

Erin Gruwell: A Biographical Account of a Teacher Leader for Change

Ronald D. Morgan

University of Redlands

Peter Lock

Beattie Middle School

This biographical account of Erin Gruwell's work with marginalized youth explores the relevancy of her work for today's educators, especially those responsible for the education of future school leaders. Through both a review of the literature and in-depth interview with Gruwell, this paper shows how Gruwell emerged as a teacher leader and change agent. In summary, it is important that both current and future school administrators support teacher leaders like Erin Gruwell, by working together in challenging the status quo in today's schools. Being open-minded and listening to ideas teacher leaders can help school administrators be more effective in their often difficult role. Ideas such as "smaller learning communities" and the philosophy of "saving one student at a time" have echoed in teacher leaders like Erin Gruwell and others. School administrators' collaboration with their teacher leaders on campus, only increases the odds of more effective solutions coming forth that can help to improve academic achievement.

The story of Erin Gruwell's work with marginalized students has inspired those in the field of education, as well as those outside it, by the reforms and actions she initiated in her classroom. Gruwell demonstrated that through personalization and building on one's background experiences helped her and the students discover a sense of purpose in their lives. From that sense of purpose, came an increased desire for students to learn and, more importantly, stimulated their thought process (Gruwell, 2007). As a teacher leader Gruwell helped students, through counter narratives and other techniques, make a strong commitment to equity and social justice. According to Ackerman and MacKenzie (2006, p.68), "teacher leaders are the pack mules of effective school improvement because they carry the weight of responsibility for ensuring that reforms take root in the classroom." This account of Erin Gruwell's life reveals how as a teacher leader she became and remains a leading change agent for transformative learning in today's schools.

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Change Agents for School Reform

Feiman-Nemser (1990) argued that while optimistic faith in the power of education to help shape a new social order has continued to exist, the reality also has continued to be the sobering realization that schools have been instrumental in preserving the same social inequities.

Teachers find themselves walking on the intersection of such duality, and their agency most definitely influences the balance in one of the two directions; Gruwell's story is one of a change agent who embodied optimistic faith manifested through the best of leadership traits. As Lane, Lacefield-Parachini, and Isken (2003) stated, teachers have needed to develop feelings of ownership "so they feel empowered to transform the urban educational setting" (p. 56). Trybus (2011) also stated that leaders who want organizations to change need to create and implement a shared vision. This vision, stated by Kotter (1996, p. 68), "refers to a picture of the future with some implicit or explicit commentary on why people should strive to create that future." Effective change agents have communicated with stakeholders in ways that made the change more understandable, coherent, and valuable to the organization, while setting the direction of change. Trybus (2011) also emphasized that a critical priority for a change agent involved creating a vision for the future.

Those considered to be "change agents" in promoting change in today's schools have tended to not only believe in the need for change, but some also have possessed the ability and skills to bring it about by working with others. These individuals, according to Evans (2010), saw the necessity for change, created an opportunity for vision development, and engaged in both personal and organizational growth. A change agent also needs to understand that seeking sustainable change must be an on-going effort. Fullan (2001) believes that an effective change agent possesses skills in three main capacities: developing relationships of trust, communicating the change vision effectively, and empowering others to take action toward change.

Effective change agents, in addition to being visionary, can also empower and mobilize people by modeling risk taking. This includes providing intellectual and emotional support and inspiration when followers have faced resistance, given the entrenchment of the existing system (Trybus, 2011). These change-agent leaders have not succeeded by working alone but rather building a culture of shared leadership with distributed ownership and common communities of practice (Trybus, 2011; Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002). Lampert (2002) described this collaboration as being where "everyone has the right, responsibility, and the ability to be a leader." (p. 38). This culture is critical to bringing about change, Trybus (2011) argued, and works to minimize resistance to change.

Evans (2010) and Fullan (2007) both argued that if change was perceived as imposed on the people involved, resistance to change occurred because people were not involved and may have been prevented from making sense of the change. Evans (2010) further emphasized that effective change agents constantly monitor themselves such that they remain cognizant of the human dimension of change, as well as about how people have invested themselves in the existing system.

