

Rethinking Schools *Online*

Teaching in the Undertow

Resisting the pull of schooling-as-usual

By Gregory Michie

As a seven-year-old, I was amazed by the ocean. I remember being awed as I looked out at the vastness of the water off the South Carolina coast. And I recall the cautionary words my mother used each time I tried to wade in deeper than my waist: "Be careful of the undertow."

According to my mom, the undertow was an invisible current beneath the ocean's surface that, if you weren't careful, could pull you down the coastline or out to sea before you knew what was happening. It tugged you along almost imperceptibly, she said, so you had to consciously keep your bearings: Pick a recognizable landmark and don't lose sight of it.

I could have used her advice when I began teaching seventh and eighth grade on Chicago's south side two decades later. I went in with no formal preparation or credentials, and as a white male transplanted from the South, I was an outsider to my students in many ways. My approach at the time grew out of what made sense to me. I thought classrooms should be active spaces where kids had regular opportunities to do and make things. I thought students should be encouraged to express themselves creatively. I thought their voices should be not only heard, but valued. I believed kids should feel a connection between what they studied in school and their lives outside school. And I felt they should be pushed to think critically about the world around them.

Most of all I recognized that a meaningful, quality education was crucial for the young people I would be teaching, whose communities had been largely neglected and abandoned by those in power.

But having beliefs or guiding principles is one thing. Figuring out how to put them into practice, I learned, is another matter altogether, especially if you're teaching at a struggling urban school where the "pedagogy of poverty," as Martin Haberman calls it—characterized by "constant teacher direction and student compliance"—is in widespread use.

In that sort of environment, it's easy to lose your footing as a novice teacher, to begin to drift from your anchorage, to be seduced by the pull of convention or expediency or outside demands. The undertow of schooling, you quickly figure out, can be as strong and stealthy as any ocean's—maybe even more so.

So, how do you resist?

Connections With Colleagues

The first thing to know is, as much as it may seem otherwise at first, you're not alone. I've spent significant time in dozens of Chicago schools during the past 13 years, and while many have their share of adults who have become, at least on the surface, jaded or resigned to mediocrity, I've also found dedicated, caring, even visionary teachers almost everywhere I've been. This is important to understand as a new teacher because it makes it less likely that you'll fall into the trap of seeing yourself as the anointed one, the lone crusader working for justice in an unjust school and world. Heroic teacher memoirs and Hollywood movies notwithstanding, that is rarely, if ever, the way things are.

While the organizational structures and scheduling at your school may not support alliance-building

among teachers (and may, in fact, implicitly encourage you to isolate yourself), one of the best things you can do for yourself as a beginning teacher is seek out allies—both within your school and in the broader community of educators. Fellow teachers with whom you are aligned philosophically and politically can be vital sources of both emotional support and practical ideas, and even those who don't seem to share your views can sometimes prove helpful. A colleague who's been teaching in your building for 25 years—even if "traditional" or "burned out" at first glance—may still have lessons to impart and useful advice to offer, and may, in time, turn out to be not as one-dimensional as you originally thought.

That's not to say that you should expect to be surrounded by hopeful and forward-thinking educators. Cynicism can be deeply entrenched in big-city public schools, and it's also wildly contagious. One of the first temptations for a new teacher is to join this chorus of negativity and begin, however reluctantly, to recite the sorts of excuses you were certain you'd never make: that you can't really get to know your students because there are too many of them, that you can't engage students in group work because they get out of control, that you can't focus on building critical thinking skills when your kids are having a hard enough time just finding a vocabulary word in the dictionary.

I've heard myself say or think all those things at one time or another, and they're all legitimate dilemmas. But Bill Ayers, longtime educator and author of *To Teach*, points out that focusing on all the impediments to your work, while perhaps therapeutic in the short term, is ultimately a dead-end for the committed teacher. Ayers suggests turning each obstacle around and viewing it from a more hopeful perspective by saying, "OK, this is my situation, these are the realities. Given that, what can I do?" Maybe you can't do everything you'd planned or imagined—at least not right away—but you can always do something.

Starting Small

It may be that you have to start with something small and seemingly insignificant—like bulletin boards, for instance. In many schools, bulletin boards simply become part of the scenery, wallpapered with routine announcements or seasonal messages that rarely provoke thought or cause anyone—kids or adults—to stop and take notice.

