

"MULTIPLICATION" IS FOR WHITE PEOPLE" RAISING EXPECTATIONS FOR OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN

by the author of
OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN

LISA
DELPIT

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INTRODUCTION:

YES, DIANE, I'M STILL ANGRY

Recently I was invited by education activist Dr. Raynard Sanders to New Orleans for an educational summit. The speaker, the renowned and controversial Diane Ravitch, had told Dr. Sanders that she wanted to meet me. Dr. Ravitch, currently a professor at New York University, has made headlines with her about-face on many issues related to public education. Ravitch was the assistant secretary of education in the George H.W. Bush administration, where she made her conservative intellectual and political reputation with her staunch support of standardized testing, charter schools, the No Child Left Behind Act, and free market competition for schools. She has now repudiated many of her earlier positions, stated both in public presentations and in her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. This courageous scholar has resigned from influential conservative policy groups and has incited many powerful enemies. As a result, in contrast to her former life as a popular conservative commentator, she

has now found herself barred from expressing her new views in many popular venues.

Before the speech began, I joined Diane, Raynard, and a few invited guests in an adjoining room. Diane and I talked about the devastation of public schools in post-Katrina New Orleans and how politicians and educational entrepreneurs hawking privatization are claiming the travesty of New Orleans education to be a national model.

Diane asked me why I hadn't spoken out nationally against what was happening. I told her about my work in New Orleans and my modestly successful attempts to engage other African American scholars in the struggle against what was happening there. I added that the sense of futility in the battle for rational education policy for African American children had gone on for so long and that I had come to feel so tired, that I now needed to focus on those areas where I felt I could actually make a difference: working with teachers and children in an African American school. I was so angry from the sensation of butting my head against a brick wall, I told her, that I needed to give my "anger muscles" a rest. Diane looked at me squarely and said, "You don't *look* angry."

I realized two things at that moment. One was that Diane's anger was relatively raw and still fresh and hadn't yet needed to be modulated. It must have been quite a shock to go from being an influential authority whose views were sought and valued in most political circles to being a virtual outcast. While it was undeniably courageous to reanalyze one's positions and come to a significantly different stance, it has to be anger-provoking to realize that the power elite seem less interested in logical analyses for the public good than in maintaining power and profit. Her anger had a different quality than the anger of those of us who have struggled with the same issues for many years.

The second thing I realized was that, yes, I *am* still angry—despite my attempts over the years to calm my spirit and to focus

on the wonder of teaching and learning. I am angry at the machinations of those who, with so little knowledge of learning, of teachers, or of children, are twisting the life out of schools.

I am angry that public schools, once a beacon of democracy, have been overrun by the antidemocratic forces of extreme wealth. Educational policy for the past decade has largely been determined by the financial contributions of several very large corporate foundations. Among a few others, the Broad, Gates, and Walton (Walmart) foundations have dictated various "reforms" by flooding the educational enterprise with capital. The ideas of privatization, charter schools, Teach for America, the extremes of the accountability movement, merit pay, increased standardized testing, free market competition—all are promulgated and financially supported by corporate foundations, which indeed *have* those funds because they can avoid paying the taxes that the rest of us must foot. Thus, educational policy has been virtually hijacked by the wealthiest citizens, whom no one elected and who are unlikely ever to have had a child in the public schools.

I am angry that with all of the corporate and taxpayers' money that is flowing into education, little-to-none is going to those valiant souls who have toiled in urban educational settings for many years with proven track records. Instead, money typically goes to those with little exposure to and even less experience in urban schools. I am left in my more cynical moments with the thought that poor black children have become the vehicle by which rich white people give money to their friends.

