

"Andre's Story"

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The story of Andre is paramount to my inquiry. It tells the story of one student who had to carve his own way for achieving justice and social action in his life and how I as a teacher had to broaden my own interpretations and perspectives to make way for his.

Andre, a 15 year-old ninth grade student in need of emotional and learning support, was admitted to my mixed categorical special education class from Devereaux Residential Treatment School in October, 2000. He arrived experienced with the judicial system as a result of a conviction on car theft and he had a longstanding school history of acting out and displaying defiant behavior with authority figures.

Andre is about 5 feet 6 inches tall. He has sleepy hazel colored eyes that easily glaze over when he is frustrated or engaged in some self fulfilling behavior, such as masturbation. He wears his hair in the popular Allen Iverson, 76er, braided style most of the time. He frequently has a runny nose which requires him to ask for tissues throughout most classes. He salivates easily, so his mouth is almost always very wet and shiny. Andre is of average size compared to many of the boys who have experienced growth spurts between 6th and 9th grade. He walks with a smooth gait easily swinging his long arms close to his body. He pads across the floor with the kind of smoothness that I have noticed with other boys who have practiced moving about inconspicuously--quietly, secretly, catlike. He is impulsive and strong willed. He readily calls out in groups and initially was often frustrated by the shortcomings of other students and their impatience with his reading difficulties.

His early behaviors at Germantown High were characterized by incessant loud talking in class, excessive and unprovoked profanity, open masturbating, refusal to participate in class or home activities, cutting classes and talking back to security officers and teachers. He initially refused to bring any supplies to class beyond a pencil or pen. A lengthy conference with his mother one month after his admission to my class, finally remedied that situation.

After some very brief reading exchanges, in my class, it became clear that Andre had extremely limited reading and language arts

skills. He demonstrated a limited sight vocabulary and even fewer word recognition skills. He often overlooked punctuation in trying to read and skipped lines in long passages. His writing was filled with misspellings, mechanical errors and lack of fluency. When others would read, he would quite often make noises or call the names of others to engage them in unrelated conversations. But, he could remember information spoken in class and could make deep and meaningful connections to ideas especially those related to current events or social responsibility. He had strong opinions about many topics and often called on his many hours of watching TV to find support for some of his arguments for or against a topic.

Andre became a catalyst for, sometimes, explosive discussions related to literary characters, political events and personalities and educational issues brought forward in the media.

Finally, on December 13, 2000 Andre began a slow metamorphosis into the world of looking and sounding like a "student". He began to work on a relatively consistent basis in spite of continuing to be brash and impulsive. Nonetheless, it was obvious that something was beginning to happen. His profane remarks were soon followed by "My bad", "I'm sorry", "Okay----okay!" or "I didn't mean to do that".

After more than 2 months of refusing to write in a class journal which was the daily routine for this class, Andre finally decided to join in. He responded to a prompt: "Describe how it feels to read your own written work aloud".

When I read my work in class. I do not like it. The classmates try to make fun of me.

The class makes me mad because they have the same problems as me. So, I do not think that they can laugh at me any time of the day. That makes me want to read more, so I can be better than them. (Entry transcribed for clarity)

Andre continued to struggle for at least another report period with impulse control, profanity and masturbating (although he was very obviously attempting to be more subtle about this latter behavior). What Andre didn't know was that I was also struggling.

I was impatient with the amount of profanity that Andre and 4 other students used on a daily basis and the sexual innuendos and personal fondling repulsed me. I had never thought of myself as some prima Donna or goody two shoes. After all, I was married and had raised 2 sons and grew up in a household with 4 men, and had been

teaching in an urban environment for 27 years. But, I was outdone by all this fondling. And, all my Christian proclivities were challenged every time I heard "F--- you" or Suck my d---, you b----". I am almost ashamed to admit it now, but I lost it when a male student openly manipulated himself to the point of erection during one of our Pennsylvania State Assessment Test preparation activities. This class, Andre included, was challenging everything that I had come to believe about high expectations, teaching and learning.

Nonetheless, Andre became an emerging writer, reader and speaker. His tolerance for reading frustration grew steadily as did the tolerance level of his classmates. His persistence rate for completing tasks increased, as well. He was proud of himself and so was I. We were both proud of what we were learning from the class and each other.

