

Through Students' Eyes: Urban Youth Show Us What They Believe About School: Opening Keynote Address of the 2008 National Association for Professional Development Schools Conference

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Figure 1 is an image taken by Xidi, one of the students with whom we've worked in an inner-city Cleveland high school and as a participant in the Through Students' Eyes (TSE) literacy and photography project that we have co-directed. Xidi was a junior when he took this picture, and he was not only a less-than-consistent participant in TSE, but he was also an increasingly reluctant school attendee. We knew him as an intelligent Asian American young man who worked more than 50 hours per week at his family's restaurant and who was developing a gambling addiction. While school was becoming less of a priority for Xidi as he moved closer to graduation, he was still aware of what helped his peers to find success in school:

This is John Sebabe. He breaks with friends of mine as much as a couple of times a week in the summer. I go hang out with them sometimes. My friend Tony "Fresh" Velez, who goes to Lincoln-West, breaks with them. He's very good and he's very into it. He is also in drama club at Lincoln-West. The drama teacher lets him do his break-dancing and plan all the dancing in the school plays, even in the

Christmas Carol play. Some teachers may not trust you enough to do that. That's what keeps guys like him in school.

Xidi's photograph and reflection are an example of the results of our collaborative work—specifically, the TSE project—that illustrates how professional development school (PDS) partnerships can impact teaching and learning for students, teachers, and teacher educators. We are fortunate to work with a tremendous now-decade-old PDS partnership called the Master of Urban Secondary Teaching (MUST) program. It is through MUST—the pride of our urban teacher education efforts at Cleveland State University—that we have been able to work so closely together for such an extended period and to focus on key issues not just in our classrooms but in our broader communities.

Introduction

We are veteran city teachers and teacher educators working in Cleveland and Euclid, Ohio.



Figure 1. “Teachers who trust you”

Kristien is now a literacy faculty member in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University (formerly at Cleveland State University), and Jim has been a proud city teacher for more than a decade. As a PDS site coordinator (Kristien) and mentor teacher (Jim), we have worked together for the past 8 years across three schools via the MUST PDS partnership between Cleveland State and the Cleveland, Euclid, and East Cleveland school districts. For the past 2 years, we have taught together at Euclid High School in an inner-ring suburb in Cleveland—Jim as the lead full-time teacher and Kristien as his co-teacher and a supervisor of MUST student-teaching interns.

While we have invested deeply in our students’ lives via our teaching, PDS work, and the TSE project, we’re not from the same community as these youth. Kristien grew up outside of Chicago but attended high school in rural Indi-

ana. He not only made it through high school, but he valued virtually every step of his own schooling process. At the start of each school year, he shares his school history with our students, as well as the schooling story of his father. His dad is much like the city youth with whom we work: While his father is long since retired, he just made it through high school and has never been able to achieve success in his own eyes. He’s an amazingly talented individual, but his gifts are known mostly by his kids, all of whom idolize him. While Kristien’s mom and dad never preached about school, he still knew what success in school meant: It was a promise, a possibility, and perhaps the only avenue he had to realize the potential that remains just that in his father.

Jim is both a veteran English teacher and what we recognize as a classic example of irony. He barely graduated from another inner-ring Cleveland high school, and his cumula-

tive grade point average as a senior was just above 1.6. He remembers receiving a phone call at home the day before his high school commencement, letting him know that he would be able to walk the stage with his peers the next day. Jim's poor school performance wasn't due to substandard intelligence; he just didn't comprehend the importance of education. He was labeled the product of a lazy, father-absent family, and he failed two math classes and two English classes, one of them being sophomore English. Here's the irony: He now *teaches* sophomore English at Euclid High School. Jim also shares his personal story of high school with our students at the beginning of each school year because he wants them to know how much time—and, for that matter, money—he wasted by not taking advantage of high school.

We also disclose these experiences because we want our students to know that we can relate to the influences outside of school that impact their performance in school. When we think back to our time as high school students, it was the teachers who considered these influences—and who shared some part of themselves with us—who had the most positive impact on our education. The TSE project that's grown from our PDS partnership is perhaps our most important effort at reaching our students and at challenging their disengagement from the schools to which we've dedicated our professional lives. The most compelling aspect of the project is that it looks to what these high school students believe and see about school for *solutions* to this detachment.

TSE

The brevity of this article doesn't allow us to share many statistics or details about the schooling experiences of our city students, but suffice it to say that the picture is not pretty. Because most of our students' families were disenfranchised from their own school experiences, there's little expressed value for school in students' homes. With generation gaps narrowing and high school dropout rates in Cleve-

land hovering near 50% for almost four decades, the message is clear: School doesn't matter to our students, and their postschool options are extremely limited as a result. As urban teachers, we have worked to address the perception that our class—or *any* class for that matter—may be unimportant, because for our students, such a point of view can end up being a literal matter of life or death. It is our responsibility to address this perception and to give students a means to ask and answer some of the most basic questions they have about school.

