

Drinking to educate: The frustrations, expectations, misconceptions and successes of secondary teaching in New York City

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ABSTRACT: This narrative recounts the experiences of a new teacher attempting to implement the America's Choice Ramp-up literacy program in a culturally diverse, New York high school. It argues that this program can fragment teaching and detract from student learning. It further argues that the program can undermine teacher morale and professional judgement.

KEYWORDS: English, America's Choice, Ramp-up, cultural diversity, standards, teacher professionalism, teacher morale.

I never drank before I became a teacher. It was a Friday night ritual that began early in my first year. A colleague and I would get our students' writing together in a pile, crack open a bottle of wine and start grading papers. This somehow made the disappointment of our high school students' "unlearning" more bearable. We were both amazed at how little our high school students knew about Standard English – things we took for granted, things we thought our students would know, things we expected them to come to our class understanding could not be assumed to be a priori knowledge. I was shocked and dismayed when I thought that teaching high school English meant meaningful discussions about literature (as I remembered it from my English honors classes), and it turned out to be something different altogether. I needed to go back to the basics and teach reading, sometimes on a very basic level. I felt ill-equipped to handle such a task. What did I know about teaching reading? My license was in English, not Reading, and if New York State had two different licences for the subjects, I had to assume that they weren't the same.

Teaching wasn't necessarily on the queue for me when I was at New York University completing my Bachelor's degree. I was going to be a writer, but when that didn't pan out the way I wanted it to, I looked back to the many people who influenced me and my teachers ranked high above them. What could be a better way for me to give back to the world than to educate? I quickly applied to Queens College's Secondary Education program to get my Masters in Education and begin my teaching journey. I had no idea it would begin as swiftly as it did. I wasn't done with my schooling and I had never student-taught. My head was full of ideals and expectations which were based on my own high school experience. My students would indeed be happy to have a young, hip teacher who wanted to give them everything and I would help them find their brilliance. That was not what I met with at all when I was told to go to room 348 and teach. No guidance, no curriculum, no keys. I wasn't sure what I was going to do, but I knew I had to fake it, at least for a little while, until I knew the nature of what I was dealing with. I received a clear picture almost immediately when I noticed my students weren't receptive to anything new and that I had to win them over before they would even trust me a little.

Looking back on my experience last year and the journey I am currently on with the novel New York City initiative to “Ramp Up”¹ freshman classes, I’m not sure that we are doing our students justice. We are merely following orders and going against our instinct to teach to their needs. We are following scripts that are disjointed and confusing. We have multiple components to one lesson and not enough time to nurture the understanding of any of them. Something wasn’t working before, but “Ramp Up” wasn’t the way to fix it. (They recognized this fact, when just one year after its inception, region 5 (my district) opted not to do the continuation for the sophomores the following year.) Teachers are expected to follow the written script from the book which addresses a broad range of skills at once and it isn’t until the very end of the school year when it all comes together and makes sense. Instead of allowing the students to master one skill at a time giving them purpose in their learning, we are asking them to learn many confusing and difficult skills at one time, only exacerbating their bewilderment. Our job as teachers is no longer about teaching the students, but doing a juggling act to get through one lesson. There are many components to each lesson and a fine-tuned way of handling them. Unfortunately, the training is second-rate and insufficient, and the students are the ones who suffer.

All of our students are different, but similar in that they are all from a low socio-economic background coming to class with their own issues and concerns and looking to us for help. These minority students have been “socially promoted”² and pushed aside for most of their lives. Our educational system has failed them for long enough. If they had been receiving the education they needed up until now, high school wouldn’t be the circus it turned out to be. We would be able to conduct our classrooms in the same manner we remember being taught. It wasn’t geared toward passing tests, because the curriculum taught the skills needed to pass those tests and teachers were trusted with the responsibility of preparing students through the curriculum. The test shouldn’t set the curriculum; it should merely be a representation of what the child has already learned.

PRELUDE

It’s 6.30am and I am already at school preparing for the long day ahead. My room is set up as the “model” classroom. The walls are text-rich, filled with informative posters and student work. The chalkboard has the day’s agenda posted clearly: Independent reading (20 minutes) with 5 minutes built in for reading response, Read aloud/think aloud on our class text (approximately 10-12 pages) modeling

¹ “The National Center’s Program: An overview. Since 1987, the National Centre on Education and the Economy ® has been developing policies, tools, professional development, and technical assistance to support states and communities determined to get their students to high, internationally benchmarked academic and occupational standards. The NCEE® is the manager of the New Standards ® program, which produced academic performance standards and matching assessments for the schools. America’s Choice ® School Design is a comprehensive program that includes the tools, professional development and technical assistance needed by schools and districts to implement standards-based reform. The National Center’s Workforce Development Program provides the designs, assistance and policy guidance that the federal government, states and localities need to implement world-class workforce development systems.

