

**(R) Looking for Ways to Encourage Better School Behavior In Our Students:
One Case Study
Or
Can a White Male Teacher Successfully Connect With a Troubled African
American Girl?**

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Introduction

In my student teaching experience, I have had the benefit of a continuous placement in the same setting for not just one semester, but for the full school year, and in that time I have been able to get to know many of the students better than I might have otherwise. Linda is one such student. I have participated in very enjoyable and productive learning activities with this girl, and I have been there for many of her rougher moments as well. This paper is a report of my ongoing struggle to understand, predict, and make sense of both the productive learning episodes as well as the more frustrating ones I have spent with this student as well as my attempts to encourage and foster more of the beneficial behaviors this young learner is capable of while discouraging the lessor so ones.

The Context and Culture of the Community and Neighborhood:

The William Trotter School is situated in the heart of Roxbury on Humboldt Avenue, which is down the street from Linda's apartment complex. Roxbury is a very old community, having been settled as a farming village not long after Boston itself was incorporated in the early 1600s. As Boston continued to expand on what was then the nearby Shawmut Peninsula, Roxbury on the mainland grew into an important farming and then residential community for the Boston affluent. At the last turn of the century, Roxbury's farms and estates gave way to industrial development as well as lower and middle income housing for the southern Europeans then immigrating to the United States in large numbers, this author's paternal grandfather among them. Boston annexed the town of Roxbury in the late 1800s. Around this same time as well as a bit afterwards, southern African Americans started moving into the northern cities in search of a better life. Many Boston-bound blacks started settling in these same Roxbury working class neighborhoods as well, and by the end of the second world war, were becoming a significant presence in the neighborhood. The new interstate highways, improved pavement and automobiles, as well as the spread of utilities, opened the surrounding towns to development, and the more affluent European Americans by and large left the inner city working neighborhoods to the newcomer blacks. Society's

simmering racial differences and hard feelings later came to the surface with the introduction of forced busing that had been implemented in the schools as a way of solving the increasing racial school segregation Boston had endured. Most of the remaining white population fled Roxbury, especially the large Jewish populations long established along Blue Hill Avenue in both Roxbury and Mattapan further down the road. Most of the community's wealth departed for the new suburbs along with the white middle class. Freed from its former dependence on the New Haven Railroad by the highways, industry followed its favored workers and found new homes in the suburbs as well. Roxbury's African American community was left with older housing, a much poorer economy, few jobs, and no way to get to the new economy taking root along Route 128.

For a variety of reasons the remaining African American families faced tough times. Divorce and separation among black parents became increasingly the norm. In the 02121 zip code according to the U.S. census of 1990, of 3457 households with children under eighteen years of age, a majority (2205) were run by a single female, 1035 households were headed by two parents, while 217 households were run by a single male. In other words, less than 30 percent of the households with children under eighteen were headed by a married-couple family that may as well have included step-parents instead of the blood parents. The majority of households had only one parent.

Median household income for the 02121 zip code was \$22,010 for the same year compared to over \$51,000 for this author's suburban zip code. The total head count in the census study showed the following racial breakdown:

Black	23,025
White	935
Hispanic	3026
Other	1648

There were 9696 children living with one or more parents, 1383 children living with grandparents, and 1600 living with other relatives.

The bottom line: Roxbury has become overwhelmingly African American with a relatively small Hispanic population. The a majority of the school-aged children live in lower class households headed by a single female parent, or a grandparent or grandparents, or another relative. In my experience, this single mother is often working many hours out of the home as well.

I am reminded of the description of the run down and drained Camden, New Jersey described in Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, though I think that the local Roxbury situation is not nearly as bleak as the one Kozol depicts Camden to be for a number of reasons. First, the minority community in Roxbury has been able to respond to the declining neighborhood in a number of positive ways over the years such as community housing such as the substantial and ongoing Orchard Park development as well as other initiatives. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the City of Boston still has considerable financial resources on account of its vibrant downtown and other upscale neighborhoods that it is able to reallocate to communities such as Roxbury. Though most all of the white population left Roxbury, the presence of a world-class downtown with its financial and cultural resources has left Roxbury in a position that Camden, cut off from both the tax dollars of its suburbs, (and never really having attained the cultural critical mass of a larger city like Boston to begin with) could only dream of being in. Nevertheless, although all hope is far from being lost, Roxbury remains a community of people at risk, especially for its children.

William Trotter School Structure and Culture:

Despite the fact that the Boston Public Schools have an integration plan in place, the overall racial makeup of the Trotter School students rather closely matches the greater neighborhood (Trotter, 1996)

Black	521
White	86
Hispanic	40
other	10
Total	657

A letter to parents distributed in early 1989 included a well-written history and mission statement that still seems apt for today (Trotter, 1989):

The Trotter School was founded in 1969 as an alternative city-wide magnet school with two distinct yet related missions. The first of these was to implement a multi-graded, developmental classroom structure of open, innovative, and individualized education much like the family grouping of the British Primary School. The second was to enrich the lives of children by promoting racial and ethnic integration, thereby offering students increased opportunity for exposure to the diverse cultures represented in the city.

...As we move into the 1990s, our challenge at The Trotter is to retain the school's unique character as it evolves from a city-wide magnet school into a district school.