I am angry because of the way that the original idea of charter schools has been corrupted. In their first iteration, charter schools were to be beacons for what could happen in public schools. They were intended to develop models for working with the most challenging populations. What they discovered was to be shared and reproduced in other public school classrooms. Now, because of the insertion of the "market model," charter schools often shun the

very students they were intended to help. Special education students, students with behavioral issues, and students who need any kind of special assistance are excluded in a multiplicity of ways because they reduce the bottom line—they lower test scores and take more time to educate properly. Charter schools have any number of ways of “counseling” such students out of their programs. I have been told by parents that many charter schools accuse students of a series of often trivial rule infractions, then tell parents that the students will not be suspended if the parents voluntarily transfer them to another school. Parents of a student with special needs are told that the charter is not prepared to meet their child’s needs adequately and that he or she would be much better served at the regular public school around the corner. (Schools in New Orleans, the “model city” for charters, have devised an even more sinister scheme for keeping unwanted children out of the schools. The K–12 publicly funded charter schools, which are supposed to be open to all through a lottery system of enrollment, are giving preferential admission to children who have attended an affiliated private preschool, one of which charges over \$4,000 in tuition and the other over \$9,000.)¹

In addition, the market-driven model insists that should charter schools actually discover workable, innovative ideas, they are not to be shared with other public schools but held close to the vest to prevent “competitors” from “winning” the standardized test race. So now, charter schools are not meant to contribute to “regular” public education but to put it out of business.

I am angry about the hypocrisy rampant in education policy. While schools and teachers are admonished to adhere to research-based instruction and data-driven planning, there is no research to support the proliferation of charter schools, pay-for-performance plans, or market-based school competition. Indeed, where there is research, it largely suggests that we should do an about-face and run in the opposite direction.

I am angry that the conversation about educating our children has become so restricted. What has happened to the societal desire to instill character? To develop creativity? To cultivate courage and kindness? How can we look at a small bundle of profound potential and see only a number describing inadequacy? Why do we punish our children with our inability to teach them? How can we live with the fact that in Miami—and I am certain in many other cities—ten-year-olds facing failure on the state-mandated FCAT test and being “left back” in third grade for the third time, have had to be restrained from committing suicide?

I am angry at what the inflexibility and wrong-headed single-mindedness of schools in this era have done to my child and to so many other children. There is little tolerance for difference, for creativity, or for challenge.

The current use of standardized tests, which has the goals of promoting competition between schools and of making teacher and principal salaries—and sometimes even employment—dependent on tests scores, seems to bring out the worst in adults as well. In locale after locale—including Washington, DC; Georgia; Indiana; Massachusetts; Nevada; and Virginia, to name a few—there are investigations into widespread allegations of cheating by teachers and principals on state-mandated high-stakes tests.

And finally—if there ever *is* a finally—I am angry at the racism that, despite having a president who is half white and half black, still permeates our America. In my earlier days, I wrote about the problem of cultural conflict—that one of the reasons that having teachers and children of different cultural groups led to difficulties in teaching and learning was a lack of understanding about the other group’s culture. I now have a slightly different perspective. I still believe that the problem is cultural, but it is larger than the children or their teachers. The problem is that the cultural framework of our country has, almost since its inception, dictated that “black” is bad and less than and in all arenas “white” is good and

superior. This perspective is so ingrained and so normalized that we all stumble through our days with eyes closed to avoid seeing it. We miss the pain in our children's eyes when they have internalized the societal belief that they are dumb, unmotivated, and dispensable.

Nor can we see what happens to the psyches of young, often well-meaning white people who have been told that they are the best and brightest and that they are the saviors of black children. Most inevitably fail because they haven't the training or the experience to navigate such unfamiliar territory successfully; nor are they taught to learn with humility from parents or from veteran African American and other teachers who know the children and the communities in which they teach. Others burn out quickly from carrying the weight of salvation that has been piled upon their young shoulders. Several young Teach for America recruits have told me that their colleagues frequently run back home or off to graduate school with the belief that the children they went to save are unsalvageable—not because of poor teaching but because of their students' parents, families, or communities.

