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Working to Make Learning Work in an Inner-City Classroom

Kevin La Plante

When I leave school in the evenings after having coached basketball practice, I always scan the empty parking lot before I drift too far away from the metal door that locks when it slams shut. Fortunately, I have never had a dangerous incident, only annoying reminders of crime such as the theft of my hubcaps and license plate, but the fear is a constant companion.

My fear is justified, considering the tumultuous surroundings. Even though I am a respected teacher while inside the school's walls, I am a stranger to these streets. On more than one occasion I have walked to my car, stared at a brilliant sunset smearing its fading color against downtown's skyscrapers, only to hear the pop of gunshots somewhere down the block. I grow uneasier proportionate to the diminishing light of day.

Working in the City

I teach at the Dewey Center for Urban Education in Detroit. The school rests in the shadows of the Jeffries' Housing Project, and painful reminders of our city's decay defiantly stand against all the good I, along with my dedicated colleagues, try to accomplish from 8:30 until 5:00. Images of poverty, crime, and violence pollute the landscape. Signs of despair and misery are flocked together in greater numbers than the hoard of pigeons I drive through on my bumpy, pot-holed trek out of the Cass Corridor.

No matter how disturbing the vista, my comfort level grows when I hear the click of my car's locks. About this time I realize that I am able to leave this spot. I drive to a relatively safe, well-kept, middle-class neighborhood. My biggest concerns here are reduced to when I will find the time to cut the grass, shovel the walk, or get the trash to the curb.

I have the freedom and means to leave a neighborhood that more closely resembles a war-torn nation than the onetime prosperous auto capital. Yet, my students remain trapped in this neighborhood.

At the very least, they must learn to deal with their environment if they wish to survive. And remarkably, many want to do more than survive; they want to live, to work hard, to dream. It is this hope, determination, and brilliance, above all, that guarantees I will return the next day with a positive attitude, ready to do the best I can, regardless of the daily catastrophes.

On my drive home I pass a young man, a student of mine, who also plays for the team I coach. He will have to catch two city buses and spend more than an hour "commuting" home, covering a distance of a little over five miles. I will fly along freeways, tunnels of concrete intended to transport travelers through the city without requiring them to confront it, and I will be home in

a comfortable house and be greeted by a beautiful family in about 25 minutes.

I lightly toot the horn; he looks up from the large bundle of clothes that reveal only the shadows of his brown face. He recognizes me in my warm car, and his head surfaces from the confines of his hood like a periscope breaks water. He waves by throwing his right arm up into the air with one single, deliberate motion. I watch our smiles meet. His disappears before my car has passed. I think how strange his smile looked, so unlike the solemn, tough stare he usually wears when he walks the city streets. His eyes return to a more defensive watch; he clenches and I see the outline of his jaw. I watch as he disappears into the shadows, kept alive by broken streetlights. He steadily moves to his bus stop down the street.

. . . many want to do more than survive; they want to live, to work hard, to dream.

I think about him and the others for a while over the chatter of some sports talk-show on the radio. I think about class tomorrow, ways I can teach better, and lessons that are more likely to motivate the students. I am sad about the condition of this city. I even can deduce cool, objective reasons for the dismantling of an industrial powerhouse. I become enraged when I dwell on the lives of many of my students. In some cases, I want to strangle parents who neglect and abuse their children. As for others, I applaud the courage and strength of parents who set good examples, wanting for their children what any parent wants—a healthy and bright future.

Frustrations from Inside and Outside

In other social circles, away from the city, I want to punch my white counterparts in the nose when they flaunt their racism and bigoted jokes around me because they think I am somehow one of them. I scream at the TV when I hear politicians feed off of the fear and ignorance that has plagued this nation since its inception. I turn a cynical shoulder when I am reminded of yet another inept

bureaucracy that wastes money or refuses to spend it wisely on our greatest resource and responsibility—our children. I laugh at a school district that mandates the curriculum I teach, even requiring that I showcase slick posters in my room outlining the “goals and objectives” in a language and a reality light-years away from the actual student body. Our district’s top-heavy administration values flash over substance. I am expected to teach a curriculum without adequate books and supplies. Our General Superintendent preaches “clean and safe schools” as a main priority, but I must purchase even the toilet paper and tissue for my students.