1997 finds The Trotter school having completed the transition to a district school. Physically, the school is comprised of four circular pods connected by a common hallway. There are 24 K-5 classrooms, 6 to a pod in the building. Each pod has a mix of grade levels and is viewed as being a mini-school within a school. In the center of each pod area there is a common resource area with a full-time teacher, a varying number of computers, as well as other learning resource materials. Each learning pod person is expected to contribute his or her time to helping the regular classroom teachers in the adjoining rooms with team-teaching and other enrichment and remedial activities. In actuality, this happens with varied success throughout the school. Some of the classroom teachers have said privately that the center pod personnel have been less than supportive of their classroom efforts and see the center positions as low demand responsibilities.

The Trotter School classrooms are still organized on the multi-graded classroom model that has existed since the school's inception. There are K/1, 2/3, and 4/5 classrooms on site. There are no single grade rooms. Additionally, as an ongoing experiment, two of the four 4/5 classrooms have been designated single-gender, that is there is one all-boy 4/5 class as well as one all-girl 4/5 room, and it is this latter setting that is mine for four days a week. On Fridays I work with Mr. A in the all-boy setting. Students are placed in a single-gender classroom by parental request.

During the past year there has been much discussion amongst the staff and the Parents' School Site Council as to whether the school wishes to continue the present multi-graded model. Many faculty members feel that the days of the multi-grade classroom have come and gone, if in fact they were ever

here. While the school was originally organized on a peer-tutoring, group learning model, the student-to-teacher ratio was much lower back then and nowadays staff feel that it is not realistic to expect this older model to work with the 24 to 1 student/teacher ratio that has become the norm for the school compared to the 15 or 17 to 1 ratio back in the school's earlier days. Furthermore, many staff feel that implementing the new Citywide Learning Standards is largely impossible in a multi-graded classroom because of the necessity to teach two different curricula at once. In short the Trotter School had to abandon its curriculum that suited the twin-grade classrooms for the Boston standards with the result being that the system-wide standards necessitate two of everything: two reading groups, two math curricula, two science, etc. The overall effect of this higher student-to-teacher ratio and split curriculum within the classroom is to destabilize the classroom learning environment to a greater degree that in turn further stresses children already residing in a stressful community.

On the other hand, the fact that a child can loop with a particular teacher for two years in the dual-grade classrooms is considered a real plus for both students and teachers by almost everyone involved in the school. There has been an active looping committee in the Trotter for most of the past year investigating the particular benefits and liabilities of the looping aspects of the present grade structure. The committee has found much support among faculty for continuing looping in a single-grade-per-room structure. Meanwhile, the parents have been resistant to this proposed change. In fact, the parents' council gave its approval for only one strand of straight-graded looping next year, and this has prompted several staff to put in for a transfer at the end of this current year, potentially adding more stress to student environments.

Academic Performance:

As determined by the Stanford 9 test battery administered in May 1996, William Trotter students performed at the following national percentiles (Trotter, 1996):

Grade	Test area	percentile
3	Reading	45
5	Reading	43
3	Mathematics	41
5	Mathematics	36

Trotter school students perform poorly on standardized tests compared to their national peers and the performance gap widens somewhat as students advance through the grades at the Trotter.

The Trotter school uses a pull-out model to teach the students on individualized educational plans. At the start of this year, out of 657 enrolled students, there were a total of 53 students in substantially separate special education settings. My classroom setting has two girls in the LD program going to SPED instructors for the greater part of every afternoon.

Students placed in substantially separate Special Education by program (Trotter, 1996):

Program	Black	White	Hispanic	Other	Total
LAB	11	0	2	0	13
Early Childhood	14	1	1	0	16
LD	8	0	3	0	11
Language	10	2	1	0	13

Consequently, I try to plan as many of my new material and group activities for the morning periods as possible, withholding more of the afternoon times for independent work and enrichment activities. Even then, it is not possible to schedule activities such that these two girls don't miss something important.

Note, however, that Linda, the girl who is the object of this case study, is not in any such program currently.

Curriculum

As I have said previously, decision making about curriculum at the Trotter School has been mainly taken out of the hands of classroom staff and put into the hands of the curriculum coordinators downtown at 26 Court Street as well as the State House. Within set limits, however, the school can still select its curriculum materials (text books, etc.) from a list of a few choices. One teacher from the Trotter is on a committee to find a new intermediate grade mathematics text for the system, but for the most part classroom content by and large will follow the city and state frameworks more and more in the future.

Classroom curriculum content has been increasingly dictated by the standardized tests given to the children every fall and spring. With overall test scores typically in the 30th to 40th percentile range, there has been a great push to increase these scores by "teaching the test" and mentoring lots of simulated test problem activities. Currently the principal has directed that the first period of every day be given over to such practice. This has added noticeably to the stress level of both the students and teachers in my opinion.

Interestingly, though the Stanford 9 test explicitly states that the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Standards (NCTM) figure prominently in the makeup of the test, there has been a noticeable resistance among teachers in the Trotter towards incorporating more of the NCTM ideals in mathematics instruction. Such ideas of teaching math (and perhaps other subject areas as well) as problem-solving, communications, connections, and logical reasoning have been ridiculed by at least one learning pod coordinator as well as by other staff people. "All they want to do is teach the kids philosophies in math. What they need is more drill!" I recall one teacher saying. The current mathematics text book, *Connections* by D. C. Heath, is being discontinued next fall at the Trotter because staff feel it is too short on practice, despite the fact that it has a wealth of pull-in books, black line masters, and other activities. Written just after the NCTM standards were released in the late 1980s, it is full of fun and interesting lessons. In my opinion, it is a very underutilized resource at our school. At one meeting last month, where several teachers gathered to talk with the principal about Stanford 9 preparation, the principal pulled

out a copy of *Connections* that she had reviewed the night before and announced that "This has everything we need," but the teachers were not buying any of it. Instead there was much talk of looking forward to the new book *next* fall.

