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Keeping It Real

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Milton Reynolds

This story begins near the dawn of my teaching career when I was teaching at Nueva Middle School in Hillsborough, a school dedicated to the education of gifted children. Not an unreasonable need, but certainly a concept that requires close examination because it is rooted in a troubling history. Seeing myself as a person who is committed to the goals and principles of social justice and equitable access, I struggled with myself a great deal before deciding to eventually take the job at Nueva. Part of my internal struggle was gaining some clarity about what it meant to be an educator as the term is most expansively defined and in that, who would I serve?

Having decided to take the job, the story I told myself to salve my inner conflict was that I'd be an advocate for the few students of color that attended the school. I'd be a touchstone, a place of potential refuge for them. I knew the experience of being the “visible visitor” all too well; it was a lived experience. Since I was the only full time teacher of color at the school it seemed a reasonable stance. There were a couple of other folks of color on campus; the gardeners, janitors, and two, maybe three support staff, but I felt it important that the students had other models. After all, this was at a school for the “gifted,” so the absence of teachers of color presented a real dilemma, but for me it also reeked of possibility.

By virtue of circumstances, I had the ticket to the show; for most of my life I was raised in communities in which I'd been the visible visitor. As difficult as that aspect of my upbringing had been at times, it provided me with the skills needed to navigate this community. I'd discovered long ago how to read the cues present in my social environment, so that “the large shadow I cast,” as my father often refers to it, didn't work against me. These lessons were hard in coming and often painful, but if I could spare some of my students the indignities and slights I'd suffered through sharing my experiences and strategies then it seemed a noble goal.

As it turned out, many of the students who were most affected by my presence were actually the White students. Most of them had never had an opportunity to interact with any people of color in a meaningful way, outside of the “traditional” superordinate/subordinate patterns that typified their lives, so the sustained engagement w/me was a real eye opener for some. While this isn't the thrust of my piece I must say that many of those interactions are still with me, as I’m sure they are for many of my former students.

The primary story I want to convey is about a student of mine, Rahman Jamaal McCreadie. I was aware of Rahman before he came to the middle school in seventh grade. I'd seen him on campus, he was one of those kids with that twinkle in their eye; he was obviously very bright, if not a little squirrelly. When time allowed I would walk down to the lower school and check in with the younger kids; it gave me a chance to get to know them and they me, so I was familiar with Rahman and knew that I wanted to engage him once he got to the middle school. When that time came I inherited him after
a bit of lobbying. In looking at his previous reports, it was clear that he was coming with some “baggage,” but it was also clear that folks didn’t really “see” him.

When I began to review his cumulative reports, they seemed to represent a very different student from the one I had come to know. In my mind it had a great deal to do with the way his previous teachers had seen him; the way they interpreted his behaviors. For the record, Rahman is biracial, but looks “identifiably” African American. Rahman was raised by his mother and by and large the community that he navigated in and out of school was predominately White, as were the social norms that he internalized.

Rahman wasn’t your “average” kid, by seventh grade he’d already earned a Black belt in karate; he was an accomplished trumpet player, an exceptional mathematician, had strong writing skills, and was becoming an accomplished actor. He was literally bursting with talent. Needless to say it was troubling to me that many of his previous teachers viewed him as problematic. I don’t think that anybody would say he was horrible and he was generally well liked, but little things are big.

Halfway into our first year together, in seventh grade, he was still struggling with some of the behavioral issues and was experiencing some frustration about the situation. As his advisor I started up a conversation with him about the situation saying, “Well, Rahman, as a young Black man…..” He stopped me midsentence. It was apparent by the look on his face and his actions that I had clearly upset him. Maybe upset isn’t the right word, but clearly I’d put him in a place of great dissonance. This was disconcerting to me, as I’d always prided myself on being attuned to my students and attentive to their needs. I was always available to them and felt I really connected with all of them, especially Rah- man. It was also shocking to me that I had done to him what some of the others had; I hadn’t seen him as he saw himself.

He proceeded to tell me, “Well, I see myself as both White and Black and I need you to see both sides of me…..” I had to pause for a second and think of what to say. The immediate response of just about anybody would be to defend themselves and say, “Well, no, that’s not what I meant to say…..” But somehow I knew that this wasn’t the time or the place for that. What was important at that moment was for me to allow Rahman to tell me what he needed me to hear, simply for me to listen. Quite frankly, a defensive response had never seemed sufficient for me either in thinking back on some of the racialized moments of my trajectory through childhood. Fortunately, for our relationship I kept quiet and was able to hear him. In that moment I demonstrated to him that our relationship was more important than me being right.

It’s still an emotionally weighty event for me; recounting that frozen snapshot still brings up lots of feelings. It was one of those moments everyone has in their teaching careers when we become the student and our student becomes the teacher. We are still very close and communicate often. On more than one occasion we’ve refl ected on that experience and we both view that as a defining moment in our relationship.

Rahman knew that I was invested in him. We were tight and we talked a lot; sometimes it was about school, but other times it was about life in general. In some ways, he would say I was a “surrogate” father for him because his dad really wasn’t in the picture early on. So as you might imagine I was shaken in the moment he revealed his chosen identity to me. Fortunately, I did bite my tongue. I allowed him to teach me; it’s one of the wisest things I’ve done in my teaching career. In retrospect it wasn’t much, I just had to be willing to accept the important lesson that my student bravely provided me with and I was able to as he says, “keep it real.”

