REDISCOVERING COMMUNITY

Indi Ekanayake

Dr. James Lytle's discussion of the "destruction" of the School District of Philadelphia was indeed a bitter pill to swallow.   As an educator who is both an alumnus of Teach For America and a charter school employee, it might seem as if I am representative of the types of people whom Dr. Lytle is lambasting – an inexperienced and uninvolved agent, alien to local concerns and a proponent of sometimes market-based, sometimes profit-generating, and generally misguided attempts to "reform" Philadelphia's public school system. While I disagree with a number of things about the charter school movement and Teach For America as an organization, both bodies have given me the opportunity to meaningfully better myself and form genuine connections with young people, and for this I am forever indebted.

Dr. Lytle's piece surrounds a number of external actors and forces coming in to influence the schools. I cannot speak with any authority regarding policy decisions; the closest I have ever been to making policy was getting lost inside City Hall while trying to find some of my students on their internships. I cannot speak with any authority regarding financial austerity; besides my feeble attempts to create a personal budget that limits how often I eat out, I have no real experience in the matter. In spite of these shortcomings, I feel as though I can definitely attest to the realities faced by schools and educators referred to in Dr. Lytle's commentary. While the litany of injustices committed against our public school system deserves to be repeated indefinitely until true and substantial change occurs, I will not be doing any of that here. Given this opportunity, I would like to discuss an ideal that all aspects of our educational system need to understand and embrace, and that is the notion of community.

Dr. Lytle poses a poignant question that should be asked by any individual involved in education in our great but troubled city: "Is Philadelphia headed in a direction that makes sense, one that will ensure that children are better served than they have been?" I believe that the only type of direction that makes sense is the direction that attempts to create or revive a feeling of community in our schools. In this instance, community is not a generic value combining aspects of kindness and empathy, nor is it political jargon aimed at categorizing and pigeonholing the complex thoughts and needs of diverse individuals into easily memorized and recited statements that supposedly represent vast swaths of people. My definition of community is more complex and more visceral. Community is a shared sense of intellectual and socio-emotional safety. Community is the ability to take risks in a stable and supportive environment. Many of our schools have lacked community for quite some time, and efforts to reform and rejuvenate our schools will undoubtedly fail if a sense of community is not restored. I can only speak regarding my own experiences in education, because attempting to represent the views of others would be inaccurate and irresponsible. With that said, I have had the great fortune of interacting with two cadres of individuals that have strengthened my belief in the benefits of community in educational environments, and these two groups are the staff and students of Sankofa Freedom Academy, and Teacher Research Group.

Sankofa Freedom Academy (hereafter SFA) is a young charter school in Frankford that was established in 2009. SFA is not a perfect institution, but there are many features that indicate to me both a theoretical and practical emphasis on the building of community. One of the hallmark features of the school is an Afrocentric values curriculum surrounding the Virtues of Ma'at, a set of guidelines developed in Ancient Egypt to maintain truth, balance, and order, and the Nguzo Nane, a modified version of the Seven Principles of Kwanzaa. In no way am I advocating that the School District of Philadelphia adopt an Afrocentric curriculum or stance, but at SFA, the presence of these values in our interactions with other adults and with young people results in a sense of collectivism and shared progress. We all have a stake in the wellbeing of others, and as a result, hostility is minimized and competition is healthy. Additionally, the school values the incredible contributions that all individuals (especially the students) are capable of making and works to create an environment that lets these individuals feel as though their contributions are worth sharing and that self-expression is a necessary aspect of education. SFA is a place where the banking model of education has no place; Paulo Freire would have been proud. Finally, the sense of community at SFA helps students build self-efficacy and transform this belief in themselves into real educational and societal progress. SFA graduated its first class of seniors in June 2013, a group of urban youth who are prepared to grapple with the issues plaguing their communities, going to college to study diverse topics from politics and law to medicine and education. They have overcome petty distractions and serious hardship, and many of these students are the first in their families to be attending college. SFA is an isolated incidence and it would be difficult to generalize the operating values and principles of the institution onto an entire school district, but if anything, it does serve to show that motivated individuals in the right context are capable of great things. Throughout our dialogue surrounding school reform in Philadelphia and throughout the country, it would be a travesty to ignore the power of motivated and inspired human capital.