School Philosophy

The current mission statement of the school reads:

The Trotter Elementary School is a child-centered community committed to academic excellence. All are challenged and encouraged to excel. Our diversity is celebrated in an environment that is safe, clean and positive. We use technology to enrich all curriculum areas. We strongly support professional development for our staff.

Now this mission statement says both a lot and yet not much at all at the same time. I suppose it could be the mission statement of any school, but in the school's defense let me say that there has been a continuous and pronounced push to focus on the core value of respect or the "R" word as everybody at Trotter calls it. Going hand in hand with the continuous diversity training that both staff and students participate in, respect has been taught through such things recently as Martin Luther King holiday and African American History month assemblies as well as informal talks the principal and vice-principal have given to classrooms as they make their rounds.

Classroom Culture

The D214 classroom is a mixed age grouping of four, fourth graders and twenty, fifth graders. All but two students are African-American. One of the remaining students is European while the other is Hispanic. Coincidentally these same two students are fourth graders. Linda is an African American fifth grader.

As indicated previously, all the students are female, having been placed there at the option of their parent/guardians. Several of the fifth graders looped with the cooperating teacher, Mrs. D moving up from

her 4/5 setting the previous year. Gender issues are faced squarely. Once a week, Mrs. D has a "Girl Talk" session, and until recently had a learning center display in the classroom where girls could submit discussion questions for the talk. Earlier this year Mrs. D invited in the girls' mothers for her annual "Sister to Sister" breakfast. (Being a male, I was asked to excuse myself and did so, though I think this absence highlighted the for the whole room, the possible gender division that exists between the rest of D214 and me, the male student teacher.) This irritated me for some time as I think it disturbed some of the girls as well. I wrote:

(February 18)

D214 had their Sister to Sister Breakfast this morning, an event I was exiled from because I was not female. I'd like to report what went on as there were many parents (I should say mothers) there, but being the wrong gender I was excluded. Frankly, I find this a continuing irritating part of my placement. Almost every time a chance for parental contact comes up for me, I get excluded because the parents are usually female, this is an all female class that the mothers purposely put their daughters in, and all the other teachers and even the City Year coordinator are female and Mrs. D assumes that the parent/mother will not be comfortable with me. If I had known how important it was to the students, mothers, and cooperating teacher that everything about D214 be female-oriented, I would have asked for another placement. Missing important events like this breakfast ensures, I think, that I will never be as much a part of the teaching and learning process in D214 as I could be otherwise. I accepted the placement last fall because I didn't want to look like I was against such a progressive experiment as this single gender, all-female class. I even wrote a paper last summer that, in part, dealt with the special considerations girls have with learning mathematics and technology in a mixed classroom with boys, but now I think I have accidentally allowed myself to be dealt a poor hand for the purposes of my practicum experience. I am reminded of the community in Tyron Thomas' book *Harvest Home* where the women control everything and have a secret autumn harvest ritual in the middle of the night involving human sacrifice of a young male. An example in the extreme to be sure, but I really would have liked to meet some of the mothers, yet all I got was an offer to watch a video somebody made of the event.

What I did do was visit the all-boys classroom for the day. Mr. A, a teacher of 13 years is in charge of this classroom. Nonetheless, Mr. A and I quickly made plans to allow me to work in his classroom every Friday for the duration of my assignment at Trotter.

Mr. A and I talked about a number of things, but one subject that seemed especially timely was the subject of me being the only male in D214. Mr. A suggested that I might on occasion turn out to be the unsuspecting target of aggression by the girls and mothers of D214 because I am the only man in the students' lives. Perhaps there was a man (father, step-father, maternal boyfriend, or older brother) in the family's life that didn't do something he should have (or should not have) done for the rest of the family, and that as the only man left, I might be the target of some unconscious aggression or resentment by the girls or the mothers because of this. It is interesting to note that when I did run into several of the girls from D214 later in the day in the cafeteria they called me "Traitor!!" Still later, when visiting the classroom, Linda put her arm around me and said that I abandoned their classroom. I explained that I did not belong at

the breakfast and that I was working with Mr. A for the day. I suggested to Linda that she (and the rest of the class) missed me. It was a crazy day all around.

Academic and Social Task Structures

In other aspects the classroom is more traditional. The desks are arranged in groups of four with a grouping that Mrs. D uses as an attempt to keep disturbances to a minimum. We do a mixture of both cooperative and individualized activities with this seating arrangement. Mrs. D emphasizes the reading and language arts ends of the Boston Public Schools curriculum perhaps a bit more than the science and mathematics end which, coincidentally I am more than comfortable picking up, though as indicated before, there is some resistance to invoking the NCTM standards in mathematics pedagogy at the Trotter and I think it must be said that Mrs. D could be characterized as belonging to this pro-drill, anti-NCTM mindset. Nevertheless, as a teacher who has only been in the classroom for three years herself, Mrs. D recalls well what it was like to be a student teacher and has given me an ample amount of freedom to teach as I see fit.

As a former actress, Mrs. D puts a good deal of emphasis on using drama to present lessons and information to the girls. Proper and varied intonation is an important part of her lessons, the majority of which are delivered to the class as a whole. Most of the academic tasks culminate in an individualized or sometimes a group assignment sheet to be completed in the duration of the period.