With all of the frustrations, corruption, and inequity smacking me and my students in the face every day, it would be easy to give up. In order to avoid burn-out or a serious bout of depression, who would blame me if I fell into the pattern of many urban teachers? “Try to leave the problems at school. Try not to let it get to you. Do what you can. Remember, we can’t save them all.”

Probably the greatest ill that can infect poor people is for them to accept their condition as normal, or the way life just is and always must be. As for a social ill, when we, the middle class, become hardened by the tragedy, flip the channels to another newscast, the situation worsens immensely.

I recognize that these are coping mechanisms necessary on some levels to preserve sanity and a trace of order, but on the flip side, this indifference only perpetuates the problem. I have vowed that I will not be a member of the silent, do-nothing majority. If it’s wrong, I will say something about it, and if possible, I will take steps to improve the situation. As a teacher I do not expect my students to follow my rallying cry, but if they decide they wish to act, then I owe it to them to equip them with the skills, literacy, and knowledge to get the job done right.

Curriculum writers often create wonderful curriculum on paper, but sometimes forget that teachers cannot teach any kind of curriculum in isolation chambers any more than they can teach anything that is meaningful in isolation. The world is inextricably connected to parts that feed off of each other, each gear spinning off the other. I have not set out on a crusade to instill any

specific political beliefs in my students. I do not wish to create a mold to cast “right-thinking” young people who can spout the line. However, I do want them to learn to think and act for themselves. While I acknowledge the complicated system of gears that keeps our society running, I also know the machine is brutal and unforgiving. If not unlearned, the cycle of poverty will continue, and many of my students will be crushed in the machine or held prisoners in ghettos.

In other words, the total picture is what my class is all about. I am very fortunate to have the same group of students for a three- to four-hour block of time everyday in which I teach them language arts, literature, and social studies. Along the way we throw in “Life 101” and get to know each other in profound ways. Probably, the main reason my students and I have formed a relatively successful academic relationship is because we are about half-school, half-family. This close, care-giving community fosters the risk-taking and self-esteem vital to any project that seeks to enrich a life and offer more than dutiful marks in the book for the mandatory grades. I cannot underscore this enough—a teacher truly must care about his/her students in order for serious learning to take place, and this feeling cannot be faked. Ask the students, they are impeccable judges of honesty.

Students Write About Their Lives

A couple of years ago I was asked to become a participant in a unique learning experience. The Bingham Trust awarded a major grant to a group of college instructors at The University of Michigan, Michigan State University, and The University of Wisconsin. Bingham Trust decided they would fund a cutting-edge project that aimed at increasing the literacy skills of students across the country while fostering improved self-reliance. This project is named “Write For Your Life,” and, in many ways, the title was meant to be literal.

Through a collaborative effort between university and public school teachers and researchers, the premise was revealed: What if students write about the issues that truly impact their lives, particularly meaningful health issues?

Doesn't it follow that their abilities to read, write, and think critically would be enhanced because of the heightened student interest?

I thought I had an answer to the question right away. Of course, students would do better. In fact, this had been my approach in the classroom already, I just didn't offer a snappy presentation, complete with educational jargon and theory to justify my approach. I always invited students to write and research about important issues in their own lives. With the added resources that the grant would provide, along with the support from an amazingly talented team of caring professionals, I figured the results would be only positive.

What if students write about the issues that truly impact their lives, particularly meaningful health issues?

I came back inspired from our first retreat and brainstorming session. Once again, my dream of saving the world, or at least a small chunk of it, was restored. I tailored a few writing assignments that would help my students focus on as broad a spectrum of health-related topics as possible. I found that when I gave prompts like, “write about what you see on your way to school or describe an unhealthy time in your life,” the themes and issues poured out so intensely that the possibility of turning off the faucet, even if I had wanted to, quickly became as difficult as demanding that teenagers not talk when they get together.

