

The Tears of the Tin Man

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I recently had the opportunity to substitute teach a group of 7th grade charter school students. The 90 minute classes transformed into several youth diversity workshop sessions that lasted throughout the remainder of the school year.

In processing this entire experience, the one thought that came to mind was that both myself and these amazing students were entering into unfamiliar territory. What I knew was that the dialogue which we would embark upon would leave both the students and I in unfamiliar territory. They were willing to receive me and all that I knew about the topic but that was all I knew.

This experience, in irony, had me think about one of my favorite classics, the Wiz. In my reality, I was Dorothy, and my children were those who would challenge me and my journey along the way as I was now treading through

unfamiliar “educational” territory. I was presenting in front of a group of students who appeared to be protected by a tough exterior. I was warned that talking to these children about such topics would be impossible and could turn into my forcing them to feel compassion or remorse.

The discussions among teachers were that despite their academic excellence, these students failed to display the same level of advancement with social awareness. There was ambiguity regarding the challenges of making these children “feel” and “see” beyond the superficial.

Unfamiliar Territory

When I began my personal vocational journey from a predominantly white private school, into a predominantly black charter school, I had no idea what to expect. I was forewarned that my status of privilege would be partially responsible for my lack of success in this environment.

My lack of “urban” exposure would be the curse that would presumably set me up for failure for many reasons: I could not relate to the social challenges, I would not be able to survive the disciplinary confrontations. I concluded I had nothing to lose. I would at least gain the exposure I had not had prior.

The Journey (The Yellow Brick Road)

I was allotted the opportunity to not just substitute teach, but to also utilize my time with the 7th grade students to implement mini diversity workshops. The 7th grade group consisted of 3 classes, each with at least 25 students. My obvious concerns were that I was uncertain how to proceed to discuss diversity with a group of predominantly students of color.

My personal educational experience was the opposite of this. I was always in the minority. I was not confident about what these students could possibly need to know or understand about diversity. These students had the privilege to study among many who looked like them. However, my mentor, Oman Frame of iChange

Collaborative, challenged me to consider the possibilities of conducting a gender diversity workshop. I could have never imagined how the students who were stereotyped as emotionally detached, would receive gender based diversity dialogue.

Assumption of the “Modern Day” Tin Man

The Tin Man in my personal opinion is symbolic of many of us. There are those who hide behind this tough exterior not realizing that in actuality it is survival mechanism which grants us the ability to survive in our schools, our homes and everywhere else in between.

These children appeared to not feel. They appeared to not be phased by the challenges of society. I am certain that the issues that our youth are facing are not the same as the educators who teach them. Our youth are being influenced by this “tough as steel” mentality of hiding emotions. This is not just in regards to our girls but our boys as well. However the question is are they being taught to hide how they feel? Or are they simply not being

encouraged and nurtured to express their emotions? The assumption of the Tin Man in the movie, was that the emotions always existed, yet, he needed the support and encouragement to release what was inside of him.

Releasing the Emotion

What started out as an initial discussion about basic terms of gender identity, classification and gender awareness, was the beginning of dialogue and expression of strong opinions.

During our first discussion, it was important for us to clarify what a conversation such as this would require. We needed to establish that we would need to create and maintain a “safe” environment. According to my mentor of iChange Collaborative, this would be mandatory to do before proceeding with anything else.

With a group of 7th graders, it was important to ask them what “safe” meant to them. What did they need to feel safe. Additionally,

acknowledging what they needed in order to feel safe enough to have a conversation such as this. Collectively, the list was established. What the list included was that they needed the following: to feel respected, they needed to be heard and listened to, they needed to feel comfortable in expressing themselves without judgment from others, they needed to know that their information that they shared would be only between those who were in the classroom.

Our first discussion included defining gender identity, sexual identity, and what were gender stereotypes which they were familiar with. Imagine the challenges of having any conversation with any 7th grader with the word “sex” in it, you can assume the initial reaction and excitement of this conversation. Though many proved to be exceptionally mature, there were others who displayed the opposite.

I assigned the students in gender mixed groups with the expectation of having small group discussions about various gender based topics. The groups were given the following

topics to discuss amongst one another: gender and sports, gender and equal pay, gender and education and etc. They were asked to discuss and write down on one side of a sheet of paper about their thoughts about the topic. What were their individual thoughts and assumptions about the topic they were given. Additionally, someone was responsible for transcribing what their group members thought about the topic (unfiltered). After their conversations, they were then asked to find one fact on the internet about the topic that would either support or challenge their thoughts and to also write down the sites in which they were quoting from. For example, regarding the topic of equal pay of men and women in Georgia, what were the actual statistical facts? What they were able to accomplish was to have a candid discussion, healthy debate with the opposite sex and to also research and find sources regarding their designated topics. The results of this initial session were that the students were curious to explore more about this subject matter. What students shared was their passion for the topic

based upon their personal experiences with gender stereotypes. Some females were raised by their fathers only, some males never had males in their home and discussed the struggles of this scenario. These stories from the few students would be the catalyst for the next sessions. We also incorporated a group activity called "Stand up/Sit down". I posed the statements of gender (presumably true or false) to the group. The students sat in a circle. If a person agreed with the statement, they were to stand up and sit back down. This activity would give students a visual of how many or how few students shared similar views. After this exercise, the discussion included their thoughts and feelings about what they witnessed. Many were amazed at who stood up and who remained seated regarding certain statements. With the statements which proved to show many had similar views, students felt relieved that they were not standing alone. With the topics which individuals represented solo, they felt vulnerable but empowered to be able to stand up and be seen.

