

"DJ"

by Vanessa Brown

This is a poignant case sample of one urban high school student's foray into human agency and social action in a special education English language arts class.

I can remember that "DJ" had a rapid-fire manner of speaking to everyone. His words could dart past you with such swiftness you would hardly know they were directed at you. His daily greetings almost always foreshadowed the upcoming tenor of our next 52 minutes together. I would have to move fast to catch the words, the tone, the message and its implications for teaching and learning in room 226.

"DJ" is an impressive yet average sized ninth grader who is dark and handsome. He has deep brown eyes that never rest on any one subject for a length of time. He moves with a frantic, but steady gait as if always on his way to somewhere else---his speech already gone on the journey---"DJ" might say, "Good mornin', Mrs. Brown"---"Fuck you, bitch"---"Oh, I didn't mean to say that" all in what seemed like one long breath.

He could grab his journal, work in it, and throw the books on the floor in a matter of minutes---"I'm tired today!"

On the other hand, "DJ" could be thoughtful, kind and deeply sensitive. Having been raised by his religious grandmother, he also had an abiding awareness of right and wrong; justice and injustice. On rare, but cherished occasions his spirituality would pervade the classroom---"My soul is at peace today, Mrs. Brown".

On those occasions, he would stand close to me and inquire about my weekend, my family, and an engagement about which we had talked or what the journal-writing topic was for the day.

"DJ" was an anomaly. In spite of his unyielding level of energy, his impulsivity and frantic behaviors, he was eager to be a part of a supportive community. One might initially surmise that his indiscriminate use of profanity, his verbal and physical threats to me and the students and assaults on students were attempts to circumvent teaching and learning in our class. However, closer examination albeit painful at times, revealed some other impetus for this madness---Power and control.

When "DJ" was in a "mood", he was a powerful and controlling force to be reckoned with. More than a few times, only the presence of a school security officer could calm him down. Yet, he rarely wanted to actually leave the classroom. With tears streaming down his face, he would sometimes plead, "I'll stop! I'll change! Just let me stay!!!" Unfortunately, I learned rather early on that it would serve no one's purpose to let him stay after an attack. He would have to leave. He would have to pay for his indiscretions. Needless to say, chance meetings with him in the halls later on those days would be characterized by his angry retorts about my unfairness.

By the onset of winter-like weather, "DJ" was writing and sharing aloud very short journal responses to daily prompts designed to help create and support a community of reading, writing, teaching and learning. "DJ" and his classmates required much more time for this part of the lesson plan than other classes on my roster. Each day, for weeks, we repeated the same journal writing ritual.

"DJ" eventually took great pride in having an opportunity to command the attention of this audience. He would oft-times embellish his entries during the sharing, insuring a lasting impression on his listeners and cursing the non-listeners. He savored my connections and comments on his writing, especially when I or another student acknowledged, "Your entry makes me think of . . . or this reminds me of . . ."

"DJ" was not too different from several boys and a few of the girls who came to my class burdened with social and emotional challenges. Despite the obvious increasing joy that "DJ" and others felt during the journal sharing, this burden hovered over them like an albatross.

Nonetheless, we started a familiar PhilWP activity, a three-part interview to foray into the realm of community building. I wanted to get students to talk and listen to stories about themselves. "DJ" and his classmates conducted peer interviews and then produced illustrations to depict the impressions left by the individual interviewees. I prepared sample interview questions before hand and cleared the final four questions with the group the day before actually doing the project.

The illustrations became the first student work to adorn the walls of the classroom and the first pronouncement that we were on our way to building a community. We had started the process of creating a safe place to "ask questions and/or show confusion, to reveal understandings and struggles, sources of joy and areas of pain" (Schoenbach et al, 1999).

Because my pedagogical beliefs were grounded in the intersection of social

action, service learning, political acts of change and reading and writing intensive classrooms, I exposed the students to snippets from Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, excerpts from The Autobiography of Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass' Narrative of the Life of a Slave, lines from interviews with Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, the poetry of Sonia Sanchez and Gwendolyn Brooks along with Dr. Seuss' celebratory Hooray for Diffendoofer Day.

I imagined that the words of these giants would catapult them to a different way of thinking about their world and their roles and responsibilities to it. I challenged students to critically examine conditions in their own families, neighborhoods and schools; to look closely at what problems most prominently impacted their communities, and to make suggestions on ways to confront and remedy problems while encouraging community assets. Through the journal writing, creative writing, letter writing and sharing and literature responses and weekly newspaper activities, "DJ" and others were asked to find the connections to political and social action. I thought that I could use the literature and writing to ease our way into becoming a community of politically and socially conscious and active teachers and learners.

While "DJ" actually did begin to write more with increasing ease, neither he nor his classmates showed any signs of a willingness to directly confront issues that they identified. As a matter of fact, "DJ" was often impatient with these topics and hostile when I would try to push the idea of taking responsibility for our communities and enlisting the aid of others to make change.---"Fuck dem, they ain't goin ta change". "What we keep talkin bout dis for"? At other times, he wouldn't write at all.

Months later, a widely publicized, horrific drug related murder that claimed the lives of 6 people and wounded 3 others occurred in a neighborhood near our school. I asked students to talk in small groups about their feelings about drug activity in our communities and how we might get young people to stay away from drugs. Two students then suggested that we develop flyers and to put them up around our school and in student lockers. I thought, "Well, this is a start".

Surprisingly, DJ drew a very detailed flyer with the words, "We want you alive, not dead---Don't do drugs." Immediately after school, I drove to a local copy shop and had 5 copies made of each child's finished flyer. We stuffed them in student lockers and hung them on walls around the building the following day within a 10 minute limited time frame while other classes were still in session. DJ actually helped us decide who would cover what part of school.

This was our turning point. The students had decided on and implemented an action and I had entrusted them to do what they said they would do. Again, I had served as the witness, that students could and would do what they said they would.

"DJ" started taking advantage of the power embedded in the processes of the classroom. A particularly interesting example of this was when "DJ's" class was scheduled to take a written exam covering the details of the Watson's Go to Birmingham, 1963.

On the morning of the exam, another male student was really acting out and actually threatened to disrupt the entire exam process. Just as I moved in to calm the student by talking slowly and softly, touching his shoulder and drawing the student's attention to parts of the test that I thought he would be comfortable with, "DJ" took charge of the others and initiated a move that surpassed my wildest dreams.

"DJ" whispered to the students in his row in front of the windows to turn their desks around to face the window, which would render their backs to "Kev", and me who were struggling to find a point of focus. "DJ" further instructed the students to engage in a modified writers' workshop to complete the literature response sections of the test

I was floored. Here was "DJ" taking on the role of leader at a crucial moment and there were his peers respecting and responding to his leadership in the most natural way.

The establishment of community and frequent opportunities to exercise action in the classroom under girded by reading, writing, talking and listening with caring others had been critical. We had moved from square one, but at the students' own pace.