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Grounded in Greatness: Common Schools, Common Teachers, and Uncommon Results

As a public school teacher without a private school pedigree, I am often at the front lines of teacher bashing. Many of today's so-called education reformers blame teachers like me for the ills of American schools: no-name university, tax paid worker, union member, female, white, working/middle class, mid-career. Our cynical society adores superheroes and anti-heroes, but as Mr. Rogers once said, find the heroes in the crisis; find the helpers. I wanted to learn about the everyday heroes in education, the common, everyday teachers who are doing great things. They fulfill every criterion for what many believe ails our schools, but they did something simple and divergent from other urban schools. They became exceptional.

George Washington Elementary School (WE) in Union Hill (UH), New Jersey is an urban school. It is poor, crowded, transient, and has a steady stream of new immigrants from Central America. Three-quarters of the students speak Spanish and during the 1990's Union Hill was among the nation's ninety-two most depressed municipalities. Locally, it fared worse than Newark and suffered its share of corrupt New Jersey politics. Nevertheless, it is a community built on *la familia, viene el primero* ("family comes first), *respeto*, (respect), and hometown pride ("Union City First"). The school receives wrap-around support from the community and reaches out through liaisons to parents who are normally ignored. The district is also the largest employer in the community (Kirp 84).

Nobody has given up on the schools, not the local politicians, not the local businesses, not local law enforcement, except for the republican governor, Chris Christie (though even he is coming round to the exceptionality of this maligned community). Even the affluent communities such as Princeton that never want to pay for “those kids” have come around as they realized good schools equal good business. In essence, the UH community believed “the community’s duty to education is, therefore, its paramount moral duty” (Dewey 438). Union Hill knew if the schools failed the community failed. They believed in the Jeffersonian philosophy of education for all.

The history of education is filled with experiments and conflicting beliefs. What made this school district heroic? They decided as a community to focus on literacy, bilingual education, a closely aligned curriculum, early childhood programs, knowing their students, and the experience of the teachers they already had. David Kirp writes in his book, *Improbable Scholars: The Rebirth of a Great American School*, “they didn’t have flash and pizzazz, just hard and steady work (17). They didn’t have Michelle Rhee fire people on camera. They didn’t have a board of wealthy philanthropists like Geoffrey Canada. They had trust, *respeto*, and everyday heroes.

Thomas Jefferson once said, “read good books because they will encourage as well as direct your feelings” (902) and this is the crux of the literacy focus in UH and why it is so exceptional. These everyday heroes know that everything starts from the ability to read” (Kirp 85). The teachers drench their students in literature (Kirp 88) to launch their literacy skills in English and Spanish. Because they are an elementary school, the teachers read fairy tales, tall tales, and myths. Students are drawn to the plot and the magic, but teachers pluck words from the reading and create word walls with the idea that “the more words

they [kids] know, the faster they learn words” (Kirp 74). These are age appropriate books, but they are also classics and part of cultural literacy (Hirsch). The WE teachers don’t water down the curriculum or the word skills, in fact they do just the opposite. The teachers read stories aloud in both Spanish and English (Kirp 35) so that all students, as E.D. Hirsch believes, “from kindergarten on can understand the gist of everything they read” (qtd. in Kirp 75). It is in writing where the district’s skilled teachers really shine. For example, in a third grade classroom students journal for forty minutes every day. Many high school writing students would balk at this expectation. In addition, the exceptional teachers simply follow the writing process and provide continuous feedback (Kirp 65). This is not splashy pre-packaged curriculum. It is in fact the very same method Catherine Beecher outlined in her mid-nineteenth century writing regarding “The Hartford Female Seminary” (64-65). One teacher also focuses on what she calls brownie point words, such as exquisite and stunning, that will hopefully impress a future writing test evaluator (Kirp 43). All teachers encourage, and sometimes demand, that students use the words in their writing even if their Spanish and English abilities are of variable fluency. This direct instruction of “literature plus words and pronunciation” (Kirp 88) helps students to develop cultural capital, prepare for the test, and develop an enjoyment of reading. If they only taught phonemic awareness and vocabulary then students would miss out on the role of literature—the expression and interpretation of social experience as expressed by Progressive education philosopher John Dewey (433). By drenching their students in words and literature, the WE teachers are drenching them with skills for exceptionality. Unlike many school districts, they didn’t turn to technology to teach their students and they

didn't turn to a scripted curriculum; they turned to common pedagogy. And that makes them exceptional.