Effective change agents have based their vision on being able to answer why change was needed. Furthermore, they have established relationships of mutuality such that others implementing the change have envisioned personal gains along with the organizational ones. Effective change agents have succeeded because they knew how to deal with resistance and

remained focused on change, even when facing the most resistant colleagues (Trybus, 2011). These change agents embodied patience, humility, and the belief in the value and worth of each person in order to develop a collaborative approach to change.

Leadership and change agency must be aligned in order for effective change to occur (Hensley & Burmeister, 2009). Hence, it becomes apparent that one cannot be a change agent without being a leader (Trybus, 2011). Likewise, a leader without a vision for change will be ineffective and short-lived. It is therefore important for site administrators and district officials to be supportive of classroom teachers who have a vision of change. Trybus (2011) iterated that leadership and change are needed for the future of schools, classrooms, and systems that work towards improvement.

Cohen (2008) stated that “[e]ducators have largely ceded the public debate about education to others” (p.1). He further says that “having attended school, or having children that attend school, does not, as many may think, make one an expert” (p. 1). Yet many parents and politicians with no background in educational leadership are more involved than ever in creating and implementing school policy. Palmer (2008) states “that much of what goes on in schools is shaped by politicians who are more interested in winning elections than in winning good futures for children.” Because of this, he asks “school leaders and all who care about public education to go beyond helping educators become better at doing their jobs and support them in becoming agents of institutional change,” (p.4).

Recent educational leaders, who have challenged the status quo and became change agents, include Geoffrey Canada, Joe Carter, Marva Collins, the late Jaime Escalante, and Dennis Littky, who all realized the need for students to believe they had the potential for success. Consequently, they along with many others have worked tirelessly to shift the status quo away from politicians making decisions, and instead requesting schools to, “supporting educators in becoming internal agents of change,” (Palmer, 2008, p. 4). By focusing on the inherent need for change, advocating for smaller learning communities and not being bound by limitations, these change agents were instrumental in helping teachers like Erin Gruwell realize the importance of changing the status quo. According to Ackerman and Mackenzie (2006), it is essential for teacher leaders such as Gruwell to “think about the gap in schools between the real and the ideal, and the discrepancies that they witness compel them to push against the status quo” (p.1).

Gruwell’s work, as a teacher leader, became a foremost change agent with impoverished students in Long Beach, California, in the late 1990’s and who continues this endeavor to this day.

Erin Gruwell: A Voice for Change

While in college at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), Gruwell observed the now-famous incident of an unknown Chinese student standing in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. The image of an individual her same age, standing up for what he believed proved to be a powerful one for Gruwell. Seeing this young man’s bravery and willingness to take a personal stand in the face of great adversity for what he believed, initially helped Gruwell decide to become a lawyer. “Although I wasn’t brave enough to stand in front of a moving vehicle [...] maybe I could stand before a judge and fight injustice in the courtroom” (Gruwell, 2007, p. 10). She decided at that point in her life to pursue a degree in law.

Less than three years later, on April 29, 1992, the verdict in the Rodney King trial was announced. Gruwell had been working as a concierge at the Marriott Hotel in Newport Beach when the verdict was announced; she and her coworkers watched the unfolding events on the television in the employees' lounge. When the rioting escalated, the dinner they were about to cater was cancelled, and she was sent home. There she found her fiancé and roommates also watching the news coverage of the L.A. Riots.

As the evening wore on, the comments of her roommates became racialized and stereotypical in nature, which made Gruwell uncomfortable. "I looked at my fiancé, hoping he'd interject. I wanted him to say something, anything" (Gruwell, 2007, p. 12). She attempted to block out her roommates' increasingly inflammatory comments by focusing on the coverage that was unfolding before her on television. One scene in particular caught her attention:

I fixated on an image of a disgruntled man throwing a Molotov cocktail at a Circuit City building. The television crews immediately panned down and showed a little boy looking up at him. The boy had stars in his eyes. I recognized that look – it was the same reverence I had for my father when I was a child.

