

Practitioners

Practitioners were invited to contribute written reflections of their learning to this document. Everyone had contributed to ongoing discussions on the project's electronic discussion list and several participants came together in July to discuss the work. That session was taped and pieces of the transcript appear in the body of the report.

An edited version of the transcript follows; its shifts from topic to topic reflects our ongoing questions, the connections we've made and our continuing struggles to make sense of all the pieces.

The remainder of this section is comprised of the practitioners' writing and reflects the fact that the work we attempted to do is complex and layered. Each practitioner grapples with the issues raised by the project and the ways in which she intends to move her practice forward now that our 'official' work together has ended.

Transcript: July 21, 2000

Janet: ... for each of you and for the students you are working with, what if anything has come of this? What is it that you want other educators to know?

Nancy - *I think I'm going to be designing some kind of a short training thing for literary teachers because we are going to have three out of five teachers that are going to be new, transfers this year. I feel like I've learned a lot of stuff that I hope to incorporate next year. Last year I was kind of waiting for people to talk about violence, but people probably aren't going to bring it up. It's up to me to bring it up. So I did, towards the end of the year and we had some good discussions, but nobody said anything personal about themselves just about people's opinions.*

I can talk about some random things that I've learned ... One thing, I guess from Jenny's book, is I want to incorporate a lot more in my class about specific things that help people to learn and things that keep them from learning. I've just kind of talked about it very briefly in the past, but I think that it's really important, and also that if people feel like they are learning, which means that I have to do more with, not assessment, but with showing people their progress. Then that's a way of helping people see that they are getting more control of their lives, that they can change them, so hopefully I'll try and do more of that.

I also think talking about people's previous experiences with school and learning and stuff like that... in the past that topic has brought up a lot of conversation about violence because of teachers hitting students, parents hitting kids, stuff like that, so I think that that's a good topic to explore more. I think what in the past I've kind of done a topic for a little while then I think, "um, maybe you all are getting bored. I've gotta move on." but I want to do things more in depth instead of just jumping around and "today we are going to talk about school and violence and then tomorrow we're going to talk about something else. Another thing I think is really important which I didn't really think about until the end of the year when another teacher brought in a woman on our staff, and she did a yoga presentation. So then I had her come to my class too, and it was really interesting. People just loved it, and so I want to do more with movement and maybe some mediation – maybe exercise. Some – a lot of my students are just so out of shape. I think that the fact that they don't move very much makes them feel worse.

Talking about goal setting and, and people's motivation. I've always kind of had a problem with it, with setting goals, but now I understand more why people can't do it, because they - a lot of people don't see any possibilities other than the way things have always been. So how can they possibly set goals, and that's- that's something Genesis emphasizes. "Got to have your students, got to set three goals, make a mission of progress, and everybody always just says the same things. And it's really pointless, so I want to have a more of a discussion about that with the other teachers and the- I don't know we're going to have a new director so who knows what's going to happen

Dina: *I think we should do some sort of exchange; I think you all, we should all go to each other's programs, find some time to do that,*

Nazeen: *How can we expand either awareness or work with domestic violence? That's something that I'm trying - I'm struggling with. What are the ways, you know I might tell you, "Okay we are going to do x number of workshops. We are going to meet." But something concrete, how can we move into a bigger picture of domestic violence and be*

a part of that? That thinking came about from my daughter's project that you had directed her to- she's working with a battered person ... the system itself is so rigid and so against her. At this point she wants to give up on life. And that got us both thinking, both my daughter and myself, about what other ways are there for us to get involved as educators.