But bulletin boards can be to teachers and students what blank walls are to graffiti artists: an opportunity—the most visible one of all in many schools—to make a statement, to pose questions, to speak out on an issue, to bring kids' lives into classrooms or hallways. In one school I visited last year, I saw a bulletin board that featured the words "They Were Here First" at its center, with the names of a number of Native-American tribes radiating around the outer edges. At another school, students displayed what they'd learned about the AIDS epidemic in several African countries. Still another teacher put up a thought provoking quote along with an invitation for students to attach quotes that they found challenging or inspiring.

Those may not sound like such radical acts when placed alongside the more elaborate proposals of education's critical theorists. But once you're in a classroom of your own, you begin to realize that it's in the details, as much as in the big-picture theorizing, that critical conceptions of teaching find life. Kids can learn about equity and justice from the way community is formed in a classroom, how decisions are made, who is represented on the walls and bookshelves, what sorts of interactions are encouraged and discouraged, whose thoughts and ideas are valued, and, yes, even what's on the bulletin boards. Teaching for social justice, in practice, is as much about the environment you create as it is about the explicit lessons you teach.

The Question of Content

Content does matter, though, and it's another area in which, as a new teacher, you'll be challenged to hold true to your beliefs. For one thing, it's likely that you'll feel the ominous cloud of high-stakes testing looming over every curricular decision you make, dictating your answer to the perennial curriculum question: What knowledge and experiences are most worthwhile for my students? Beyond that, you may be further overwhelmed by all you need to do in order to make what you teach more meaningful and critical: limiting the use of biased and oversimplified textbooks, bringing in primary source documents, connecting topics to real-world issues, reading whole novels instead of chopped-up basal selections, giving students opportunities to write about their lives, weaving the arts

throughout your subject areas, inviting your kids to help decide what they want to study, and so on.

The scope of the challenge can be truly paralyzing: Because you can't do everything, you delay doing anything, and instead fall back on using textbooks and following directives until you get your feet more firmly on the ground. But the ground is always shifting when you're a teacher, so your feet may never be fully planted. Instead of waiting for that to happen, why not take on something more manageable: Start with one subject and commit yourself to bringing it to life for your students. Or, if you teach only one subject to several groups of kids, try putting your own spin on things one day a week, and try to build from there. Again, you may not be able to do everything you'd hoped all at once—but you can do something.

Balancing Freedom and Control

If you're coming into the classroom with an orientation toward teaching for social justice, you already understand that, although they have helped many people, in many ways public schools have served as an oppressive force in the lives of poor children and students of color throughout this country's history. I had that shameful legacy in mind when I started out as a new teacher, and I wanted to do my part to interrupt it. But my approach, at least initially, was overly simplistic: If schools were oppressive, I figured, then the antidote to that was freedom, so in my classroom students would be "free." It sounded great in my head, but since I hadn't thought out the specifics of what freedom really meant within the context of a public school—or how I might create the conditions where it could happen—I quickly found myself in the midst of absolute chaos in my classes.

Not only does chaos in your classroom make you crazy, but it directs all your energy toward addressing student misbehavior. Other concerns—such as whether your kids are learning anything—lessen in importance. These skewed priorities are often reinforced by administrators who place a premium on order and control, and who hold up as exemplary those teachers who keep the tightest reins on their students. If you're not careful, you may find yourself falling unwittingly into a similar pattern of thinking: classifying your days as good or bad based solely on how quietly your students sit at their desks or how straight a line they form in the hallway.

Many young teachers think they'll be able to rise above such nonsense once they have a classroom of their own, or they delude themselves with the belief that they'll be viewed as such cool teachers that they won't have to worry about disciplinary issues. Progressive approaches to teaching often encourage such an attitude by glossing over classroom management concerns, or by suggesting that if teachers simply come up with engaging lessons, management issues will largely take care of themselves. But my experience is that, in many urban classrooms, it's far more complicated than that, and if you're blindsided by serious discipline concerns, as I was, you can feel compelled to adopt draconian corrective measures.

The point is not to obsess over order and control as a beginning teacher, but to go in with a specific plan of action rather than vague notions about "freedom." If you really want to have an open and democratic environment in your classroom, you have to be thoughtful and purposeful in creating structures that support it.