In the language arts area, Mrs. D's enthusiasm and coaching have left the girls well-trained to lead their own reading activities. While doing my pre-practicum last fall I wrote a passage that still seems to nicely summarize the language arts academic task structures as well as the overall social task structure of the room at least on reading:

(October 24)

...Let me visit a reading circle I recently sat in on in Trotter D214. This table was reading from their reader and was expected to answer the questions at the end of the selection. They were grouped by reading ability according to the reader they were assigned to. All the girls took turns around the table reading a paragraph or two. Like my experience three weeks ago.

Mrs. D was occupied with another section of the class and left this group to do the activity as a group with me as observer.

Frankly, these girls required little from me. Nobody's attention seemed to wander far while another student was reading. I think this was due to the fact that all the girls seemed to be more equally qualified oral readers, with nobody being particularly slower performers than others. Thus there were no quicker readers becoming unduly bored with the task. Three weeks ago[while in another group], some of the girls attention wandered while slower girls were doing the reading. This week all the girls seemed more focused on what their classmates were reading. Having similar ability levels of the group members for such repetitive activities such as reading seemed to make for a more productive group in this case. Everybody was participating almost all the time.

Also unlike the other table, this group didn't seem to have any "bosses." At the previous table, one group member was always the fastest to correct the other girls and to tell people where they were. This time, everybody seemed more equal in status. In the last group, there appeared to be an unofficial leader that the others seemed to pick because she had superior reading ability or a more dominant personality, I am not sure which. This time the table was ruled by consensus.

Everybody in the group was working cooperatively. Nobody was working on the reading by themselves and all five group members were following along with the progress. At times several different people spoke out the words that the reader was having difficulty with. At the end of the reading when it came time to write out answers to the questions, there was more discussion than with the previous reading circle I participated in. I think, however, that this greater cooperative activity happened because Mrs. D, who prefers there be little consultation on these reading assignments, was further away this time. I let the cooperative activity continue because it seemed more natural and productive.

While the desks in our classroom are arranged into groups, we tend to keep the same groupings regardless of activity. Students do move a bit for reading because they have to sit with people using the same reader, but for the most part one grouping fits all activities. As I have indicated, I am not sure that math groupings make sense for reading groupings. One of my other Boston College teachers showed us an example of a classroom that uses tables instead of student desks. With no assigned seating, the arrangements can be more easily changed to suit the activity. I can see some merit to this arrangement.

During mathematics and other curriculum activities the class works in a more teacher-centered classroom structure, especially when Mrs. D is leading the activity. Julie Gorman (1996) put it well in her essay on low-tracked math classes when she said:

The teacher asks a question of the student and the student answers. Students talk to each other, but for purely social reasons. They rarely talk about math and they are not encouraged to do so. Though they sit in table groups, 3-4 to a group, this is only because the teacher uses cooperative learning structures in her other classes.

Though I have been working to reverse much of this mathematics pedagogy so that the resulting social structure more so resembles the reading class social structure, due to a lack of practice on the part of the students, my results have been mixed so far. Competition in mathematics is more the norm than the exception and this seems to stifle and scare the girls who are less adept with the material into submission.

Questions That Have Arisen:

Though I have spent the better part of a dozen pages detailing the neighborhood and school history and culture of the setting I have worked during the past year, it is the children that are the real focus of my activities, as they are the focus of any teacher of course. Inevitably, one or more students presents an especially interesting situation and dilemma for an instructor. Whether due to a extra special personality, student talent or difficulty, such children can come to dominate a teacher's professional attention. For me, Linda is one such student.

Easily the smallest, shortest girl in the class, Linda is physically the most immature. Many others have started developing sexually, but not Linda. She is, quite frankly, tiny. Linda's energy level varies tremendously. Boisterous, loud, *or* very quiet and on task describes Linda.

She lives in a small townhouse with her mother and 10 month old sister. She has never mentioned what happened to her father and only occasionally sees her step-father. Her mother works full-time and is gone most of the day and early evening. Linda has said that her cousin drops in a lot, but that she, herself goes out little.

Throughout the past year I have struggled to understand the dynamics of this individual. At times Linda has been a joy to have in the classroom. Sometimes one of the most observant and analytical minds in the class, she can quickly rise to the forefront of any classroom activity. At other times, she can be quiet, sullen, and withdrawn, though not often. Much of the rest of the time, unfortunately, Linda can be a major disruption in the class. Too many times argumentative and rude, there are times when she can be

outright hostile to any staff person, never mind another Trotter student. Through my ongoing teaching, my teaching journals, and now this essay, I have been attempting to find for myself, the best and most effective approaches to use with Linda as a teacher and mentor in order that I might minimize the personal and learning disruptions and keep Linda and hopefully the rest of the D214 class in a fun and productive learning atmosphere.

Data Sources

After reviewing and rereading many of my journal entries for the past year as well as recalling the many conversations I have had with my cooperating teacher and supervisor, I cannot help but think that the overall answer to this main question is right in front of me, if only I knew how to select and arrange the right pieces. What daily events do I recall that were enjoyable and worked for both Linda and myself? What didn't work, especially the horror stories I shared with colleagues? Why did things go wrong and what can I do differently next time? Where can I search for answers? The following come to mind:

- Interviews and conversations with my cooperating teacher. Mrs. D has known Linda now for almost two years. She knows the child's mother and knows Linda's background well. Linda is as much a puzzle and joy to Mrs. D as she is to me.
- Other professionals in the Trotter School. Linda participates in a weekly school-based group counseling session. The psychologist, Christine, as well as the administrators of the school know Linda well too. Neighboring classroom teachers have instructed Linda as well. As I have seen, other staff people are full of ideas and opinions as well as recollections about students they have had in previous years.
- Course and independent readings I have read throughout the year have given me many ideas (as well as more questions) for things to try out and investigate in the classroom.
- Neighborhood profiles. Although I am a lifelong Boston area resident, only recently have I learned of the significant history of Roxbury and more particularly the Trotter School. A voracious reader of the popular press, I had many preconceived notions of what Roxbury (and urban minority communities in general) were like. It is important to ascertain the truth about this community from the fiction and use this to help understand what is going on with our area students and children.