The conversation we started years ago still continues between us. As he told me later, that was the first time he began to think of himself as Black, even as he said he wasn’t, at least not entirely so. In retrospect it shouldn’t have been all that surprising, as the
extended family he was surrounded by were all European Americans and that was the case for the community he lived in. Nevertheless, our interaction started an internal process of inquiry about his identity that has been ongoing.

Our conversations about identity and place deepened and as it did the process pulled us together and opened doors to other conversations. Even though I’d botched my first attempt, we eventually got to what I was trying to communicate to him in the first place. That was the notion that there were a series of social circumstances that were at the root of his frustrations and that they were largely a function of the way in which other people were seeing him and interpreting his actions. The upshot of the situation was that those were things we could work on together, as I’d had to figure out similar strategies myself. My task as his advisor became one of helping him learn how to navigate the social norms of that community and how to avoid the conflicts that arose from interpretations of his behavior. It wasn’t that his behavior was any worse than anyone else’s it was just that he was more “visible.”

Our conversations helped to illuminate the context he was struggling to see and lacked the language to articulate, as he hadn’t really thought of himself “racially” prior to our conversation, at least not in a way that was connected to how he was viewed. Once we were able to surface the social context, everything changed. It was a very short period of time until he got his “behavioral issues” sorted out and became quite skilled at navigating the school environment. There was carryover outside of school as well.

When it came time for him to go to high school we had another hurdle to surmount, where to go? Rahman had already told me that he wanted, “to be around his people” and to attend a high school where he would not be the visible visitor. We went back and forth on this he, his mother, and me. My advice to him was that I wanted him to be in a position to get what he needed out of school. Foremost in my mind was the desire to keep him focused on his education, but also to set the stage for college. I encouraged him to think about the matter, but to do so in broader terms. I understood his desire to be at a bigger school where he wouldn’t be so visible and would have a larger peer group, but I also didn’t want him to get lost in the mix or sidetracked by some of the social aspects of school.

There were many schools interested in him and some were offering substantial scholarships. I knew that even though the “price of admission” to some of these schools would be both economic and social and that he would yet again have to endure the rigors of being the visible visitor, that in the long haul it would afford him a greater set of options at the end of four years. The other major concern his mother and I shared was the question of whether the behaviors that might afford him membership in the community at the school he voiced a desire to attend, might ultimately run counter to his academic needs. Fortunately he trusted me enough to weigh in heavily on this decision.

He ultimately decided to go to one of the schools that had been working hard to recruit him and as we had surmised, the opportunities there would soon reveal themselves. He got to travel to Africa during his freshman year and in subsequent years went to Cuba and Iceland. He won the lead role in nearly all the school plays. He practically owned the school by the time he left. The benefit was really twofold, as he really helped that school and his peers to grow and in doing so, helped challenge some of their traditional practices like the “senior slave auction” and other problematic traditions. To his credit, he was able to apply his now well-honed social skills such that he was able to get his needs met and to be heard in the process.

To bring this to an end, he went on to graduate near the top of his class, was overwhelmingly selected as their graduation speaker, and had an array of colleges to choose from as we had hoped. He settled on USC, where he graduated from the School of Cinematic Arts and now enjoys a growing audience for his music and a successful film career.
While this story has a happy ending, Rahman’s behavior in middle school was not egregious in comparison to his peers; in fact it wasn’t any different. He was simply more visibly obvious. A major dilemma in education is that there’s a big intersection between who’s in front of the class and who’s in the seat. This fragile intersection has elements of social class and aspects of gender and race often loom large. A friend of mine used to say that “Everyone likes puppies but some folks are afraid of dogs.” Not to compare people with animals, but I see his saying as rather descriptive of the journey that many youth and especially young men of color make as they move from elementary school to middle school and one that continues as they matriculate into high school.

These young men enter the classroom hoping to be seen as good kids, as open to learning and hoping, like most of us, that their teachers will like them. While it’s fair to say that many students do encounter similar classrooms from time to time, too often, they encounter just the opposite. As they grow older and bigger in stature they often encounter fear and distrust from adults and frequently find themselves in positions where folks expect the least of them. In my life this procession of experiences translated to hurt, from hurt to frustration, and from frustration to anger. In the absence of staff that I trusted, those who’d simply “keep it real with me” my anger and alienation festered until I was eventually expelled from school in my junior year.

Sadly, most of the penalties and the consequences that accrue around this dynamic weigh heavily on students, usually long before they had the chance to figure it out. When I look at the dropout/expulsion rates of young Latino and African-American males in particular, I can’t help but think that so much of it has to do with them reacting to their environments and interactions within those environments as I had reacted to mine. None of this needs to happen.

I firmly believe that any teacher can effectively teach any student. And while it’s true that “race” can present a hurdle it doesn’t have to. Learning, like many things in life is a largely social process. One’s ability to work effectively with students is contingent upon one’s ability to communicate the importance of that relationship to that student. True, teachers have other responsibilities as it relates to the transmission of knowledge, but I feel it’s largely the relational aspects of the equation that are lacking.

What was important for Rahman was that he knew that I cared about him and I was invested in him as a person. Our initial conversation was one of those moments where the student became the teacher and I was open to the lesson. I now often work w/preservice or new teachers and I make a point to tell them that among other things, teaching is largely about relationships. It is important to have content mastery, it’s important to be able to scaffold information so students can navigate it, but if the students believe that you don’t care about them or you’re not invested in them, you can be a pedagogical wizard and end up falling flat.