One, don't take everything that happens in the class as personal.
And,
two, stay focused on what is important.

We both noticed that as I ignored certain inappropriate behaviors and attended more to what was expected and needed, the more he and others responded positively. As a matter of fact, Andre's masturbating in class decreased dramatically, although never quite disappearing and his use of profanity was reduced to sometimes only once in a week and sometimes zero times in a week. As he gained further confidence in himself, he began to help others, particularly a close buddy of his who was labeled EMR (Educable Mentally Retarded) and who had not previously demonstrated even the slightest reading, writing or spelling ability.

"You know those flashcards, she gave us, man? Use 'em. They'll help you remember. I got mine in my bag. Got a whole lot. Use'em, man. You wan spell bedder, don't you? How people gon know what you mean if you can't spell nuttin' so people kin understand?"
(A retort from Andre to Britt)

Andre's interest and persistence with writing was relentless. Learning had finally become purposeful for him and there was no stopping him. He had earned a "20" grade point average during our first marking period, a "60" for the second, a "75" for the third and "87" for the last marking period. According to our cumulative grade system, the four grades should have given him a year end average of "60", the equivalent of an F. I asked for and got permission to discard his first marking period grade and entered a grade of "87" for his final

grade. He also received a gift certificate for making the most improvement and a certificate for good attendance for the last two marking periods. He felt victorious----as if he had scored a coup. He had shown the world, his world, he could do this. He bragged of his progress to every visitor who came into the room. When he had claimed the books he wanted from my class library for summer reading, he refused to put the books down for fear that someone would take them. He kept asking his friends if they wanted him to read something to them. Several times during our last days together, he raffled through his journal trying to decide which was his best entry. He allowed me to keep the journal only after I promised to use it to show other young people what they could really do "if they put their minds to it, try and believe in themselves".

". . . give it a little more grease." (from an interview with Andre one day before school ended)

The import of the transformation in Andre and several of his classmates did not quite register until the last days of June. An embarrassing large number of students had stopped coming to school because of mixed communications about being excluded because of inadequate immunizations and grades going in almost two weeks before the last day of school. Not until the student numbers began to wane and I began to review old lesson plans, take down behavior management charts and reread anecdotal notes did the reality of what had happened with so many of my most challenging students hit me.

I had been frustrated so often because I had inscribed in my mind what I wanted transformation to look like. I had these expectations of how it would look, sound and feel for students to grasp the ideas I was promoting and turn them into a student led plan of social action that would impact the school and larger community in some neat predictable way. But, this wasn't happening. As a matter of fact, it was not until I relinquished some space in the classroom to make way for the uniqueness of the students (whether I liked the taste and feel of it or not), was I able to truly notice and appreciate all that they brought with them.

"I am going to simply ask the boys to take their hands out of their pants. I'll do it one-on-one without generating the attention of the others". (An Excerpt from my lesson plan reflection log)

Furthermore, only after I broadened the lens through which I was willing to look at these young people, was I able to fully help them move toward critical social change within and for themselves. There

was no battle cry to refurbish the local YWCA, home of the first integrated YWCA swimming pool, or campaign for increased funding for public schools. There was only mediocre response to the threat of increasing the cost of school tokens or legislation requiring the wearing of school uniforms for Philadelphia school students. However, what I saw in this particular group of students was a very deep and personal conviction to change how others perceived their individual capabilities.

For them, at this time in their lives, this was the most important social action to be taken. Justice for them included being respected and regarded for the beautiful, strong, intelligent, over comers that they were. They needed to negate the images that they themselves had helped forge in other people's minds---they needed an undoing of sorts. They needed forgiveness, redemption and reconciliation. And, for more than a few of them, I was to be their witness. Through the processes of our class, I was charged with collecting the evidence that they were better. There could be no further action to serve others until this was done.

Andre believed this and so did his classmates. And, because of our struggle together, I now know and believe it, too.

"Now, I realize better what I need to know. Education is the key for success. I know I have to be better". (An excerpt from an interview with Andre one day before school ended)