Judith Baker and Joseph Check

Stories Inside Stories:
Creating Successful Writers in an Urban High School

This is a success story about writing in an urban high school; like most success stories, it is a mosaic of smaller tales. The school is Madison Park Humphrey Center, a large, diverse, primarily vocational high school in Boston. The success centers around the students, the teacher, and the journalism workshop that produce the school's award-winning newspaper, The Cardinal Spirit.

The students, judged by traditional measures—grades, standardized test scores, attendance—have little interest or aptitude for reading and writing. Yet, working together under the guidance of an expert teacher, they consistently produce excellent writing that is eagerly read by a real audience of their fellow students.

Last year the audience for their writing leapt far beyond the boundaries of their school. The success of a Cardinal Spirit special issue on “Crack in Our Communities” was recognized in March, 1990, when, in competition with hundreds of urban and suburban public and private schools, the newspaper received several prestigious awards, including Excellence in News Writing and a Special Achievement Award in Scholastic Editing and Publishing from the New England Scholastic Press Association.

This special issue, published in September, 1989, was distributed in every Boston secondary school and sent out to newspapers across the country on the electronic high school news service, Online.

Such success provokes questions. What went on in Madison Park's journalism class that encouraged students to put forth better efforts than most had ever made? How could students who literally didn't know the definition of “journalism” enter and win city, state, and regional journalism contests? Why did students chronically absent from school or on suspension for fighting sneak back to attend editing sessions? Why did students who never did homework send their cousins and boyfriends in with pages of writing on deadline days when they themselves were sick? Some of the answers are in the stories that follow.

The Students' Stories
The students who enroll in the journalism class are a heterogeneous group who, in the opinion of the authors, are quite representative of many of today's urban public school seniors. The journalism students have not dropped out of school, but tend to have had poor attendance and poor grades (especially at the ninth and tenth grade levels), test very poorly on national scales, have grade averages in the C range or lower, come from poor backgrounds, work more than twenty hours a week, and have generally had more than their share of hardships. The classes have within them a wide range of academic performance. The sixty students who have taken journalism over the past two years have included a valedictorian and two members of the National Honor Society, as well as nine Special Needs students and seven students who dropped out of school during their senior year. Most students in the class scored between the thirtieth and fortieth percentile on national reading tests; few had combined SAT scores over 550.

Thirteen came from families who speak Spanish at home; two were Cape Verdean and one was Vietnamese. Five were white and the remainder were Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean. At least seven of the students were parents and several lived on their own without the support of parents or guardians. At least thirteen of the sixty were, in the view of their teacher, intensely alienated from school, as evidenced by frequent suspensions and poor performance both behaviorally and in terms of grades. On the other hand, thirty of the sixty were clearly leaders in the school, as evidenced principally by their participation in sports and leadership organizations, and in some cases by academic performance. Many became leaders almost entirely because of their participation in journalism.

The stories of individual students are instructive. Here is a brief look at two students.

Anthony Robinson began his senior year planning to move to Florida and become a travel agent after graduation. He finished the year with a strong sense of himself as an author, a firm desire to become a journal-
ist, a $3,500 scholarship, and an offer from Suffolk University to enter their journalism program after a year in prep school. In large part, the change in his confidence and aspirations is due to his work as a news and features writer on The Cardinal Spirit.

Reflecting on the journalism class, what does Anthony recall? Because of the class, he says, “I started reading a lot.” He began comparing his articles to other people’s articles and stories, comparing Madison Park’s paper to other schools’ papers. Then he moved to books such as Richard Wright’s Black Boy and several accounts of the Holocaust.

How is the journalism class different from English classes he has had? According to Anthony, “They don’t shove a book in front of you and tell you to read. It’s a group, not just an individual. You have one teacher all year long—Mrs. Baker—not a succession of substitute teachers. You get to work in groups choosing what stories to write about, and you get to argue for or against changes in the drafts of a story. Everybody does some of everything—writing, editing, proofreading. More than one person is covering each story, so you can take the strong parts of each person’s story, and everybody copyreads, but the editors decide on final changes.”

