Handbook of Social Justice in Education

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Robles’ Dilemma

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My career did not begin the first day I stepped into the classroom. It began in an English class, or maybe the day of my graduation from high school, when my English teacher asked me a most sincere question: “They (the school) are going to let you speak in front of the whole graduation class?” Or maybe my career began when my Teacher Cadet teacher made it clear to me that according to the way I get along with people, I could make a good teacher. Perhaps my real passion for teaching became clear when I realized for myself the effect, both negative and positive that teachers can have on their students (a lot of my memories are negative, along with moments when I really wanted to learn and my teachers did not fulfill their responsibility in terms of the academic learning that should have taken place).

Through many years, and as a teacher still, I have flashbacks to the times my English teacher ignored me in class when I made comments related to the lesson; my Algebra teacher called me out in front of the whole class for scoring last on chapter tests (regardless of how hard I tried); my Government teacher gave me detention for sleeping in class (after working eight-hour shifts five days a week at my job—and I had to wake up to be at my 7:30 am class); or another English teacher made me do push-ups in class for speaking a language other than English. Now, I find myself teaching in the same class where the students were placed on lock-down because of a gang affiliated shooting that took the life of a fellow classmate in front of the school building. But sometimes I feel that the teaching I am doing is the teaching I would have liked my teachers to have done with me. I make a major effort to eliminate any pessimistic vocabulary when I am talking to students.

The realization of my dream began many years later as I applied for teaching jobs in various school districts. After succumbing to rejection letter after rejection letter, I took a short, a very short vacation in southern California. Just as I was settling in, I got a call from the dean of Richmond High School, my alma mater back in the Bay Area. “Mr. Torres, we have an opening for an 80% teaching position. We would like for you to join us if you are available.” The next day I was on a return flight to the Bay Area. Excitement accompanied me all the way. Just the bare image of me, Armando Torres, soon to be Mr. Torres, standing in front of a classroom as I would finally get a chance to do what I had been aspiring to do since my years as a high school student—teach. By the time we hung up the phone, I realized that I had not even asked what subject. Yet, it didn’t matter at the time. What mattered was the fact that I would finally get a chance to step into a classroom, the very classroom that I had sat in as a student many years before. However, this time it would be different. This time, I would be in control of the environment within the classroom. This time, I would establish the positive and nurturing relationship that needs to occur between teacher and student. This time, I would be sure that my new introduction to these classrooms would be different from what I had myself experienced.
as a high school student at Richmond High, and that many of the students were currently experiencing.

Ironically, my teaching career would begin at the same school from which, 10 years earlier, I had been expelled. Many teachers still remembered me. While a few teachers were happy to see me, others were cold and bitter at having me, their “trouble maker” on their teaching staff. Despite this, I was proud. I was proud that the same teachers that once upon a time asked me to leave the class because I was “unteachable,” now had to put up with me as a member of the faculty. I would also be among the same staff with those teachers that reminded me of what an amazing teacher I would be one day.

“So you sure you want to do this?” said Mr. Crozzley, as I stepped into his office. “Would you be willing to teach full time if the opportunity arose?” he continued. Without hesitation, I gladly nodded and welcomed the challenge. Little did I know what was coming my way. He broke down the scenario. “Since you’re not full-time staff, we cannot get you a classroom for yourself so you’ll be teaching in three different classrooms, three different subjects.” All of a sudden the enthusiasm that I felt two days before left me, as if it was also taking my dream, the opportunity to teach in my own personal space. Having a personal space is important to me because it allows for full control and stability in one’s teaching. He asked me with concern, “Will that be OK for you?” Was it OK? What was my other choice? Of course it was. It would be a great opportunity for me to tough it up my first year and maybe work my way up and hope to one day have my own classroom. In retrospect, I don’t think it was so much toughing it up; I really think it was a silly decision on my part, and one that I regretted for a while but learned to accept as a great lesson.

