

Christensen's perspective helped me translate Dr. Irvine's analysis and Nancy Mohr's questions into practice that can help kids. I hope that by contextualizing the analysis of how and why their literacy strategies are keys to student success, I can add the missing dimension of explicit student empowerment to my conversations and work with teachers. I believe that the added dimension, which links literacy with the power dynamics in our society, is the key to student engagement and success.

I will continue reading the contributions of Dr. Irvine and other educator-researchers of color as I work to develop the lens of my "third eye," for the clarity of what the third eye sees depends on regular collaboration, reflection, and change in my practice.

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Education as the Practice of Freedom

by Camilla Greene

The academy is not a paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The Classroom, with all of its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.

—bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*

Many educators are committed to serving urban youth—the students ignored by the current public system—but how many educators believe in teaching their students to view education as, to use bell hook's phrase, the "practice of freedom"? Evidently they do not, and I fear the consequences.

As an external coach in schools and school districts, I have been engaged the past few years in a variety of transformational initiatives, mostly in urban areas and mostly in high schools. The Gates High School

Transformation initiative in urban areas stresses personalized teacher-student relationships in small schools and small classrooms—in effect a new paradigm of teaching and learning. Consequently, it has been disheartening to visit newly established small urban high schools and find that, more often than not, they model not the practice of freedom, but the practice of continued domination and control by adults.

Something is amiss here. Urban educators, mainstream and non-mainstream alike, are practicing oppressive discipline over students least served by the education system. Doubtless those educators have learned to teach the required subject matter to willing students, yet they have not learned to transform the behavior of unwilling students.

Learning to transform student behavior requires more than mastering the pedagogy of teaching content, and it does not occur overnight: it is instead a journey of realization. It is a journey informed and shaped by an unshakable belief in the humanity and dignity of each student, a journey that requires adults to suspend and examine previously held assumptions and expectations about students viewed as “others” through racial or national heritage, historical oppression, or socioeconomic status. The challenge is to engage urban students in meaningful curriculum and learning experiences that center and motivate students to make sense of their lives. The content and the process of education should allow learners to see how they can shape another reality without compromising what they value as members of non-dominant cultures, whether Haitian, Vietnamese, African, Caribbean, Latino, or any of dozens of others.

Standing alone, the challenge and the necessary journey are only abstractions: a manifesto without substance and a metaphor without meaning. To put them to use, one must ask: What does education as the practice of freedom mean, and what would such a practice look like and sound like in our newly formed small urban high schools? The answer lies at the end of that journey of realization.

My own journey encompassed several years as an English teacher in urban high schools. I found that reaching urban teenagers disengaged from the educational process depended on developing relationships with them. Early on, I learned that the professional learning community, which is so valuable in working with other educators, could serve as the model for a reciprocal learning community in my classroom.

Getting to know my students as unique individuals was one of many joys I found in teaching. Using what I gained from getting to know each student helped me develop strategies to encourage more empowered, authentic learners. To know each of my students well, the students and I had to co-construct a sense of community. Early in the school year our learning community established the ideas we could learn from each

other, and we all brought our strengths and weaknesses to our community. They became the foundation of our learning.

Engaging students in learning meant helping each one find a voice in a supportive community that focused on learning. In each learning situation we struggled with how we wanted to be treated and how to treat others. We took time to resolve conflicts and learn from them. Together we established rituals and routines for establishing, maintaining, and expanding our learning community.

Crucial to developing a sense of community in the English classroom was the power of the circle. Sitting in a circle, we became a community that broke the hierarchy of desks and rows; we were all facing one another and we were all equal. We viewed the circle as a necessary format and platform for establishing an emotionally safe and nurturing climate. In our discussions we talked a lot about metacognition. We regularly debriefed and evaluated our learning performances. We learned to ask questions of ourselves, each other, and the curriculum. Often the questions were similar to those used by Deborah Meier in the Central Park East learning environment (*The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* [Beacon Press, 1996]): For whom is this important? Who benefits? On the metacognitive level we asked: How will I know when I know? It was also crucial that my students learn how to give me feedback about my performances and interactions with them.

Because we had established a professional learning community, my students taught me how to challenge the genius within each of them. They taught me how to channel their often-negative energy into positive energy that advanced our learning community. Students no longer wanted to miss class, because their presence had become an integral part of the learning environment. Nor did they want to be late: something that mattered to them was going to occur. I taught myself and them how to ask essential, probing questions. We grappled with formulating high-order thinking questions and used them to engage in Socratic seminars and text-based discussions, conceive and construct projects, explore the world of possibilities, and develop action plans for learning and expanding our horizons.

When students could speak their truths without fearing putdowns, ridicule, or retribution, and with their permission and help, teens who once might have set fires in the bathrooms were transformed into teens who used education to confront, address, and resolve their issues non-violently.

We have a choice as we transform large urban high schools into autonomous small high schools. Either we unconsciously replicate the schools we now have, or we consciously take on the challenge of education as the practice of freedom: with our students we co-construct

“the paradise” of possibilities in a small school, in small classrooms where teachers, parents, communities, and students mutually thrive.

To those who would teach in our urban high schools—teach to transform the students, not just cover the curriculum—I say, “Your job, should you decide to accept it, is to touch the spirit and the humanness of each urban teenager and channel that spirit to engage in positive ways with learning and academic excellence.”

The journey through the co-construction of learning and discipline practices is not for the faint of heart. Often the harsh realities of the students’ lives will intrude, or something said or done with the best intentions will cause offense. If we truly want to teach those the current public system has not served, we must not ignore places of discomfort.

Discipline is a prerequisite to success, but discipline cannot consist of behavioral constraints oppressively imposed. Discipline must be an individual choice to do the right thing for the sake of the whole and for the sake of developing the individual learner as a critical thinker. If educators achieve the trust of their students—trust that can be accomplished by engaging them in a professional learning community—constructive discipline will result. But if they impose the kind of discipline found in schools as we know them today, the result will be schools as we know them today, only smaller.

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Creating Moral Schools: The Enabling Potential of Critical Friends Groups

by Bruce Law

Can a school—the institution, rather than the people who compose the institution—be moral? I believe the answer is yes, and further, that educators are in a position to create moral schools. In fact, I believe that the fundamental challenge for school leaders today lies not in declining budgets, higher standards, and uncertain graduation outcomes but in creating a moral purpose for their schools. In this essay, I hope to illustrate how Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) can serve as vehicles for moral leaders to create moral schools.

Ordinarily, we apply the concept of morality to individuals. We say that individuals are moral to the extent they choose a course of action