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Finding Joy through Vulnerability in the English Classroom

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*There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.*
– Leonard Cohen

In the past few years, moments of joy in the English language arts classrooms have felt tragically few and far between. Too often, in fact, these moments of joy feel like interruptions to the official curriculum and “real” work of the classroom: learning to skillfully read, write and speak the approved curriculum. The unexpected moments when we have a laugh with our students, when we pause to connect with their pain, when we put the curriculum aside to help our students feel seen—these are the cracks in our teaching that let the light in. As we—two English teachers and an English educator—reflected on moments of joy in our classrooms, we realized that our most joyful moments tend to occur outside of the “expected.” They surfaced in moments of vulnerability and authentic human connection, when we showed students our humanness and let them show us theirs.

When Emily invited Darlene and Kayla, her former English education students, to reflect on their experiences with joy in their secondary English classrooms, we found commonality in their experiences with joy and vulnerability. While we expected to identify joy in moments of high engagement or students’ success, we instead found joy in

moments where we let down our guard and provided space for vulnerability. We resonated with the words of Ghody Muhammad, who writes, “Joy is fun and celebratory, yet it...is also the embodiment of, learning of, and practice of self and humanity, and care for and help for humanity and the earth” (70). In what follows, we look inside Darlene’s and Emily’s classrooms to see how joy emerged from vulnerability, echoing Brené Brown’s notion that vulnerability and joy are inextricably linked. We conclude with thoughts about how we might prepare English teachers to allow vulnerability in their teaching so that these rarer moments of joy, these “cracks” in our lessons, become the norm rather than the exception.

Teaching to Heal: Navigating Pain to Reclaim Joy

I was a few weeks shy of completing my student teaching experience. I had been assigned to a school in an affluent, predominately white district. However, I was fortunate in that my classes were some of the most racially and socioeconomically diverse in the entire school. My Latinx identity—something that I’d long been taught to suppress in most academic contexts—suddenly gave me an unforeseen advantage in the classroom. Not only did I feel comfortable engaging in difficult

conversations about race and discrimination, but my experiences growing up with immigrant parents allowed me to connect more easily with my first- and second-generation students, including one student named Rahim (pseudonym). Rahim is a first-generation Nigerian American student who instantly bonded with me. Our relationship developed through the exchange of stories about our respective upbringings in non-white, immigrant households, including our difficulties publicly "claiming" our respective cultural identities and our reflex to "code-switch" in predominately white spaces. However, I never shared these stories with the entire class; rather, they were strictly reserved for one-on-one interactions. My reluctance to incorporate more of myself into the classroom would come to haunt me weeks later when Rahim, in a moment of vulnerability, uttered the words "my brother died."

The revelation, in which Rahim revealed that he'd intentionally kept his brother's death a secret, prompted me to reflect on my own teaching practices. Up until that moment, I had been happy with my teaching: I created units that were connected to critical social issues, centered around diverse texts, and that encouraged critical dialogue. I had done everything necessary to cultivate a safe, culturally responsive classroom environment. Yet, here was a student who not only suffered an immense personal loss, but who chose to process that loss alone. Like his Nigerian identity, he felt safer keeping parts of his humanity—his suffering—hidden. Even with all of my "classroom successes," Rahim's confession threw all the brokenness around me into sharp relief.

For days afterward, I felt lost. What could I, as an English teacher, do to help my students heal? How could I help them create a pathway toward joy? Then, it hit me: the

answer was in the content. Specifically, I needed to draw on the emotional core of the content to let more of "me" and my students into the classroom. Incorporating more of myself into the content would bridge the psychic chasm that existed between me and students like Rahim. By incorporating instruction that was grounded in vulnerability, we could move toward a culture of joy.

I discarded everything I had planned for those final weeks and started from scratch. I began sharing stories about my life and my family to help contextualize and humanize the content I was teaching. For instance, a text depicting linguisticism became an opportunity to share stories about my family's reluctance to speak Spanish in public. My white students—many of whom had been reluctant to talk about race in previous weeks—began speaking more candidly about their emotional responses to the content. My students of color began sharing snippets of their personal lives. Even Rahim, who often avoided sharing personal details about his life in front of his classmates, began opening up. He now felt comfortable talking about his Nigerian heritage, his struggles with reconciling his dual identities, and his experiences as a Black teen in America. A small, imperceptible "crack" had formed in his emotional armor—one that allowed joy to flow in.

