

Periodically, I wonder if I'm going too far in my classroom. I stare at the time line for the core curriculum. I copy down the skills to be taught then I create an excel spreadsheet to track my progress at teaching those skills and finally I do away with the rest.

You see, I majored in the classics, so I empathize with the school of teachers who believe that our kids must know the canon—but then I do away with those thoughts too. Last year, many people were incensed when Ackerman compared working in a high needs school to being a triage doctor-- but to some extent, I actually agree with that assessment. The school that I work in is an emergency room. Every day, we bleed students into the

abyss of

push outs, juvenile delinquency, and functionally illiterate—those

forgotten until they make the news. Students leave my school

so often, that it is not peculiar

when a child disappears and never returns. So

yes, I'd say the emergency room analogy was warranted.

For that reason, I strongly believe that days of spending six weeks on Julius Caesar “because all kids must know it” are over. It is sardonically ironic that as educators, we often lack the most important facet of learning: reflection.

We educators must acknowledge that we have failed class after class of students because we decide to be married to the content that we teach and not the skills necessary to produce informed and engaged citizens. Instead, we waste our time struggling over Elizabethan English when many of our kids can't read contemporary English. Reflection would help us to see that an entire unit on Thoreau may not be

as relevant through our students' eyes as it is through our own. Reflection would help us to understand, that the same principles and lessons we want our students to learn via Chaucer could be acquired

through more

culturally relevant content. Reflection would help us to understand that the behavioral problems we face in our classrooms are a reaction to a lack of engagement that we help foster—with our everyday choices in teaching.

Reflection would force

us to listen to our students.

Last week, I went on one of my customary listening and learning tours (no affiliation to Arne's). I heard my students in the hallway debating about why religion was a hoax. I listened a little closer and heard that two more students were "booked" for possession of narcotics. I listened still closer and learned how Jiquan would be late for the rest of the school year because his older brother was shot and he would now have to take his younger brother to school every morning.

Those listening sessions implore me to do away with that time line that doesn't respect my students, or their lives. With my mental listening tour notes, I plan thematic units. Our last unit, examined the school to prison pipeline. You're probably wondering how students who are reading on a 6th grade level can understand a nuanced issue. . .but it all comes down to them being vested. Together in think tanks, my so-called underperforming students read reports and articles that are well above grade level. They study the

effects of high concentrations of poverty, the results of over policing schools, and the limitations on under resourced schools. They go on to deconstruct the juvenile "justice" system in our world. My students summarize,

reflect, and debate about

data that is relevant to their lives. Students begin to draw connections between what they tacitly knew but had no previous validation of. I watch

students grow to understand some of the most complex systems in our society without anxiety. They understand

systems that by design will fail them, and then, they develop theses on how to address such broad ranging issues. Finally, students turn their frustrations outward instead of inward and no longer blame solely themselves for their lives' circumstances.

Still the most validating aspect about all the extra work it takes to not stick to the script is the desire my students have to come to class and to participate. I have a class of the "nightmare

kids" but they are not a nightmare in my classroom.

It is reaffirming that my students outperform their peers in the school and throughout the District. It is reassuring to see that my students, without rote memorization, and without the canon are able to tackle standardized tests without their education being diminished.

Critics of my philosophy will argue that I am politicizing students and overstepping my boundaries as an educator. They will say that teachers like me push our agenda onto precious impressionable minds. They will say that District wide mandates force us to stay on time line. But what I see materialized is a higher attendance and achievement rate among my students. What I see manifested after trying to work through complex social problems is a lower failure rate and a greater sense of community among my students. And then what I see is a glaring reality because I rest assured knowing who exactly I'm working for. I am not a puppet. I know what's best for my students and I would not be able to respect myself as an educator if I did anything differently.