- My teaching journal entries are full of questions, answers, and observations. Frankly I was skeptical that I would have anything new to contribute to my teaching by keeping a journal. In fact, I looked at the journal initially as a report to my teaching supervisor more than anything else, but when combined with the comments my supervisor has added to the entries, the journal became a powerful yet personalized and customized source of information about teaching, and about individual students in the class in particular.
- Interviews with Linda herself. Perhaps nothing endears children to our hearts as much as the ongoing conversations we have every day with them. Children will tell us much if we take the time to listen.

Answering the Question:

Before continuing, it is important to consider the central question more carefully. There are at least two important aspects of the question to consider:

- In order to determine how the teacher can improve student behavior, on-task performance, and learning, we need to examine exactly what the problem is. Aren't all students troublesome in class on occasion? Just how do we qualify what amount and type of off-task behavior is unacceptable and who is deciding what is unacceptable? What (and whose) standards are being used to judge the situation?

- What will a satisfactory outcome look like for the teacher, and for the student? How will we know when we've arrived at a satisfactory learning and behavior outcome and who will be the judge of that success?

Let's look at each part of the question as we review some of the events and observations of the past year.

What Exactly is the Problem?

One journal entry described an event only too typical as far as Linda's classroom performance is concerned:

(November 21)

This past Monday morning, my teaching activities were hampered somewhat by one of the students in class, Linda. Linda completely shut down on me during the first lesson, and proved to be defiantly disruptive to boot. She would not stop banging on her desk in the middle of my first math lesson except when I walked over to her table. Then when I walked away, she would start the banging right up again. Nor would she leave the room either, for I quickly ascertained that the only way I was going to remove her was to drag her, and being the only male in the class, that didn't seem like a good idea. The whole situation was rapidly turning into a power struggle right in front of both the rest of the class as well as my teaching supervisor, who was present this day to observe a lesson. (Oh why did this have to happen now?) I had to deal with the situation and did so insofar as my student teaching position would allow. Without

getting into too much of a power play as some call it, or losing my cool, somehow I managed to keep the distraction to the rest of the class to a minimum by squatting down next to the desk and having a private conversation with this girl Linda for several minutes. She was very evasive and wouldn't give me any answers as to what she was doing or why. In fact, she denied she was doing anything. Nonetheless, I did manage to cut a deal with her: She could sit there quietly and didn't have to do anything (i.e. participate) as long as she didn't disrupt the class with any further noise or banging.

And so went my introduction to Linda. This was my very first whole-class lesson in front of the girls. Here I was, a white male teaching a room full of African Americans, and I was immediately confronted with a defiant, argumentative, and difficult girl, something I had been expecting to find in Roxbury all along yet was quite unprepared to deal with. During the previous summer and now into the fall I had been reading about the inadequacies of white Europeans teaching with white European ideals to African American youth and why such educational pedagogies were doomed to failure it seemed. My mind raced back to Herbert Kohl's article, *I Won't Learn From You!* and the photograph of the seemingly defiant, young African American boy staring into the camera that *Rethinking Schools* had published on the first page of the article (Kohl, 1992). Kohl said in part:

[Willful not learning] consists of an active, often ingenious, willful rejection of even the most compassionate and well-designed teaching. It subverts attempts at remediation as much as it rejects learning in the first place. It was through insight into my own not-learning that I began to understand the inner world of students who chose to not-learn what I wanted to teach. Over the years I've come to side with them in their refusal to be molded by a hostile society and have come to look upon not-learning as positive and healthy in many situations.

Not-learning tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable challenges to her or his personal and family loyalties, integrity, and identity. In such situations, there are forced choices and no apparent middle ground. To agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of self. The only alternative is to not-learn and reject their world.

Other authors I read for my course work such as Geneva Gay, John Ogbu, and Shirley Heath further convinced me that, as a white person, successfully teaching African American children was going to be exceptionally difficult, if not completely impossible for a whole variety of reasons. Some students wouldn't want to learn from me, others would want to learn but couldn't because they couldn't understand

my ways or cultural underpinnings enough (or I theirs) for learning to be even possible. Linda, on my very first lesson it seemed, proved those authors correct.

Going back to Kohl, I wondered, was I somehow not respecting Linda's integrity? I didn't think so. Especially during that first lesson when I knelt down next to her desk and talked quietly for several minutes, I think I have always tried my utmost to pay her position respect. After this I tried even harder to treat all the girls with respect because that's what I would want (i.e. the Golden Rule.)

We have already examined many of the context issues facing the D214 classroom, including the very powerful gender issue. Shirley Brown, in her otherwise very inspirational essay, *Lighting Fires*, detailed that "About five years ago, I became keenly aware of a lack of fire in my classroom... tests were being passed, but where was the engagement?" (Brown, 1993) Brown goes on to say how the incorporation of women's issues into her teaching brought the lessons alive for the students. Dear God I thought, must I become an expert in women's studies to teach the fourth and fifth grade girls in D214? I was getting more and more depressed over the whole idea because I knew I couldn't get that worked up over women's issues. Returning to Linda, I knew that I couldn't have her defiantly banging on the desk during my lessons, but I really began to wonder, was there a problem with her, or with me thinking a white male could teach a class such as her's?

