

## "A Quiet Victory"

by  
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I used to think the best way to demonstrate to my Principal and the world at large that I was a good teacher was to keep my class quiet. I felt that's what the administration wanted, and by extension, what the world wanted. That is, keep the kids quiet and in their seats in school until they could grow up and learn to keep quiet and in their seats at their jobs. But like so many early ideas and fears I had as a teacher, over time I realized I was wrong. Ultimately, I came to understand that the only way to make learning meaningful would be to allow for both stillness and constructive noise.

It's my firmest belief that students are generally taught to be quiet in elementary school, not because the early childhood teachers aren't comfortable with noise, but because a classroom full of 30-35 talkative kids is very loud, and communication on a group level is very difficult. Quiet becomes the goal because disseminating information above a loud din is practically impossible. Yet, without constructive noise, students will become bored and disengaged, the death of any learning environment.

The trick, I learned after many years, is to create situations where a classroom begins in quiet and moves to engagement through constructive noise. This is achieved by establishing ground rules for group discussions, and allowing students to feel safe expressing their inner thoughts.

This can be risky and difficult to achieve and may feel dangerous to both teacher and student alike. Trust becomes fundamental. Students won't talk if they feel their opinions won't be respected. Teachers will often have to guide discussions through raw student responses. "Loud" students can also be problematic as they often dominate discussions unless the teacher creates balance by carefully calling on "quiet" students to add their points of view.

Again, the trick is to have everyone engaged, while not having an administrator view one's class as "out of control."

And so it was that I came to have a discussion with a classroom of ethnically diverse students about the use of the "N-

word" in the play *Fences* by August Wilson. The issue was this: The class was "performing" *Fences* aloud in class, as reader's theater. Wilson's character, Troy Maxson, an African-American man denied the opportunity to play major league baseball, uses the "N-word" throughout the play. During my color blind casting of the play, a Caucasian girl was assigned the role of Troy to read aloud. The issue was simple yet profound: should this Caucasian student be allowed to read Troy's lines that included the "N-word;" or should she say a benign word ("ninja") in its place; or should she skip over it entirely? Alternatively, would it be all right if an African-American student, assigned to read Troy on a different day, be allowed to use the "N-word." From an artistic point of view, Wilson wrote the words, and if his words were altered or edited, wouldn't that be a form of censorship that damaged the integrity of the play? I had my ideas of what to do, but realized the best solution would be to discuss the "problem" with the class.

Midway through a very heated discussion, my Principal unexpectedly walked into the classroom and sat down for my annual observation. I hurriedly explained the issue to her, and waited to see if the students would back off their very hotly contested positions. I had a temporary moment of fear and for an instant wished that my principal had chosen another time to drop in; perhaps a time when everyone was sitting quietly in his/her seat, listening to a student read a well-edited essay. But that's not what happened. The students kept firing away. The debate was heated but powerful. It seemed that everyone had an opinion.

I listened intently and tried to guide the discussion without crushing it. I tried to keep students from hurting each other's feelings. All the while, I watched, as my principal said nothing. An African-American woman, she had to have a position, not only on the discussion, but whether or not the discussion was appropriate for a high school English class. The students went back and forth with each other to the bell. After the students left the room, I turned to the principal, who sat filling out my evaluation form. Finally, as she got up to leave, I asked her what she thought. "I have my own views on the issue, but I thought it was a great discussion."

She handed me a positive evaluation, and quietly left the

room.