

# Writing for Their Lives in the Deeper Part of Hell

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In the winter of 2016 I was invited to visit Washington High School in Northern California to meet with the administration. The purpose of the visit was to engage in a conversation about the many challenges confronting the school, and to offer suggestions on how they might go about addressing them. The meeting started with the administrators sharing a bit of information about their backgrounds. Nearly every member of the leadership team, including the principal, had attended Washington HS as a student, and they continued to live in the community – Del Pacific Hills (DPH), by choice. Several had formerly been athletes and they spoke with pride about the school’s accomplishments in basketball and football. The one administrator who was not from DPH was a former math teacher who had been recognized as a Teacher of the Year by the state three years previously.

Despite their pride, they spoke openly about the many challenges facing the school: low student achievement in all subjects, low graduation rates (though they had been rising in recent years), low A – G (the courses required for college admission) completion rates, and chronic truancy. Having worked with under-performing schools for many years, I found the challenges they described were unfortunately, familiar. However, what struck me as different about this team of administrators was their deep commitment to the students and the community. Their commitment to improve the school was rooted in their commitment to the community. I had no doubt that their desire to provide better educational opportunities to children in DPH was sincere.

However, while their commitment was strong and their desire to make a difference appeared genuine, the school’s leadership made it clear that they felt overwhelmed by the challenges they faced and were at a loss

for what they could do to move the school forward and achieve greater progress. As our talks progressed, the administrators described the enormous obstacles that many of their students faced: inter-generational poverty, families in crisis, homelessness, high rates of interpersonal violence, and a broad range of psychological and emotional difficulties that they described as being related to toxic stress and trauma. They spoke with compassion about these issues but they also expressed their frustrations over the pressure they were under to meet state and district expectations for improved academic performance. The principal put it this way:

We’re working our butts off to get better but we’re not making any real progress. My team is committed to these kids. We see ourselves in them. But nothing we’ve done so far has produced the kinds of gains the district wants. They’re supporting us but they’re not going to wait forever for us to produce results.

The leadership team complained that they had not found ways to address the low expectations of some teachers who they felt used the poverty of the kids and the community as an excuse for the school’s poor performance. They continued to emphasize the school’s strengths: strong athletic teams, many committed, hard working staff, and a culture that they characterized as nurturing and supportive of students. According to the head counselor: “Our kids know we care about them. When the bell rings at the end of the day many of them want to stay up here because they’re safe. They know that at least at Washington someone is looking out for them.”

While they valued the school’s strengths they made it clear that they understood they were not enough to produce the gains in

test scores that the district and the state sought. The Assistant Principal put it this way:

The district wants clear evidence of improvement and they want to see it soon. We feel as though we are making progress, but we haven’t received guidance on how to do this work. We are committed to these kids but the barriers we face are formidable. We’re working hard but I don’t see a clear path forward.

Sobered by our conversation and the challenges facing the school, I was invited to tour the school and visit some classrooms they regarded as exemplary. Later, I was invited to observe a literacy circle that was in progress. The circle consisted of twenty-two students gathered around a rectangular table. A poet-mentor (not a regular member of the staff), who had been hired through a grant to support efforts to improve student performance in literacy, led the circle. I sat along the periphery of the classroom as the mentor prepared the students to engage in a writing workshop.

To get the workshop started, she offered the following prompt: “I am not who you think I am.” She then went on to model what she was looking for from the students by explaining that though the students might see her as a professional woman who “has it all together”, she is in fact a single mother who once dropped out of high school, who takes care of several family members, who has a brother in prison, and who struggles everyday just to make ends meet. She offered: “There’s a lot more to me than what you think you see. I struggle everyday just to get by. I’m sure that’s true for some of you too.”

The students embraced the prompt and immediately went to work writing. I walked around the room watching them as they

wrote and was impressed to see that several had written more than a page within a few minutes. After about twenty minutes of writing she asked who among the students was ready to share. Several hands shot up immediately. She looked around the room and called on a girl with long braids and glasses who had written over two pages. The girl stood up at her seat and proceeded to read an essay that started like this: "I am not cancer." She explained that she had recently been diagnosed with cancer and had been consumed with worry about what it meant for her life. She wrote that she had undergone several tests already and made numerous visits to doctors. Then, speaking in a clear, firm voice, she explained: "I will not allow this disease to define me. I am more than cancer. I am a young woman with hopes and dreams. I want to go to college, and eventually I want to have a family. I will not allow this disease to control my life."

When she sat down after reading the essay the room erupted with sustained applause, and a few students walked over to hug the girl. The poet-mentor then asked for another volunteer and more hands shot up. This time she called on a tall young man wearing athletic gear. He laughed as he spoke which led me to assume that his laughter meant he was not taking the activity seriously. However, after hearing just a few sentences from his essay I realized this was not the case.

