America's Unseen Kids

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Teaching English/Language Arts in Today's Forgotten High Schools

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For Greta, Jane, and Elizabeth.
—Hal

For Łukasz, who reentered my life at the
beginning of the writing of this book and stayed.
You will always be my Irish dream.
And for my loving family—Jim, Sally, Sean, and Keely.
—Megan

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Foreword

The Genteel *Un*teaching of America's Poor

Several years ago, I spent some time observing instruction in a large, inner-city high school. Too many students crowded into too-small classrooms that held too few books and offered too little support of any type created a climate that was at best depressed and at worst was oppressive. Teachers drove daily into a parking lot that was surrounded by an eight-foot cyclone fence with barbed wire looped across the top. The gate into the lot was locked after the last car arrived. Students and teachers entered the fifty-year-old building through front doors that were framed by ten-year-old metal detectors. Hallways were bare except for the occasional poster that reminded students "Truancy Is a Crime" or "A One-Two Punch Is a One-Way Ticket to Suspension." Classrooms all looked the same: worn student desks in long straight rows that were covered in penciled graffiti; battered blackboards that had profanity scratched into them; worn-out overhead projectors that sat on wobbly stools at the center of rooms and projected dimmed images toward screens that hung by dirty cords from ceilings missing tiles; windows covered by broken Venetian blinds; faded green walls that had not been painted in at least a decade and fluorescent lights that sometimes worked, other times did not.

Each day, as students entered the building, security guards instructed them to empty their pockets, empty their backpacks, empty their purses, stand over here for pat downs, hurry up and gather materials, stop pushing, stop yelling, stop cursing, and get to class. At the same time, as teachers entered the main workroom to sign in and retrieve mail from their mailboxes, the principal reminded them how many days remained before *the test*, meaning, of course, the state assessment.

"Make today count," he said each day. "If I walk by your room," he'd remind teachers as they filled Styrofoam cups with coffee from one of three stained Mr. Coffee Makers, "I want to see standards written out on the blackboard and students in their seats and working. In their seats and working." One day, not able to listen to his admonition yet again, I asked if he was serious—that students always needed to be in their desk seats to work.

"Yep," he replied.

"Why?" I asked. "What if they need to be standing up, say, to give a report?"

"Not our kids," he said. "Our kids stay in their seats."

"You're kidding," I said, sure that he was going to break out in a smile, and we'd laugh at his comment.

He stared at me and, with no hint of a smile, not even a grin, explained, "Some kids—those out there heading to class right this minute so they aren't late" he said, nodding toward the bus lot now filled with kids streaming into school, "learn best with rules. Rules and structure. We give it to them." And then he walked away.

He didn't say it unkindly, that comment about "those" kids. With reflection, I realized he said it with sincerity, perhaps concern, and certainly with conviction. Somehow along the way, he had concluded that those kids, *those* kids whose lives are lived in the gaps—the poverty gap, the health care gap, the nutrition gap, to name but a few—and whose lives are spent wondering—wondering where dinner comes from, where they'll sleep tomorrow, what will happen when the rent can't be paid, what they'll do when they're approached about joining a gang, what they'll do when someone in their family is sick and no one can pay for a visit to the doctor, what they'll do when they don't have the bus fare that gets them to the store to buy the poster board for their history report or the novel for English class—*those* kids will do better if we just require that they stay in their seats. *Those* kids just need some structure. And we do them a service, a good service, by giving it to them.

I watched teachers in the building use instructional material that required chanted replies; I saw them distribute photocopied packets that reduced topics such as the Holocaust to a series of literal questions that were to be answered in complete sentences and only in ink, black ink. I asked teachers if they thought classroom discussions might be helpful. All answered no, not for *their* students.

"Those kids, well, they live in such turmoil at home that we provide structure, quiet, orderliness, here at school," one social studies teacher explained to me. An English teacher echoed his sentiments, "Students here need to get the basics; we don't have much time with them when you look at all they need to learn, so we must drill the basics into them. They do better with strong discipline." The science teacher chimed in: "Some kids can handle the higher-level thinking discussions you might see in other schools, but not the kids here; the kids here haven't had anyone show them

how to act and so we do. We demand they sit still and answer questions and they learn how to do that."

I looked out into the hallway as students walked past. "Those kids?" I asked. They nodded. "Don't you think they'd enjoy conversation? Discussion? Ideas to debate? Sitting in groups and figuring things out? Trips to the library? Working on a computer?"

