

Introduction

Litchfield, Connecticut: under an hour from Hartford, is a historic town centrally located in the scenic Northwest Hills of Connecticut. With the Appalachian Trail running through it, this region is known for its rolling landscape and New England charm. Yet few from the inner city in Hartford would know of it or would even think of moving here for a better life. Touchstone: located in Litchfield, is a residential treatment center for delinquent girls who were once caught up in the turmoil of big city life, of family disputes, of drugs, alcohol, crimes and an assortment of other aberrant situations. This serene setting is worlds away from their previous lives, allowing for reflection, healing and school.

Entering Touchstone's premises, one might think of it as a weekend resort, or someone's private compound. A big stone house dictates the space and is encompassed by smaller white and red barns and houses, each strategically located and designed to balance and contrast the splendor of the plot. These city girls could not be further from home. Albeit the amazement I have for the facilities, it is the girls' journey here and their evolution as young woman that astounds me most. Focusing more narrowly in on their writing workshop, in doing this, I will discuss the benefits of these creative sessions which facilitate the girls' expression of their past and present lives and how the power of writing is transforming their world. In an effort to discover the underlying cause, of their presence at such a treatment center, I will look to their cultural background and the American educational system as factors leading to their placement in Touchstone's residential treatment facility.

Background

Every Tuesday for the past eight years, Sharon Charde makes the 45 minute drive down to Litchfield, CT to volunteer herself as writing mentor with the Touchstone girls. As a family therapist for 25 years as well as a leader of women's writing retreats since 1990, Sharon decided she wanted to work as a facilitator with teenage girls who were incarcerated. Writing, she thought was a good way to do that. Feeding from prompts from books, articles, their conversations, or a meaningful quote, the group writes until the ink of their pen is arid or the blade of their pencil is dull. Free writing is a process whereby the writer writes spontaneously and without pause about whatever comes to mind in response to a prompt. "Free writing is supposed to help student writers develop authentic voices by getting past the writing 'disease' that Macrorie coins 'Engfish,' the stilted prose of developing student writers. Free writing enables developing writers to spontaneously tell the 'truth of themselves'" (Bruce, 2003, 26). As one participant describes,

"I write now and it is more from the heart than ever. Sharon taught me how to just write and write without trying so hard to polish it up. That's when you start getting to those real feelings and thoughts. You go back later and fix it up. I look at it as like an out. It is my out when I am having a bad day or a good one. If I'm not even sure what is wrong I can just write and write and eventually those feelings will be out on that paper in front of me" (Ch, 2006).

Instead of focusing on form, spelling, grammar and fluidity, they write to provoke their mind, uncover their feelings and shed the weight of their troubles, pain, anger or joy.

They write from the heart instead of the head, the confines of the academic world are tossed aside, and what is revealed is truly amazing.

“With gestures that mimic its Romantic roots, proponents of expressivism generally teach students to write informal, personal narratives out of their lived experiences. The purpose of writing in expressive writing classes generally is to “empower” individual writer through the use of types of writing that enable personal autonomy, self-expression and the reclaiming of ‘voice’” (Bruce, 2003, 25).

By using this style, we see into their selves, feel their past and are enveloped by the candidness of their stories. These girls are indeed empowered by their writing and sharing of their stories. We hear about families: mothers who didn’t care, fathers they never knew; about rape: by a stranger, an uncle or friend; we hear about depression: confusion about who they are, if they are gay and acceptance from friends; we hear about gangs: of their reality in it and their fear of it.

Their stories are real, their memories intense. No judgment is passed, only acceptance for the words that they speak and the feelings they express. Trust is integral; without which, no realities would be shared, only superficial feelings and meaningless stories. Support is required; without it the girls would feel shameful, critiqued and judged. The walls of the room act as barriers from judgment, the eyes of the listeners a blanket of hope; hope that by writing and sharing their futures will be brighter, and that their new found strength will be used to resist their past lives and go for their dreams.

I WANT

I want a lot of things
like a mom and a dad
a nice house on a block where it’s quiet--no noise

I want a lot of things--
don’t mean I’m going to get them

I can beg beg beg
and still not get it

I can be as needy, whiny--anything--
still not going to get it

where I live I got to work
earn for what I want
even if I do that
I'm still not going to get it

so let me tell you
what kinds of things I want
and how I want them to be

I want a mother who is caring, kind, gentle, loving
who will always be there for her daughter

I want a father who is strong and mighty
will help me if I fall down
or have a bump in the road

I want a nice white house
with red shutters and a red door
a pool in the back yard
a play set for if and when I have kids