Janet: *I think, with so much else that we do with education, one of the most pressing areas is systemic issues. So the woman that your daughter is helping is lucky to have her here as an advocate, but it still doesn't fix the system. It helps her through it.*

Nazneen: *She's been to court with this person, and she's sat through the hearing and she said, "Mom ... they said that it can't be done today, she has to wait another month." And she has grabbed her head and said, "Mom, I can't do it." So it's very important; it's affecting a lot of lives ... especially women's lives. ...At this point, being adult educators, we serve many more women than men. Ah, in what ways can we branch out? Maybe another way would be for us to get involved in advocacy and outreach to inform people beyond the classroom.*

Janet: *I think that in all of our settings, there's so much work that we do, that literacy is almost accidentally connected to it. But, there are so many connections to the folks that we're working with and their strengths, but also their needs in terms of community assistance.*

Dina brought her kids (to the computer lab), and they're fabulous! They're energetic, they're- but I know, I just intuitively know that, that these are kids that by virtue of being in YouthBuild and just, by virtue of being kids in this point in history and everything else, they've got some real big issues. I don't know what they are, but how do you validate them, make them feel important and honor who they are, and also, talk about, so, what are you doing with your life that's really positive and moving you forward?

Dina: *... you know my thinking when I went to visit the middle school – I went to observe a pre-ESL class. And after that class and after talking to the teacher, the teacher was saying two of them belong in special education, and I worked with those two and I didn't think they belonged in special ed. I found out that attention was helping the kid. I think youth at that level needs to know that they're important, that's my. It's important for them to know that they're important and they're loved. Those two things – if they don't have any self-esteem or worth at this point because they've seen so much abuse,*

nobody- everybody says they're stupid. But no, "you're important, you're doing well." I mean that, that I thought was a key to- I couldn't I couldn't differentiate who had-

So many kids come through my program who have been labeled "Special Ed" and many, many, many of them have been in special ed programs and I don't see it at all, I don't understand how-

Nazneen: *Lack of time and attention to the kids, basically that's what's happening.*

There are ESL kids, some of them are newcomers into the country, have been here six months or a year and some have been here longer. Now, in terms of the class environment I observe that the ones who've been here longer were more disruptive, and more not able to concentrate on work. And the newcomers were like, right away- you know, they're struggling with language, but they're more disciplined and wanted to work and wanted to ... So something in the environment changes them here. Is it the struggle of the parents?

Janet: *And the other side of that too is if you 're- the good news about the kids who been here a long time were disruptive is that maybe they're safe and they're comfortable. it's like, "it's okay for me to be a jerk now." but the bad news is "it's okay to be jerk." That there aren't other ways to be safe and to be comfortable as a kid in school. And I think that's too simple.*

Nazneen: *The problem is that they're labeled. Before I went there and the teacher was telling me, "This group is bad and you will see how bad they are." Academically, they're being labeled as the bad guys you know?*

Dina: *yeah, yeah exactly. It's interesting hearing you speak about, you were talking about – we do a lot of showing progress. I think one of the major things is just doing new activities. We do exercises, activities, assignments, until there's some improvement. One of the things that the students talked about last year is Amy, the humanities teacher [marks papers rigorously] – so some student gets a mark on their paper that says, "You have to do this over. You have to do this part or answer these questions," people get all*

frustrated, "Ah, I have to do it again?" But then they get used to it, and when they hand it in they know they're getting it back and they don't always know why, but they know it could be more. And eventually, they hand papers in that answer some of the questions that she asks all the time. One of the students came back from last year to talk to this group and that's one of the things she spoke about, Amy's a tough teacher but when you get a good mark from her you know, you get comments from her you know you deserved it. The program runs in a cycle so we talk about where we all are in the beginning, where we're trying to go, and what kinds of things as a group and as individuals and so all along the way we can say, "Alright we're stepping it up now. Now we should be thinking about this, now these are things we absolutely don't tolerate.