Yes, Diane, I am still angry. And that anger has fueled the two themes that run throughout this book. The first is the symbiotic interplay between my personal life as a mother and my professional work as a scholar and hopeful activist. Within the chapters of this volume are stories that range from my daughter Maya's first years in elementary school through her admission to college. My concerns for her educational struggles informed my work in schools. Feeling her frustration and pain opened my eyes to the frustration and pain thriving in so many of the classrooms I visited. Reveling in her successes helped me to suggest potential modifications for schools where I saw damaging practices. In fact, Maya has more than once over the years informed me that I wouldn't know half as much about education if I didn't have her! And she's right.

The second theme that runs through the book, from the chapters on educating young children to those focused on college students, is the relevance of a list of ten factors I have formulated over a number of years that I believe can foster excellence in urban classrooms. These factors encapsulate my beliefs about black children and learning, about creating classrooms that speak to children's strengths rather than hammering them with their weaknesses, and about building connections to cultures and communities. I believe that if we are to create excellence in urban classrooms, we must do the following:

1. Recognize the importance of a teacher and good teaching, especially for the "school dependent" children of low-income communities.
2. Recognize the brilliance of poor, urban children and teach them *more* content, not less.
3. Whatever methodology or instructional program is used, demand critical thinking while at the same time assuring that all children gain access to "basic skills"—the conventions and strategies that are essential to success in American society.
4. Provide children with the emotional ego strength to challenge racist societal views of their own competence and worthiness and that of their families and communities.
5. Recognize and build on children's strengths.
6. Use familiar metaphors and experiences from the children's world to connect what students already know to school-taught knowledge.
7. Create a sense of family and caring in the classroom.
8. Monitor and assess students' needs and then address them with a wealth of diverse strategies.
9. Honor and respect the children's home cultures.

10. Foster a sense of children's connection to community, to something greater than themselves.

So, yes, Diane, I am still angry. But I am also still hopeful. Some days I find it easier than others to locate that hope, so I am thankful that I have the opportunity to spend most of my days with the African American children at Southern University Laboratory School. There is nothing to inspire hope like the beaming smile of a kindergartner who has just written her first book or the cool demeanor that can't quite mask the excited grin of a seventh grader who has just mastered quadratic equations or a senior trembling with exhilaration and anticipation as he flashes his first college acceptance letter. No matter how angry I get when I think about what the larger world may have in store for them, I owe my life to children, and I am forever grateful for the hope and joy their smiles and hugs engender.

6

"I DON'T LIKE IT WHEN THEY
DON'T SAY MY NAME RIGHT":
WHY "REFORMING" CAN'T MEAN "WHITENING"

This story starts in 1954 with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and illustrates an interesting way in which education policy seems to repeat itself, often to the detriment of black children and the black community. Many educators today don't realize some of the "unofficial" repercussions of the desegregation decision. Prior to that ruling, black teachers and principals were guaranteed jobs in the segregated system. Whites taught white children in white schools and blacks taught black children in black schools. Often black teachers and principals were more highly regarded than their white counterparts, as work in black schools was one of the few avenues of employment open to highly educated African Americans.

When desegregation was forced into southern states, whites were determined to keep as many white teachers and white principals employed as possible. Hence, desegregation led to an initially unexpected opportunity for whites in education. In 1954, about 82,000 black teachers were responsible for teaching 2 million

black children. In the eleven years immediately following *Brown*, more than 38,000 black teachers and administrators in seventeen southern and border states lost their jobs.¹

In Arkansas, for instance, virtually no black teachers were hired in desegregated districts from 1958 to 1968. In Texas, five thousand "substandard" minimally or uncertified white teachers were employed to teach in formerly all-black schools, while certified black teachers were told to go into other lines of work.²

Black principals fared even worse. By some estimates, 90 percent lost their jobs in eleven southern states.³ Many were fired, and others retired. Still others lost their jobs for minor transgressions, such as failing to hold monthly fire drills. Those who stayed were often demoted to assistant principal or to coaching or teaching jobs. Others were offered clerical or even janitorial work.

