

Letter from the Trenches

Can Schools Teach Freedom?

Kim A. Broadie

2021

The late David Graeber perhaps said it best. “Bureaucracy has become the water in which we swim.”

For over 20 years, I was embedded within the New York City Board of Education as a licensed agent authorized to deploy weapons of mass instruction. These weapons were placed in our arsenal to control, and perhaps teach, but above all avoid scenes like the following, which happened just days after I started:

We heard that the automotive kids stole Braithwaite’s car battery. I suppressed a nervous chuckle. It could have been me. It must have happened in broad daylight in the parking lot in front of Wingate High School.

Poor Braithwaite. They drove him out of the school, out of teaching. Soon after that day, I sat down with him in the teacher’s lunchroom. He was a man besieged. The administration was taking a hard look at his lack of classroom control.

His students, like jackals, delighted in picking his bones clean. As he lifted his fork, which dangled an inch-long piece of mystery meat, he said he needed to stick it out because his wife was sick. He was enduring this humiliation for her sake. Soon, he would disappear from the school.

Approaching middle-age, this was my second career. I stepped into the world of public education when I entered George Wingate High School in 1994. Location: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, epicenter of race riots between Jews and Blacks. Uncontrollable rage on the streets, rage in the classroom. I, the middle-aged raw rookie, entered that classroom starry-eyed from reading such works as radical educator Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which he writes:

“Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it Or it becomes the ‘practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.” Good luck with the second choice. How can you teach freedom if you can’t get past the door? Just getting inside the institution required navigating a bureaucratic maze. A Soviet-style people’s republic, one colleague called it.

It was, and is, as Graeber wrote, “a Utopia of Rules.”

Hell, the only reason I did get in was because I borrowed \$30,000 and lived on baloney sandwiches for a year to get a master’s degree; to get a piece of paper from the NYC Board of Education; to get to stand in front of a high school classroom; to get to teach state mandated history...provisionally.

And, don’t forget the background check, the fingerprinting, the drug tests, the transcripts, etc., etc. All of which were to be paid for by the applicant.

Surviving probation meant controlling students by psychological persuasion and not so subtle coercion. I learned the hard way when my students strolled into my classroom that first week and began rearranging the furniture to their liking.

I was the second new teacher in two weeks. A fact unimportant enough to prevent resuming their private conversations. I didn't realize I was being snubbed. I, the liberator, the cool teacher, would engage them in an interesting dialogue. They were annoyed by my interruption. One student looked up at the blank chalkboard.

"Hey, mister, where's the aim?"

"We don't need an aim."

That did it. I had just demonstrated my ignorance of accepted norms.

An aim had to be written on the board at the beginning of the class. I was expected to hand them a warmup assignment as they walked in the door. Seating assignments had to be made. Everybody knew that, except me.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed didn't mention developmental lesson plans. I was instantly marked as raw meat to be chewed up and spit out, just like Braithwaite. These students now controlled the class. They had the power.

Teachers they didn't like often quit after the first few days. That week there was a French teacher who was assigned cafeteria duty and was hit in the head with a flying plastic tray during a food fight. He later died in the hospital from a brain hemorrhage.

Another teacher, soon after, was carried off in a stretcher, having suffered a fatal heart attack in the middle of her 40-minute lesson. Rumor was the students cheered when she dropped to the floor. Yet another couldn't prevent her class from pushing aside the desks so they could chalk ritualistic pentagrams on the floor.

Part of me cheered their rebellions, the other part feared losing my job.

When my supervisor came in to observe my teaching, he wrote, charitably, that my classroom presented a most confusing situation. I needed to learn how to manage the class in order to guide them through a lesson.

The aim, by the way, had to be in the form of a question that encapsulated the topic of the day, or rather, the 40 minutes I had to instruct them. At the end of 40 minutes, students would be able to answer the question based on what they had learned during those 40 minutes. When the bell rang, they moved on to the next 40-minute lesson. Another topic, another aim, totally unconnected to the last 40 minutes. Confusing. Random. Education, then and now.

Fast forward to Fall 2020. After a few years of retirement, I wanted to get back into the classroom to see what Covid wrought. I landed an assignment at the Harbor School, located on Governor's Island, in the middle of New York's harbor, across from the Statue of Liberty.

Gone were the large high schools. Every high school now has a theme: performing arts, science, law, etc. This high school focused on water: marine biology, seafaring. Every high school had to compete for students, every high school was graded. The theory of this was to offer a more intimate high school experience in line with the students own interests.

In practice, it accentuated the role of public schools as "sorting mechanisms," as contemporary education theorist John Taylor Gatto said in "The Psychopathic School," a speech given in 1990. "We are on the way to creating a caste system, complete with untouchables who wander through subway trains and who sleep upon the streets." The students are filtered through the schools and placed into their socially required slots to maintain the status quo.

The Harbor School was, and is, a gem, despite all these onerous constraints. Covid and the blended learning center on computer-based Zoom lessons, which are also required to be aligned with Core curriculum standards. Nevertheless, they were able to offer a dazzling array of programs that involved using the harbor for hands-on research in marine biology, scuba diving, vessel operations. Against all odds, the faculty and staff radiate enthusiasm, and genuine caring. The principal insists on an egalitarian culture, encouragement and not punishment.

Still, rules are rules. The system has no conscience. The unwritten axiom of obedience is the DNA of modern education. As Gatto says, " [when the bell rings],...the young man (or woman) in the middle of writing a poem must close his notebook and move to a different cell."

Such is the water in which we swim. We can hardly imagine otherwise.

Kim Broadie has turned the page on thirty years in public and private education. He lives in New York City and wonders if freedom will survive in an artelect world.

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Fifth Estate #409, Summer, 2021

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