Janet: *Sorry to interrupt, but I really like the point you're making there, because there's this whole thing of like, "they're disadvantaged oh it's so hard, so we say, that's okay - you did very well." And that that sort of infantilizing - we do it to adults as well as to kids. But to say, "No, this isn't okay, like, you did a good job, you got this thing in, and that's great, but you can do better and here's how.." So from day one you're saying here are my expectations of you because I think we can't say, "Well you know they've had a troubled life, so, whatever they can do is fine."*

Dina: *We also know that a kid that comes in barely write sentences is not going to be writing ten page papers by the time he leaves YouthBuild. But if he can write a solid paragraph without any mistakes or very few mistakes by the end that's a lot, and that's the kind of stuff we aim for. Maybe a page depending on how much work he puts in.*

Nazneen: *I still believe with adults, that you need to find that entry point. For example, now at that time I didn't know much about trauma and domestic violence - the time I'm going to talk about, when I was in the classroom. One of the things I found that some people, they were just not writing. You know you're doing peer work, or you're doing picture work (dealing with pictures) and I would find that they would - and this is one student in particular that I'm thinking about, he used to tell me, "You sit here." And initially I was kind of dis- I was a little upset with him that I- I have to split my time between twenty students, I can't just sit there with you and do you work. And eventually, I could see that he was having trouble just picking up and even writing one single thing. Maybe it's because he went through it as a kid in school, I sat down with him and I*

started, what I started doing is, just looking at the picture and writing two things for him, if he said “man” to me or “sky” to me, I’d write them. And then I’d tell- I’d give him the pen and say, “Now it’s your turn to write, and you write this one for me.” And I would help him spell- he couldn’t spell it, but it was something that you—to work along with this person instead of saying, “Here it is take it and do it.” And a lot times they can’t perform. But rolling up your sleeves and sitting down and finding that entry point where you can enter and get them to hold that- and even do- even if it’s just one word. Um, it was a big leap, and eventually he was not asking me to sit down with him.

Dina: *I don’t know, not to be new age-y about it, but I really think it’s an energy thing. Some people just need a little bit of your energy to get very focused on them. And it’s just like you’re saying, they need to know that they’re important and they need, I mean it takes so much effort so some people to just sit and concentrate on the introduction to the lesson and when you break out and say, “Do this yourself.” It’s like—and we’ve all been in those- we’ve all been in those classes where the teacher’s been really creative and says, “Go do this project, “ And you’re like, “I don’t want to do this right now... I don’t want to talk to these people right now,” you know. But I’m astonished how much of the time my students are actually willing to go through (inaud) because we ask them to be very active and work with each other a lot and come back with some product in a certain amount of time –a lot. And that’s, and we give them down time too, but I mean, I try not to even let them know how amazed I am by what they do.*

Janet: *Another thing about writing – I think something Jenny said when we ask people to write about their weekend... All the energy people chew up saying “What can I tell, what can I not tell?” ... I think rather than seeing only the resistance, we need to be seeing the reasons why people aren’t writing without only saying “Oh it’s okay, it’s okay.” or knowing when the time is right to say, “No, it’s okay you don’t have to do today.” I think about all of that in the face of increasingly restrictive program outcomes. But I think being forceful in pushing students to do things because the outcomes are there, doesn’t make them learn any better than saying “Okay go to the comfy chair, take some time for yourself.” Or, “You need one more sentence.” Or, whatever it is to help them. But to take that sort of punitive edge off, and then to inform the people - so many people go into adult ed work wanting to help ‘those people’, and so okay if that- whatever that motivation is about, what is that. What does that mean? And what are we doing? When are we just doing horrible things to people in the name of helping them?*

Dina: *I was just going to say how at YouthBuild it's possible to not talk about violence. I can't imagine being in a classroom with this particular population without issues of violence coming up. And I haven't found a particular need to sit down and say, "Let's talk about violence"*