In 1964, Florida had black principals in all sixty-seven school districts. Ten years later, with integration under way and the black school-aged population growing, only forty districts had black principals. In North Carolina, the number of black principals dropped from 620 to 40 from 1967 to 1971. In 1954 Kentucky had 75 black principals. In 1968 there was 1.

Famed Louisiana educator J.K. Haynes, in a 1968 newspaper article titled "Veteran Educator Bemoans Loss of Negro Teachers and Principals," wrote, "It is a strange thing to me that in nearly every instance the assumption is that a black principal is inferior."⁴

A National Education Association task force sent to Mississippi to investigate issued a statement that said, "Black educators are being dismissed, demoted, and pressured into resigning from desegregating school systems: blacks are then replaced by whites without regard to qualification."⁵ Northwestern University sociologist Johnny Butler, originally from Louisiana, published a paper in the 1970s in the *Journal of Negro Education* titled "Black Educators in Louisiana—a Question of Survival."⁶

Butler explains that while there were no laws in Louisiana to

prevent black teachers from being displaced, there was a federal ruling that applied to the Deep South that should have protected their jobs. It stated that "if in any instance where one or more teachers or other professional staff members were to be displaced as a result of desegregation, no staff vacancy in the school system should be filled through recruitment from outside the system unless no such displaced staff member is qualified to fill the vacancy."⁷ This meant that in order to give positions to new, white teachers, strategies had to be devised to remove black teachers from the system altogether.

Butler found that this was accomplished by claiming that the black teachers were incompetent, by closing black schools, and by demoting current black staff to lower positions. He quotes a few of the interviews he gathered with dismissed or demoted teachers:

Friday, I was called into the office. The principal said, "Miss _____ I don't like what I have to tell you but I want you to resign." His reasons were 1) failure to develop certain reading skills, 2) allowing pupils to read a reader before they were ready to start with it—inability to handle the job. The principal made no earlier comments concerning his reasons for my dismissal. Had he done so, the errors which he said I made could have been corrected.

—*MA certified, tenured, 6 years of experience*⁸

The teacher stressed that she was taken completely by surprise and had not been consulted about the reasons for her dismissal at an earlier date.

Another instance:

The first time I became ill my principal carried me home and asked for my retirement without any full statement or anything. . . . I

can't see why he would ask for a retirement because of illness, or because someone is out for a few days. I was given the option, retire or receive a letter of dismissal.

—*MA certified, tenured, 12 years of experience*⁹

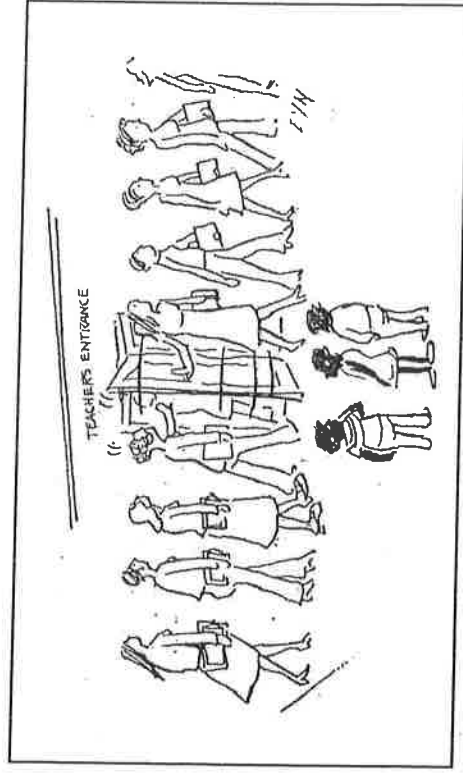
Logically, Butler claims, educators with MAs would have had greater immunity from displacement. But the opposite was true. The data collected for this study revealed that those with MAs had a higher percentage of displacement in all categories.