One teacher leaned toward me, patted my arm, and interrupted my litany: "You mean well, I'm sure," she said, "but you just don't understand what those kids need. It's a little hard at first," she continued, "but then you realize that those kids, well, they need you to treat them differently if they're going to make good grades."

"Differently from what?" I asked.

She stared at me for a moment before answering, "You know, from other kids, other kids who don't need this type of structured education."

"What type of education do other kids need?" I asked.

She bristled through her smile and said it was obvious to her that some kids could handle the freedom that allowed them to do more creative things, to "handle the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy," to interact more with their peers, and if I understood more about the students in this high school, I'd understand that.

And there it was—that declaration that those kids, *those* kids whose lives are limited not by their potential and not by their poverty but by the interpretation of what that poverty means they can achieve, require an education that does not look like the education of children whose lives are lived in the security of abundance, or at least the security of enough. That assertion was made with the genteel smile of someone confident that I, too, would see the value of this diminished educational experience once I had spent time with *those* kids.

That declaration has guided too many instructional decisions in too many schools as too many school boards and superintendents and principals and even teachers decide on instructional materials and instructional strategies that, in all likelihood, would not be offered to the gifted kids or the kids whose parents know how to demand of their schools better technology, better libraries, better textbooks, better teachers, better supplies, better tutors, better playgrounds, better gyms, and . . . well, anything that can be bought with the money these parents will willingly, can easily, supply. No one would ever suggest that a scripted program be used to teach these kids; that's the curriculum for *those* kids, because those kids need *that* help, *that* kind of education.

That declaration, that genteel declaration, hides behind the well-intentioned and soft-spoken statements of "they need structure" and "they need discipline" and "they need the basics." That declaration is too easily accepted as wisdom, so we are left with an education of America's poor that cannot be seen as anything more than a segregation by intellectual rigor, something every bit as shameful and harmful as segregation by color.

These are harsh indictments from me, I realize. I also know that many of you holding this book in your hands would never teach any student, especially students of poverty, in such a way. Many of you are as dismayed as I am at the attitudes and comments of the teachers in that high school[1]; many of you believe as I do that this segregation by intellectual rigor under the guise of "helping those kids find some sort of success" is an appalling injustice that must be addressed. For those readers, I am preaching to the choir. But, as a choir director I know and respect once told me, we must preach to the choir because the choir must sing the loudest, sing the best. The choir must lead everyone else, so they must know the most. The choir must get it right, or they will lead the rest astray.

Many of you holding this book in your hands are the choir singing the song of educational reform in your building, in your district, perhaps in your state. You'll want to keep this book, *America's Unseen Kids*, close. In it, authors Hal Foster and Megan Nosol speak boldly—not only about the inequalities that exist in America's schools, but of strategies that allow *those* kids the rich education we want for all students, the rich education each student deserves. In it, they remind us of all that is lost with the genteel unteaching of America's poor.

Kylene Beers
Senior Reading Advisor to Secondary Schools
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1. I should point out that as I spent more time in the school described in this essay, other attitudes from other teachers emerged. Many believed that the educational experiences that they offered to students at this school were forced on them by district level administrators who in turn felt pressure from state and federal policies. Others eventually reported that they lacked needed knowledge on how to help underachieving students. They explained that while they didn't like what they were doing, they lacked the research base and practical experience to encourage the school administrators or colleagues to use a different approach or to simply use a different approach in their individual classrooms. While I remain dismayed at the number of schools that turn to scripted programs and highly structured class routines—sometimes almost militarist type environments—guided by the belief that "those" kids require an education that is mostly about learning to follow rules, I am always heartened by teachers who stand in opposition to such practices and offer students, all students, rich, exciting, and powerful educational experiences. I find those teachers everywhere—St. Louis, Detroit, Miami, Los Angeles, Houston, New York City, Cleveland, Phoenix, Baton Rouge—and know that they are changing the lives of the students they teach.

Stumbling into a Book

Hal Drags His Feet

The last thing I wanted to do was write a book.