We have a code of conduct that we hand out to all the students, and included in the code of conduct is the potential for immediate dismissal if there is verbal, physical, emotional abuse, and we have eleven sections of the code and we broke people down into groups of ten or eleven groups and had them act out skits for each part of the code. You know, we had them come up with the wildest example they could think of, you know, that would demonstrate something that would trigger our punitive measures, you know, based on the code. And it was awesome, it was the funniest thing I've ever seen in my entire life—so hilarious 'cause we had kids in costumes like running paper and like teachers, you know and it was SO funny. Their skits were so funny and they're so true, and it really highlighted these particular issues. And so, yesterday we had an incident where a kid who's been giving people a lot of shit, and he's been talking a lot of shit Some basketball knocked over some juice and he took this shirt that was in the corner of the gym and wiped it up, and then some other kid gets on his case for using somebody's shirt, he said the shirt was just there it wasn't anybody else's shirt it was there before we got there. The kid started, "I'm going to break your face and dahdahdah, and a staff person was walking by and he was like, "Um, I can't believe you didn't even start when I was around." You know, so he was, he was gone.

[Dina then explained what happened among staff in trying decide whether or not the student should be asked to leave the program; she and another colleague argued that this was a teachable moment for the group, and that the student in question shouldn't be expelled].

So this morning I pulled the two kids and then the group had its own discussion. I see these kids have got problems with each other and talking through me and you know they're both like, "It's over, I don't want to talk about this, but if he doesn't talk to me and I don't talk to me it's going to be fine." And I was like, "You cannot do that for ten months you know what I'm saying... You know in ten months in here it's not going to be possible, you're going to be put in groups and we're not going to separate you on purpose you know, so you got to learn to work together"

We bring them in front of the group and the group was amazing; they said, “ We want an apology from you guys.” But they were on, you know they were like, “Look, from the beginning you’ve been giving people shit and that’s why you hear it back, “you know, and then people were coming to his defense they were saying “He’s the youngest person in here. We have to—he’s got to try to break into the community, but we also need to try to stay open to him and help him out, help him understand.” It was great. The back and forth was amazing, and then they shook hands and apologized in front of everybody. But the point is that it’s impossible in this environment to not talk about—for it to not come up.

Janet: *I don’t know if you heard the discussion in the computer lab this morning. I was kind of kidding but not really kidding with the kids about violence, sex and guns online. I was standing behind one kid and he had some cartoon of some guy with a sword on his screen, and I didn’t know it was a sword. Once I read the image, (some cartoon violent thing) I suggested that it wasn’t appropriate for the lab. I said, “You know what. It’s violence. That’s not okay here.” Um, with this one poor kid in the back room the first session, his screen would not close. And they were all sex sites, and he couldn’t get the windows to close. I said “Tell you what, just like close exit out of the thing and go back in to the internet, to some other site. I don’t want to censor you, but I do have to censor you.*

Dina: *Yah, no, that was good, that was perfect. That was perfect what you did because it opens the door for us to do the same thing, you know and we we need to do that on the site with people’s internet stuff.*

Janet: But the other side of that too, is, well forget morality, it’s just like, this stuff is so creepy, it’s pornographic, it’s demeaning to people, it’s icky. People aren’t saying nice things to each other when they- and it’s like and so, that’s to you- if that’s what sex is, like, that’s your choice, but....”

Nancy: *I think they’re mostly fascinated by it you know, they’re young boys*

Dina : *What’s good about this, is we’ve been doing—we’ve been having all these discussions about the media and about several ways in which they present—and we have,*

people haven't talked about this before. We talk a lot about, you know, we talk a lot about videos with guys with lots of money, their big chairs and expensive furniture. And we're like, "You know that stuff is rented. They don't own that shit, it's rented."

[The videos] create this desire to go out and buy this shit. And then one kid asked this great question. He said, "So can we become like a gang if we have...?" And it was in the context of something where somebody was talking about peer pressure. He was like, "So can we act like a gang?" I said, "I don't understand." And what he was touching on, he didn't realize, was this whole idea of recreation of culture and reinforcement of ideas. I said to him, "Exactly, that's what happens." I even introduced it in those terms. I talked about sociology a little bit and defined it, and I said, "So, what a lot of people say happens is that we, in our lives, live things out that reinforce what we see on TV. And you have the people who are doing the advertising and making up these TV shows see, "Oh this is what people latch on to," and then they make more of it. And then we buy more of it, and then they make more of it. And so, and people are like, "Wow, you're right, you're right." So it helped them to understand why there's an increase in things like sex on TV. And in advertising. And there were really, it was exciting like that sort of, that concept was exciting for people to grasp.