This was the scenario: First period I would be in the east wing of the school. For the second period I would have to collect my teaching materials and drag them to the west wing of the school. I needed to get to that classroom before the teacher, who had the only key for the room, had left. Third period I would run back to the previous classroom, which had been used by a teacher that only utilized the room for three periods, yet wasn’t willing to hand over the room for someone he once taught, or at least thought he taught. Fourth and fifth periods, I would be able find refuge in the social science lounge. I had initially considered using this underutilized space as my classroom; however, it was too small to teach in and full of abandoned teacher lockers. It wasn’t exactly my ideal setting for what my classroom should look like. Sixth period I would work my way to the north wing and teach a world history class of 43 students. From east wing to west wing to north wing would be my pilgrimage through the masses of hundreds of bodies attempting to work their way to class, to their lockers, to their friends, bathrooms, to the large body of students congregating to see a fight. Students moving behind me, in front of me, next to me, blocking my right of way to a classroom. And in that classroom I would find an able body of students who expected something new from their teacher, or at least something that would keep them academically interested in school.

Based on the students’ attendance, I was keeping them academically interested in school. Class size varied from 24 ninth grade students in my second period social science sheltered class, to 43 bilingual tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students in my sixth period world history class. Just as students feel exhausted at the end of the day, so do teachers, and I was no exception.

Never to forget that back-to-school night: as fatigued as I was, so were the parents from their long day of work. The parents came only to find their children’s teacher without a classroom. Instead, their teacher was behind a table in the middle of a hallway looking like an army recruiter at a college recruitment center. The only things accompanying the teacher behind the table were his students’ grades and a few brochures on “How to Help Your Son/Daughter Learn.” I was armed with a smile demonstrating that everything was
just fine. And it was! I was enjoying my job. I had a wonderful group of students that had
made the decision to show up to class. Now while the simple act of attending class may
not be a huge accomplishment, for the students that I work with, the simple act of just
showing up to class is a struggle and a success all in one. This is especially so for those
students who are considering leaving school, which at Richmond High were far too many
students. I was convinced that my success as a teacher began with my ability to connect
with my students. The connection I made with my students was because of my attitude
toward them. It was this attitude that allowed me to keep my head above water, along
with their interest to learn. Despite these conditions, I continuously questioned my reason
for sticking with this job. It wasn't long before my pilgrimage from class to class began to
take a toll on me. Plus, class size began to increase as the school year progressed.

Don't get me wrong, some great lessons where taking place during my busy moments
at Richmond High School. I will never forget the lack of interest my students first had
about the subject of steroids. It was around the time Arnold Schwarzenegger was running
for governor of California. The press quickly began to circulate articles on steroids. An
article the students and I found interesting was on “Steroids and High School Athletes.”
Students voiced their opinion and were up front, “Those are problems rich white kids
have. We don't have them problems here,” said Ruby. This was a great opportunity to
use this controversial topic as a teachable moment in class. The students and I divided the
class in half—debating for and against steroids. Having students walk out of class saying,
“I don't even agree on using steroids yet having to defend them was fun.” or “We should
do more of that, Mr. Torres,” reaffirmed for me that as a teacher I have to be fl exible
enough to take advantage of the unplanned teachable moments. Through this activity, I
was able to see the importance of student interaction and student voices. Little did I know
that during her junior year, Ruby would be on the cover of the local newspaper sharing
her experience on Richmond High's Debate Team and how it had encouraged her to seek
a career in law.

While many students leave memorable moments in the lives of teachers, only a few are
actually the ones that make teachers decide whether they return the next school year or
not. I could never forget the presence of Panda. Panda was a 5 feet 2 inches, dark skin
Mexican-American kid who could go anywhere he wanted and would always be noticed
by students and teachers alike. The young ladies at school didn't find him attractive, he
was too cute. His constant and unbreakable smile was impossible not to notice. Soccer
was his passion and even though he was part of the junior varsity soccer team, he often
rode the bench for the varsity team. Playing on the varsity team was his aspiration, espe-
cially since he was a freshman. Who wouldn't want to play on Richmond High's varsity
soccer team? It has been nationally recognized as an elite team placing fourth in the state
of California and 13th in the United States. The varsity players looked on Panda as the
little brother everyone wanted to have. He was funny, sincere with his words, immaturely
talkative, made everyone laugh; he was cute and always the center of attention.