All of this created another issue. Many white students fled the district to private academies. And many white teachers did not want to teach in predominantly black schools. Thus, those white teachers reassigned to black schools (usually those with less experience and tenure) wanted to leave. State guidelines said that any teacher transferred had to remain in his or her post for three years. Most of these teachers then transferred out after the three years, creating an ever-changing array of young, white, inexperienced teachers in predominantly black schools.

A cartoon published near this time shows a long line of white teachers entering and exiting a revolving door, while a group of black children stare in bewilderment.

And now let us imagine that this same cartoon is published in the paper today. Could it possibly be applicable? In December 2008, *Time* magazine published a cover picture of Michelle Rhee, later the infamous superintendent of Washington, D.C., schools, holding a broom. The message: she is sweeping out "bad teachers."¹⁰ The problem is, the teachers being swept out in D.C. and all over the country are veteran teachers, frequently black, who are working in low-income black schools.

And who are they being replaced with? Just as in the 1970s cartoon, a long line of minimally certified, undertrained, white teachers who will largely leave after two years of teaching service.



History has a way of repeating itself, and black children have a history of being the pawns in other people's agendas.

The emblematic—although certainly not the only—program for this effort is Teach for America (TFA). Founder Wendy Kopp crystallized her plan while she was a senior at Princeton and wrote a thesis on mandatory national service, focusing on a teacher corps for low-income areas. After college, she succeeded in securing corporate funding for her project, and by 2008, TFA's IRS 990 shows that the organization had revenues of \$159 million. Recently, TFA received \$50 million in federal taxpayer money from the U.S. Department of Education to continue its work.¹¹

In two decades, Teach for America's approach to eliminating educational inequality has not changed: Recruit smart, hard-working graduates from Ivy League and other highly competitive universities and ask them, after a short training course, to take a hiatus from their future careers to commit two years to teaching in a low-income urban or rural school.

I have worked with a number of TFA teachers. Many, though not all, are tremendously dedicated, hard-working young people who want to do their best for the low-income black and brown stu-

dents they teach. Often they are struggling and having great difficulty in the culturally foreign, educationally challenging setting in which they find themselves. Some, albeit not many (perhaps 20–35 percent, although the exact numbers are hard to discern), continue to teach beyond their two-year commitment. The longer they teach, of course, the better they become. But most do not stay long enough to become excellent in the job.

Many teachers and teacher unions, while annoyed by the halo that the media have placed around the heads of TFA teachers, did not pay TFA much attention initially. With the slowing economy, however, districts are laying off veteran teachers—many African American—and yet still hiring TFA recruits. In the summer of 2009, Boston Teachers Union president Richard Stutman met with eighteen local union presidents, “all of whom said they’d seen teachers laid off to make room for TFA members,” according to an article in *USA Today*. Stutman added, “I don’t think you’ll find a city that isn’t laying off people to accommodate Teach for America.”¹²

In the Mecklenburg district of Charlotte, North Carolina, the superintendent laid off hundreds of veteran teachers but spared 100 TFA-ers. TFA expanded into Dallas in the fall of 2010, bringing in nearly 100 new teachers, even though the district laid off 350 veteran teachers in the 2008–2009 school year. In D.C., former TFA corps member and then superintendent Michelle Rhee laid off 229 veteran teachers in October 2009, but only 6 of the 170 TFA teachers in the system, according to the *Washington Post*.¹³

An Internet search provides numerous reports of veteran teachers being laid off and new recruits from TFA and similar programs being hired: In May 2011, while thousands of New York teachers faced the threat of layoffs, the city recruited 400 new teachers from New York City Teaching Fellows and 100 from Teach for America.¹⁴ In April 2011, over 200 teachers without tenure were told by the Kansas City, Missouri, School District that their con-

tracts would not be renewed. Many of the positions would likely be filled by the 150 recruits from Teach for America sought by Superintendent John Covington.¹⁵ In the 2010–2011 school year, the Clark County School District of Las Vegas had to cut 540 teaching jobs to help close a \$145 million budget deficit. Yet in addition to the 308 teachers Teach for America has supplied to Clark County over the past six years, the district expects to place 50 additional recruits in the 2011–2012 school year.¹⁶ On the heels of laying off more than 900 teachers, the Houston Independent School District hired 213 corps members during the 2010–2011 school year, said Pamela Kaiser, Teach for America’s public information coordinator. The contract for 2011 to 2012 anticipated hiring about 100 new Teach for America recruits.¹⁷