But I thought I might write an article about a collaborative project that I helped create between the university where I teach and a local urban high school which we will refer to in the book as Galway High School. I trotted out my best academic voice and soon discovered that I had no investment in what I was writing. I didn't care about the article, and I didn't know why. With the clear eye of hindsight, I realize now that an article was in no way long enough to capture this ten-year project. Nor was the academic voice I was using able to convey the chaos and stress, our losses and victories, and the unexpected insights we stumbled onto as we explored a possible solution to one of the great dilemmas of American life: teaching at-risk kids.

My experiences were screaming to be turned into something more substantial. After all, the project had been at the center of my life for ten years. It was a collaboration between me, an English educator; my English education students; a great high school English teacher (called Sally Eisenreich here); and her high school students. Bringing my university students into the real world of school kept me inside the boundaries of teaching. I never had to go home at night and say, "Wow, I'm so removed from the real world. What am I going to tell my class tomorrow?" This project made it impossible for me to lie to my students.

Then the city decided to close the high school. They may have needed to close Galway for a good reason, to secure funds to help rebuild the other city high schools. Nonetheless, the collaboration was going to end. At the same time, my career was also

coming to an end: I was approaching retirement age. Searching for ways to close all the chapters of my life, I saw the two as mixed. Was I going to spend my last years as an education professor disenfranchised from the real world of the classroom?

I needed closure, but I was afraid of writing something that was not me, a piece of work constructed on someone else's terms. I certainly didn't want to write a book.

Then Megan knocked on my door.

The conversations Megan and I had are how this book came to be. That's the great thing about collaborations: both sides need to compromise, cooperate, relinquish control. Megan is my student, but it was smart of me to listen to her, just as Megan was wise to listen to me. When she recommended that we write about how my stumbling led to this book, I listened. Inexorably, words appeared, chapters emerged, a structure was formed, and this book became a reality.

Megan Speaks Her Mind

I was enrolled in one of the classes that participated in the Galway High School project. It was the first semester of my master's program, and I was also working with Hal outside the classroom as his graduate assistant. We didn't begin with the intention of writing a book. My task was simply to help Hal get information for his article.

Because I was Hal's graduate assistant, I had a different role from the other students in the class. Hal put me in charge of the evaluation committee, which gathered information about Sally's high school students and their personal and academic lives. This assignment became the basis of four case studies we undertook: I purposely matched four college students with four high school students in Sally's class based on what I judged were their compatible personalities and the kind of help I anticipated the college students could provide. I wasn't going to conduct empirical research, but I planned to tell the stories of how these relationships developed.

In the beginning, everything was on track; the case study pairs were creating real relationships.

Then everything started unraveling.

One of the Galway case study students, who had deep emotional and mental issues, disliked her college-student mentor. Another was creating problems for Galway's teachers and administrators and was consequently removed from the class. The evaluation committee had to abandon its two most interesting case studies. The remaining subjects were academically solid, and we quickly ran out of things to learn from them. The case studies came to an untimely end.

Suddenly I had no work to do.

Hal and I started talking about how we could resolve the problems but then decided just to cut our losses. I was lost and disappointed. We walked over to Starbucks, our

usual meeting place, to devise a new plan. I reminded Hal that he had spearheaded this project for ten years: we had meaningful data, and we couldn't give up. The project was a big part of his life. He needed closure. I told Hal he should write a book.

Hal Thinks, "This Might Work"

Megan turned twenty-three that November 1. My birthday presents to her were the Jon Krakauer book about Everest, *Into Thin Air*, and a rough outline of a book on the collaboration project with specific assignments for her to work on for the month of November. I was hoping this was the focus Megan needed. I still didn't want to do a book, but I felt that Megan's graduate assistantship experience was rapidly falling apart and that once again we needed structure.

Megan and I began writing. She sat at her desk and I sat at mine, each of us putting our memories into words. Before we knew it, we had some pages written, some kind of outline, some vague plans to continue.

The momentum that was beginning to take shape finally came into focus at the National Council of Teachers of English meeting in Pittsburgh, when I ran into my former editor, who expressed interest in the idea of this book. She told me she would be happy to read a prospectus without reading chapters. I thought, "Oh my God, this might work." I knew two things about my writing, whatever it was to become: it was going to be through my eyes, with my voice, my best attempt to re-create the experience for my readers, and it was also going to exhibit the voice of a teacher in training who had participated in the project. There was no way I was going to do this book without Megan.