If I had wanted to follow in the footsteps of my father when I was a child – how would this child respond to his father's actions [...]? I wondered: If a kid could be taught to pick up a Molotov cocktail, could he be taught to pick up a pen instead?

Maybe the best way to equalize the playing field wasn't in a courtroom but in a classroom. When I made the announcement to my father that I had decided I wanted to be a teacher, he did not take the news so well

[...]

"Where do you want to teach?" he asked rather gruffly.

"I want to teach in an urban school district [...] I want to make a difference" (Gruwell, 2007, p 12-13).

Gruwell returned to school, and attended California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), where she simultaneously earned her teaching credential and her Master's degree.

When Gruwell began her student teaching experience at Woodrow Wilson High School, she was surprised at the segregation on campus. On paper, Wilson High School was a culturally diverse school, which was one of the reasons Gruwell had chosen to complete her student teaching at that site. To complicate matters, she had received minimal guidance or support from her supervising teacher once she was in the classroom; she was essentially left on her own.

As a student teacher, I should have been able to rely on my supervising teacher, but he had stepped out of the classroom [...] and never returned [...] After nearly forty years of teaching, my supervising teacher planned to retire at the end of the school year. He had emotionally checked out and was now coasting on autopilot (Gruwell, 2007, p. 2).

When Gruwell had met with her supervising teacher over the summer, he had suggested she begin teaching on the first day of school so that her authority in the classroom was established immediately. Like most student teachers, Gruwell quickly realized that classroom management did not come easily. “It was obvious my students were the ones managing me” (Gruwell, 2007, p. 2). She learned that her ideas of life in a classroom were rather utopian: “As a student teacher, I was pretty naïve. I wanted to see past color and culture, but I was immediately confronted by it when the first bell rang [...]” (Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 2009, p. 2).

Gruwell realized early on in her student teaching that she had been assigned low-performing students; many were involved in drugs, violence and gang activity. However, Gruwell was able to help transform her students’ lives by instilling a philosophy that not only valued diversity but helped them promote it, finding a way to connect learning opportunities to the students. She challenged her students to steer away from the drugs and violence and to, instead, make choices for them to become citizens for change and eventual college students. Gruwell and the students began referring to themselves as the “Freedom Writers”, in reference and homage to the civil rights activists of the 1960’s who were called “The Freedom Riders.”

The students’ journey of change was collected by Gruwell in the form of anonymous journal entries and later published as the “Freedom Writers Diary.” Gruwell later published “Touch with Your Heart” (Gruwell, 2007), which essentially was her memoir, and more importantly, a challenge to the educational community about desperately needed change to transform learning in the country.

An Interview

In a recent interview with Erin Gruwell, she discussed the reasons that led her to be a change agent, first at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, where she was originally hired to teach, to the creation of a training program; then at the Freedom Writers Institute, that promotes transformative learning. As Gruwell reflected back to her childhood, she stated that her passion for change began with the education she had at home, where her father, a self-proclaimed civil rights activist, taught his beliefs to Gruwell from an early age. Throughout her childhood, Gruwell’s father had encouraged her to question and evaluate authority in terms of whether authority promoted or hindered the development of the human person, which she claimed has helped her believe in individuals, especially her students, whom others deemed as hopeless. She was raised to think critically and encouraged to ask questions and then debate someone’s answer if she disagreed with it. Having a father who modeled the importance of asking questions and not settling for the status quo, helped Gruwell have higher expectations for the world of education.

However, when Gruwell first started her student teaching career, she was shocked to find a school system where students weren’t encouraged to ask questions but instead told to be quiet and to listen. Gruwell even found in her teacher-training program she was talked “at” rather than being talked “with.” Her expectations for becoming a teacher did not come from the classes she took, but rather from her on-the-job training when she became a student teacher. On the first day of her student teaching, primarily through trial and error, Gruwell quickly had to learn, on her own, how best to work with students. And while she remembered vividly the various teaching theories she had learned in college, Gruwell realized early on

what she really needed when she got into the classroom was the practice, more than just a list of theories.