There's some other some other stuff I was going to say too. I was going to talk about previous school and learning experiences. We did an activity a few days ago called "Why Do Smart People Fail?" Amy ran the activity, and she had them do...I don't know whether she started out with this or ended up with this, but she had them write about something that they failed at. And a lot of people chose to write about school, but people wrote about other things too. Like a track meet that they didn't run well, or a basketball game they played in. She provided a lot of examples so they wouldn't they wouldn't think they had to name anything in particular. It didn't have to be anything huge. So that was great, and she did a whole activity around that idea about why, sort of taking a look at those barriers and trying to understand why they happen and try to accept the part of the blame that is your fault. You know, it's like sometimes you're going to probably not do too well, but sometimes there are reasons why you do that. School wasn't engaging, or my teacher told me I was stupid over and over again. In the case of a number of

students, they were seriously insulted by their teachers very early on. I was just listening to this report on the radio the other day that said that all it takes is two consecutive years of poor teachers for students to go from the college-ready track to the remedial track.

Janet: *I remember twenty years ago, when I was doing my MAT at RISD, reading sociology studies. You pick the one kid, who's like always kind of funky and smelly. In first grade, he's the hardest kid to connect to, and so he's the easiest kid, when you've got three or four other ones, to ignore, or to treat like crap.*

[the discussion moves to our questions about knowing that students/colleagues have had experiences of violence and being present to them when difficult content arises]

Dina: *It's something I learned from a relationship I was in a number of years ago. The guy was totally neglected and abused. And his brother was in prison for life for murder. When he would tell me something, it just seemed like the entire world was his source of pain. Every spot was tender, you know. It's like taking a walk after he would tell me some story about something that happened one time when he took a walk, I would be like, "Shit, can we even take a walk?"*

And then there was a time when I went to go visit his nephews, who we had taken care of for a little while, cause their father was the guy in prison because he had killed their mother. So I went to visit them. They were in a foster home, and that was around Christmas time. These kids, their foster mother is so on her shit. She had like a ton of kids, and there were a lot of kids, it was like a first stop for a lot of kids before they had adopted families. And she was very experienced with this whole thing and I was sort of like, "So how are you guys doing?" And they didn't know how to answer and she just said, "Well it's going to be tough at Christmas without Mom and Dad around." And I was like, "Right. Right, like why are we talking about this? Of course that's the number one thing on their minds." So once that was said like that you know, "It is going to be hard, isn't it?" They were like, "Yeah." And I was like, "Did you guys get stuff from people?" And they were like, "Yeah, we got new clothes..." and that kind of thing. And so just remembering that that goes on. Remembering that for people who have experienced all

this kind of stuff, if I'm in a room of people, and somebody brings up the topic of rape, you know in certain settings, it's like this happens in life, and there are times when...It happens. It comes up, you deal, and you move on. I mean, and not for everybody, and not all the time, but for the most part, talking about normal everyday things is not, you can't be treating people like a burden all the time.