According to education journalist Barbara Miner, there is also growing tension between schools of education and TFA over jobs for new teachers. The College of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), for example, graduates about 300 certified teachers a year. The graduates, especially elementary teachers, are increasingly having difficulty finding jobs in Chicago schools. Victoria Chou, dean of the UIC College of Education, says, “One reason is the number of jobs committed to Teach for America and similar programs, which have arrangements with the Chicago public schools.”¹⁸ TFA has recently expanded into Alabama as well. According to a February 18, 2010, press release from Governor Bob Riley’s office, 90 TFA teachers were to be incorporated into the “black belt” schools over the course of three years. At the same time, veteran teachers in Alabama are being dismissed. It is not too difficult to imagine which teachers are being replaced in the “black belt.”¹⁹

In New Orleans, an announcement came out in May 2008 that indicated that TFA was planning to double the number of TFA teachers to 500 in the 2009–2010 school year. In 2010–2011 the numbers increased even further. Paul Vallas, then head of the

New Orleans Recovery School District, "surplussed" (read "dismissed") 150–200 veteran teachers to make room for more TFA and TeachNOLA (a similar local program) positions. Lance Hill, executive director of the Southern Institute for Education and Research in New Orleans (who occasionally refers to the program as "Bleach for America"), says, "This is the pattern: Vallas contracts with TFA and TeachNOLA for several hundred openings, then brings in 240 TFA teachers this summer and fires an equal number of veteran teachers, mostly black. This unprecedented practice of "set-asides" for mostly young, white, temporary teachers has had a disastrous effect on teachers who endured the worst conditions in the schools and are fighting to rebuild their lives after [Hurricane Katrina]. They get fired to make way for novice teachers who will leave the city and its problems when their two years are up."²⁰

According to researcher Howard Nelson (in a personal communication), the teaching force in New Orleans was 73 percent African American prior to Hurricane Katrina, and is now only 56 percent African American. This is in a city where over 95 percent of the students are African American.

As alarming to me as the reductions in black teachers are the newer efforts to push TFA graduates into administrative positions in school districts. According to Heather Anichini, TFA managing director of teaching and school leadership, TFA aimed to have more than eight hundred alumni leading their own schools or school districts by 2010. To achieve that goal, TFA has partnered with a number of organizations and universities. New Leaders for New Schools offers TFA graduates clear, simplified pathways to becoming a school principal. "Building Excellent Schools," for example, provides paid internships for TFA alumni to become principals.

Although I haven't found exact numbers, because a minority of the TFA teachers are African American, the numbers of African Americans recruited to become principals cannot be very high. Regardless of ethnicity, however, these are young, minimally expe-

rienced individuals typically from distant cities. TFA boasts of its partnership with over 150 graduate schools offering TFA alumni benefits, such as two-year deferrals, fellowships, course credits, and waived application fees (what New Orleans writer and activist Kalamu Ya Salaam calls "welfare for the well-to-do")—with Harvard being the overall top choice of TFA alumni. All of this is designed to ensure that young people from faraway communities, with as little as two years teaching experience, are groomed to become principals in overwhelmingly black and brown schools.