Over the first couple of years, we came up with some fantastic research topics and projects on cutting-edge issues such as gangs and violence, teenage pregnancy, the effects of popular music on young people, racism, AIDS, gender equity. The list sounded like a “who's-who” of social problems.

I gave my kids these words of encouragement and warning: “For your research, most of you will not be able to consult the traditional sources. At best, you might get a couple of magazine articles. Because of the unique angles many of you are using to approach your topics, there might not be

any books out there. You will have to conduct interviews, field surveys, research overlapping topics, go directly to primary sources, and dig deep. In short, many of you will have to write the first books on your specific topic."

What followed was just that: A maze of information and a frenzy of energy that resulted in writing and book production. These student products spoke volumes about what a group of students could do if inspired. While not every paper was magnificent, every paper was the best that that student had ever written, bar none. Many of the young researchers discovered that they had to answer their own questions, or worse yet, maybe conclude that at this point, there weren't any good answers out there. Even the frustrations were helpful.

Many of the students felt it was important to hear from other young people. When a few groups decided they would research gangs, the students quickly discovered that they were not limited to the traditional authoritative texts. In a gang survey they asked peers in other "Write For Your Life" classrooms about the roles gangs play in their communities. After they analyzed the results, they wrote reflection papers based upon their own personal experiences as well as the lives of other students that they researched.

One student in particular captured the complexity of this issue without succumbing to it. Sandra wrote with an understanding not clouded by years of over-theorizing. Sandra wrote what she knows and what she means.

"I learned that all gangs are not bad, and not all people join gangs because of their parents or what goes on at home. I agree that gangs are a problem in our community, but the communities are sick, too. Gangs only can live so well because of this sickness."

"I know someone who called himself a 'gangbanger.' He lived it everyday. He had his reasons, but he was down with his set. Yes, he would die for his colors, but how many soldiers have died for a flag in history? It's not that different. Anyway, the gangbanging caught up to him. He got busted and now he's in jail. He's not even eighteen years old and his life already is messed up. It's not fair, but it's the way it is."

In a way, I'm scared of gangs. In a way, I'm not. Some gangs don't care who they shoot, stick-up, or hurt. Then again, there are a lot of gangs who try not to hurt civilians or innocent children. It all depends."

On top of the research papers, the class produced some of the most powerful fiction, poetry, and narrative writing I have been associated with at any level, including college creative writing courses that I taught. The kids published books that made adults, even strangers, cry when they read the words. Others laughed at the humor and the "tell it like it is" attitude the students used to convey their points. We had demands on our publications that would make a bookstore take notice. The more people read their words, the more heads shook in disbelief. Frequently, I heard the murmuring, "I can't believe these are eighth graders."

I never knew what would appear on each new page of student writing. When I asked the students to write about their walk to school, Marco wrote willingly. He was eager to revise his piece and get it ready for publication. Finally, this reluctant writer had something to contribute. It was hard for me to concentrate on editing suggestions, commas, and spelling. All I wanted to do was cry. Marco wrote:

"When I come to school I see a junky neighborhood. I live in the Projects. Back in the day the Projects used to be nice, or at least that's what all the 'OG's' tell me. Maybe one day it will be nice again, but it's got a long way to go."

"When I come to school I fear that something could happen to my younger sister. I fear some crazy person will come and try something. I walk her to school everyday. She's only seven years old. I will die for my sister because I love her. I have lived to be eight already, she has not. I know how it feels to be eight. She don't right now. So that's what I fear when I come to school, and that's what I see when I come to school."

As I workshopped this piece with Marco, I didn't ask him why he cast a different slant on the prompt when he wrote, "So that's what I fear when I come to school." I think I knew the answer, and I didn't want to embarrass this kid who devoted so

much of his energy to being tough. I respected him and that was that.