Over the past 4 years, Jim and I have worked with nearly 100 middle and high school students from our Cleveland area schools, all of which are classified—and function in every, often negative, sense of the word—as *urban* centers. We began with a group of youth from Lincoln-West High School (Cleveland's most diverse, a veritable United Nations of public schools), worked next with students from Rhodes High School (the first of our MUST PDS sites), and have continued with youth at Euclid High School, which is better than 70% African American in a city that has just recently elected its *first* Black council member. We recruited these students from classes that Jim and I taught or classes taught by the mentors with whom Kristien has worked as a PDS site coordinator. All three of these schools are long-time PDS sites for our MUST program, and there's no doubt that the rapport and relationships we've built with these youth and teachers were fundamental reasons why these young adults even bothered to show up for our project.

Aware not only of the fact that our students' and their families are part of a cyclical multigenerational disengagement from school but also that these youth are very multiliterate, visually oriented, and technologically savvy, we turned to digital photography for tools to help students to reflect on and illustrate their relationships to school. Relying on “photovoice” and “photo evaluation” methods, the goal of TSE was to get kids to think about visual answers to the project questions before answering them with text. We hoped to empower these youth to articulate these answers in ways that made sense to them and to

our community stakeholders. With local foundation funding, we provided students with simple cameras and access to computers and printers, then asked them to take pictures in response to three seemingly straightforward but often obtuse questions:

- What are the purposes of school?
- What helps you to succeed in school?
- What gets in the way of your school success?

Over the course of a year, we then met with students every other week to peruse, select, discuss, and write about three to five photographs each. To be fair, this project doesn't work with just one or two people. Jim and I have been fortunate to collaborate with a plethora of supportive teachers from these students' schools, family members, and local photographers to help students make sense of the images they've taken. We believe that it is these one-to-one contacts, conducted repeatedly over time, that have enabled these youth to reflect more deeply on the meanings of their pictures. Ultimately, we worked with these students to select what we all considered the best and most compelling of their responses to the project questions.

Purposes of School

We began by asking students why they got up every morning to come to school. While space does not allow us to share many of these students' images or reflections here, we summarize their answers and illustrate these with a key example. For many of these youth, they came to school in pursuit of a "good" life, which they define as higher education or a career that allows students to move up in the class system, a family and time to enjoy it, and, as one might expect, material things—nice cars and houses, the "bling-bling," as it were. These city students want to have the tools that allow them to reach their potential: They have visions, like all kids, of being important. They desperately want to matter and to find their places in the adult world. Too, they want

education to be a source of change for their communities and the daily goings-on of their neighborhoods.

One thing that stood out repeatedly is that these students want to come to school to be respected as unique individuals on the verge of adulthood but that they rarely feel like they are treated this way. The students repeatedly referred to the adults in their lives, both in and out of school, and described the tremendous impact these adults had on them, both positively and negatively, with their words. When these students perceive that an adult has slighted them or dismissed their chances for a productive future, the students become fixated on proving that adult wrong. These kids would tell you that their future success involves adults who believe in them and support them with words. Alycia, like many of these youth, has certainly told *and* shown us (Figure 2).

Opportunity

This picture makes me think of how you have one chance at life. You can't miss your one shot. For most people, if you mess up or miss your shot, you get a second chance. In my lifestyle, it's a hit-or-miss proposition. That's why I go to school: Education is something that I need to succeed in my life. Instead of horseplaying, I'd rather get it done and over with so I can move on to bigger and better things. I need to succeed in life to prove to everyone who has ever done me wrong that I am independent and just fine without them.

—Alycia

Alycia was a student in one of our sophomore English classes last year and was a management "challenge." She came from a single-parent family and loved to be the center of attention in class. She's currently in a cosmetology vocational program, but her photographs were consistently eye-popping and her writing was often angst filled. Her ability to consider visual answers to the project questions was unsurpassed. It turns out that behind Alycia's goofiness was a young lady who'd experienced a great deal of pain at the hands of the men in her life. She's one of many students who might



Figure 2. "Opportunity"

be traditionally dismissed as flighty by some teachers.