Educators are often subject to the whims of outside forces, such as administrators, state education policies, and the local and national financial landscape, to mention a few. As a result, I have personally chosen to focus my attention and energy on what I do believe I can control, which is the community in my classroom. Through the various teacher training sessions and workshops, I was told quite a few different strategies regarding building classroom climate, that ranged from "being a no-nonsense nurturer" to making sure I "[did not] smile until December." None of these styles was authentic to me; they were pushing me to take a stance or adopt a persona that was not genuinely me, and when I tried these styles during student teaching, I was highly ineffective. My successes in reaching my students at Sankofa lie greatly with the amazing students themselves, but also in the open, honest, and caring way in which I conduct my classroom. I expect a lot of my students but I also give them freedom to be themselves and take intellectual risks. Building community within your classroom is a risky endeavor itself; students need to see that you are a human being with true experiences before they are willing to open up to you, and this is not always natural for many individuals. My first week of teaching at Sankofa was a whirlwind of pairing names and faces, establishing protocols, and attempting to map out a successful path to real learning outcomes by the end of the year. In retrospect, the most important things I did were all related to building community. These included student surveys that went beyond basic demographic information to figure out what these young scholars were really about. Every student has to make a "My Chart," which is essentially a pie chart that shows how exactly they perceive their own personalities and lives. Most importantly, students are introduced to the ask-me-anything culture of the class. Partly due to my interest in fostering scientific curiosity in my students, this is one of the most consistently re-emphasized and practiced aspects of my class. Students have designated times when they can ask me whatever kinds of questions they want, scientific or otherwise. If they feel uncomfortable asking in front of the class, there is a place where they can write questions down to be answered at a later time. While my job description includes no mention of "counselor," "therapist," or "life coach," this role as an advisor is something I seek to establish in each one of my classes. While some students take immediate advantage of this and some students never choose to engage me in this way, the knowledge that I am truly a confidant and a source of trust goes a long way towards establishing the intellectual and emotional security that defines community.

Through Teacher Research Group (TRG), I have been able to collaborate with other education stakeholders in the pursuit of action-based qualitative teacher research. Being part of a group of forward-thinking educators has had both short- and long-term benefits for my practice and the practice of my peer teachers, and a few of these merit discussion. First, TRG has really helped with self-esteem. Teachers are often overstressed and under-rewarded, and education reform frequently depicts teachers as ineffective, incapable, overworked, and unhappy. To be publicly discussed in this light is demoralizing, so having a group like TRG to provide community is personally and professionally helpful. It is empowering to see other educators doing great things in their individual classrooms in spite of some of the external circumstances referred to by Dr. Lytle, and this can push me as an individual to investigate and experiment with novel structures and methods in my classroom. Additionally, TRG does a great job of harnessing individual strengths and aiding in introspection and reflection. Developing community requires safe and honest dialogue, and that is exactly the environment that has been developed and fostered by the facilitator of the group, Andy Danilchick. TRG provides a space where I feel comfortable taking risks and sharing my experience, because I know the result will be acceptance and support. As mentioned earlier, teaching has the potential to be both stressful and demoralizing, and TRG helps combat these realities and challenge teachers to approach issues from a stance of empowerment. The final point I would like to raise regarding TRG is that conversations between teachers are often about annoyances and disruptions – sleep deficits, incidents of discipline, conflict with administrators – but they usually do not move beyond this. Venting serves its purpose, but TRG turns venting into proactivity. The climate of the group and the feeling of community elevate conversations beyond pettiness into actionable thoughts and suggestions aimed towards what should be our ultimate goal: putting students first.

I joined TRG at the beginning of my second year of teaching, a point in time where many of my Teach For America corps member peers were starting to plan what they would do after their commitment was completed. My viewpoint was a little bit different – now that I had at least a notion of the basics of managing a classroom, how could I push my students towards greater intellectual independence and responsibility? I was left with vague ideals and no outlet, until I received an email inviting me to the 2012-2013 school year's first TRG meeting. I didn't entirely know what to expect, but I knew I was in the right place immediately after the meeting started. Instead of merely introducing ourselves and getting started, we went through the process of check-ins. A check-in is an opportunity for each member of the group to share something that they are feeling or experiencing mentally, emotionally, relationally, physically, or spiritually (summarized neatly in the acronym MERPS). While I do not remember the exact content of my check-in, I know that being able to share my experience in a supportive environment enabled me to sort through stressors in a way that I was not capable of doing in other spaces. Additionally, the sense of community established by check-ins engenders the strongest collaborative workspace that I have experienced since I became a teacher – in my first TRG meeting, I was able to take my shapeless pedagogical interests and mold them into a more concrete form that eventually led to a yearlong research project investigating how teachers could structure student-centered classrooms. Finally, in February, I was lucky enough to have the ability to present some of my findings at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Ethnography in Education Forum. Without the community of TRG, it would have been much more difficult to evolve my practice and find honest and consistent encouragement for the work I have been trying to do with my students.

Without the support of Sankofa Freedom Academy and Teacher Research Group, it would be very difficult for me to stay positive about the profession of teaching. Dr. Lytle listed countless indicators of the apparent shift away from democratic education towards a market- and business-focused model, and this model does little to serve the students. As the ultimate recipient of services, they should have more voice in their futures, but sadly the recent past does not indicate that this is happening. My advice? We all need to step back and consider community. Schools are cornerstones of our neighborhoods, and the more they are spoken for and controlled by external agents, the more our youth will be alienated. Children have potential, but without the strength of a community behind them, they will be hard-pressed to find success.

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