What is all of this doing to our children and to our schools? A primary concern I have is that the message going out very strongly is that people who look like the African American children in the classrooms are not good enough to teach them. I am disturbed by this growing trend in urban systems, which seems to belittle the value of experienced African American teachers and imply that young, inexperienced, minimally trained European American college graduates are the salvation of low-income students of color. Post-Katrina New Orleans, cited as a harbinger for what is to come in urban districts around the country, is a case in point. Shortly after the Katrina disaster, the entire New Orleans teaching force—mostly African American—was fired. Although other districts around the country snapped up many of these teachers, New Orleans policy makers have been slow to rehire. Instead, they, along with private foundations, have sought to replace those experienced teachers with young, predominantly European American, alternatively certified, and Teach for America recruits. The Los Angeles-based Broad Foundation, the Seattle-based Gates Foundation, and the Fisher Fund of San Francisco joined together for the first time in order to provide \$17.5 million to New Orleans, primarily to recruit and provide short-term training for "new" teachers and principals, most of whom will be neither from New Orleans nor share the culture of the predominantly African American student body.²¹

I do not wish to berate the young people who seek to teach through these programs. Many are idealistic and wish to make a difference in the world (although some I have interviewed talk more about building their résumés). Some will stay on to become excellent teachers; however, without the tutelage of experienced, culturally knowledgeable mentors, over 50 percent will be gone in two years, and over 80 percent will be gone after three years.²²

We know that first-year teachers are least able to produce positive growth in their students and that teaching quality increases dramatically for the first three years before leveling off in the fourth year of teaching.²³ Thus, the constant replacement of second- and third-year teachers with new recruits will mean by definition that we will provide a substandard education for children in low-income urban schools, where such alternative teacher selection programs are situated.

I do not propose that we terminate these programs, but we must ask alternatively certified, young, idealistic teachers to make a longer commitment to education to ensure that our most fragile students are not subject to constant teacher turnover. Further, we must use some of the money we pour into alternative certification programs to provide long-term, careful training for a cadre of teachers who are committed to long-term service in low-income communities and who are extraordinarily skilled in all that we know about teaching children from culturally diverse communities. Otherwise, as one New Orleans community activist told me, we are providing low-income schools with tourists rather than teachers. We also know that, quality held constant, those who are most familiar with the students they are teaching are most likely to teach them well. If we are to successfully incorporate young, less-experienced recruits into the teaching force, we must ensure that quality, experienced educators who know and understand the students served by the school are there both to serve the students and to help mentor new, young, culturally unfamiliar teachers.

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It's hard to overestimate how important it is to be known, especially in southern black communities. I've recently returned to my hometown in Louisiana after having lived away for many years. What strikes me more than anything is what I've started to refer to as "the dance of place," that I engage in several times a day:

"Delpit? Did you go to St. Francis? Do you know any Guerins?"

"Yes, I went to school with Tyrone."

"Oh, he's my husband! We have to get together."

or

"Did you live over by the Variste's on Lettsworth? You must have known my uncle. He was the minister over at Mount Olive."

or

"Your mama taught my uncle, Glenn Darensbourg, over at McKinley."

or

"I think you're my cousin!"

This is a means by which connections are made, a sense of belonging established, a feeling of order restored. When none of one's teachers can engage in that dance because they just arrived in the city, connections are harder to create, shared purpose more difficult to come by. When a child cannot connect the attitude and perspectives of a teacher with the attitudes and perspectives of community people who love him, understanding suffers. When teachers stumble over the unique names common to a place, then

there is a deep disconnect. As one New Orleans child summed this up, "I don't like it when they don't say my name right."

I recently visited a charter school serving African American high school students in a large Midwestern district. All but one of the teachers were European American. Most were young and were seeking alternative certification. In what I thought was a courageous request, one of the administrators asked me to sit down with a group of ninth graders to find out what they really thought about the school. Several of the students immediately said they thought the teachers were too young, that it was hard to take them seriously, even if they yelled. I asked them who they would go to talk to at the school if they had a problem. Almost in unison they said the name of the office secretary (I'll call her Ms. Rigby). I asked why, and they responded that she was older, she was African American, and she could relate to what they were telling her. But, they added, Ms. Rigby didn't play, and if they were on the wrong track, she wouldn't hesitate to "bust" them, even if afterward she would give them a hug. "She's like your mama or your auntie," one of the students added.