I want a nice husband who loves me
and can protect me

I want a Rotwieler who also
can protect me

listen
I want all these things

it's nice to want, right?
seeing families with a mom, a dad, nice things--
a nice childhood that I wanted but could never have

the reasons why I couldn't are all these nice things
because my life was bad
things happened

from now on
and from this day forward

I will try try try
to have the good life--
the one I haven't had for the last 16 years

(C, 2006, Poetry Festival)

I started my journey with my aunt and the girls in the spring of 2006. Taking my first class in the Reading Department at the State University at Albany, New York, was a forever changing experience. Little did I know that this class would be as powerful or be one which would lead to constant reflection on the practice of literacy. In essence, we were encouraged to view literacy through a variety of contexts: cultural, socio-economic, and historical. We read about and discussed the changing conceptions of literacy in an increasingly global, cultural economy. We probed the many complex roles that literacy plays in shaping selves, social relations and societies. We discussed the dimensions of social and linguistic diversity and debated the implications of such diversity for literacy learning and development. And, we spoke about the relationships literacy plays among classrooms, schools and other social and institutional sites. My perceptions of literacy and my knowledge of what shapes literate acts were forever changed. No longer was my view in black and white, it was no longer static, but an ever evolving entity that would change due to the manner in which I viewed it. Powerful is one way to put this eye-opening experience, life-changing yet another.

In the middle of learning, discussing and reading about literacy in its various contexts, I contacted my aunt, Sharon Charde who was running her creative writing workshop in Litchfield, CT with the Touchstone girls and in Lakeville, CT at Hotchkiss. Her original writing endeavor with these girls was an amazing real life paradigm of how to view literacy outside of the traditional classroom setting. Little did I know how

powerful her sessions would be. I was amazed by the rawness of the girls' writing, by their honesty, bluntness, and use of the English language in creative and new ways.

While their writing was not of the traditional academic version to which I was accustomed, it was novel, fresh and free from the confines of the academic world. These girls spoke from their heart, revealed their past stories, and read like they were on stage.

One of my favorite poems, entitled *Lost* is a true testament to the impact poetry has had on the participant.

LOST

flying for asphyxiation
blades and drugs, my deviation
this fucking life needs dedication
that's why I won't survive

running out of medication
must go under this sedation
that maybe a revelation
don't feel like I'm alive

blood to boost my elevation
kind of buzz that saves the nation
the level of sophistication
can never be the same

am I just a complication
set aside for the duration
my demise, your aspiration
but you'll never take the blame

carve another indentation
figurehead of your fixation
half-way to intoxication
above the stars I lay

immune to all purification
your words lost in blood's sweet translation
show me your appreciation

as I fade away

suicidal ideation
broke with ease my weak foundation
drug-induced pupil dilation
with what substance lies your trust?

draining and disfiguration
kiss the steel love this temptation
death has broken your reservation
dark angel turns to dust

(N, Poetry Festival, 2006)

Writing and sharing in the safety of Sharon's class allows the girls to be themselves, to write about what they care about and to use the style they prefer. They are true to themselves in this arena, as opposed to other more traditional writing environments. What's more, they receive instant gratification for their hard work and dedication to the act of writing. As Heather Bruce recounts, "'Voice' effects of writing in creative writing classes derive from what the students' term 'writing authentically' and 'writing honestly.'" Students say writing in this context represents their "true" or "real" feelings and is distinct from the "usual stuff" they say and write in school just to oblige teachers" (Bruce, 2003, 119).

One of the most commanding visits I experienced was the one in which I joined Sharon and her husband John, at the Poetry Festival at Touchstone. Sharon organized this annual event to bring together local, women poets with the Touchstone girls. The mutuality of these two different groups reminded me of my visits to Hotchkiss with Sharon. At first the divide amongst the girls and the poets was dynamic. As the Touchstone girls sat giddy on the grass, proudly exhibiting their gold hoops, tight shirts

and mini skirts, the poets (strewn amongst the crowd) were calm and collected, mostly of middle-upper class variety and seasoned in their work or finding their newfound voice from within. As the evening evolved, the before mentioned divide, seemed to meld as stories of love, rape, death and despair entered the evening's dusk. Despite their veteran status or their young naivety, the group coalesced in one. "Support!" filled the country setting as both the Touchstone girls and older woman read aloud their poems. Ex-Touchstone residents, former poetry festival participants, dotted the landscape, an obvious testament to Sharon's influence, compassion and support throughout their journey at Touchstone and thereafter. One such participant read her poem, which is also published in Sharon's book *I am not a Juvenile Delinquent*. This poem is one which truly speaks of the reality many of the girls face back at home.