In the classroom, Panda participated in all classroom activities except one, reading.
We did current event articles with a KWLH chart to go with it. When time permitted,
we debated some issues. He enjoyed debating against the use of steroids amongst high
school athletes. Panda was often selected as the speaker/representative of the group when
it was time for presentations. One time, while teaching the lesson on the Native Ameri-
can experience in the Bay area, I had asked Panda to read. It was no wonder why Robles
talked so much.

As a ninth grader, Robles was reading at second grade level! Words like the, they, a,
and if were easy for him to read, but became, plagues, and instinct became words that
were torturous to him. The discomfort of his reading was obvious to the entire class,
yet there were still a few giggles in the class that just couldn’t be held back. I constantly reminded the class to “Respect others’ right to learn and my right to teach.” It so happened that Panda had compensated for his lack of reading ability with verbal participation. Just as the blind develop a keen sense of hearing, Panda developed a skill at talking that became his defense mechanism to make up for his inability to read.

As his teacher, I sought out support from other high school staff. I learned from his counselor that Panda had been kicked out of previous classes due to behavior issues such as excessive use of profanity, talking too much, and not respecting others’ opinion. I stood in awe! I could never have guessed that Robles had these issues. I mean, he did talk out of place a few times, maybe twice, I pulled him out of class to speak to him about his language, but I assumed (never assume) every teacher when having discipline issues with their students did the same—talk to them individually without calling them out in front of the class. Whereas other teachers had negative experiences with Panda, I did not, well maybe twice, but no more than that! Robles and I worked well together. There was mutual respect between teacher and student and even though I would discipline him on occasion, he always knew it came from a sincere desire to see him succeed. We even spent a few nights going over his reading skills at the local Barnes & Noble in order for him to feel a bit more comfortable reading in class. He was happy to have me offer extra assistance and I was equally as happy to be able to provide it. If you would have asked me to guess which were his books of choice, I would have never guessed, and you wouldn’t have either: *The Life of Selena* and *The Titanic*. It was evident he knew the history behind Selena—her childhood, the life of her family, her career as a singer, and other topics I wasn’t aware of in her life.

Hearing the counselor describe to me other teachers’ experiences with Panda, caused me to ask, “Is that the reason why Robles has been placed in my class?” You see, Panda was at the point where no one wanted him in their class. In many teachers’ eyes, Panda had become an “unteachable” student, just as I had been labeled, many years before. However, I believe there are no “unteachable” students and Panda proved this to me. It seemed like every time I spoke about Robles in department meetings, no one was sure who I was talking about, kind of like a rare species. One teacher expressed something that I hated the most, “He shouldn’t even be in this school. It is impossible to teach him.” Those words have haunted me for years. The same words that had been used against me years before were being used on Panda: Words that degrade a student. Words that didn’t break my bones, but damn, how they did and do cause psychological pain. Unfortunately for me, and for many students as well, we begin to believe judgments like that, especially when we lack the positive reinforcement that can easily make a difference to students’ performance.

I’ve noticed that many teachers do not have the attitude of “all students can triumph,” or “they are all teachable.” And if they do have that attitude, it’s positive effects can easily be lost due to the excess work placed on teachers in underprivileged communities. Being underpaid, working with oversized classrooms, disciplinary issues, adjunct duties, and being surrogate parents for many of the students are common experiences all teachers face. However, at schools like Richmond High, located in low income, high crime communities that are known to be in one of the nation’s most violent cities, these experiences are multiplied. Unfortunately, this extra burden manifests itself in the attitude the teachers have toward the students most vulnerable to their behavior: low income students, first generation students whose parents are immigrants, English language learners, “unteachable” students, those students that have been marginalized within our educational system and have no other options as to where they attend high school. These teachers have taught me a very important lesson: Don’t be like them. Don’t assume that students are
“unteachable,” don’t marginalize students, don’t take your frustrations out on the students. A few other lessons learned were to avoid the teachers’ cafeteria; do not listen to the negative feedback they share about students; and most definitely, do not follow in their footsteps, regardless of how many years they have been in the teaching field or how many degrees they possess.