I started looking for other answers as I simply did not want to believe that my color and gender was such a insurmountable barrier to teaching this girl. I hoped rather that it was the fact that I was an inexperienced student teacher that was at the root of my failure to connect with Linda. I later described the rest of that day in a journal entry:

(November 21)

It was only later on, after the adults in the class gathered around for a discussion of the lesson experience as a whole, did I learn that Linda commonly has behavior difficulties on Monday mornings coming out of the weekend. Mrs. D suspects that there may possibly be some affection or attention deprivation considerations affecting Linda's home situation. This knowledge that Monday morning is oftentimes a difficult time for Linda was enlightening news to me.

All that I had been learning about the effects of the stresses of single mother life in this community immediately came back to my mind here. Maybe it wasn't just so much the fact that I was a mismatched white male teacher teaching this class as it was the particular stresses of broken home life in Roxbury as well that was driving this situation.

Later in the day Linda was much more attentive in class, not just to Mrs. D, but to me and the other students as well. Still, I think that Linda's situation is more serious than I initially suspected at the beginning of the day. I say this because I later observed Linda sitting out in the learning pod playing on a computer by herself for over an hour by the time I noticed her. She had been allowed to visit the pod when she finished a class activity Mrs. D had been doing and missed the call to lunch. By the time I figured out that she had not gone to lunch it was too late. D214 has last lunch and if you miss it, there is no second chance. I was going to talk to her about the morning's disruptions but she seemed somewhat cool to my presence in the pod and decided to give her more time before I investigated for myself what had gone on with her during the morning's troubles. I was perplexed as to how she could have sat there all this time and how she managed to tune out the fact that her class filed right by on its way to the cafeteria. I was also very concerned that she was going to go hungry all afternoon but rushed her to the cafeteria too late. Tonight, as I write these words I wonder why I did not talk to her more? The answer I want to give, unfortunately, I think, has to do with fear.

I was fearful that I couldn't really do anything to ameliorate the situation. All the education I had recently acquired seemed to indicate that I needed all the super specialists such as SPED teachers, counselors, learning specialists, etc. we find in schools today to help me understand this student's situation and I couldn't do it so it seemed. There were several other incidents similar to the one seen in the math lesson that seemed to indicate that connecting with Linda was beyond my reach. I wasn't convinced, however, that the only obstacle was the fact that I was a white male in an all-girl class in Roxbury. The community and home life situations that abounded also contributed I think, and I had to help Linda overcome this burden as best I could.

During the final week of my pre-practicum, I had the occasion to work with a substitute in D214 while Mrs. D was out on family leave. Of the day I wrote:

(December 4)

The first period went well, the class worked on the spelling definitions we had planned, but by the time second period came around, and I attempted to read a chapter of a book to them, classroom decorum started to break down. Linda, who it may be recalled was the girl that refused to work with me in my math lesson two weeks ago, again became a disruption. I let her

do something in the math book rather than read. Linda picked a page in the chapter on decimals and proceeded to complete decimal inequality sentences. Hey, it was learning I said to myself. I worked with her at my table after I finished reading *Little Annie of Christian Creek* with the rest of the girls who then attempted to complete the discussion questions. (I do seem to be building some kind of relation with Linda. She will be quiet and do her own thing, I just have to work with her and get her on an agenda that gets her learning more along the lines of something that I can better plan on.)

Throughout the weeks I always I treated her with respect and patiently yet firmly explained her transgressions when they came. There was an improvement. The outright distractions stopped. As long as I shared a bit of decision making with her, Linda would quiet down and work even when the regular teacher was out of the classroom, even though the "work" was often something I thought was an unproductive piece of her own choosing rather than mine. There was still more progress to report:

(January 20)

Readers may recall Linda as the troublesome student who disrupted my division lesson with base-10 blocks last November. I have gotten to know Linda much better since then. She is a very kinesthetic, high-energy girl who thrives on always harmless, physical contact with her classmates, though this is the very activity that often gets her in trouble for this behavior is often the first thing adults notice about her. She needs attention and will demand it if it is denied. What is not as quickly noticed about Linda is her up-beat, fun-loving attitude. She is always smiling around her many friends in the classroom. Her academic performance, while not where it could be, is better than most in her D214 class. Her math is on par, her spelling quiz scores are commonly 90's and 100's, and her writing usually demonstrates thoughtful ideas expressed in a very neat cursive handwriting. Writing to the author of our current class reading book, "Yang the Youngest and His Terrible Ear," Linda told the author, Ms. Namoika, that she liked the Yang book almost as much as her favorite "Goosebumps." Linda also expressed the wish that Ms. Namoika consider writing a scary, mystery book next time. Compared to many others in the class, Linda had great questions for the author. For my part I learned this past weekend from correcting these letters at home that Linda likes reading mystery/suspense and horror books. I seem to be commanding more respect from her lately as I help her keep her behavior in line. Tuesday I intend to talk to her about "Goosebumps" and her reading interests in general. I am going to bring these facts about Linda's interests to Mrs. D's attention too. She could use some good news about Linda.