“This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-99-C0-0154.” (NCEE, 2003, p. 2)

² In the American context, pushed along without academic reason.

visualization (20 minutes), Accountable Talk (10 minutes), Writing workshop (25 minutes) with conferences and a Share Out for the last few minutes. The workshop structure is not the problem, the amount of content that they want us to teach in one period is.

My skill of the week has been laminated and left to hang on the board until Friday. The skill of the week was a brilliant concept thought up by my region administrators in the city. Every classroom (including non-English content areas) from K-12 is supposed to teach the same skill of the week at the same time so that the students theoretically get literacy skills in all of their classes. (Unfortunately, identifying figurative language isn't appropriate for the lesson you are giving on background information for *The Piano Lesson* by August Wilson or if you are teaching a lesson on cell reproduction in science.) The twelve-week "Skill of the Week" schedule is as follows: Recalling facts and details, finding the main idea, understanding sequence, recognizing cause and effect, comparing and contrasting, making predictions, finding word meaning in context, drawing conclusions and making inferences, differentiating between fact and opinion, identifying author's purpose, identifying figurative language and summarizing. We are required to work the skill of the week into every lesson for that week or else we are unsatisfactory.

Once my skill of the week is clearly mounted, I can spend my time making sure that my focus question or aim is written to guide the lesson and the numbered homework assignment that enforces the lesson. If I don't answer my focus question throughout the course of my lesson, then I am definitely an unsatisfactory teacher. (That's what I was told recently. It doesn't mean that I ran out of time or I was flexible because the students took me in another direction.) The problem is that the focus question addresses only one part of the lesson and there are six parts that I need to cover today. The dilemma is in deciding which aspect is the most important part. I need to ask myself whether it is more important to fit the whole lesson in (because that is what I'm told to do) so I can stay on track with the program, or should I give the students the time to learn each lesson and be prepared to move on?

It is now 7:45 A.M. and the bell is going to be ringing soon. The anxiety about my day commences: two block periods of freshman (9th grade) English (90 minutes each) and one sophomore (10th grade) English class (42 minutes), and whether or not administration is going to be doing a "snapshot" of any of my rooms. (This means that my supervisor and any number of other departmental supervisors can just drop by and scrutinize my room, class, teaching style for about ten minutes or less and draw a conclusion based on that limited information.) I fear that the new curriculum is going to fail like those that have come before it, and they will witness that failure in my classroom of 36 students where only 26 students maximum are supposed to be present. I worry that I will be ineffective. I am concerned that I will not be able to offer my students the kind of help they need. I am afraid that my students will not trust that I want to help them. I am after all, a white, female teacher who grew up in the suburbs, teaching a room full of multi-ethnic children. Do they believe that I am really looking out for their best interests? I wish I could go back to bed when the bell rings. Why can't things be the way I imagined they would be?

PERIOD 1 AND 2 (FRESHMAN BLOCK 1)

The students file into the room groggily. It's three weeks into the term. They know that they are supposed to get their folders and begin reading for independent reading as soon as they get to class, but I remind them with a smile as they enter and sit down to reinforce the habit. Welcoming my students every day, I stand by the door saying "Good morning" to any student whose eyes make contact with my own. I try to be positive even though my insides are churning. The more agitated I become, the wider my smile grows. Some students are sleeping even as they walk in and others are just operating on their own agenda. I understand that high school is both a social and academic place, but English class is not the time for chatting about last night's events, nor is it time to go to the bathroom, the nurse or any other place where learning isn't occurring. Some students begin reading right away because they like to choose their own books and have time in class to read them. I get such a rush from those students' contentment during this time. I wish all of them were this enthusiastic.

This is just the beginning of the class. It starts off well and then it systematically falls apart. After this, the students are set to do a reader's log on their independent reading books. Some won't stop reading, some won't write, some won't wake up and some are too engaged in conversation to stay on task. Only a few of them get their work done and others have no idea what is going on because they are doing their own thing. I try to rally the troops back to the activity at hand, but time is racing on and the next part of my script is upon us.

Quickly moving on from that part, we have to do a read aloud/think aloud where I model good habits of readers and we all "enjoy" a book. *Or*, I enjoy a book and my students complain or sleep through it. We are allowed to read only about 10-15 pages a day and we have to stop regularly to model behaviors. This seems to annoy the students because, just when they are getting into the book, it is time to stop. Then we discuss the book in the accountable talk time and the habit that was modeled.

