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A Glass Half Full

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A Glass Half Full

Jeff Duncan-Andrade

A few weeks before finishing this essay, and just two days before my parents' 62nd wedding anniversary, my father was killed in a car crash outside my parents' home.

"What now?" I asked my 82 year-old mother.

"I just have to remake myself son. I will take each day as it comes and focus on what needs to be done. My glass is still half full," she replied.

She was simply repeating a lesson she taught me as a child when she ordered me to the kitchen table and placed a half-filled glass of water between us. Pointing at the glass, she asked, "half full or half empty?" I refused the bait and stared blankly at the glass.

"Son," she continued, "how you choose to answer that question, is how you will live your life. Your glass will always be both half full and half empty. If you choose to see your life as half empty, focusing on the things you don't have, then you will never fill your cup. But, if you learn to see your life as half full, seeing all the things that you do have, then you will fill your cup, it will overflow, and you can share that with others."

The education of poor and working people in this country has often been treated as a glass half empty. For generations, we have rationalized why we haven't, why we won't, and why we can't serve "these" families. But, as my mother's lesson suggests, this is a choice that we make. It is not inevitable. We could, if we so desired, choose to see all children for their potential and invest in them accordingly. Were our nation to become serious about such an effort in education, two things would need to happen.

First, we would have to meet every child's basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, and safety). There is substantial research evidence that the absence of these basic needs increases exposure to toxic stress, dramatically impacting educational and life outcomes. If we are not willing to meet this challenge, then we should admit our society values children in poverty less than wealthy children and stop these absurd discussions of meritocracy and accountability inside a system that is profoundly inequitable.

Second, educators would have to address the issue of teacher quality. As a veteran urban classroom teacher—19 years and counting—I agree wholeheartedly that many of the federal and state regulations for teachers and schools are deeply problematic. Every day, I navigate ill-conceived policies and ludicrous working conditions. There are real political and economic powers responsible for these conditions. These powers designed, and now maintain, an unequal system and everyone knows it—kids, parents, politicians, and pundits alike. Nary a person in this country would have the gall to say that educational opportunities are equal among the rich and poor. Progressives have amply illuminated this point, and rightfully so.

However, while we have been busy pointing our fingers at the injustice of these inequities, we have mostly avoided the fact that under these same conditions, there are teachers that consistently get high levels of engagement and achievement. This fact alone suggests there are other contributing factors to widespread school failure and we must add that discussion to our visions for change. The truth is that even if the daily reality of teaching were more ideal, we would still have far too many colleagues in urban schools who are unwilling and/or unable to meet the social and academic needs of students. Some of these colleagues have been mired in mediocrity for years and they have no clear path out of it. Others, earlier in their teaching careers, will not stay long enough to become good teachers because there is no clear path to excellence.

Either way, defining, assessing, and developing high quality teaching is an unmet challenge in education. The good news is that there are enough excellent teachers in our ranks for us to say definitively what works, how it works, and why it works. Our path forward should acknowledge this knowledge, harness it, and let it drive our approach to teacher recruitment, pre-service education, assessment, and development.

Rethinking Recruitment

Teacher education continues to fail to recruit and attract students of color, particularly candidates from racial groups that struggle the most in our schools. Oddly enough, this same challenge does not seem to present itself to the athletic programs on our college and university campuses. Teacher education would do well to learn from sports programs that have successfully recruited from communities of color for decades. Borrowing from their model would require us to get into schools, as early as elementary school, to start forming relationships with young people, families, and educators, encouraging and incentivizing their matriculation into teaching.

Rethinking Pre-Service Education

Teacher educators should have first-hand knowledge of teaching practices that are responsive to the conditions of the neighborhoods and schools where they are sending teachers. They should also be exceptional teachers themselves. This means universities will need to change faculty recruitment criteria, prioritizing successful K-12 practice as a primary requisite for positions in teacher education.

If teacher educators are active and effective educators themselves, the curriculum will be more relevant, based on the faculty's practical experiences in the field. Teacher training should also include cutting edge research from germane fields such as public health, neuroscience, and law. This knowledge base will better prepare educators to design classroom pedagogy and support systems that are responsive to students' lives. Finally, teacher education should involve regular discussions with community members, students, parents, and effective teachers that come from the communities and schools where these novice teachers are headed.

Rethinking Development and Assessment

As teachers transition from their university education to the K-12 classroom, they should be apprenticed in classrooms of exceptional teachers (as we see in the trades, law, business, medicine, and the martial arts). To identify the educators to lead these apprenticeships, we could utilize evaluations based on a teacher quality index.¹ This approach positions excellent practitioners at the vanguard of the profession and cultivates a more meaningful professional community based on extended mentorships between early career and veteran teachers in the community—something that is sorely lacking, the absence of which contributes to high rates of early career teacher turnover.

Visions of a Cup That Overflows

My willingness to go on record with an admission that our nation and our profession has failed to meet the needs of poor children does not place me in agreement with the current regime's "commitment to accountability." From the ground, it is clear that their models of social and school accountability are procedural commitments to scapegoating; a not-so-sophisticated smoke and mirrors game that will never change outcomes in the aggregate. Entire neighborhoods and schools are surely "too big to fail," so bring on the radical influx of resources to bail them out. If teachers are the problem, bring on the national commitment to recruitment and competitive compensation packages that put teaching on par with every other profession our society values. Alas, these resources do not appear to be forthcoming anytime soon; for that, many will see our glass as half-empty.

There is another option. We can take the advice of my 82-year-old mother. We can remake ourselves, addressing the basic needs of all children and defining, assessing, and developing high quality teaching. We can see the communities that our society blames for a glass half-empty, as the places that actually make our glass half-full. Were we so bold, we might actually give all our nation's young people the quality of education and life that they deserve.

¹ A group of scholars from San Francisco State developed the Urban Teacher Quality Index, an evaluation tool for teachers that identifies excellence and supports improvement.