However, in that last paragraph when he wrote, "I will die for her" I wondered if he had confused his verb tenses. I suggested he switch it to the conditional and write "would" instead of "will." He looked at me with a strange look on his face and didn't say a word. I assumed the look was confusion, so I tried to "teach" the mini-lesson from a different angle. After a few futile attempts he finally clarified my confusion. He looked me in the eyes with one of the most serious stares I have ever encountered. Marco said, "Mr. La Plante, I know what I meant. I mean I 'will' die for her." Once again, that was that.

One of the most surprising developments was how many young men wrote poetry, although they refused to call it that. I struggled with delineation, but most wanted to keep the words in the standard block form of prose. No matter the form, the poetic power often leveled me.

One of my favorite students, Dan, a tall, athletic, bad-ass, wrote some of the most moving and sensitive work in the bunch. Here is an example of his poetic prowess in prose form, of course, the way he likes it. Dan has his own style.

"On my five-time journey to school, I see pretty much the same thing. Faces are confused, blurred into the same scene. Footprints to buildings and the hour clock that rings are at my back. I'm late, but I don't hurry. I find patches of grass trying to peak over the snow, blades that want to show their beauty. The cement is rough just like the people. A dog barks, I bark back ... inside. Barking gives way to cries. Cries heard and tears running ... running from children who fell."

The persuasive, emotional, and eloquent writing took its toll. There were some stress-related issues here, and I wasn't always equipped to deal with the Pandora's Box effect, but I did my best to put on all the hats teachers are expected to wear.

The Social Action Approach

Last year, I decided early on that I didn't want our primary focus to be limited to an examination of open wounds or the scars memory has hidden. Even though tragedy makes for great material, it

can be pretty bleak. Plus, I wanted the students to do something with their knowledge and ideas. I bought into the service-learning philosophy, as well as the knowledge-into-social-action course, and we were off on a range of projects that aimed to make our corner of the world a little better place.

One of the most surprising developments was how many young men wrote poetry, although they refused to call it that.

Students formed groups, created project proposals, wrote grants for funding, devised roles and timelines, and managed their projects at every level. The implementation was rewarding to be sure, but it frazzled my patience. We had Peer Mediation (Conflict Resolution), School Beautification (Landscape and Paint), Tutoring, and Recycling all going on at once. Somehow we pulled it off, even documented and reflected upon our efforts, but never again—it was too much for me. One class, one project from now on. Not every project worked itself out like the students had drawn it up in the blueprints, but then again, dealing with those snafus and obstacles is a major lesson in life. If nothing else, every student walked away from the year with a living example of how a good idea, some hard work, and a dedicated team can make a difference.

Looking For a New Way

As for this year, the wheels that spin out great projects and research questions sort of fell off. I probably have one of the most loving groups I've ever had. They love to write poems, adventures, and science-fiction type explorations. They are extremely curious about history, government, and how things work. They love to talk and discuss, but there wasn't much in terms of a unified theme or issue coming from our writing. Everything seemed scattered, forced, or worse yet, the kids wanted to learn about everything. In short, there was no passion driving a quest, an awesome idea that would keep us interested with

a semester-long unit. We dabbled with “Equity In Education” as a topic, but to their credit, most concluded the fire was not strong enough to produce a major body of work.

I was stuck with a difficult question, myself: What happens in an inquiry-based, student-centered, theme-oriented classroom when there are no questions of consequence? Of course, the students would respond to my prompts such as “How can we make the world a better place?” But for the most part, there was little impetus that would propel a unit.

I debated my role as teacher. Should I let them muddle around with the prospect of designing curriculum some more, or should I take over the helm and steer the unit to my desired destination? I did a little of both.

As the qualified professional, I constantly evaluate our theme studies to make sure the unit covers the necessary curriculum strands and learning objectives. In addition, I enhance the units or broaden them to include areas the students wouldn’t think of without the prior knowledge I bring to the fold. In many cases, this building method involves history, literature sources, learning activities, or other pieces of information that support and compliment our unit. Still, I wanted student input. I recognize the essential need for authentic student voices if the unit is to take off and really soar. I do not want our units to be bound to the same boring standards we all have suffered through at some point in our school experiences—standards that ground our imagination and passion.