When asked if journalism class makes you a better writer, Anthony thinks seriously and then, slowly, gives this answer: “It feels like a big job on your shoulders—a responsibility—it makes you feel good, and people come up to you in school when the paper comes out and say they liked what you wrote, or they get mad at you, or they ask you questions. You can write about things that teenagers are doing positive, and in journalism you can do something to make things better.”

Anthony sees writing as “seventy percent creativity” and calls his composing process “daydreaming.” He talks about a recent column idea that came to him. “It was like I dreamt we were all one big family, but I knew that in the state we’re in now it’s like an amusement park—guns, dope, like a bad roller coaster ride.” He says the process of turning this “daydreaming” into a column is “picking up the pieces and putting them together.”

Irma Gomes is the paper’s co-editor. She says, “It feels like something big on your shoulders. It’s like an English class, but not.” When asked how journalism differs, she says, “In my English class we have lots of substitutes. And in journalism people can write whatever they want to write.”

Irma views writing as “sixty percent hard work.” She loves news writing, loves to get outside the school and into the community for stories, to visit people and places and “get the facts.” She feels she’s learned how to handle responsibility from reading other people’s work. When she sees her own work in print, she says, “I feel good. I can’t believe I did it, because it’s what I wanted to do.”

What does it mean, exactly, for these students to “write about what they want to write about,” to decide collectively what’s important for the school newspaper to
cover and to take the responsibility for it? The best example is probably students' collective decision last year that cocaine was the number one problem their school and community were facing. They covered the issue honestly and comprehensively. Some aspects of their approach to the issue: William Bradley and Levi Ware interviewed a neighborhood drug dealer who looked at selling drugs to former friends this way: "... they made their own decision so I stay strong from their weakness." Carmen Vasquez wrote the story of Annie, who was twenty-two, three months pregnant, had two beautiful children, and was addicted to cocaine. Carmen wrote the story both in Spanish ("Embarazada y Adicta") and in English ("Pregnant and Spaced Out"). A teacher, Richard Battle, wrote a poem called "Your People Can't Read But They Have Freebase," and Veronica Turner and Eric Gibb, under the headline "View From the Other Side of the Badge," interviewed an undercover narcotics detective.

The Teacher's Story
Judith Baker has been teaching in the Boston Public Schools for eighteen years, most of them as a Social Studies teacher. For several of those years she also coached a state championship girls' basketball team at Madison Park High School. Initially, teaching writing was for her a matter of necessity rather than choice. Three years ago she participated in the Boston Writing Project Summer Institute. She credits this Institute, along with an earlier intensive curriculum project for her Master's degree, for transforming her teaching.

The journalism class was first conceived as a way to permit "academic" and "vocational" teachers to team up in a school which had recently become a vocational school. The idea was to pair an English teacher with a teacher in the Printing and Graphics cluster in the hope that a successful collaboration would encourage other teachers to devise similar projects. Once the idea of interdisciplinary teaming took hold, we decided to make the course a journalism course, as journalism seemed a good intersection of these two disciplines.

Journalism became a hands-on approach to teaching English, not an add-on elective. The subject matter—design and construction of a newspaper, the importance of freedom of the press and ethics in reporting, practice in journalistic writing style, and reflection on the process of writing—makes use of teaching techniques that can easily transfer to other subject matters such as science and math. These techniques include student choice of topics to research, research methods, focus on revision, careful attention to main idea and supporting detail, group work, peer editing, public defense of one's ideas, and finally, publishing.

However, more is involved than just technique. I believe the class works well because it gives students a means of control. In the journalism workshop, writing and publishing aren't ends in themselves; they establish control over learning. Up until now books have been stumbling blocks for many students in the class, but if they can write the book, they can read the book; they can get other people to read the book. Journalism is a survival course that covers politics, speech, communication, and traditional English. To me, Anthony and the other students' control of writing represents control of literacy—reading, writing, and thinking. There's also the performance aspect—you're going to be doing this in public, so an article must be good enough for someone you don't even know to read it.

