

Trials of a Hip Hop Educator The Caged Lion and the Key

Written by Bro. Tony Muhammad ID4167

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Every class I open up with an activity related to the lesson of the day. The purpose of this is to provoke the students' interests and getting them focused on understanding the meaning behind what they are supposed to be learning. For about a two week period already we had been studying about how slavery laws had been changing in the United States from the adoption of the U.S. Constitution (in 1787) to its official end in 1865, what prompted these changes and what kind of effect did it have on the way people lived their lives, especially those that were held in bondage themselves. On the day my 1st period had set to review for their next exam, I started the class by portraying a scenario on the board for my students to respond to. It was inspired by a special lesson taught by my community. The prompt read:

A lion is trapped in a cage for 400 years.

He continues to walk back and forth to either end of the cage. He stumbles on and frequently kicks a key that is in his path. If used properly, the key can open the door of the cage and give the lion his freedom.

Who do you believe the lion represents and why do you believe the lion does not attempt to pick up the key and use it for what it was intended for?

As expected, most of my students at first were thrown off by the question. Many of them gave me crazy looks as if saying, "Augh! There he goes again with these crazy questions!" Then finally one of them asked me, "Does this have something to do with slavery?" I responded, "Maybe. What made you conclude this?" Another student responded, "The lion is in a cage and his freedom is being taken away ... So the lion represents us!"

Then I asked them, "Well, if the lion represents you, what is the key supposed to represent?"

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One of my students that usually does not participate yelled out, "It's a tool that helps you get free!" I asked in reply, "Physically or mentally?" The whole class yelled out, "MENTALLY!" "So what tools can you use to gain your freedom and help you think for yourselves?" One student yelled out "THE LIBRARY!" I asked, "And do you use the library the way it's supposed to be used?" A very studious student replied, "I check out and read books all the time!" Another one said, "I'm not going to lie! I go to the library so that I can go on the Internet!"

I asked that student, "What type of websites do you go to besides Myspace and music video pages?" At that point my class was riddled by dead silence. "I asked them, where can you stay updated with the latest, latest news?" They all replied, "The Internet!" "So how many of you use this wonderful tool for that purpose?" Again, my students became silent. From there I asked them, "The lion is walking in the cage for 400 years and is yet to attempt to escape ... Why is that?" One student said, "Because it's been in there so long, he probably doesn't even realize that his freedom has been taken away." Another student yelled out, "He's used to it living the way that he is!" This is when I turned it all on them and asked them, "So are all of you comfortable with your own lives right now? Are there certain changes that you need to make and you just keep putting it off?" The mode of our discussion became more personalized after this point, but it was especially joyful to myself to experience my students taking a parable and applying its directive meaning to their lives.

I tried this same activity with the rest of my classes. However, what I found was that throughout the course of the day, it took my students longer to interpret meaning from the parable. While it took 5 minutes for my 1st period class to understand the parable, it took my 7th period almost half an hour to write some type of responses on their papers.

Now, I know what some of you reading this are saying right now, "The parable is way too complicated for them too figure out!" I would say, "No! It's too complicated for them if you believe it is!" The success of your students is dependant on your level of enthusiasm and interest in seeing them succeed. While they are not all at the same level in reading comprehension and, hence, abstract thought, there are many activities that teachers can introduce to their students to build these skills to the levels that they should be and then some. Hip Hop educators are in the best position to scaffold student development in innovative manners because of our strong holistic exposure to culture and the arts.

However, across the board one major impediment to fostering higher reading comprehension levels and abstract thought in our students today is the overemphasis of standardized testing in the public schools. Students find themselves preparing for such exams day in and day out with constant mind numbing articles followed by redundant questions that have very little to do with

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their social realities. By the end of the day, the students have been built into a routine that does not allow them to be innovative and think for themselves. Their thinking is only oriented towards "getting a right answer" according to a passage, even if the validity of the story is questionable or just simply wrong (i.e. Stating that Christopher Columbus "discovered" America even though there were people already living there). What's worse is that this national trend has been accompanied by a decrease in funding for the arts on all levels. Dance and Chorus classes are now being replaced with remedial Math and Reading classes for students who have not passed state exams. This process stunts creativity and mis-channels energy in the form of what most teachers would consider to be disruptive (if not straight up violent) behavior. So, should I wonder too deeply why my last period students usually have the least desire in having a class discussion?

Let me make it clear, I am all in favor of standards. However, the truth of the matter is standards by and large are not being taught in the public schools, especially through this "teaching to the test" approach that most have adopted. If anything, the standards that are being taught to our children are way too low in relation to their potential. Last year in a workshop, the late Dr. Asa Hilliard showed a video to a group of Miami-Dade Public School teachers (among them myself included) on how basic Calculus can be taught to children as early as age 5. However, one key element in the process was the way in which the children were smoothly scaffolded from the "known" (prior knowledge) to the "unknown."

National, State and local politicians, especially white ones, all know why many of our youths of color lag behind educationally. Efforts are not focused on getting to the roots of their "learning comprehension" problems. So, it is ignored that such students confuse basic words such as "in," "and" and "an." It is also ignored that they write exactly how they speak, using non-words such as "finna" and "wanna" and "gonna." As long as they can pass the exam, it's all good right? The reality is most never get to achieve their full potential in life by letting them slip through the cracks or literally failing them with no effort for correction. The powers that be in this country all know that the majority of new jobs being produced in this country currently are service-oriented, part-time and minimum wage-based (i.e. McDonald's, Taco Bell, KFC, Starbucks). Since it is being argued that "too many" people are now going to college and becoming overqualified for these jobs, certain restrictions to access or painful discouragements would have to be implemented.

Perhaps things are set up this way on purpose because there are too many people profiting from the way things are currently. I do not consider it a coincidence that in Florida the Bush family has invested in two major industries (since the years Jeb Bush was Governor); education (with the development of a company that produces remedial software for state exams) and prisons. After all, it was under Governor Jeb Bush that it was decided to not allow 3rd graders to be promoted to the 4th grade if they did not pass the state exam. What's so significant about the

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3rd grade? Many educational psychologists argue that the 3rd grade is crucial to a child's development. If the student is held back at this age it may have severe lasting effects on the child's self-esteem and consequently their achievement level. In fact, since it is projected that the child will not do well in life, a new cell block is prepared in advance for his/her benefit. With emphasis, this mainly affects children of color.

Next month I will focus on what we can do as Hip Hop educators (and really educators in general) to counteract some of these conditions and bring LIFE, LOVE and LEARNING into the classroom and the hearts and minds of our students.

More on Bro. Tony Muhammad

Hiphopeducator19@gmail.com

www.myspace.com/tonymuhammad