Oh, wait, it's time for the next section of class: the work period. Now we are doing some kind of group project with a reading that isn't at all related to the earlier two readings and we are going to learn something "valuable" (says America's Choice, the script I am following for the Freshman "Ramp Up" program). "Wait, miss, what were we supposed to do?" The students aren't listening or they just didn't get it and I don't really have time to re-explain the assignment. I try to ask someone at their table to explain the task at hand. "Shakeema, you know what we are doing, right? Can you please explain it to Tyrone?" "Okay everyone, we only have five more minutes to complete this assignment because Shaniqua wants to do her book talk and you need some time to put your folders away." I don't mean to rush them, but there is so much time wasted in explaining and re-explaining because the students don't come to the high school with the skills they need to keep up.

Do you feel tired after reading this paragraph? Are you confused? Well, imagine how our youngsters feel when they are receiving these lessons set up by Evelyn Woods (discover of speed-reading). No one can keep up with this.

The bell rings when I least expect it and the students are in a mad dash to get to their next class, leaving my room in an utter state of chaos. Folders aren't properly put

away. Independent reading books are left at their desks. Garbage from their breakfast (which they aren't allowed to eat in my class) lingers like a bad headache and I need to clear out so that the next teacher who shares my classroom can let her students in. I am deeply puzzled by what transpired, but at least I have a period off now to reflect on how my afternoon classes can be better.

PERIOD 3

I sit quietly behind a computer in the United Federation of Teachers' teachers' centre in my school. The security of Room 111 has yet to wear off. I cozy myself to the computer in the far corner out of sight of the door so that no one will know where to find me. I remind my staff developer that if my supervisor calls for me, I am not here. I am beyond complaining about my situation, but no less frustrated by it. I feel a deep empathy for my students because I have a hard enough time getting through what they are supposed to be learning.

Last year, I taught balanced literacy, but I had the freedom to make up my own plans. I selected how much we read, what activities to go along with the reading and how to conduct the writing workshops. The students still read independently. There was a thread connecting my lessons. There was a point. I feel that real learning happened. I was eager to do well and to share my insight with my students. I wanted to share the time with them and have a reciprocal relationship where we all shared with each other. Still hoping for this fantasy now, my eye begins to twitch again as the free time ends.

PERIOD 4

It's time for my sophomores. Some of them have been in high school already for four years and haven't made any progress. They are a really special group of students and I mean that in the best way possible. This is a short class comparatively, so I need to whiz through today's lesson. We are working on Greek mythology – *The Odyssey* to be exact. The version I am reading with them is from *Mythic Voices* by Celia Barker Lottridge and Alison Dickie, a 5th grade text that has several editorial mistakes that even they pick up on. I start on my mini-lesson of the skill of the week, which is understanding sequence. "Everything we read happens in a particular order. That particular order is called the sequence. We can recognize sequence by the words that introduce different things. For example, first, second, third or next. Does everyone understand what I mean?" Of course, they don't understand order, seeing as they are coming from lunch and aren't in the mood to learn. It takes me a while to settle them down, probably not that long, but it feels like an eternity. My eye starts twitching, I feel my face warming and possibly turning pink and my one or two good students give me reassuring looks letting me know they are ready to learn. I push through to the read aloud where I read an excerpt of the excerpt of *The Odyssey* and model what I expect the students to do in their groups. Only half of them are paying attention because they know I will repeat myself in frustration at least three times if they don't listen initially.

I manage to get through the whole lesson, but without adequate time for a share out³. I am counting down the minutes until the bell rings so that I can run back to the solace of the teachers' centre and decompress, I mean prepare both physically and mentally for my last class of the day. What my first period lacked in energy, my last class definitely makes up for. Since they are the last periods of the day and they have had lunch already, maintaining focus is difficult. It's like 30 students with ADD and I am the bouncing ball they need to be following and I am not moving nearly quickly enough.

PERIODS 7 AND 8 (FRESHMAN BLOCK 2)

I'm back at my starting point, ready for my second run of the earlier lesson. These students don't understand the benefit of being my second class. If I could do it differently, without administration checking in on me, here's how it would look. The students would be greeted at the door and we would start with the read aloud first. I would read for about a chapter depending on the length, stopping only when I want to demonstrate the habit of the day. I ask the students to write down questions they might have and use sticky pads to mark the spots in the text they don't get so we can address them after we are done reading. The students are engaged, because the text has been chosen by them. (After doing considerable research for my Masters on choice and struggling readers, I know that this has a positive impact on their motivation.) They have a real stake in the accountable talk because they are enjoying the reading and are eager to return to their own studies in their independent reading later.

Writing workshop then begins and I read aloud a model that I have written. I always do my assignments with the students so that I know what I am assigning them and they see that I don't expect them to do anything I wouldn't do. "So what do you think? Do you recognize what I have done with my piece?" I ask them and surprisingly they all understand exactly what I did. They then eagerly go off to work on their own projects and I can't get any of them to stop writing. Each student is at varying places in their own writing process and that is all right because I have been conferencing with them and I know where each of them is planning to go with their piece. The excellent effort they are putting forth is continually recognized and I am trying more than anything to help them love writing as much as I do. I wrap up the writing workshop by allowing some of the students to read their pieces and note their progress. We talk about the process and they end the workshop with a small process reflection piece in their journals.