He began "I am not a homeless kid that no one loves, even if my mother kicked me out of her house and attacked me." He proceeded to tell a wrenching story about how he and his brother were expelled from their home by their mother and her boyfriend. He described how his clothes were ripped from his body and how he and his younger brother had to walk through the streets in the dark, barely clad, to their

grandmother's home. He read his story carefully, slowly enunciating each word as if he were reading a report written by an observer to the incident. After he finished his two page story he smiled broadly and sat down. Once again, there was applause and several students walked over to the young man to offer hugs, and words of sympathy. I realized then that his smile had nothing to do with his story or his feelings about the incident.

The literacy circle continued like this for

Repeatedly, several students raised their hands to share their work. In each case, the stories conveyed personal experiences with hardship, and in some cases, hopes and aspirations for a better life.

another thirty minutes. Repeatedly, several students raised their hands to share their work. In each case, the stories conveyed personal experiences with hardship, and in some cases, hopes and aspirations for a better life. When the bell rang indicating the end of class, several students walked out exchanging hugs with the poet-mentor and their classmates. As they filed out of the room the poet-mentor thanked the students for sharing their stories and told them that when they met in the following week they should bring their essays with them. She admonished them: "This was a great start but we don't do our best work on the first draft. Bring your essays back with you when we meet next week so that we can work on the vocabulary and the writing. I want you to be able to share your stories with others and I want your work to be excellent."

Struck by the intimacy I witnessed among the students, I asked one of the students if she knew the other students who participated in the class. She explained "Kind of, but it's not like we're friends or

anything. I mean we see each other at school but I barely know some of the people in here."

I've chosen to share what I observed from my visit to Washington High School because it aptly reveals the potential for using literacy and deeper learning as an intervention for change in schools. The case also offers concrete lessons for addressing the limits and possibilities of education in distressed communities. During my visit to the school I learned that the students used

another name for their community Del Pacific Hills – DPH. They called it the Deeper Part of Hell. One student explained that the moniker came into being after several students had been killed in drive-by shootings in 2011. Several of the students I spoke to told me that they hoped they would one day escape DPH because the community

offered nothing but tragedy and death for them. One girl, a senior with short hair and a big smile, elaborated: "This is not a place where you want to live and raise a family. There's too much killing and people being shot here. All of us are hoping that one day we can get out, but the truth is many of us will probably be stuck here for the rest of our lives."

The experiences of students and staff at Washington High School illuminate the opportunities and challenges for using deeper learning as a lever for change. During my short visit it was clear that while the administrators at the school were deeply committed to their students and were serious about their desire to do whatever it takes to improve the school, they were at a loss for what to do. Simply working harder to raise student test scores, the primary evidence that the district and state demanded, had not resulted in any tangible progress. According to the administrators, progress had been made in improving the culture of the school, but improvements in student learning outcomes (as measured by

test scores) had been negligible. Without doubt, the school's lack of progress on standardized tests could be attributed to many factors: low teacher expectations and morale, a lack of resources to address student needs (e.g. social workers capable of providing case management for the neediest students, teachers in core subjects capable of delivering instruction to English learners, etc.), and the weak academic skills of many students. The literature on the "science of improvement" identifies all of these factors as essential to efforts to change student outcomes (Bryke, et.al. 2015).

It is important to note that the poet-mentor had already found a strategy to get students deeply engaged in learning by asking students to write about their lives. In a short period of time she created a supportive classroom environment and got her students writing on intensely personal subjects. Research on trauma shows that strategies that build a sense of community, foster positive relationships and provide social and emotional support to students in need, are also highly effective at addressing the effects of toxic stress (Raver et.al. 2008). Similarly, research on literacy development

shows that the strategies utilized by the poet-mentor – revise and re-submit – can be highly effective in improving the literacy skills of students (Christenson; Hull; Lee). Once they completed their first draft, she was in a position to get them to improve the quality of what they produced. The poet-mentor explained:

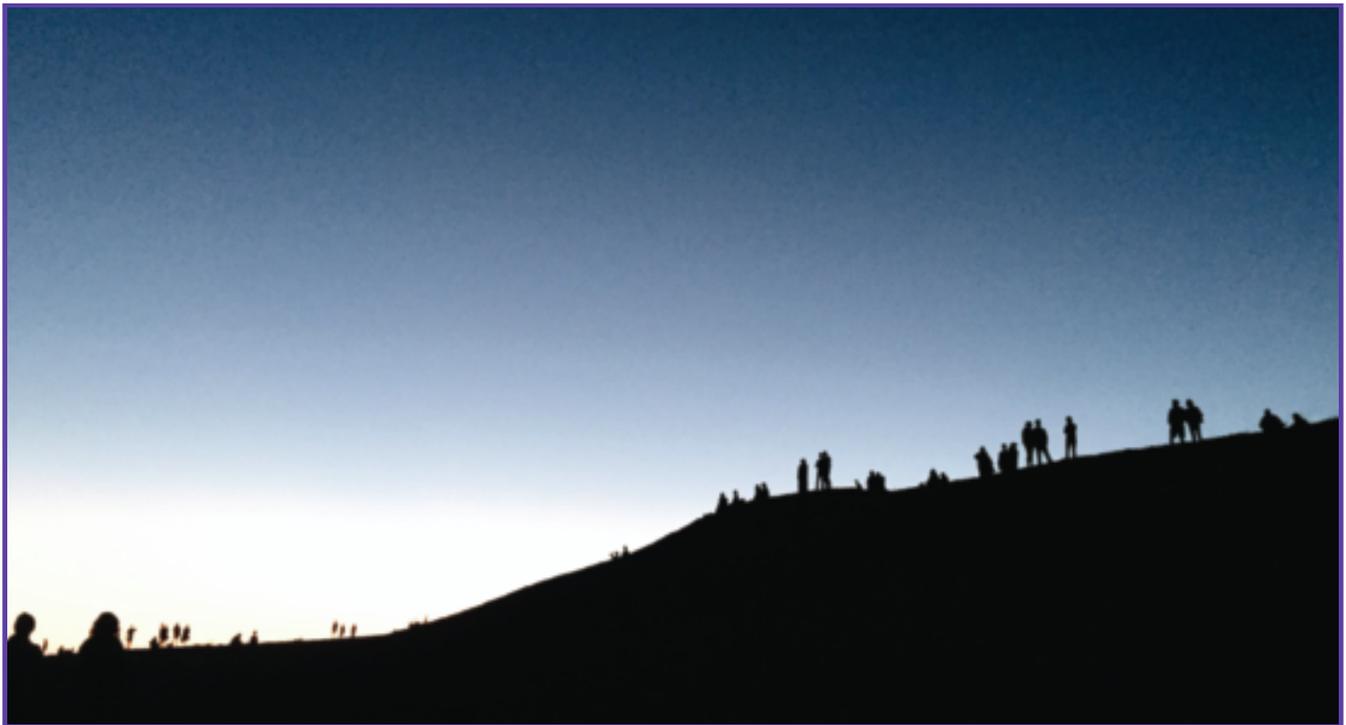
These kids have a lot to say, if we just ask them to share. Many of them are carrying heavy burdens that prevent them from focusing on school. Once they see that they can write about their lives they start to see writing as an extension of oral communication and they begin to embrace it. As they do they start writing a lot more. It's not like what they write is perfect. But who writes perfectly on the first draft? I want them to see writing as a process of communicating what you think as clearly as possible.

Imagine what might be possible if the administrators were able to see and appreciate the powerful learning

opportunities that were created in that classroom? What would happen if similar learning opportunities were available in classrooms throughout the school? Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS), a writing program established at UC Davis, utilizes this kind of approach to writing in all subject areas. Existing research shows that it is highly effective at getting students to utilize their higher order thinking skills (Watson). Sadly, in too many schools, students regarded as slow or in need of remediation, are denied access to instruction that calls upon them to utilize such skills (Noguera, et. al. 2016).

By inviting students to write about their lives the poet-mentor created a context in which deeper learning through writing and sharing was possible. As I glanced at the papers of the students in the classroom I noticed several misspelled words, run-on sentences, and poor grammar. However, what impressed me about their writing was the fluency and ease with which students put their ideas on paper.

When I spoke with the administrators about the school's challenges they stressed the need to raise student achievement.



However, they never mentioned the need to increase student engagement in learning. How was it possible that they failed to see the connection between engagement and achievement? The administrators at Washington HS told me that most students were well-behaved but complained that many of them were struggling to pass their classes. Because of state and district policy they were focused on achievement outcomes, grades and test scores, not the process or strategy that would lead to better outcomes.

Research has shown that developing higher-order thinking and skills such as analytical writing, research and problem solving, may be the key to increasing college readiness and providing students with access to high wage jobs (Noguera *et al.* 2016; Belfanz). In contrast, some of the well-known reformers who have led the efforts to bring change to urban school districts (for example, John Deasy in Los Angeles, Joel Klein in New York, and Michelle Rhee in Washington DC) have attributed the lack of progress to resistance from educators and the persistence of the *status quo* (Klein 2014). However, while these critics have wholeheartedly, and often uncritically, embraced technology, value-added measures of teacher effectiveness, school closures, charter schools and data-based decision-making as primary levers of innovation and change, they have typically paid scant attention to efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom.

For schools like Washington HS to make greater progress they will have to do more to make opportunities for deeper learning more widely available. This means teachers will need more time for collaboration with their colleagues so that they can engage in the types of activities that led to sustained.

It is not yet clear what direction President Donald Trump and his administration will take with respect to education (Saul 2016). Even if he chooses to leave ESSA in place many educators across the US have grown

accustomed to complying with the federal mandates that have accompanied standards-based accountability over the last sixteen years and they may not know what to do with the greater flexibility. There are of course important exceptions. California has devised a new set of data benchmarks aimed at pushing school districts to adopt a more holistic, equity-based approach to monitor performance<sup>1</sup>. The question we must ask is whether or not such opportunities to learn will be made available to students in schools like Washington. For the sake of California's future, let's hope so.

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<sup>1</sup>(<http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr16/yr16rel59.asp>)

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