It's not just the literacy education that allows WE to be the exception. It is their entire curriculum. The UH district-wide curriculum framework is organized so that the material is in the same sequence (Kirp 87 and Hofstedter 37) as well as challenging, consistent, and aligned (Kirp 18, 87, 207). It is "the same basic curriculum, but teachers add on to it" (Kirp 75). The curriculum is not new and that may lend itself to exceptionality. The UH district followed education critic Richard Hofstedter and only used the "doubly tried and true" (370) format of plan-do-review (Kirp 12). In addition to a strictly aligned and cohesive curriculum, when WE students enter the primary grades, the mission is to "get kids to enjoy coming to school and learning, [and to] have control in their lives and learning" (Kirp 34). They know that not only does the child need to be taken care of, but also they need direct instruction. The teachers begin with establishing routines and habits (James, Locke) such as classroom management procedures and even "doing homework, *tarea*, every night" (Kirp 34). They also focus on Horace Mann's ideas of moral education and Arthur Bestor's bane, life adjustment classes. For example, the teachers help students develop discipline from within, and learn patience for where their classmates are in their learning (Kirp). The teachers want their students to be good mathematicians but also good people, respectful, and responsible for themselves (Kirp). When all elements of education are met, success can happen.

While many may criticize the soft skills and praise pedagogy (James), the WE teachers do not believe in the child-as-an-empty-vessel-approach (Locke, Kirp 123). They do believe in "basic academic subjects to all students" (Bestor 195) such as reading,

writing, and common arithmetic (Jefferson 367) plus the addition of art and music (and sometimes dance) (Kirp). The WE students are “well versed in science and history, geography and foreign languages, art and music and they become engaged citizens as well (Kirp 186). What also makes this curriculum so exceptional is that it is based on the individual child’s needs. Because the class sizes are not exceptionally small, the teachers depend on learning centers for students to work in groups to help each other. These learning centers allow students to shift to different activities and use multiple intelligences as established by psychologist Howard Gardner. This also mirrored Harvard’s William James’s belief that the “teacher ought always to impress the class through as many sensible channels as he can. Talk and write and draw on the blackboard[. . .] [so that] the individual child will find the most lasting ones for himself” (James 77). Moreover, the teachers are constantly engaged in apperception (James 87). By providing context they are “building up systems of useful association in the pupil’s mind” (James 51). This curriculum framework, grounded in philosophy and best practices, is one reason UH is the exception to urban education, not the norm.

Besides a highly organized curriculum, the UH district decided to provide free and required preschool. While there is still some variation in quality, about 75% of local preschools follow the aligned literacy and dual language curriculum. Like many economically downtrodden communities, the thirty-three preschools range from Perry preschool look-alikes to mom and pop businesses that merely put kids in front of the television. Because of the emphasis on high quality early childhood programs, most have teachers with early childhood degrees as better educated teachers make better educators. Like their counterparts in the K-12 schools, the area preschool teachers don’t have

pedigree degrees. They neither have federal programs such as Head Start, nor do they have elite preschools such as the 92nd Street YMCA in New York City where enrollment begins at conception. Most preschools were already established and the requirement made economic sense. Nonetheless, like most things, the emphasis on preschool costs a lot of money. The local community wants it and the local politicians want it, but Chris Christie, the Republican governor as well as Christine Todd Whitman have tried repeatedly to overturn the requirement because early childhood is just babysitting or daycare (Kirp 112) and it costs too much. He seems to be ignoring the economic research done by Heckman (Kirp 112) and contradicts Thomas Jefferson's philosophy of education for all equals good economics.