I don't intend to use this last journal entry to convey the idea that all the major issues with Linda had been solved by any means, however. Later on I wrote:

(February 18)

Linda asked to talk to me about the same time I had turned down my tone in class and said that "The class thinks you're showing off for the substitute (with regards to the stern lectures I had used to get the day underway in the morning. A method, I must say, that worked quite well.) One good thing about Linda is that she never minces words. "I guess this was her way of trying to make you feel guilty", Ms. A, the City Year volunteer suggested to me later. Did I later get too permissive in part because of this comment? I think I did. Linda was actually very well behaved today and that caused me to give her comments additional weight. Though

Ms. A asked at the end of the day what work Linda had to show for 6 periods and we agreed that she had none. Linda went to the nurse during spelling and she tutored another student in math during the second half of the reading period. She had no time line assignment to show for the social studies period. Yes she was quiet, but she did almost no work. I guess this is an improvement over her performance during the other days that Mrs. D was absent but it still leaves something to be desired. During substitute days I continue to try and find that right line to walk on management with her so that she'll actually do something besides sit quietly (if she does that much.)

Not much progress was being made, or was it? True, Linda still wasn't doing much work for me on days that the cooperating teacher was out of the room, but she was quiet, and she was behaving for me and listening to me far more than before. One day she had quite a talk with me:

(January 30)

Yesterday Linda explicitly told me what a lousy weekend she just had. Her mother had promised that they would start getting out of the house/apartment more on weekends "when she gets some money" as Linda put it, but this was not such a week. Linda wanted to go see her step-father, but they ended up going to her cousin's place instead and it was clear that was a real chore. Then there's her mother busy with Linda's two younger sisters, aged 3 ½ years and 10 months. Linda said that her mother never pays her any attention. "*This is why I'm this way*" she said to me. Having seen my sister raising my two nieces down the street, also 3 ¾ years and 10 months, I can see why Mom is so busy and my sister has a husband to help out too! Linda isn't allowed out of the apartment, and I get the idea there isn't much to do while inside except watch television and help with the baby. I *know* I would go nuts in a similar situation. Growing up I had a big yard with woods all around and a pond to explore. I was almost never kept inside during normal hours except when I was preschool-aged. I had several friends all living on our quiet side street. Being cooped up in this way as she is in a small city apartment with no yard or a computer to surf the web or fun things to read with only a TV (do they even have cable?) and a (crying?) younger sister would be too much for me. What about young girls like Linda enduring every afternoon and weekend imprisoned like this?

So all at once here is Linda telling me (quite accurately I think) about one of the major frustrations she has in her life and her ability to recognize, if not diagnose what she and I have to improve about her performance in class. I also wrote that day:

Lisette continues to surprise me. More the class trouble and noise maker than anybody else, she rarely seems to be paying attention in class, yet her writing and math especially seem to be among the best in the class. At certain times she settles way down and does excellent work, though it seems to be more designed to get me to spend more one-on-one time with her than anything else. She certainly expects and demands this one-on-one attention. How can I encourage her to give me (and herself) more productive activity time?

Looking back upon such journal entries now, I could see that relation building, honest talk, lots of respectful listening, patience, and some concerted efforts at observation were beginning to pay off for both

of us. I was certainly less pessimistic about what many of the readings I had consumed last summer and fall had to suggest about such situations between white male teachers in minority settings and the students. Maybe I *could* connect with girls, and African American ones at that (even Linda).

On the other hand, unto every picnic a little rain must fall, and fall it did at the end of March. I wrote a journal entry that sums up my "Linda learning curve" as well as anything I could possibly write right now:

(March 30)

Back when I was working as a restaurant manager, I was exposed to a lot of human resources training that intended to smooth over supervisor / staff relations sufficiently to lesson employee turnover. Earlier this week another incident with Linda prompted me to wonder if perhaps there wasn't something in those human relations principles I learned way back when that could be applied to the teacher / student situations I find myself in now. Nowadays, my mentor teachers use strong discipline and correct students in front of each other when they misbehave. Even a bit of sarcasm is not out of the question in these situations. Last Tuesday I found myself in a situation where I responded to a student in this fashion, but later questioned whether the way I handled the situation was really the best way I could have done so.

Going back to the situation at hand, I was reading one of the last chapters from *The Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* aloud to the students as a change of pace. The book had not really captured the students for a variety of reasons and I thought that this might be a better way to wrap up the book. As I moved from one chapter to another, Linda took the opportunity of the momentary break in my reading to walk over to Chantee's desk and help herself to Chantee's water bottle despite my admonition to return to her seat. I then said something largely to the effect: "Life is really a one-way street for you isn't it? You can do whatever you want, touch or hit whoever you want, say whatever you want, or take whatever you want, but if somebody else did that to *you*, you'd bounce them off the ceiling" with Linda's response being: "No I wouldn't" to which several class members retorted "Oh, yes you would." As I walked back to the front of the room, Linda said "You shut up" under her breath and as I asked her to repeat it, she did so for all to hear. Following that I calmly started filling out a school incident report and told her that I was doing so. No screaming, shouting, or tempers lost on either side, I just did it.

Later in the day, I had an occasion to talk to my practicum supervisor about the situation and asked her for some thoughts as to why Linda said what she said and she suggested that since the class and myself put her in a no-win situation with the comments that were made, she had nothing to lose by making her comment. After some more discussion, I came to the conclusion that I was needlessly sarcastic and that further backed Linda into a corner so to speak in this situation. After talking to my supervisor it occurred to me that Linda may not have even been speaking only to me when she said to shut up, but the whole class as well. Certainly it was not pleasant for her to have nearly the whole class chirp in with their irritating comments about her one-sided behaviors as they did, when they did.

