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SUM 301

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Teaching Philosophy

I have been a student in the classroom for almost 16 years of my life and in that time I have been taught by over 50 teachers and professors. Having spent this much time in education, as many people do, creates a lasting effect on the way that you view learning and teaching. In many ways, it affects the way that students interact with the world, the way they think, and how they form their opinions. Education at every stage is precious, delicate, and impactful and it must be treated that way. For many people, there was an experience in the classroom paired with a possible experience outside of the classroom that lead them to where they are now.

For me, the things that have always stuck out in my classrooms were the conversations around injustice. Injustice surrounding all people, although specifically people who look like me, Black people. I remember in 6th grade, the topic of slavery was skated over by my social studies teacher and how much he swore that the Civil War was based on the issue of states' rights. At this point, not much outside of my home had been explained to me about the Civil War specifically. Because of this, when I went home, I told my mother about what I had learned and regurgitated to her what my teacher had said to me. She was shocked, but explained to me that that was not the case and asked me to think about "the state's rights to do what exactly?".

Reflecting and questioning why I would choose to believe something that I now know could not possibly be the truth, I realized that so much of what I learned in school up until that point were things that I considered fact, things that were not debated so when my teacher taught our class

that it was a matter unaffected by race or enslavement, there was no reason for me not to believe him. At any point in my education, although specifically before high school, I was so impressionable. The simplest things had an impact.

As long as I have been able to remember, I have been passionate about fighting worldly injustices. I often credit this to my parents, specifically my mother. They both taught me that when you can help someone that you do. While they were speaking on an individual basis, it did not stop there. Watching the news and seeing constant turmoil and injustice across the country, but our government failing to help. Seeing my family's city of New Orleans destroyed by Hurricane Katrina and many being failed by the same people who promised to help them. Seeing many Black people murdered by the police, the same people that swore to protect them. Constantly, we are surrounded by injustices and promises that have been left unfilled and broken and it is hard to watch and feel as though there is nothing that you can do. I felt this way for a long time that all I wanted was to do something, but I had no idea where to start.

In my 10th grade year of high school, my English teacher¹, Ms. Thompson, announced that she would show the documentary, *the 13th*, from Ava DuVernay after school. She encouraged all of us to come to her classroom and see it. The documentary detailed many injustices and unfair laws that before, of which I was only vaguely aware. The film documented the unfair treatment of Black people in America specifically in regards to the 13th amendment and the prison industrial complex. One piece of this puzzle that historians and activists harped on was the effect that the criminalization of drugs had on black people and people in low income communities. To further this point, they included a clip from a republican administration describing their political strategy in criminalizing crack cocaine and marijuana. The plan was to

¹ For privacy reasons and out of respect to her, I have renamed her something else although I believe she deserves all the recognition I could possibly give her.

heavily associate anti-war ‘hippies’ and Black people with marijuana and crack cocaine, respectively, and then heavily criminalize both. This hammered on something that I had always assumed, but that many injustices that were supported by law were for nothing other than political benefit. The documentary was extremely impactful and I vividly remember leaving the room with tears running down my face and continuing to cry once I got home. But once I was able to calm down and reflect on *the 13th*, I was able to realize what the film had done for me. Besides illuminating the structures of the prison system, the documentary gave me something concrete to work on, laws surrounding drugs and the prison industrial complex, rather than the larger idea of ‘lessening injustices and promoting equality’ that I had planned since I was younger.

When I was a junior in high school, my grandfather passed away. This was very upsetting, but one thing that I appreciated during that experience was that Ms. Thompson allowed me to sit in her classroom while I waited for one of my other teachers and offered to speak to that teacher with me about taking a test later in the week. This was already more than I could ask for her, but later that week at my grandfather’s funeral, I was very surprised to find her there and when she greeted and hugged me, I could not help but to start crying. While this a lot to ask of every teacher, I think that it is important that every student feel as though there is someone who they have this level of trust and comfort with in their school.