Any good leader knows that a good system of good employees makes for good work. The UH school district capitalized on the fact its teachers were locals. Unlike TFA teachers who parachute into a location for a short time, many of these teachers attended the UH schools themselves. In fact they made a point to not employ TFA teachers, as they would destabilize the school (Kirp). More often than not their own kids attended the schools. They knew the community and they knew the kids. One teacher stated, "I know who these kids are. I know what I can get out of them" (Kirp 28). TFA recruits and charter schools (of which there are none) can't say the same. Many teachers have spent their entire career in the UH district. There was trust and local leaders understood loyalty and longevity. The community didn't want outsiders infiltrating their ranks. While fresh ideas are good, the UH district felt "the teachers who have been on the job the longest are those who contributed the most in making this such a fine school" (Kirp 69). These teachers did not have elite educations and almost all attended the often-criticized schools of education.

Much to the derision of those in elite schools and corporations, these non-scholarly proletariats are doing well.

The teachers also adopted an evaluation system where two years of unstellar results released a teacher. The local union didn't object and neither did the teachers. They knew this was the best way, as do many teachers when they are asked independently of the union. Moreover they also developed an intricate mentorship and collaboration structure for teachers. Newer teachers worked with master teachers like Alina Bosbally with 27 years in the district, and experienced teachers had time to collaborate and learn from colleagues (Kirp 69). The district realized teaching is an art, but also that teachers can be made (Kirp 162) and that "education thus conceived marks the most perfect and intimate union of science and art conceivable in human experience" (Dewey 438). They recognized what James did, that "success [in teaching] depends mainly on the genius of the teacher, the sympathy, the tact, and perception which enable him to seize the right moment and to set the right example" (James 36). They already had these genius teachers. All of these actions combined helped make a teaching force with an aptness to teach (Mann 48). Because the district and community gathered around its teachers and held the philosophy of education for all, every teacher was able to "realize the dignity of his calling; that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of social order and the securing of the right social growth" (Dewey 439). Here in Union Hill, New Jersey the support for the local teachers was the rule, not the exception. The everyday heroes were exceptional.

Even though the school district believed its teaches could handle the job, they still had issues with testing, politics, and funding, like every other school district. Until the community banded together and made education a focus, UH schools were failing. They

were the rule, not the exception of urban education. And thus began standardized testing. In 2009 one-third of UH students passed the Assessment of Skills (ASK) tests. Because of this, the state of New Jersey took over and UH became a reconstituted school (Kirp 61). At the time of publication they scored at the New Jersey state average, have an 89.4% graduation rate and they halved the achievement gap of whites and Latinos (Kirp). In the last few years, UH schools have had to deal with changing tests and changing levels of proficiency. Some of their students would have been proficient on one year's test but not another, and some students would be proficient if they were in another state. The same is true for teachers' evaluations; as student scores fluctuate, so do teachers'. While the WE teachers feel trapped by the test (Kirp 182) and spend two months engaged in test preparation skills (no science, social studies, or specials are offered), they tell their students "don't worry about the exam. Pay attention to learning" (Kirp 43), although the teachers may be telling this to themselves. The teachers might agree with philosopher Bertrand Russell's sentiment of "children being forced to learn acquire a loathing of knowledge" (Russell 215). It's unfortunate the policy makers haven't read Rousseau for they would know to protect children from other people's expectations and judgment.

Much is said regarding the sorry state of our schools, but much of this information is propaganda—to sell newspapers, to pass policies, to promote corporate agendas. The truth is that education is complex and complicated. Elite universities, hedge fund managers, and billion dollar philanthropists seem to think they can be superman and save our schools. Everybody wants to be the caped crusader, but Superman never stuck around for long before he was called to save the world again. The lasting heroes, the ones who clean up after superman's *kapow!*, are those people like me. The ordinary, the

stereotypes. The rank and file teachers who have taught millions of students through the years. The teachers who know their communities and know their students and know a little about everything—even if they went to a little known school and have a little money. I wanted to read about great teachers doing great deeds amidst great danger, which is after all what a hero is. The teachers portrayed in *Improbable Scholars* are common people who banded together with the support of their entire community. They are grounded in philosophy, pedagogy, and notions of the public good. Hopefully the rest of society can see that teachers like this are the rule, not the exception.

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**All citations are from the compilation of materials provided for the Summer 2014 NEH Seminar: Philosophers of Educations: Major Thinkers from the Enlightenment to the Post Modern Era.