Did I do the right thing in the situation? True, I maintained order and got Linda to sit down and be quiet and still. True, the class knew that Linda was going to have a real problem with the vice-principal, Mr. T when that incident report got to him (3 such reports force I in-

school suspension, and Linda, I understand, already had at least one other report on file.) It is also true that I didn't lose my cool. I took the whole incident in a very matter-of-fact way. And why wouldn't I? I already knew the book was not going over very well with the class and had learned that this is one of several scenarios that initiate troublesome behavior, especially from students such as Linda. No doubt Mrs. D would think positively of my handling of the situation. Only a few months ago, such an incident would have slowed or stopped the entire class and lesson for the rest of the period. Back then Linda would not have given up with only one remark and yielded so quickly to me. So I call this progress. But is it, and if even it is, could some other tactic get even better results? I think so.

One of the things I learned in dealing with restaurant staff back once upon a time was diplomacy. Have I been tutored so much by my teachers telling me to "find my attitude" that diplomacy doesn't get the weight that I could give it in such a situation? Back at the old job we *never* corrected an employee in front of another. While I don't think that in a full class situation, we always have the same luxury of one-on-one conferences that allow the student to save face, it seems clear to me that we should try for this as much as possible, that at least I can maintain student dignity when they are exhibiting incorrect behavior in the class and I correct them by focusing more on the observed behavior and less on theatrical talk ("Life is a one-way street....etc.") As my supervisor said last week, Linda knows the teacher has all the power. Next time I'll do everything I did this last time, but I'll be more to the point about addressing the poor behavior without digging a hole for the student (and perhaps myself) to fall into.

What Kind of Solution Do I Want?

What do all of these episodes, both the ones recorded here and the others not recorded, have to say to me?

For one thing, communities such as Roxbury place significant stress loads on families and thus the children of such families. Mothers who are perhaps behind in the bills and that are out working until ten or eleven at night and who have nobody to help with the children need help themselves. These mothers may not be in a position to assist their children as much as other parents. Sometimes from the teacher's perspective, a tired or overly-extended parent can look like a parent who doesn't care. Just today, Christine, the counselor who leads the group session that Linda attends called Linda's home to see why Linda was not in school for the fourth Monday in a row. Monday is the day the session meets and Christine, as well as several other staff people, have felt that Linda was avoiding counseling by staying home. We even discussed pulling Linda from counseling if that would get her back in school on Mondays. The thing that disturbed all of us the most, however, is that Linda's mother wasn't around to

know that she was staying home it seemed, or if she did know, didn't care. The cousin answered the telephone. This is something we plan to investigate further.

Beyond the community, many of the authors I have read in my program over the past year such as Lisa Delpitt, Geneva Gay, Herbert Kohl, Shirley Heath, and others, are right on the mark most every time they detail the extra difficulties and concerns minority children bring to the classroom, but they need not scare me into surrender and retreat, though sometimes I am tempted.

Urban schools themselves are stressed by their internal politics and organizational structures. Curriculum issues, ESL, SPED, extra racial and cultural issues, as well as a host of other issues, spread thin resources and people thinner. Educational staff, already stressed in almost every setting, are extra stressed in urban settings by many of the conflicts and difficulties similar to those I detailed behind the scenes at Trotter earlier.

Nonetheless, by staying thoughtful and observant, I can make progress with almost every student. Using my new insight and knowledge from the many authors and teachers I have read in the past year as well as by using some common sense and old knowledge (listen, respect, support with patience) I can help students make the most of their time in school, even Linda.

As I write this, however, I am mindful of the words I wrote one day after getting into a book on the uncertainties of teaching:

(February 2)

In all my writings, both last fall and now this past winter, I seem to be always looking for *the* solution. Whether I am questioning Boston Public Schools recommendations, or wondering about the appropriateness of my own actions, I seem to be assuming that there exists one clear-cut solution to whatever problem I have on hand at the time. Not that I realized this without help, I just started reading Joe McDonald's book: *Teaching: Making Sense of an Uncertain Craft* which among other things, details how teaching can be downright messy in all its complexity and shades of gray if you will. As a former electrical engineer, am I all too often looking for the correct solution or formula to tell me what to do in a given situation? I think the answer is yes. I am something of a neat freak in having everything organized just right. What am I to make of things in a school class or school day that don't go just right (i.e. according to my plans or some other well understood algorithm?) Am I setting myself up for extra and perhaps undue frustration and disappointment? I found it interesting that McDonald saw fit to

mention Werner Heisenberg and his uncertainty principle. I never before would have applied it to anything other than a physics question. Can I live with such uncertainty in a classroom and social situation? It would seem I must in order to find happiness as a teacher. I take this thought as a warning for I have always been one to seek out and require clear cut answers to things I do. Can I adjust my thinking about teaching in ways that McDonald suggests? Time will tell.

In rereading about both the ups and downs of all the episodes I have been through with Linda in the classroom these past several months, it is clear there is not one magical solution that will suddenly give me the answer to how to assist her in her development. Teaching (as are all of human interrelations) is a complex and uncertain thing. There are traps set at every context level we teach on whether these be community, other teachers, parents, the cultures of our students etc. that are waiting to get us. But by continually examining, studying, and detailing what works for our classrooms as well as listening to what other teachers have to say, we can hope to greatly accelerate the learning curve for us, as well as our students, and thereby start arriving at some of the answers to the questions we pose.

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