The solution was to go back to our writing. I had students review their own journals, as well as those of their classmates, in small groups. We listed some of the issues that stuck out as important. In addition, we consulted an earlier survey we did as a class called, “Look What’s Up.” This survey examined the impact popular culture, sports, TV, music, the movies, the media, and our environments play on our attitudes, personalities, and values about life.

This exercise of revisiting some earlier work was fun; we even reminisced a bit, but once again, we had a list of just about everything under the fluorescent lights. Finally, a talkative, free-think-

ing student (typically classified as a problem child) offered invaluable words of wisdom as I struggled to force themes, seemingly trying to pound square pegs into round holes. What we did was make the round holes a little bigger so they would accept the square pegs with room to spare. The student said, “Mr. La Plante, it looks like we’re talking about everything. I mean, this is society, ain’t it?”

Brilliant. Talk about not being able to see the forest through the trees. I wasn’t even seeing the trees through the leaves. I let her words be the last ones for the day, and as the students filed out, I sensed a rush of excitement that wasn’t there a few minutes before. I thought about the matter more that night. I knew many of my students love using the powers of imagination, so why not encourage them to design their own future society?

Over the year I had not prodded my students to write about any sad moments in their lives; the ones that did share the hard times chose to do so. I believe that writing indeed can serve as a therapeutic force, but that sometimes we deal with emotional pain in healthy ways that do not require us to stare starkly into the mirror. Building a future society grants us distance to examine the troublesome issues of our day in concrete ways without drudging up and reliving every nightmare.

After we agreed that we would build a three-dimensional model of our future city, complete with all the components necessary to run any city, the ideas became contagious.

When I shared my idea of the future society with the class, I received my first indication that most of the students felt pretty pumped about an idea for a unit. After we agreed that we would build a three-dimensional model of our future city, complete with all the components necessary to run any city, the ideas became contagious. Why not focus on Detroit? At this point, the unit

became communal. As a group we decided what we would do, and I added my "teacher concern" when necessary.

The unit is still evolving even as I write this article. It has taken on a life of its own. Just today our recently-elected classroom City Council worked with the classroom City Planner and Mayor to produce a working proposal to rectify the problem of vacant buildings in our city. This came about because one student said she is tired of looking at all the "ghetto buildings." Another commented that these broken-down eyesores not only make our city look bad, they're unsafe. Drugs, rape, and arson are but a few of the activities common to these crime centers.

Where will this unit end? We intend to present our model of a "Revived Detroit" to Mayor Archer and other leaders at the end of the year along with our written recommendations. Additionally, we will paint a mural that will not only cover up some gang graffiti on the school's external walls but will depict our vision of a thriving Detroit that includes what's good about our city currently. When areas such as crime, education, the environment, politics, business, housing, transportation, and parks are thrown into the mix of our future society, the educational advan-

tages become obvious: Students will become better readers and writers, and more importantly, better citizens.

I know it's fashionable to claim we want students to be "empowered." I'm not sure all the powers-that-be really want an empowered, literate, educated under-class of poor children, but I do. I fully believe the only way we can empower people is to teach them to help themselves and then help others: A unit like "Revive Detroit" aims to accomplish that goal.

That should be enough, but it's not. I love these kids in much the same way that I love my own daughter. In so many ways my goal is to just be there for them, to be a constant care-giver, to provide a sanctuary from the crap they must deal with once they leave the school. If I am successful I want their school experience to be safe and "normal." By normal I mean I want them to reclaim and grab onto the last remaining threads of a childhood that is unmercifully taken from so many inner-city children. Childhood innocence and feelings of security are illusions for too many, a part of the make-believe world of TV land. If nothing else, I fervently hope that my students continue to believe in their dreams and fight to make them come true.