Supports for School Success

As encouraging of their school achievement, the students in our project highlighted family members, both peripheral and proximate friends, peers in and out of school settings, and the widest range of community members—many people whom we, as teachers and adults in their lives, didn't recognize as mattering to these students' school success. The people they mention are both here *and* gone, alive *and* past. They see *some* of their teachers playing these supportive roles, but these are almost always those who invest in youth beyond the classroom and who do so over extended periods of time. While many of us feel as if our students and other youth are not paying atten-

tion when we profess the value of school, they *are* listening and they appreciate our diligence. And, even more importantly, they *will* pay attention to us if we spend more time listening to them, about their decisions and deliberations, *without* judgment. Finally, the TSE youth instructed us in the fact that teachers, other adults in their lives, and even their older and *younger* family members and siblings serve as mentors for the types of activities that allow them to find school success. As Kayla's reflection and photograph (Figure 3) reveal, having strong mentors was one of the most important elements in her school achievement.

My Adopted Inspiration

There is a program in Cleveland called Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Greater Cleveland. The "bigs," as we call them in the program, are meant to serve as mentors, like a big brother- or big sister-type. Jodi is a big inspiration in my



Figure 3. “My adopted inspiration”

life. She sets a good example for me, which helps me carry on my success in school. She has completely surpassed her duty as a “big sister.” She has impacted my life by encouraging me to pursue my dreams—even as they have changed from an artist to a forensic pathologist and everything in between. She has always been there for me.

—Kayla

Kayla is now a senior in high school and has been accepted at both local private and state public universities with full-ride scholarships. She’s an incredible spitfire of a young woman, someone about whom we’ve marveled often—an old soul in a baby’s body who we sometimes think is more capable of managing her life than we are our own. We’ve never fully understood what in her experiences has driven her towards this tremendous school success—like so many of our students’ families, hers is over-

whelmed with merely surviving. We understood more about what’s kept Kayla on track for school and beyond when we saw the picture and read her words above.

Impediments to School Success

So what gets in the way of these students’ school success? Much of what they shared with us was not entirely surprising. While they have the same need that virtually every high school student does to feel accepted based on appearance and attire, the quality of materials and accessibility to these items can be a challenge. They have too few adults in their lives who have successfully navigated the challenges of a day-to-day life, let alone a high school education. They cope every hour with the realities of poverty—including inaccessible health care, transience, and eviction—and these fac-

tors can't help but weigh on their ability to focus in school. They lack insight into the implications of their "feel good now" decisions, particularly those with life-altering consequences. They take on roles designated for adults in many other families—for example, child caregiver and wage earner. They deal with extreme urban realities on a regular basis, such as violence and the incarceration or death of friends and family (Figure 4):

Eman

This is a photograph of a drawing of my friend Eman and a poem from his obituary. Eman had a difficult life with many obstacles to overcome. Unfortunately, he was not able to overcome them. I made this image to help motivate me by reminding me of things that he had to go through that I do not want to go through.

It also helps to remind me of things to look out for. The death of a family member, especially young family members, can get in the way of school. It is hard to concentrate on school when you are dealing with the death of someone you are close to. It makes it even more difficult to deal with when things like this keep happening.

—Gordon

Gordon, one of our sophomores last year, would be an easy guy to overlook. He's fairly short and very quiet and has dark intense eyes. His good friend Eman, the nephew of one of our fellow teachers, committed suicide in the middle of last school year. It was one of four student deaths in the high school last year. Gordon's comments and image are haunting in light of this—even more so because he's

