be. Education for a free people is education designed to understand the world as it is, honestly and fully, to act responsibly upon that world, and, where appropriate, to transform that world. This means that education for a free people is education that encourages people to be subjects, not objects, actors in history not victims of history. It is education that encourages people in the process of becoming more human, in the vocation of thoughtfulness and care. There is an urgency to this kind of teaching in our precious and precarious cities today.

And not just in our cities. The broad outlines of what is described here could productively inform teaching from the gold coast suburbs to the red hills of Georgia or the rich farmlands of the prairies. Every community faces problems of alienation, disconnection, meaninglessness; every young person deserves a

chance to make and remake, to become valued and valuable. The city is the place where these contradictions appear with fire and intensity.

During the historic "Freedom Summer" of 1964, when volunteers poured into Mississippi to fight for civil rights, register voters, and participate in the movement, hundreds of "freedom schools" were organized to teach basic skills to the victims of racism so that they could register and vote, and in the process to transform the social order of the south. The schools were vital centers of learning, and explicitly political settings. As Charlie Cobb, an activist with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, wrote, the freedom schools would draw "the link between a rotting shack and a rotting America."

The curriculum of the "freedom schools" points, again, to the ways learning to read the word can link powerfully to reading the world. Teachers in these schools were advised that while every student would be different, all would likely bear the scars of a racist system—cynicism, distrust, lack of intellectual preparation. But students would have important strengths to build upon as well, notably experience and knowledge of how to survive under the intense pressure of poverty, discrimination, and injustice. As with many of our kids today, the scars of distrust and poor preparation are plainly visible, but so are the strengths of knowledge and experience concerning survival on some complex and sometimes mean streets. The curriculum of the freedom schools included a basic set of questions: 1) Why are we (teachers and students) in freedom schools? 2) What is the Freedom Movement? 3) What alternatives does the Freedom Movement offer us? Secondary questions included: 1) What does the majority culture have that we want? 2) What does the majority culture have that we don't want? 3) What do we have that we want to keep?

In the first unit teachers tell students that they are there to learn alongside their students, that they will investigate important questions together, and that they will help each other find their way. The initial investigation is into the state of their schools, and a

comparison with what more privileged students enjoy. What kind of school do you attend? What is its physical condition? How old is it? Do you have a library? A science lab? What foreign languages are taught there? What do you learn about citizenship? How many graduates go on to higher education? And on and on.

Later questions include: What do people learn in school besides reading, writing, and arithmetic? Do schools teach you things you think are untrue? At one point teachers are encouraged to pass out copies of the Pledge of Allegiance, and to engage students in a serious analysis of it. Does America mean everything it says? How do you know? What is the evidence? Later the Bill of Rights is analyzed in the same withering detail.

Once again, there are lessons from the countryside that might expand our sense of what city schools and urban pedagogy might be today. Think of serious, engaging questions to focus your teaching: What are the unemployment trends in the neighborhood? How does it compare to twenty years ago? What happened to make it so? What could change it?

The celebrated children's book author Maurice Sendak and the dark cartoonist Art Spiegelman highlight the inner life of children in a dialogue in the *New Yorker* about art. When Spiegelman says, "I wanna protect my kids!" Sendak responds, "Art—you can't protect kids . . . they know everything! I'll give you an example . . . My friend lost his wife recently, and right at the funeral his little girl said, 'Why don't you marry miss so-and-so?' He looked at her as if she were a witch. But she was just being a real kid, with desperate day-to-day needs that had to be met no matter what. People say, 'Oh, Mr. Sendak, I wish I were in touch with my childhood self, like you!' As if it were all quaint and succulent, like Peter Pan . . . I say, 'You are in touch, lady—you're mean to your kids, you treat your husband like shit, you lie, you're selfish . . . That is your childhood self! In reality, childhood is deep and rich. It's vital, mysterious, and profound. I remember my own childhood vividly . . . I knew terrible things . . . But I knew I mustn't let adults know I knew . . . It would scare them."

We would do well to remember this: childhood is deep and rich, vital, mysterious, and profound. What kids know can be scary, but denying them voice, denying their experiences and their sense-making, will undermine their capacities to learn, and withhold an education of value and power to them. If we offer ourselves as teachers to the city's young, we will need to step forward with appreciation, respect, and a little awe.