I then asked if any of them had failed a class. "Roy," the epitome of cool, sprawled in his chair, head cocked, eyes hooded, waved his hand. This was his first entry into the conversations. I asked if he knew why he failed. "Yeah," he answered dismissively, "I didn't do the work." I asked why he hadn't done it. "Didn't want to." I then queried the group about whether they had ever had a teacher who made them *want* to work hard. Each one except Roy described a former teacher who was "nice," or whom they liked so much they "didn't want to disappoint," or who made them laugh and made learning fun. Trying to draw him in, I asked cool Roy what he would do if Ms. Rigby were his teacher. Suddenly, his whole demeanor changed. He sat up straight and said, "I'd do my work. I'd do my work all the time. You got to be scared of Ms. Rigby [said

with a smile]. If she was the teacher it would be totally different. I have respect for her."

The young teachers in this school had a potential mentor in their midst that they weren't even aware of. They could learn a lot from Ms. Rigby. They could learn even more if they had teacher colleagues on the faculty with Ms. Rigby's background and cultural knowledge. In the same school where Ms. Rigby reigned, I asked another group of students to tell me about their teachers. They started telling me about Mr. Stieber and how great he was. I asked if Mr. Stieber was black or white. Well, they said, he's really black, but he looks white. One student said, to chuckles and general agreement, "He's white on the outside and black on the inside—he's a reverse oreo!" They continued with all kinds of accolades: "He's cool." "He's great." "He's real."

I later went to Mr. Stieber's class, expecting to see a young white man who had adopted black lingo, dress, and style. Much to my surprise, he was dressed in a suit, looked decidedly "preppy," and spoke with teacher-like authority. Nothing in his persona would give one the sense that he was attempting to adopt the culture of his students.

Later, I spoke again with some of Mr. Stieber's students. I asked them why they had said he was "really black." They said that he was real, that he was always honest, that he respected his students and insisted that they do their best. One young woman gave an example. She said that she asked Mr. Stieber how he felt as a white man teaching black history. She told me that tears came to his eyes as he answered that when he learned about Emmett Till and other terrible things that white people had done to black people, it sometimes made him ashamed to be white. The student said that tears also came to her eyes, as they connected on a very real level. I found out later that Dave Stieber was deeply involved with a group of African American teachers studying the history of racism in

the United States. He had found his mentors and it showed. He shared a work of spoken word poetry with me explicating his reasons for teaching in a school and community that many teachers would shun.

Once again, I do not want to suggest that TFA teachers should disappear. I believe these highly educated, energetic, and often deeply committed young people have a role to play. They can, with humility, under the tutelage of people who look like the children they want to teach, learn to connect with the children they want to teach. If they are mentored by master African American teachers, if they commit to teach long enough to become good at their craft, then they have a lot to offer. They are welcomed and invited in with open arms.

On the other hand, if they enter the classroom arrogantly, believing that young white people like themselves are the saviors of black children, if they ignore the brilliance of many—never to suggest all—of the African American educators who have come before them and who are struggling against all odds to educate the children of their own communities, if they do not understand and work against a belief system that demeans the intelligence of those they purport to help by unquestioningly accepting the idea that school reform means making everything whiter—then they can serve no useful role.

As I reviewed a number of articles on the history of segregation and its consequences to the teaching force, I came across an undated, untitled newspaper article apparently from the seventies that observed, "The more desegregation a state experienced, the fewer black educators they ended up with." In looking at what counts as school reform in most cities in this country, one could easily substitute "school reform" for "desegregation": "The more school reform a state experiences, the fewer black educators they seem to end up with." We must remember that children do need to see and connect to teachers who look like themselves, who know

their communities and their lives, who know how to say their names. Whatever else we might do, school reform must include efforts to recruit and sustain local, African American teachers.

If we are serious about democracy, if we are serious about providing equal opportunity for all citizens, if we are serious about equity and justice, then we have to undo any model that obliquely serves to replicate a racist past.