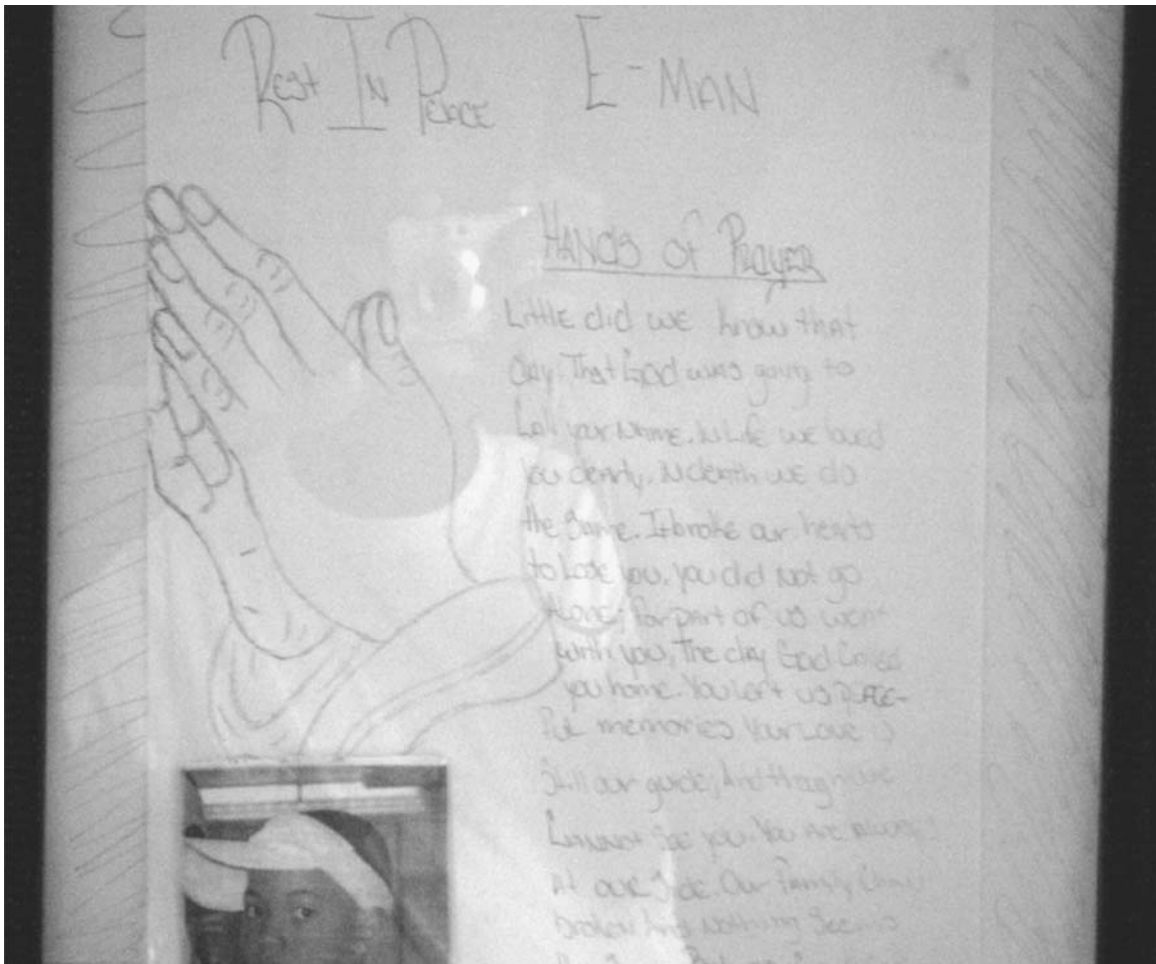


Figure 4. "Eman"

unwittingly captured a self-portrait in the reflection of the glass.

Conclusion

So what does all this mean for us as teachers, teacher educators, and PDS partners and advocates? While there are too many implications of this project to describe in any detail here, several stood out to us as we thought about our commitment to collaborating in the name of helping *all* students to achieve. It's clear to us now that the adults who matter to our students and otherwise engage with them don't need to have experienced the sort of school success that we hope for from our students. Even dropout parents can nudge their children towards staying in school. Because our students are surrounded by—and *bombarded* with—so many messages that suggest or even scream that success in school is not valued, the adults in their lives (even that occasional university PDS visitor) must preach the gospel of school's significance. The message may seem simplistic or redundant and may even seem to be rejected outright, but our youth *are* listening.

As well, all of us—teachers, university PDS liaisons, family members, school staff, and so on—should be *asking* our students about what *is* valuable in school, calling on them to articulate this worth, and then paying attention to what students highlight *and* what they criticize. And we all might appeal to the visual tools we've used for this project, which are deeply and fundamentally engaging to youth: They “get” images in ways most of *us* never will. Pictures are a powerful way in to their lives and perhaps the most accessible avenue to their achievement in our classes.

Our youth are engaged with a greater and different range of individuals and networks of

people than we understood before we collaborated with them around this project. These social activities, webs of people, and regular but informal mentoring roles *are* the curriculum of their lives. We must begin to count on these as foundations for our classroom content and teaching practices. The relationships we form with these youth are often synonymous with the relationships they form with school, our classes, and even the daily assignments we offer them. Our teaching must be consciously and intentionally rooted in these connections. We must listen and pay attention and make no assumptions and then listen some more.

Finally, these young adults are calling on us, counting on us, and even *challenging* us to be extraordinarily resilient in the face of their regular rejections of school, their daily duties beyond the school walls, and the multigenerational disengagement from school that drove us to ask our Cleveland area youth to *show* us just what school is for. They need us, as teachers and even as the occasionally present but always caring other adults in their lives, to have very short memories: We must forget what we *think* we know about them at the end of each day and sometimes at the end of each period, hour, or even minute so that we can return to them with the same hope with which we started our careers. If we can forget and forgive them in this daily way, they might show *us* what school can make possible. ^{SUP}

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