

Make Learning For and About Those We Teach

By [Starr Sackstein](#) on [June 17, 2018 10:55 AM](#)



For many years in the classroom, I went with my heart. From those instinct level decisions, I **developed experiences** and over time, discovered what worked and didn't work for the variety of students in my classes.

For one, especially in my first teaching job, acknowledging I was different than my students was a hard but important thing to do.

At first, I wanted to save my students from their challenges

and keep them safe. Then I felt ashamed of my privilege and embarrassed by how easily I took it for granted. The first school I taught in was a stone's throw from where I grew up but the worlds couldn't have been any more different. But what I experienced as a student was all I knew and although that wasn't my fault, it would take a lot of undoing to be able to truly work with my kids in Far Rockaway.

So I tried to find similarities where I could and where I couldn't, I asked a lot of questions. I humbled myself to not knowing and I struggled with them to find common ground. Since I was such a **novice in the classroom**, I had no chops, I only had my ability to connect with my students as people and fortunately, I was able to do that.

My age was another thing working for and against me at the same time. Since I was nearly their peer, I was the cool teacher that they could talk to and my door was always open. Not knowing any better and certainly not understanding the necessity of boundaries, I wore their challenges with them and wept when I couldn't help. Ultimately, the best I could do was notice, ask and adapt as needed so that they got what they needed from their learning experiences.

Recently, I listened to ***For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*** by Christopher Emdin and as I listened, I found myself nodding in agreement with my early experiences, foibles and eventual growth from my start in the inner city, to my long career

in the New York City public school system. Many of the strategies and realizations he shared about the "neo-indigenous" were experiences I had and adaptations I made to my teaching before anyone told me it was right and I certainly never knew what to call it.

Some of the striking things I've learned and reflected on since the beginning of my teaching career and each successive school I taught in, I've realized that the **students' experiences**, culture, and personalities are what should dictate what happens in the classroom. It took a while, but I learned to relinquish control, invite student's voice and ultimately put them in control of their learning.

By the third school I taught in, eight years into my career, students were designing lessons, co-creating curriculum, and self-assessing. They got more out of their learning in those classes than I could have ever given to them. Always making myself available to help with their request and empowering them to lead in a way that made sense for their learning, we moved on together as a unit. Emdin's assertion that great teaching for any population of student starts with a deep understanding of what success looks like for them in their words is where we need to start.



Too many of the challenges we face in schools these days are due to an incongruent understanding of expectations and dually damaging assumptions that just aren't true. We often label kids based on what we see not knowing the context through which we need to be looking. The lens that we approach teaching through defines so much of how success will

look and it's time we invite students into this conversation.

Let's start with the assumption students can and students want to learn. Perhaps what that looks like isn't what our expectation is because our expectations come out of our own experiences which may be dated or colored through our own learning lenses.

How might you make changes in your own classroom or team to bring more student voice and understanding into your teaching/leading every day? Please share