Much of my enthusiasm for this book stems from my being able to use a new teacher as a voice to reach novice teacher readers. Through Megan, teachers will be able to:

- empathize
- identify
- commiserate
- share
- learn

As a veteran, I have discovered that no experienced teacher can figure out what a new teacher thinks or feels in a classroom. In this book, Megan tells us that, up close and personal.

Megan provides the fresh perspective obtained from experiencing the project for the first time, but she has also spent many hours with me shaping the curriculum, designing and monitoring the case studies, helping with assessment, and running the

Shakespeare unit. She has experienced the stress, the frustration, and the fear of failure along with me. She knows what it means to work hard, reach out to a group of students so different from her in so many ways, connect with them, and teach them lessons for a lifetime. Megan tells her truth here, and sometimes it's painful to read.

The students we worked with at Galway had not been tracked into advanced classes. These were the kids in the middle, the students society brands with low expectations, our invisible students. We have faith that these students can thrive in an enriched, accelerated curriculum. We believe that the only good curriculum is the advanced curriculum, where real writing occurs, interesting and challenging books are read, and students are equipped to think deeply and wisely in preparation for a rigorous college curriculum. No worksheets, no fragmented lessons. This curriculum is intelligent, motivating, and tough.

If teaching were easy, everyone would know how to do it. Therefore, Megan and I enumerate rather than hide all the problems we faced, each from our own point of view. However, we arrive at the same place in the end. This book is primarily about being hopeful and setting high expectations because this curriculum has been a success every single year of the ten-year project. It works, and it can work in any school.

Hal Describes the Project

Ten years ago a teacher, whom I'll call Sally, came to my office and asked if I could bring my future English teachers into her classroom. Sally was very interested in training English teachers for urban schools. Since Galway was a short distance from campus, my college class met at Galway, initially working with Sally's students primarily as tutors. However, over the years the project grew to the point where my students took over the class completely; one or two of my students were always present in Sally's Galway classroom and delivered a very carefully planned curriculum, one similar to those taught in advanced English classrooms in the best high schools in the United States. It was writing intensive, it was structured as a reading workshop, and there was a Shakespeare unit at the end. We celebrated the high school students' achievements with an end-of-year party at which their writing was shared and awards were bestowed.

We taught the kids that society found to be "incapable" of doing challenging work. We certainly ran into students who were puzzles we did not solve. But for the most part our "at-risk" high school students (at risk of boredom, low expectations, stereotyping) met the challenge, academically as well as emotionally.

Although college tutors often helped the student teacher who was responsible for the lesson, many times the student teacher was the only adult in this room of between twenty and thirty high school students. We know our curriculum can be taught by a

single teacher with a classroom of these at-risk kids. We did it, and we saw Sally do it with her other classes.

Many teachers do discover these kids and set them on the path of a productive life, but many of these kids remain invisible. They have to be found, challenged, and given the skills they need to achieve productive lives. To that end, this book describes the curriculum we developed and continue to develop, and it describes many of the high school students we encountered and their learning issues. All the stories we tell are true. Therefore, the book is not just about success but also about the challenges we face.

Incredibly, the project did not die with the closing of Galway. Sally transferred to a school a short drive from our campus, and we were able to continue the project at the new school. As I write this, we are completing our second year there, and it is going very well. We may also have identified a teacher in Sally's school, a project veteran who chose to stay in city schools, to continue working with us when Sally retires. So for the near future, much to my surprise and delight, we can still impact future English teachers and these wonderful kids we encounter.

But my biggest hope is that this book will help reinforce what many of you already know: sometimes we make hurtful judgments about kids that are not true and that often create great harm and hopelessness. With the right teachers and the right approaches, some long-range planning, and a more thought-out curriculum delivered early, we can provide decent futures for many more kids than we think possible.

Our Guiding Themes for Teachers of At-Risk Students

(What We Learned from At-Risk Classrooms)

*S*top stereotyping.

*R*espect diversity in culture and language.

*C*reate strong teacher-student relationships.

*H*old high expectations.

*I*mplement student-centered teaching.

*G*ive students hope in their ability to read and write.

*C*onnect students' experiences to what they are learning.

*A*llow students to select what they read and write.

*A*pply different teaching techniques to appeal to all learning styles.

*D*eliver an advanced curriculum.

*P*rovide students with ample opportunities to share their work.

*L*earn to live with complexity.

*C*elebrate student achievement.

*T*ake advantage of all possible resources.

*R*eflect on your teaching constantly.