Later in the school year, I remember Ms. Thompson sharing with us once after a traumatic, racial event that happened at our school about how every Black student (and many others) look to her and how she does her best to advocate but that she can only do it for so long. We knew that having no else doing the same thing in a school of 1000 kids was wearing her thin. As students, we wanted to do our best for her and we wanted the best for her, but we were also

worried about who we would go to if she left. Our questions were of her wellness and we wondered why no one in administration listened to her or listened to us. While these were all great concerns, another question that we should have been asking was why did many of the teachers fail to support her or us? Or why did we not feel as comfortable going to our other teachers with our issues outside of the classroom? This may have had something to do with race as she was the only African American teacher in the entire school, but in many ways I think that it went further than that. We simply were not comfortable in our other classrooms and while a classroom is a place for learning, so much outside of the classroom affects a student's ability to do well that it is important that students feel as though they can speak with their teachers.

Many of the experiences that I have outlined thus far inform the ways in which I think about the classroom, but also how I plan to move forward in my own life. There are many things that are a standard that we must learn in the classroom such as addition, how to read critically, or the formation of the American government, but there is much more outside of that that contributes to the classroom and its impact on students. The classroom is where students spend the majority of their day and in my own experience is most conducive when students feel as though they are in a welcoming environment. This can be created by something as simple as the policies on the syllabus.

In my future classrooms, I plan to reflect this even in my policies such as my late policy which allows for students to ask for an extension with out any reasons as long as they provide me with notice at 24 hours before the due date. This is something that I learned from a past professor of mine. This helps to get students in the habit of reaching out to their professors and fosters healthy communication in the classroom. Because learning is a team effort and is not only up to the student or the teacher, it is important that clear and welcomed communication is something

that is encouraged. Similarly to my own past experiences in the classroom informing my future ones, students time in my classroom could be an opportunity for better interactions with other classrooms in the future. Policies such as this one also help to create an effective classroom that is inclusive. Many students may not be familiar with the idea that communication with their professor is encouraged or in many cases necessary because of lack of experience with college. It could also be helpful for students to have multiple opportunities and methods to ask for help.

I think that in many ways that the mindset that a learning environment should work for the students can be supported by bell hooks' *Teaching Community* (2003) chapter "Democratic Education". In this chapter she talks about the importance of fostering hope in the classroom. In a section of this chapter dedicated to hooks' idea of "radical openness", she explains that during her time as an educator, she has seen many students excited to learn lose this excitement because of their experiences in the classroom (hooks, 2003, p. 48). This idea is vital to my understanding of optimal types of education. Connecting this idea with that of my career aspirations, for most of my life, I was unsure how I would reach the vague goal of "bettering the world and fighting injustice", however, through the introduction of a documentary that focused on my community, I found an avenue. While this is a simplified version and example of what can result from hooks' radical openness, it is a successful rendering of the effect and importance that diverse material and subject matter can have on students. For many others, the documentary was educational, but for some of us it was transformative as to how we thought about our future. This experience highlights so many different aspects of the classroom that I hope to promote and that hooks mentioned in her chapter.

Furthermore, hooks discusses the importance of pluralism in the classroom. She quotes Judith Simmer-Brown who states that, "pluralism is a commitment to communicate with the

larger world-with a very different neighbor, or a distant community,” (hooks, 2003, p. 47). Hooks continues this thought by saying that in terms of education diversity is not always resisted while pluralism is. For me, this translates into subject matter and the authors and people that are studied in class. Without the exposure to the documentary, as well as other readings and authors, I am not sure that I would be as set on my goals. Further, it is not only that I was able to take in these materials, but also that the opportunity was given to me. Additionally, in order to promote the pluralism that hooks highlights in contrast with regular understandings of diversity, it is important to that diversity is reflected in the course material which aids in a pluralistic classroom.

This concept lends itself to my considerations of diversity, equity, and inclusivity in the classroom. As a student, regardless of the material, I constantly find myself excited to read and discuss authors from my communities. However, in middle school and high school, the only times that I and my other classmates were required to read Black authors was in relation to three situations: Black history month, enslavement, and the Civil Rights movement. This was extremely disheartening because outside of issues that were deemed ‘Black issues’ we were not reading Black people, but it is hard to believe that any one marginalized community is only writing about one issue. There are Black people in almost every field and electing not to choose their material or to only showcase Black voices for select issues reinforces a white narrative and whiteness as the norm. This situation also applies to many other marginalized groups and it is important that all are heard in the classroom. My goal overall is to make sure that students feel heard and understood in the classroom.

Works Cited

DuVernay, A. & Moran J. (2016) *13th*. USA.

Hooks, B. (2003). *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. (pp. 41-9). Routledge.