Gruwell discovered quickly in her student teaching that although she knew lesson planning, the use of instructional strategies, the official curriculum, and classroom management approaches, these did not prepare her for the realities she encountered in the classroom. Students manifested their anger over their treatment in school and their troubled lives by showing a dislike for Gruwell. They viewed her as being advantaged, not connected to their lived realities, and no different from the other teachers who did not value them. They demonstrated this in different ways that made Gruwell ask such questions as: “What do I do when the students call me bad names or give me different finger gestures?” She also wondered why, as a first year teacher, the students hated her so much, and why they didn’t come with a love for reading. She became convinced early on, that there was a real disconnect between education theory and practice; she believed that if she was going to survive her student teaching, she needed to know more about the important practical aspects of teaching.

So, Gruwell turned to her favorite college professor, Dr. Mary Ellen Vogt, a woman who was the founder of the research-based Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) method of reading, which has continued being a successful model developed to facilitate high quality instruction for English Language Learners in content area teaching. Gruwell loved how Mary Ellen used modeling and visual graphics; she found there was a lot of validity of the modeling and the scaffolding of techniques. Gruwell walked away with a sense of the importance of one-on-one connections, and the fact that not every child learns at the same time, or in the same place. Gruwell stated, “[F]or me, she [Dr. Vogt] was a very liberating professor because she was very practical. She was the last instructor I had at the end of my [teaching] program. I wish that I had started my program with her, because I think it would have been a very different experience.”

Renée Firestone, a Holocaust survivor, has continued to have a profound influence on Gruwell’s teaching. She has been in Gruwell’s life for almost 20 years and has been tireless in her pursuit of justice and advocating for people’s voice. Gruwell was adamant in our interview that Renée does this with incredible humility; and discussed how it has been “awe inspiring” to have such a great mentor and role model as Renée has been to her. “She [Renée Firestone] is one of the best educators I have known, because she forces people to engage in what she refers to as a ‘call to action’.”

Intentional versus Experimental Leadership

But how much of what Erin Gruwell did with her Freedom Writer students was intentional, as opposed to experimental? When asked in the interview, she stated: “I think that what I anticipated is that I wanted my students to love reading and love writing as a way of finding a voice and sharing their own story,” Gruwell continued. “What I didn’t anticipate is that being an English teacher would become a life one-on-one teacher. So much of what happened with the Freedom Writer was exposing them to a world they have never been exposed to, by taking them on field trips and exposing them to people and then mentoring them.” Gruwell went on to say, “we have covered everything from how many forks are at a fancy restaurant to balancing their check books to learning the validity of going to a counselor.” Helping her students get into twelve-step programs, or helping them grieve were not things that Gruwell

anticipated when she started her teaching career, but were experiences that became necessary for her students' success. She wanted those 55 minutes that she had daily with her students to matter; so she helped them find appropriate ways to cope with their life issues in order to be able to learn in the classroom. But having that same core group of students, with whom she had started her teaching career still be in her life to this day, is not something that she ever envisioned occurring.

Her initial, true "ah-ha" moment as to how she could connect with her students occurred on her first day in the classroom when her master teacher walked away. She has reflected back on that moment of realization. In the interview she said: "Oh God, I [was] paying the university to get my credential but they left me." She went on to explain, "I don't know what I am doing and that was the first moment I had to be resilient and resourceful and flexible." Gruwell realized the current model of education was failing her students. She had to find a way for them to be successful, not only academically, but also in their lives. With members of three of East Long Beach's major gangs crowded in her classroom, things had the potential to be explosive. She had to de-rail everything that she was trying to do. This became the most important moment for her as a classroom teacher, because of the ramifications that came with her decisions as to what she was going to do with her students.