Teaching this course is a lot like coaching. We work as a team. Although I am non-directive in the sense that the right answer is not coming from me, I'm very directive about certain requirements of the course. We have a final exam; students are asked to name and identify various parts of a newspaper and to define newspaper terms. I work hard with students on headlines and leads. Headlines, like topic sentences, have to boil main ideas into four or five words. On articles, we rewrite and rewrite and rewrite. Some pieces have six or eight students working on them and go through twelve or fifteen drafts.
All the skill work is within a journalistic context. Students will work on skills because they view writing, as do most "real" writers, as wasted if no one reads it. They don't see writing as just for one teacher, or as five-sentence paragraphs without a purpose. For them, writing is questioning, editing, revising, and sharing. That's totally different from most of what they've had in school.

Perhaps this course should really be called "Ego formation in a literate environment" because, in a sense, the whole course is about developing a better self-concept. For me that's analogous to what I learned in the Writing Project. Teachers who have been through the Writing Project have learned to revise their thinking and writing; they've gained control over their own literacy.

The Project Director's Story
As Director of the Boston Writing Project, Joseph Check had the least to do with the success of this project. He lent some moral support and some economic support, but little else. However, he may be in the best position to draw some generalizations and connections to the larger world of writing theory.

Four things strike me about the Madison Park program. The first is the simple and seemingly obvious fact that these urban high school students have become, in a relatively short space of time, effective, responsible, hard-working writers. In terms of the larger landscape of education in the United States today, this fact is neither simple nor obvious. Measurements such as standardized reading tests, the NAEP writing samples, SAT scores, and performance in traditional academic work all seem to provide "hard evidence" that students such as those in the Madison Park journalism course cannot become competent readers and writers. Two questions loom for teachers, for Writing Projects, for schools, and for parents: What are traditional assessments missing, and what will it take to repeat such success on a large scale?

My second observation is that, in my experience and that of other urban Writing Project directors, such success as is documented here is occurring regularly in high school classrooms in many cities. However, it is most often isolated, short-lived (for example, due to systemwide funding cutbacks, publication of The Cardinal Spirit has been discontinued for the 1990-91 school year), and unique to a single teacher in a department or school. Overall, the literacy landscape in urban high schools is a bleak one. We must begin to undertake the dual task of documenting and analyzing the many successes that are occurring, and of working together across sites to share ideas for spreading these successful practices.

My third observation is that it takes an immensely skilled and resourceful teacher to create such a writing classroom. Judith Baker is an experienced, dedicated, and intelligent teacher—and yet experience, dedication, and intelligence are not enough to guarantee success. She identifies two further things as necessary: the structure and opportunity to come to a self-awareness of her own teaching that was provided by her Master's degree program and the training and support provided by the Boston Writing Project. As an outsider, I see one more element; a type of pragmatically expressed idealism, political consciousness, and commitment that, in my experience, is more the rule than the exception among excellent urban high school teachers.

Finally, when I reflect on comments made by Judith and her students, I hear myself responding in two voices. One points out that nearly everything mentioned can be accounted for by one or another of the basic theoretical foundations of the teaching of writing—students need to find their own subjects, they need to own their work, they should edit and revise in groups, writers need a real audience, skills are best taught in context, seeing yourself in print gives an impetus that makes you want to continue to improve as a writer. There's nothing new here—except the other voice says that it is all new, because it's happening in the urban high school, to a wide variety of students, in ways different from those that "the literature" on writing research is built on. The Madison Park project leads to scores of questions about reading, writing, and teaching in urban students' lives and communities, important questions that need answers.

The loop from research to theory to practice to more research has badly neglected urban schools. Suburban and rural schools have, by and large, been the places where researchers and theoreticians have developed their work—the sites where knowledge has been generated. Urban schools have been places where the resultant theory has been applied. Judith's work makes me more convinced than ever that we need to begin systematically to look at urban classrooms as places where badly needed knowledge about teaching and learning can be generated as a starting point for theory, not just a terminus.

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