My Kitchen Table

My kitchen table is the hangout
We don't eat there but we express ourselves there
How many kids does so and so have?
How many times have the bill collectors called?
How much is the phone bill?
That's the food on my kitchen table
We eat the gossip in the air
We eat our wisdom at the kitchen table
Not the wisdom of books and school
But the wisdom of the projects,
Welfare dick, fast cars, drug money—
Our kitchen table is well-rounded
As if the Mafia were there
Fuck my kitchen table
There's nothing to eat
I've been eating the same shit there forever
I want different foods at my kitchen table
No gossip or shit from the streets
I want the food of books and school
How to make it
I want to digest the food at my kitchen table
Let it move through my system

Return again at the table
Fuck the food at the projects, welfare dick,
Fast cars and drug money
I want some new food at my kitchen table

(T, 2006, Poetry Festival, Touchstone)

The small congregation stood and clapped, the air rang with “support!” Looking around, I saw poets wipe their eyes and giddy girls turn to one another in approbation. Just minutes earlier this stocky girl, with baggy clothing, and a gold tooth swaggered around as if to show her power. Now reading, she became an innocent girl, revealing a part of her world that hurt the most to a tent full of strangers. At this moment I thought to myself, I need to remember this feeling; I have to etch it into my mind. We judge without knowing, we presume without discovering, we turn a blind eye to those who do not fit our ideal. These girls are real, their stories so raw, their poetry poignant. I see now that perhaps their placement at Touchstone is our fault to begin with. We deny them a chance from day one to succeed at school and to live prosperous lives. We cast them aside for the judicial system to handle, in an effort to forget they even exist. This is not the answer, and programs like this are showing us that these juvies have something important to share.

As the evening progressed, several woman stand to address the crowd with their poetry. Many of them share stories of their rocky history, or details of their delinquent acts, being raped, or in one case, killing her abusive husband and being incarcerated for that crime. My mind keeps spinning, the wheels keep churning, and revolutions loom in the forefront. These women hide their turbulent past until their voice is heard; without that voice, they are merely mousey women, educated females all groomed and well dressed; a drastic contrast from the girls in the corner. The women are white, they are

educated and they have money. Yet their talent is on par with the girls. Suddenly my once very narrow vision of what this is all about evolves into something much broader: this is about race, money, and power. All of the girls lack one or more of these things, and if they have it, it is the wrong kind. If they are rich, it is drug money, if they have power, it is from a gang, and if they are part of the “dominant race” they deny association and assume another. Our educational system did not afford them a chance from day one. They were judged by those who thought they knew who they were, who thought they knew what they could achieve, and who predetermined what we could expect from them. Education put up this wall; programs like this are tearing it down. Creative writing affords these girls, who never had a chance, the opportunity to truly be heard by others, to share their talent and to feel the exhilaration of success. Programs like this give those who have never been given the chance, a place to shine and an opportunity to grow.

“Writing in this context is self-revealing. It strips off the cultural veil that shadows assertive thinking and believing. It allows girls to speak their mind without interruption and to change their minds and words at will without punitive consequences. When students feel free to speak without interruption to an audience that is willing to take them and their ideas seriously, students counteract cultural silencing” (Bruce, 2003, 120).

Suggestions for Improvements in our Educational System

In an effort to reach girls like those at Touchstone our system of education will have to change. While there are many different factors which cause repeated delinquency, it is my belief that we can change our educational system in an effort to help this subset of students. In an effort to do this, we need to take a step back and look at the values and manners of learning which are dominant in other cultures. As Delpit (1995) illustrates in *Hello Grandfather: Lessons from Alaska*, even subtle characteristics of a particular culture change the way students learn and interact with others. We need to take this

advice as an indication that there are many other cultures and people who learn in equally different ways and that we as teachers are responsible for educating and appreciating each of our students' individual styles. We have to look to their socio-economic status, the languages used at home and the cultural background of our students to teach them appropriately and afford them the chance to succeed. If we ignore this, we will be perpetuating the current situation and continuing to fail those who do not fit the Anglo Saxon "ideal".

As educators we must seek to change the system. To start, we need to view our own actions and become more educated about the different learning styles which are characteristic of the students in our classes. We must separate ourselves from disparaging stereotypes which classify certain groups of students based on the achievements of only a few. As Spring (2006) illustrates in *American Education*, the system can change.

"Leaders of the multicultural education movement are concerned with empowering oppressed people by integrating the history and culture of the dominated groups into public school curricula and textbooks. In general, their goal is to reduce prejudice, eliminate sexism and equalize educational opportunities" (p. 135). Movements like this are giving chances to those who otherwise will be taught by the ideals of their white teachers. What's more, like Reagan, Case and Brubacher (2000) claim in *Becoming a Reflective Educator*, if we just take the time to think about how we teach, how each of our students are learning and spend the time to constantly reflect on how we can better our methods so all of our students can learn, the constraints of our old system can be broken.