In the interview Gruwell also said that she quickly realized that it was "us against the world" - the collective "us" being her students. As she worked to get money for field trips and hustled to get speakers into her classroom, Gruwell knew at that point she was doing things differently than most of her colleagues. As her students began staying after school or coming early to class to do their homework, she realized that she now had the power to get them to commit to their studies.

While being a learner-centered teacher always was at the core of Gruwell's teaching philosophy, she had to expand this philosophy to finding ways of relating to students on the basis of their lived experience. She became a learner and encouraged her students to help her understand their lives and sought their input in her teaching. This necessitated that she had to transcend the official curriculum since it was not working for her students. She faced implementing ways of reaching her students, and this did not make her popular with some people who had authority over her. Undeterred she placed her students and their needs first and acted on this belief. This resulted in her asking authority for forgiveness rather than begging for permission - and she had to frequently ask for forgiveness. In her efforts to put her students first, Gruwell would often plead ignorance as to what was allowed by the school and district - and what was not - while at the same time vehemently believing that it is not wrong to fight the good fight, which she knew was the driving force behind her efforts.

Through the teaching of literature with which her students could identify, as well as having her students journal as a way of dealing with their emotions and thoughts, Gruwell was able to transform the lives of both her students and herself. For one of their first excursions, Gruwell's students traveled to Newport Beach one Sunday to view *Schindler's List*. Soon after, her students were checking out books that were not in the curriculum to help satisfy their emerging love for reading. She was both amazed and encouraged how she was able to get the students to bring their parents to an after-school event because they were excited, and they wanted their parents to understand their newfound excitement.

Through her experiences, Gruwell became convinced that every teacher may have the epiphany that students will do things differently if the material being taught is made exciting, relevant, and student-centered. When those "ah-ha moments" were shared about one's

students, then parents and friends have to share in those “ah-ha moments” as well. Often what occurs, according to Gruwell - based upon her experience - is that students then go home and become teachers to whoever listens to them.

Gruwell always had her students write because she saw that as a necessary technique of being a classroom teacher. Also, because she used student journaling; the writing students did promote their thinking and this eventually connected them to their classroom readings. Whether the examples of stories from the books Gruwell chose - such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* or the many other books Gruwell had them read - her students learned that there was power of not just one voice, but also a collective voice. The power of writing, especially when it was a collective experience that involved her students sharing their personal stories, quickly became a focus in Gruwell’s classroom. During the interview she stated that she felt this collective experience was “like this message in a bottle - and having all of the students sitting around and reading that collection of letters made it like reading a book.”

Unbeknownst to them, many of Gruwell’s students were writing to an audience who had faced similar experiences. As they began writing, the students didn’t entertain the thought of having their writings published; they wrote their collective diary because they had something to say and share with each other. However, through their writing, Gruwell’s students (who eventually became known as the Freedom Writers) realized that they shared similar stories, and the writing and sharing of their stories allowed them to identify with others, while having their own personal truths verified and supported.

Maintaining their anonymity – for many, even to this day – Gruwell’s students wrote their stories, and then put them together into a book that was originally designed to be only for them. However, as they shared their personal tragedies, triumphs and hopes anonymously through their journals, the students realized that despite their social and ethnic differences, they were very much alike, and they came together as a “family” with the desire to change the world. “I think that what I anticipated” she stated “is that I wanted my students to love reading and love writing as a way of finding a voice and sharing their own story.”

But as Gruwell and her Freedom Writers gained notoriety and recognition, so did their experiences and writings, which were eventually pitched to Doubleday Publishing, who decided to publish what had become affectionately known between Gruwell and her students as “the little book that could” (Gruwell, 2007, p. 182). However, Gruwell wanted to make sure that her students benefited from their work. One of the agreements she made with Doubleday was that she would help promote the book in any way possible, but the proceeds also had to help further the Freedom Writers’ education: “If the book does well, they can use the money to pay for their college tuition” (Gruwell, 2007, p. 210). Her efforts proved successful; The Freedom Writers’ continued pledge to share their personal testimonies of how they survived the streets of Long Beach - in what they have referred to as an “undeclared war” - have served as stories of hope for other teenagers who face similar struggles.