Releasing the Tears

During the second session, we revisited the rules of creating a safe environment for such a discussion. The students recalled the rules and expectations. The sessions would be with the same group of 7th graders. During this session the expectations were to introduce the activity of what would be considered good and bad about being male and female. This would be an opportunity for both gender groups to have the opportunity to celebrate with one another the gender specific benefits yet to support one another through the gender specific struggles. All of this was to set the stage for a future, "healthy" debate. The challenge was that as soon as the first group began to state the items on their lists, the debate had already begun.

During one of our sessions I introduced to the students the activity of sharing what was good and bad about their gender. In listing many of the positives, there were similarities on the list of negatives as well. For example, the males discussed being able to make more money than

women, life was simply easier as a male. However, something happened during the listing of the negatives. There were emotions of frustration, hurt and pain that were released. This topic is what released the tears of many of these students. The students expressed strong feelings. Both males and females released their angry, unfiltered words and shared their stories about how the stereotypes tortured them daily.

There were stories shared about what it was like to be a female raised by her single father. She knew that she was a product of a relationship where the male (her father assumingly) just wanted to "hit it and quit it".

Another female student released her years of frustration through her shouts of angry words and sobs that were hard to translate. However, it was clear of the hurt and pain that derived from the trigger words on the list, such as males were more intelligent and had more opportunities in the world. She talked about what it felt like to be told those things entire life and that she was so angered by it.

There was also the story of the male student who was equally as frustrated with the list his classmates came up with. In expressing what that advantages were about being a man. What unleashed his frustrations were the feelings that males were expected to make more money. His interpretation was that this was also a disadvantage and a pressure for him personally. Through his tears he proceeded to tell his personal story, which no one in his school was familiar with. Despite my telling him that he did not need to share with the entire group, he insisted.

His story was that in his family he was not able to be a typical middle school kid. When he was not in school, he was the man of the house. While his classmates were playing, he was working in fields. He was expected to help his father make money to pay the bills not to buy games or clothes. The pressure was too much for him when all he wanted to do was to be a normal child who wanted to do well in school.

He compared himself to the females in his family who had it much easier than he did because they were not expected to make money for the family and work extra hard. He did not care about making money. He cared about doing what other boys his age were doing and simply desired just to be a kid. He continued to share that the other stereotypes that the class shared were just not fair to either group.

The tears that these students cried left an impression on their peers. They too shared their pains and frustrations of not only the stereotypes that were shared by one another but by society as well.

What was even more amazing were the confessions of students who on the other hand were those who found themselves responsible for upholding these stereotypes of one another. They showed remorse for the hurt and pain they had caused their peers. These were the students who asked of the group to support them in becoming aware and to be better human beings.

When I asked these students how could we, as a community and a school help them in becoming more aware and more sensitive, there were a variety of answers. The requests ranged from confronting them as soon as something was said or done, to continuing the dialogue that had begun in this classroom so that they could continue to do better and be better.

Catching the Tears

What I had anticipated at the beginning of this journey was a debate. What I did not anticipate were the emotions that were to follow. Something was released as a result of these discussions. The passion which these students displayed was not only a yearning for a debate or discussion but a release of an underlying pain.

There were students who thanked me for helping them release their feelings in a safe environment however, some were more fearful that if they started to release their feelings they would not be able to stop.

It appeared that every session which was conducted throughout the day with different groups of children, there were some students who directly felt the impact and the pressures of the discussion. Some students were indirectly impacted by the emotions of their peers and how transparent they were. The candidness, the anger, the frustration and the amazing level of being able to communicate unapologetically about the hurts and disappointments and concerns they were feeling were unavoidable to those who were giving their undivided attention.

There were those who of course appeared disconnected by all that was going on around them. However, even those few uncomfortably and sincerely apologized to those who felt the pressures of fitting into their assumed gender roles.

Of course with this type of dialogue there never appears to be enough time to come to complete resolutions. Perhaps, true resolutions do not exist, just understanding and acceptance. Resolutions do not necessarily exist. Evolving

does. Evolving, internally, is how we should commit to ourselves and to one another.

These children realized that not only were they disturbed by the stereotypes that they had become accustomed to, but they began to believe what these stereotypes said about them personally.

The Impact

Throughout all of the diversity sessions which were held, there were several solutions which were initiated by those who appeared defeated, emotionally charged, and by those who just felt compassion for one another. These students presented to me their own ideas for solutions that they wanted to see take place on their campus. I questioned their solutions for several reasons, mainly because I would not be on their campus frequently enough to help guide them and because I was not certain whether their quest for action was only a temporary feeling.

What I learned over time was that these students were sincere. Their teachers were

amazed. Students had independently initiated wanting to create support groups that would continue the dialogue that was initiated in our sessions.

They wanted to make their entire school aware of the stereotypes and to cease the damage that some of the stereotypes had caused. They wanted to support those who felt alone. They wanted to give a voice to those who had not found their voice yet. They wanted to enlighten those who walked in ignorance by making them aware that their ways of thinking were not necessarily valid or respectful of their peers. Bottom line, these students sincerely wanted to create an environment where they could feel safe and others would feel safe as well.