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In the Classroom: Pedagogy to Activate Student Voices



by José Luis Vilson

“We need to give students the ability to activate their own voice, to speak up, and create spaces for them to solve problems that we may not be able to see as adults.”

As far as the election is concerned, I’ve always felt that we were having to do the work regardless. There was always a sense of creating a path for equity, for access for true integration, for true understanding of what the work needed to be for all of us in our schools and in our democracy. What the election result highlighted for me, however, is that we definitely need to create broader senses of coalition among many different peoples, whether they be Native American people at Standing Rock, or the Black Lives Matter Movement or our Dreamers – anyone who has been disenfranchised. These are the folks who we need to start building coalitions with, because we need to create a government that suggests that everyone is included, not just for a small percentage, but for every single body in America.



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IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT VOICES

Some of the things that I think need to happen as a result of this election is giving students the ability to activate their own voice, to speak up, and create spaces for them to solve problems that we may not be able to see as adults. The thing about adults is that we do suffer from what I call a “severe case of adultism,” where we often feel like we have to be the only ones who have the solutions, instead of trying to develop people intergenerationally to be able to lead and to work within our communities, so we can truly create a space that is for us, by us, about us. That matters a lot in terms of trying to build broader coalitions not just across racial groups, but also along intergenerational groups.

I also believe that we need to concentrate not just on policy for our public schools, but also on pedagogy. The way that we interact with our students and build relationships – not just through the social-emotional piece, though that’s a big component, but also through academics. We have to make sure that all of our students can find ways to learn, and the ways that they learn best, and have a path towards their own successes – help them develop their own channels for being successful in their own ways.

I think for many of the students who I have been blessed to serve – that includes English language learners, that includes my Muslim students, that includes even the Polish and Irish students who I’ve taught who hear the anti-immigration, xenophobic rhetoric – they don’t necessarily feel like America is theirs. So, in my classroom, we have to have the conversation around what it means to be a full participant in this republic, in this democracy.

“Pushed Out of School for Being Me”: New York City’s Struggle to Include Youth and Community Voices in School Discipline Reform

JOSÉ LUIS VILSON, FILMED AT THE COALITION FOR ESSENTIAL SCHOOLS
FORUM IN PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, ON DECEMBER 2, 2016.

I had a myriad of interactions on November 9. There was a class, 702, that is a hodgepodge of different backgrounds and cultures – Central and South American students, from Mexico, from all over the place, all over the continent of Africa. So, I have a few folks who are Muslim, Christian, et cetera. On that day, we had to have a simmer-down of different content conversations, because it really became more about what the devastation might have felt like to their brothers, to their sisters, to their parents, whether immigration statuses were threatened now.

Of course, two weeks prior to that, I had a conversation in that particular class, and that class was the first class that said, “We don’t like this candidate because he’s racist; he’s sexist; he is xenophobic; he’s got all these issues with Muslims. They were more ready to point those issues out than mainstream media at times is. And when you have a situation like that, it’s like – yes, the children are alright. They’re going to be fine, because they’re activated in that way. But then to see that someone like that could then be elected says a lot about how my students then see America at large. Like, they have this awakening now, and we have not yet pushed back against all those things that isolate and disenfranchise our least empowered students. And that’s a problem.

COMPLEXITY OF LOCAL ISSUES

I think when you look at America at large, I believe that two-thirds of the State Houses are how Republican, and all of the governors are White. So, when students are looking at the statehouses, they’re like, “Oh snap! How can I feel included in this?” And then we also have to understand too with the electoral map, that whether that urban district is heavily populated or not can determine a blue state. So, New York State wouldn’t be as blue without places like New York City, Syracuse, Buffalo and Albany. Without those big urban districts, unfortunately, the rest of the state is red. So, that’s when things get really complicated, and then you have to have the conversation how our Republic was founded. It gets more complicated than just saying red or blue and numbers of electoral votes, et cetera. The down-ticket elections also matter, and really we have great opportunities to activate – because the mayors, the state representatives, they’re the ones who get access immediately and they get to be our proponents if you know how to organize well, and get our issues to the floor.

SPACE FOR ACTIVISM AND HOPE

My students give me hope on a daily basis, because they're a lot more in tune and a lot more frank than a lot of adults are. Because adults – we have these things that hold us back: bills, taxes, our families that we have to take care of. And that often makes us a little bit more conservative and less activist than the kids would be. Versus kids, they would just say, “This is what we're doing now. I believe in this and we're going to make this happen. And all I need is for adults to either support me or get out the way.”

But then I also think about the adults who are still doing this work, people who have been doing this work for ages and keep plugging away, my colleagues who are constantly pushing the agenda of trying to rehumanize our kids and work within the most difficult places to help our kids get better at what they do.

So, I just think overall there is a space for movement, for constantly moving people towards building broader coalitions of people who are concerned about what's happening in this country. So, that gives me hope on a daily basis – having this conversation with folks.

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