Teacher Leadership and Advocacy

When Erin Gruwell started teaching, she knew almost nothing of the world of poverty and traumas her students in East Long Beach faced on a daily basis. She quickly realized there were many areas that had not been addressed in her teacher preparation program; she found these omissions to be surprising, especially in today’s society. These included not knowing when or how to fill out or complete a child protective service form. She had not been trained

in such critical issues as suicide watch, or how to gain access to a student who was in the hospital after having attempted suicide. She lacked knowledge of how to bail one of her students out of jail, accompany the student to court, or visit one in juvenile hall. All of those things became a very real part of her job. Based upon her experiences, Gruwell expressed her belief that teacher preparation has needed for a long time to address these issues, a commonplace in today's society.

The potential to become a change agent was actually one of the reasons Erin Gruwell became a teacher, believing that in the truest sense of education, every teacher should strive to be a change agent. She quickly realized other teachers had given up on her students before they were given a chance to succeed. The educational system had long before served as a tool that isolated and discouraged her students, and Gruwell discovered she, too, was a victim of the system: "I had been brainwashed to teach to a test" (McGhee, 2008, p.1). This realization was a powerful one, for even today, she has continued to challenge standardized tests that have forced teachers to teach to a test that often has nothing related to the lives of poor and disadvantaged youth. She shared during our interview that "teachers need to develop into professionals but we are in a system that doesn't trust teachers and forces teachers to be robots reading from scripted lessons." She further stated: "Standardized testing, as the sole measure of student achievement, has taken away passion in teaching, and the child has become a number or a statistic rather than a unique and complex story seeking to develop fully as a human being." Given this belief, Gruwell has continued to view education as the noblest profession. She shared, "Because teachers are planting seeds every day, with every lesson plan, with every part of our curriculum, they are change agents. Part of being a change agent is the ongoing battle with bureaucracy, especially when it comes to test scores."

Gruwell shared through the interview, the belief that networks of support among teachers have needed development, especially in teacher preparation programs. She noted that every teacher needed access to a colleague: "have someone on speed dial who can be your cheerleader." In this era of teaching being so standardized and test-driven, she emphasized the importance of teachers allowing themselves to be vulnerable and "humanize" themselves, whenever possible in front of the students. Having been told by one of her professors not to smile until Christmas, Gruwell remembers that with every smile and every tear she feared she wasn't a good teacher because she was showing her vulnerability. Like many young teachers, she felt she couldn't ask for help, since she would then have to admit that she didn't know what she was doing. However, she learned early on that since teaching is such a humanistic endeavor, the more human one is to one's self, friends, family, and students, the better off one will be. With this in mind, Gruwell highly has advised new teachers to maintain their idealism by "stay[ing] the hell out of a teachers' lounge" (E. Gruwell, personal communication, September 10, 2010) because it is often toxic and can be a very negative place.

The Freedom Writers Foundation and Institute

Gruwell left Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California, when the students she had worked for the previous four years graduated and she began teaching at California State University, Long Beach, in the teacher-credentialing program. She spent several years working with undergraduate students, trying to help them realize the importance of connecting

with their future students once they became teachers. During this time the impetus for the Freedom Writers Institute (FWI) was formed:

A successful businessman [Ric Kayne] had challenged me to see if I could bottle the “secret sauce” of what made our experiences in Room 203 so unique. Mr. Kayne was a venture capitalist and had apparently backed several start-up companies. He bailed businesses out of bankruptcy and helped people manage billion-dollar portfolios. It seemed odd to me that a man of his accomplishments would want to create a nonprofit organization that would help disseminate my teaching methods. He told me he’d had learning disabilities as a child and always sympathized with children who didn’t receive the help that he did, and that’s why he wanted to help me bottle my secret sauce.