These details of practice—creating an environment for learning, rethinking your curriculum, and fostering a democratic community—can all provide opportunities for bringing a social justice perspective into your classroom. But it's also possible to become lost in the everyday details, to get so caught up in the immediacy of your teaching that you don't pay enough attention to its larger contexts. Indeed, the undertow may pull you in such a direction: Professional development seminars and in-service workshops frequently encourage tunnel vision in new teachers by focusing narrowly on specific methods, strategies, or one-size-fits-all approaches.

That's why it's important to remind yourself that methods and other practical matters mean little unless placed within a social, political, and economic context. For beginning teachers at urban schools—especially for those who are coming in as "outsiders" to the communities where they're teaching—committing to continued efforts at self-education on issues of race, culture, and poverty is vital (and also something you're not likely to get at an in-service). Middle-class teachers who lack a personal understanding of poverty and the many ways it can impact children, families, and neighborhoods need to do all they can to increase their awareness. Likewise, white teachers need to work hard to learn about the cultural histories and current struggles of their students of color and, at

the same time, to examine their own privilege.

Angela Valenzuela, a professor at the University of Texas-Austin, has written that "a community's best interests are served by those who possess an unwavering respect for the cultural integrity" of the people in that community. Clearly, that requires sincere and sustained effort on the part of "outsider" teachers, but it's far from impossible.

Holding Onto Hope

No matter what you do to buoy yourself as a new teacher, you're almost certain to have moments—maybe quite a few of them—when you question the value and effectiveness of what you're doing. One of the most persistent early challenges for a socially conscious teacher—at least it was for me—is fighting the feeling that your work isn't making a difference, or at least not the sort of difference you'd imagined. When your goals are expansive and hopeful, when you believe that teaching is potentially a world-changing act, it can become discouraging to feel continually as if your efforts are falling far short of that vision. As one young teacher I know put it, "You feel like you should be seeing light bulbs going off in kids' heads every day, like they're suddenly seeing the world differently. But a lot of times, you think, 'this whole week—nothing! I'm not teaching for social justice!'"

At times like those, the undertow pulls in the direction of fatalism, despair, and emotional disengagement. It beckons you to stop trying so hard, to be more "realistic" about the kids you teach, and to abandon your belief that public schools can be transformed in a meaningful or lasting way. Resisting that suffocating pull—and holding onto hope instead—requires a delicate balancing act: acknowledging the grim systemic realities and personal limitations you face as a teacher, but at the same time re-committing yourself to working toward something better. You have to forgive yourself for your failings, then turn around and try to use them to re-focus and re-energize your teaching the next day.

You also have to allow yourself to appreciate the good moments that do take place in your classroom—no matter how small they may seem in the grand scheme of things. In the words of the poet and novelist Audre Lorde, "Even the smallest victory is never to be taken for granted. Each victory must be applauded, because it is so easy not to battle at all, to just accept and call that acceptance inevitable." I think every new teacher should have that quote taped to her desk, her classroom door, her rearview mirror, her refrigerator, her alarm clock—to any spot where she might need a little extra strength for the journey.

Becoming a teacher is a journey, after all—one in which you're always learning. One thing I learned while writing this piece is that there's actually no such thing as an undertow. The force of water that pulls you down the beach is called a longshore current, and the one that pulls you out to sea is known as a rip current. Undertow, it turns out, is a colloquialism. Considering that my mother was born on a farm in Georgia and raised in rural Kentucky, it makes perfect sense that that's the term she's always used. Longshore currents and rip currents will probably always be "the undertow" to me.

I learned one more thing, too. If you ever find yourself caught in a real rip current, the best approach is not to try to swim directly against it: You'll exhaust yourself, and the current's force will end up pulling you out anyway. Instead, say those who are knowledgeable in the science of wave motion, you should avoid panicking, swim with the current for a little while, and eventually you'll be free.

The undertow of schools, in my experience, doesn't release teachers from its pull quite so easily. Still, burnout being what it is, there is something to be said for new teachers not trying to fight it at every turn. The best advice, I think, is to choose your battles early on, pace yourself, swim with the current when you have to, and never lose sight of that spot on the shore.

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