

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

For the Sake of Student Learning: Putting Our Voices Aside

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I'm a teacher, a mother, a wife, and a blogger. I also just happen to be Jewish. I work in a Title I school in a Los Angeles community that is not home to many Jewish people. It's primarily a Latino and Asian community, with the students in my middle school knowing far more about Moshi than Gefilte.

As this time of year approaches I inevitably mention my religion because I miss a couple of days here and there for the high holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and I like to give my students a heads up if I know that I'm going to be out. So it's also at this time of year that I think about my student of 'yore, Eduardo.

A Memorable Moment

Eduardo was a great kid, a student of great potential, but deep in the gang culture of the community around us. His cousins were recruited, his siblings were involved, and according to his writing journals, he didn't see a future that wasn't trapped by the walls formed by gang signs and colors.

Nevertheless, when he entered the classroom, it became his office. He brought a light of intelligence with him into every room and he used his power for good within our walls. He brought with him a sense of family and community longing that helped guide his behavior in the classroom. He wanted to help others, and he was a good leader. He wanted to know more about life. He gobbled lessons up, eating knowledge, reading books beneath his grade level, but wearing the sweat on his brow of someone working to better his circumstances.

But when he left the school site, he entered again a life that pulled him in a different direction. We caught glimpses of this life on campus based on his responses and how he communicated with others; but his inherent nature was that of a curious kid, a kid wanting to expand his world. So when I one day off-handedly mentioned that I was Jewish, it didn't surprise me that it was Eduardo's hand that shot up. That might signal a red flag to some, but unlike some other students, I knew there was not going to be any snark or sass behind that hand. Instead, there was going to be some kind of question that was genuine and brain expanding.

"Mrs. W? Do you have horns?" he asked. The tennis game of middle school heads began -- first to Eduardo, then to me.

I figured that one was safe to answer. "Nope. No horns," I said. Heads back to Eduardo.

"Can I say this word? Can I say 'hell'?" he asked politely. Heads back to me.

I cocked my head, not sure where this was going. "Um, yes, I trust you're using it because there isn't a better way to say what you want to ask." Heads back to their student representative.

"Um. So, if you're Jewish, does that mean you're going to hell?" The heads all turned to me with mouths agape, but each clearly wondering the answer.

Those Leftfield Questions

Now, I was in a precarious position. The lesson I was learning is that just as Eduardo's world was getting bigger with every person he met outside his gang-family, so was my world getting bigger with every person I met who perhaps didn't know about my faith. However, as a teacher, it's vital that I don't negate lessons being taught at home, at least those surrounding his

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own faith. But this was tricky. I never thought of myself as someone who was going to hell, if indeed there is one at all. But clearly in his culture, they might be teaching otherwise.

So I thought about my goal as a teacher to create independent learners and thinkers, and I responded the only way I could. I said, "I'll let you decide that, Eduardo." He crossed his arms, nodded at me thoughtfully, and the tennis game came to an end. We continued on our merry way reading Gary Soto's short story, "Seventh Grade."

Being a teacher isn't about blowing a kid's beliefs out of the water by pretending my opinion is the authority opinion in the room. Being a teacher is about guiding them to find their own answers in as unbiased a way as possible. Case in point, I don't have political stickers on my car. The only sticker the students will ever see states, "I voted."

I try to let kids come to their own conclusions. It can be conflicting, but at times, the most powerful way to teach is demanding my own silence.

Months passed, and I received a call from my younger sister right before class. The class was filing in as I was jumping up and down excitedly with my cell phone at my ear. I said goodbye, the school bell rang, and my cheeks were still flushed with happiness when I began the lesson. Eduardo's voice spoke for all of them again.

"What's up, Mrs. W?" he asked.

"My sister just got engaged!" I said. "I'm so excited for her. He's a great guy."

Eduardo leaned his chair back and said, "Hey, Moztel Tov!"

I guess he came to his decision.

Source: www.edutopia.org/blog/student-learning-our-voice-aside-heather-wolpert-gawron

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