Never one to shy away when dared, I rounded up a couple dozen Freedom Writers who would join me in identifying the key ingredients of our success – and then I challenged the businessman to pay for their tuition. When both he and the president agreed to my plan, we were off and running and fighting the good fight together (Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 2009, p. 237-238).

Yet the problems facing public education, especially those issues that appeared more readily in traditionally lower socioeconomic urban schools, have not been eliminated with the success that Gruwell experienced with her students. Rather, those issues have been illuminated, and her efforts with the Freedom Writers, have served as proof that students from all walks of life can be successful – if they are given the chance.

This realization eventually led Gruwell to the creation of the Freedom Writers Institute (FWI), a five-day intensive training program designed to work with teachers from across the United States and Canada in an attempt to help them experience a small taste of what went on in Room 203 at Woodrow Wilson High School. During the Institute, Gruwell has former Freedom Writers come in to speak, share, and work with the teachers as they learn the techniques that Gruwell found to be so successful in her career. In this way, Gruwell has worked with one teacher, one administrator and often one school at a time to effect change.

The Institute has required that teachers apply with only a limited number being accepted, as Gruwell described on the Freedom Writers (2006) website:

[...] Educators must provide information regarding their students, school, and teaching experience. Each applicant is reviewed by the Foundation's Educational Advisory Board and carefully selected so that each session is diversified by region, teaching level and experience. Much like Room 203, each session represents an eclectic microcosm that reflects classrooms nationwide.

Just as she did with her students, Gruwell has supported teachers in the FWI institute in ways that resulted in increased teacher self-efficacy and knowledge of working with diverse students. In our interview she explained why she designed the structure of the FWI in the following manner:

A lot of my university training was being talked at rather than being talked with and being included. So I think a lot of my expectations for becoming a teacher were not fulfilled in classes and really came with on the job training when I became a student teacher.... what I really needed when I got to the classroom was the practice.

Gruwell went on to report the following intended outcomes of the Freedom Writers Institute, as it was designed to capture and allow her to share her so called “secret sauce” with other educators:

I think what’s been so exciting about the Freedom Writers Institute is that everyone walks away having gained some kind of knowledge. Even though I might be guiding the experience and the Freedom Writers may be assisting me, and the teachers are participating, at the end of the day we all walk away having learned something and improved. I love that it’s so organic, and it’s so visceral, and it’s so emotional, and I think that we all gain from the fact that it’s very experiential. It’s not just taking notes, or using a laptop, or studying pedagogy – it comes to life. This is our gift to the world. We are trying to train as many teachers as we can.

Conclusion

Being a leader who has the knowledge and skills to bring about change is essential to the process, according to Trybus (2011). These attributes were apparent throughout the discussion of the background and the interview with Erin Gruwell, along with her passion for helping students from all walks of life, especially those who have been marginalized. Her drive for transformative change hasn’t dimmed since her first days as a student teacher. The ongoing work of Erin Gruwell and the Freedom Writers via the Freedom Writers Institute (FWI) has been proven to be an effective professional development tool. Teachers have been taught various approaches that work with all students, whether gifted, average, at-risk, or in the juvenile detention setting.

A focus on recognizing students as individuals – rather than as potential test scores - with different abilities, capabilities and strengths is renewed, and methods to connect with those students are learned and developed. The FWI can be a powerful and transformative professional development program for educators, which provides teachers, counselors and administrators with techniques that have proven to be effective in not only changing the status quo, but also in helping all students be successful.

In summary, is important that both current and future school administrators support teacher leaders like Erin Gruwell, by working together in challenging the status quo in today’s schools. Being open-minded and listening to ideas, teacher leaders can help school administrators be more effective in their often difficult role. Ideas such as “smaller learning communities” and the philosophy of “saving one student at a time” have echoed in teacher leaders like Erin Gruwell and others. School administrators’ collaboration with their teacher leaders on campus, only increases the odds of more effective solutions coming forth that can help to improve academic achievement.

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