We end class with independent reading. I leave them enough time to dive back into their books and they are happy to do so. Today I'm even going to take the day off from conferencing and I'm going to sit at a table and read with them. I let out a giggle while I read my book and they are curious to know what I am reading about. I smile on the inside because one of my students asked if they could read my book next.

³ The part of the lesson where the students share the work they have been doing for the lesson by reading an excerpt or giving a short presentation.

I excitedly tell her yes. Then I open my eyes and realize that this reality will never happen in this school anytime soon.

QUESTIONING MY PERCEIVED FAILURES

In this classroom now, chaos is happening a lot more than I care to admit. I keep asking myself, “What am I doing wrong? Why aren’t the students responding to me positively? Why do I have to hear them muttering under their breath about how they would rather be in social studies where they just copy notes from the board? Why don’t these students see how much I care and want to see them succeed?” I’ve exhausted myself looking for answers and I have yet to find solutions, but at the end of all my confusion lies the resounding comment from some of my students, “It’s because I’m Black, right Miss?” I’m disgusted in even thinking that they believe they are stuck with this program and that I am treating them a certain way on account of their ethnicity.

I recently read a chapter from *Inside city schools: Investigating literacy in multicultural classrooms* by Freedman, Simons, Kalnin and Casareno (1999) that addressed racial issues in urban schools. The chapter was about a white, female teacher, Eileen Shakespear, working in a Boston public school district where most of her students were African American. She wondered if her students’ “experience of White people was hostile enough that learning from her, having a close productive relationship with a White teacher, was impossible” (p. 77). Shakespear had one of her Black male students interview some of his friends without her being present and she basically found out that they believed the following: “The White man was in a conspiracy trying to keep them ignorant.” Black teachers pushed them harder than White teachers because White teachers often feared them and didn’t care about their educational well-being. They “yearned for positive experiences with each other and with other African American adults, especially grown men” (p. 83).

I find all of these things to be true. Our students are so astute and aware, and it is foolish of us to believe that because they won’t comply with a system that refuses to work with their strengths, they are incapable of doing the work. They choose to be shut off and uninterested. It is our job to awaken them from their lack of interest and try to welcome them back. We don’t give them enough credit. We don’t give them enough positive reinforcement. When we do, they are leery of it because they are so used to getting in trouble. How can we explain to them that we value what they say and truly mean it and then also implement their ideas by modifying the way the class is run? How can we show them that we are listening and we want to work with them? I’m not a part of any conspiracy. As a matter of fact, I work really diligently to create an environment of respect and understanding to let my students know that they to me are all just children who want to learn and with every willing learner, I offer what I know. I offer my passion for the subject matter. I offer my love for wanting to know them and to watch them grow. However, the line is already drawn in some cases and breaking down the walls of bad experiences past is a difficult challenge.

LOOKING AHEAD

I'd like to end this narrative by stating the obvious: things have to change. We need to gear the education of our students to their individual needs. We need to make class sizes smaller. We need to offer a pleasant learning environment. We need to remain open-minded. We need to curb our frustration and disillusionment because they can see that. I know that my students know when I am having a bad day and it isn't fair for me to put that on them. I work hard at respecting my students and not treating them like babies, but it is a paradox. When they act like babies I find it difficult to treat them the way they claim they want to be treated. It would be nice to come home on a Friday and not have to open the wine as soon as I break out my folder of student work.

Several years have passed since I started working in New York City. The situation hasn't improved, but has unfortunately worsened. More writs have been administered upon us and with each meeting we have another memo placed in our hands. My friend and I don't drink together anymore, but I have had guest "drinking buddies" join me on other occasions. It seems that happy hour just keeps getting longer (and more like therapy for the lot of us who wish things would change). My colleagues and friends are leaving the school by the bus-load and I feel left behind in the crumbling abyss of a once-glorious school. I, too, want to seek refuge in another system.

I have a hard time focusing on my grading at home now with whatever work I get (which is limited because no one likes to write a four-square essay on literature or anything else), so I have made a commitment to get to school earlier and to spend my prep periods doing more grading, alleviating both the need for alcohol consumption and the strain on my new marriage from my stress. I try to start each day with a bright idea and happy thoughts, only to have them quelled by the first regional bigwig who walks by my classroom and complains that I don't have a cursive alphabet hanging on my wall. The disintegration is accelerating and snowballing down past the playground. My students will not be able to survive in this world if things don't change.

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