Despite having to migrate from class to class, my policy has been to always greet students at the door. Why greet them you may ask? It is important for me to greet each student because in doing so I am acknowledging that individual’s presence: and the funny thing is that they will get used to it and will greet you when you forget. Also, don’t take frustrations out on them—they too are victims of the system. Do not be afraid of wishing them a good day when leaving your classroom—those might be the last and only positive words they may hear before walking out into the streets when they leave Richmond High at the end of the school day.

One afternoon, Panda walked into my sixth period class. “I’ve been looking all over for you Mr. Torres,” he said in a playful angry voice. Excitement was glowing everywhere. It appeared as if he was walking on air! In one hand he held a piece of paper I couldn’t figure out why he was so excited. He couldn’t believe he had the grades that would allow him to play on Richmond High’s varsity soccer team. “Torres! I made it!” “You made what?” I asked pretending to not know what he was talking about. “I made the grades! I’m going to play for Richmond High!” he expressed with an unforgettable enthusiasm.

Soccer season wasn’t in full effect when rumors were being spread in the district of losing extracurricular activities due to budget cuts, and this would include sports. Soon, the rumors turned to debate at the school board and quickly began to worry many members of team sports and athletes like Robles, for whom, unfortunately, the only reason for going to school was to play team sports. Robles was not at Richmond High to earn his high school diploma, or get an education to attend college, he was there because he wanted to play soccer. The funding situation began to draw media attention, both in Spanish and English. The media contacted the coaches and asked to make a special segment on students who relied on school sports for motivation in continuing to go to school. Coaches agreed that in fact, if they had ever seen a change in any student’s academics and attitude toward school, it had been Robles. Upon this recommendation, Robles was followed in school by a camera crew who wanted to capture the experience of this once troubled kid who now had found an interest in academics through team sports. He walked into my class with the camera crew and astonished me! “Mr. Torres, they want to talk to you.” Out of all his teachers and counselors, Robles wanted me to talk about the improvement he had experienced ever since his acceptance by the soccer team. After hesitating to appear on the Bay Area news, I unwillingly agreed to participate with Robles. Why not? This was a great opportunity for me to share with a larger community what a motivated teacher can accomplish when moving beyond student stereotypes. What astonished me the most is that in my classes, I had, and continue to have, many students like Robles, students other teachers find “unteachable” and “unwilling to learn.”

You see, I am continually given students, just like Robles, that are “unteachable.” Students that other teachers hope will not show up to class. It is these very same teachers that are amazed to find out how well these students perform with me and to see that I am able to capture what the students really know. Students that literally live on the other side of the tracks and struggle greatly with the task of being a student, I don’t have a problem with them. I am able to connect with them and be that positive teacher that they need—like the very few positive teachers that I had when I was a student at the same school. I also have self-motivated students who regardless of how distracting the classroom is, will still finish their assignment, whether it is at home, or at school. They will finish it.
Armando Torres

My biggest dilemma is finding that academic balance where I can contain the Robles, the self-motivated students, and the state mandated standards, as well as maintaining a healthy balance for myself where I will avoid a career change due to teacher burnout—the career that I so much desire to follow until I retire. I continually question whether I am finding the adequate balance necessary in order to educate the students that have made the decision to show up to class. Is it what I do that is different from other teachers that continues to draw the students to class? If so, where does that come from? Does it come from experiences of teachers having low expectations of me? Does it come from living in the same ‘hood as the students? Is it because I am a teacher of color? Or is it because of the respect I give my students and the high expectations I have for them? I don’t have an answer for these questions, what I do have is the sincere commitment to continue educating the students that walk through my classroom door.