In the year since I student taught, Rahim and I have stayed in contact. Recently, he caught me up on all the latest details of his life, including a student cultural event he helped organize. He directed me to a thirty-second video of the event: a throng of students dancing to Caribbean music against a backdrop of various national flags. Among the sea of colored fabric, I noticed the familiar colors of the Nigerian flag. The image prompted me to ask Rahim why he decided to help organize the event. He

explained that, as a Black person in an affluent district, he's always felt like an outsider. Opening up—allowing himself to be vulnerable in front of his white peers—would destroy the image of the assimilated, first-generation American he worked so hard to curate. “Then you came, and you were so open and real with us.... It changed me.”

Listening to his words, I realized something. The practice of storytelling allowed my students to harness a fundamental aspect of their humanity: their capacity for vulnerability. Giving students permission to express vulnerability in the classroom is an act of empowerment—an act that helps create space for connection, healing, and joy.

Fostering Collective Joy by Centering Vulnerability

In my teacher preparation program, we learned all about how to get students engaged in the content. We focused heavily on how to incorporate high interest topics and culturally responsive lessons. Despite all attempts to foster an inclusive and joyful learning environment, my students were uncomfortable interacting with one another. On paper, I was doing everything right. I was creating lessons where students could see themselves in the readings. I was making space for getting-to-know-you activities, free writes, and high-interest debates. In spite of my efforts, the students and the environment lacked enthusiasm. There were small glimpses of enthusiasm at the beginning of class when I allowed the students to partake in five-minute debates on topics of their choosing. While the students were interested in the debate topics, once the five minutes were up, they went back into their shells.

As a first year teacher, I was feeling immensely discouraged. I spent the first two months of the school year doing everything I could to cultivate enthusiasm and

engagement with my students. I was about ready to give up when an unexpected source of joy emerged organically in my classroom.

On this particular day the debate topic was: “Nature versus Nurture,” and the debate morphed into a heated discussion regarding whether all serial killers are sociopaths.

Since completing a murder mystery assignment focused on using textual evidence to best support a claim, the students showed a certain proclivity toward discussing serial killers. The students yelled back and forth with oddly specific facts about mental illness and serial killers. It was clear that this was a topic of high interest for the class.

With one minute left, the students reached a stalemate. They presented all of the facts and ideas they could come up with, so they turned to me to ask, “Ms. S., can you Google it for us? Has every serial killer been diagnosed as a sociopath or psychopath?”

“Be careful,” Ms. S., “administration will flag your search history like they do to us! Search it on your phone, just in case!”

As I pressed enter on my Google search, a loud alarm sounded. I looked at my students in confusion and they stared back quizzically. They began laughing hysterically as they realized that the alarm belonged to the 5-minute timer I set at the beginning of each debate.

“You should see your face right now, Ms. S. It looks like you saw a ghost.”

Rather than trying to play off this moment and maintain my “authority,” I let out the biggest belly laugh.

The genuine laughter and enjoyment that the students obtained from this moment was a “crack” that allowed joy and light into our classroom through an unexpected moment of genuine human connection. This interaction broke the ice in our classroom. Following this moment, I saw my students blossom as they felt more connected to me

as a human being. Rather than feeling intimidated or disconnected from me, in this moment the students saw me as someone who had the same emotions as them. It was my vulnerability that allowed the students to open up and experience true joy in my classroom. While I did not plan for this moment, I did not shut it down and allowed all of us to soak in the moment. I realize, now, how important it is to give space to these moments of connection and allow myself to be vulnerable with my students. Following this moment, my attitude and demeanor in my classroom were forever altered. Rather than maintaining a hard exterior, I softened and allowed my students to see me as a human being first and a teacher second. The students followed suit and began to open up both to me and to each other. The true source of joy within a classroom is a teacher's willingness to show their humanity to their students.

Teaching With Vulnerability

As we reflect on these moments of our teaching, we are keenly aware of the need to be human and vulnerable with our students and allow our students to do the same. As our vignettes illustrate, our moments of vulnerability led to moments of joy through authentic connection. English language arts classrooms that nurture all aspects of our humanness—not just the academic ones—seem more likely to create these moments.

As an English educator, Emily is left wondering about the implications of our reflections on how she prepares English teachers. For years, she has prepared her teacher candidates to design engaging, accessible, and inclusive curricula. This has included instruction in learner-centered,

high-impact, high-interest, and anti-racist pedagogies. She has also stressed and modeled the importance of relationships with students. These reflections underscore the need to integrate these priorities in the curricula, designing lessons that center emotional connection and support vulnerability in engaging with the curricula. For some teachers, this might feel counter-cultural, as vulnerability is often associated with weakness rather than confidence. However, our reflections suggest that these moments of vulnerability create both connection and engagement with students, nudging us towards curricula and pedagogy that nurture and savor moments of vulnerability. Emily is eager to take on this challenge, beginning with reflection on the ways in which she models vulnerability in her own teaching.

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