"As Donald Schon (1983, 1987) has suggested, reflective practice is, in essence, a kind of "reflective conversation" involving the educator, students, parents, and

other teachers. Educators need to realize that their actions as teachers take place in a context of meanings in which other participants have different interpretations and understandings (indeed, different constructions of reality). It is important that these different and sometimes competing interpretations, understandings and constructions of reality be taken into account to as great an extent as possible by the reflective educator”(p. 147).

I am afraid that the educators who have left their mark on the histories of the Touchstone girls have failed them. They have taught blindly, presuming all students share a common history, are educated in particular ways at home and share a common interest in the things that they as human beings value. To teach by these standards and with these preconceptions is a huge misconception on behalf of our educational system. All teachers need to be educated to teach in culturally appropriate ways, to teach their students as individuals, not as a mass.

Creative writing programs such as the one at Touchstone are reaching girls in ways education has failed to realize or institutionalize. Writing opportunities allow for exploration of self and realization of otherwise untapped talents. In essence, writing equals power. “Adolescent girls find that writing allows them to ‘assert a voice’—to claim a sense of power in an educational system that otherwise disenfranchises them” (Bruce, 2003, 117). To express oneself, and to share it with others enables the once silenced or oppressed the opportunity to be heard and to share who they are and where they come from. As Heather Bruce (2003) uncovers in *Literacies, Lies & Silences; Girls Writing Lives in the Classroom*, she speaks of this power shift, in relation to the perpetual subordination of girls and minorities in the school setting, in the histories they learn of and in the overall context of the classroom.

“...the notion of discourse, which historically has condemned *woman* because of her subordinate positioning in culture, might also serve as a tool that disrupts

female subordination...The possible power derived from discursive reconfigurations suggests that writing accomplished in an explicitly gendered environment might enhance girls' personal, intellectual, and political development" (p. 11).

This is exactly what the Touchstone Creative Writing Workshop is allowing for.

Reflection leads to the development of their selves, and the writing and sharing of their personal and cultural histories allows them to deal with their past, be aware of who they are and be proud of themselves. As one of the participants in my study recalls when asked if the creative writing workshop had changed her in any way, she states:

"Writing and sharing has changed my life over the years by helping me to mature and cope with troublesome situations, giving myself the opportunity to express my feelings in any kind of way and feel good about it, not having to worry about someone judging me because I tell my situations so dry. Writing takes care of me, soothes my mind, body and soul. It honestly has made me a better person."(Ch, 2006)

Writing affords an outlet to the otherwise disruptive student, allowing for expression of feelings, which in turn may alleviate an otherwise disorderly behavior. As another participant shares,

"I think that this workshop helped me learn more about myself than anything else in my twenty one years alive. I think that still to this day it continues to help me learn "me". I have learned skills that are far more valuable than just a earning a credit from a class. I have learned how to handle myself when I'm feeling all these emotions are not sure what do. I write. When I am overwhelmed and need to clear my head, I write. I know that as I get older I will continue to change and in order to keep up with myself I write. I can look back and read my journals and see where I was. I will never forget the things in my past that made me who I am because I have then on paper or in a book. I'm never going to stop writing"(J, 2006)

Conclusion

Writing and sharing are powerful tools. They give muscle and a voice to those who are otherwise silenced or disenfranchised; they can heal those who are downtrodden,

and give a chance to shine to those who never had one before. The creative writing program at Touchstone is an exemplary program for girls with a troublesome past, but is one which would also benefit the general student population.

“Writing allows students to express themselves and discover what they think, feel and believe and, concurrently, to make personal connections with the major issues, ideas, and themes presented in school or real life scenarios. Writing is invaluable because it helps students negotiate the terrain between classroom experience and daily life. Students see writing as a way to give voice to the many, varied ways they have come to know what they know.”

Realistically, most public schools will have no means for funding such programs. What can be done therefore is the training of educators at the master’s level. Throughout my educational career I have been astonished that a class on teaching linguistically and culturally divergent students is not obligatory for general educators. If a course such as this was to be institutionalized, teachers would be more adept to reach their students and appreciate where they come from. Without specialized training in cultural appreciation and educational content for culturally and linguistically different student groups, I believe our system will continue to fail a large sector of our student body. It is through working with students who have been failed by the system that the failure on our part comes to light. It is my hope that our system will change for the better, so our increasingly culturally diverse student population will be educated to the best of our ability.

Special Thanks

I would like to thank my dear Aunt Sharon for allowing me to be a part of her incredible influence on these wonderful girls. It has changed me forever, and I cherish our time spent.

Special thanks also goes to you, Mark, for your mentorship and the true educational impact you have had on me. I wish you the best always.