Janet: *Yeah. And one thing I think I'm getting better at, is being able to say, "Do you want to talk about this?" And just putting that out in a way that doesn't make it a bad thing if you answer this and a good thing if you answer that. And just now as you're talking thinking about when I was seeing the women in prison that I tutor I'd missed two weeks, because my car wasn't working and when I walked in after having missed two sessions, Susan just said "What do you want?" Not hello, not anything else. I'm thinking it was her way of saying "Well you came back, okay." Cause I'm really conscious of not saying I'm going to do something if I can't do it. And at one point she started talking about, she'd written this letter to her aunt. She just came in, she didn't bring any of her stuff. She said, "You know, did you get my letter?" I said, "No." So she's telling this story about her aunt, and then I just let her talk. And she said, " Do you want me to get the letter?" I said, "Well yeah."*

And she read it to me. And the two things that amaze me about this woman is one, when we started, her teacher had her on this pre-GED science book, and she's like reading through it at two words a minute. A horrible thing. She started reading other stuff that made sense to both of us that she could read, but then, I brought in stuff from SOAR (a survivors' support group. She wrote to them and she got a letter back. She was so excited. And this is a woman who would say, "No I'm not going to write, I'm going to do math." Wrote the letter to SOAR requesting information. So I know she can write, but don't always know how to make writing an interesting or viable option for her - I don't always know how to suggest real purposes for her to write.

And I think for me what sort of keeps it manageable, which is the last word I thought I would have come up with, is that we've got the vehicle of writing in front of us. We've got this thing we're focused on. And when I went to the Women's Center last week, we're going to do a drop-in night. One of the caseworkers was talking about the moms and kids who are in this shelter, who've gone through all this upheaval, having a book. It's a way to sit the kid on the mom's lap, and they can focus on the story of Babaar or whatever. And not on how angry I am at you for leaving dad, or not any of that. It's another way to be with your kid in a safe sort of place, where you're not going to have issues come up, but you're just going to read the story. Unless its like one of those "special stories," which I'm really conflicted about. Why are we leaving mommy? I don't know

Dina: *You know, it's too close to home. But then, also with these other two kids, we went to see the "Lion King" pretty soon after. And in this movie, the father dies. And we had no idea this was going to happen. The little lion cubs are left orphans in this big scary world. So I said to one of the kids, it was right after his mother dies, his father dies. I can't remember what I said to him, or I just said something like, "How're you doing TJ?" And he said, "I wish I had a daddy like that." And again, it was another one of those, like that simple kind of thing, because then he was thinking something, and he wanted to say it, and he even said, "I want to be a daddy more like that lion." And I said, "Good for you. That's a really good thing to look forward to."*

Janet: *And that's the thing I don't know if you had known that that happened, if you would have said to him, "There's some sad pieces in here. Do you want to go see them?" You just can't, I mean shit's going to happen. It's like with Susan, when I bring her, I've been bringing her a lot of learner stories about difficult marriages or violence, and I'll say, "This is about this, this and this. Do you want to read it?" And she'll say, "Yeah I do. And she'll go through it more."*

But she's doing this thing with a psychotherapist on staff, and she's hating it. She's, I don't know, it's one of those young women singers, some song about a gun. She was real angry. I said, "What's the problem?" And she said, "I don't want to talk about a weapon. I had a weapon." And I said, "Well help me..." And I still haven't figured it out, but I was trying to ask her the difference between when I bring her people's writings about violent experiences, why that's okay and why she's interested, and why it isn't when this guy gives her song lyrics about guns. And I don't know if it's because she just doesn't like him. I still haven't been able to. But I can't imagine not checking it out first in some way, or making there be places to go out sideways, but if you're always sort of dancing around it too. Because you were talking about it earlier, how when you raise the discussions now, it sounds like it feels different to you to do that than it did...

Dina: *I think prefacing something is a wise idea.*

Janet *Helping people do something about it if they want to. That's what we do in adult ed, period. It's not like we come in and say, "You have to, you have to..." But "What happens if you do this, what happens if you do that?" And sort of, I mean I think to some extent we're all hyper aware of violence at the moment, and probably will always be more than we might have been. But it's not about capturing the disclosure, so much as understanding it could come. And it could as easily be a disclosure about violence as it could be about gambling as it could be about substance abuse, as it could be, I won the lottery! Like holy shit!*

... others consciously and willfully say, "I'm not going to bring this with me. And I don't want it in the classroom. I don't want to talk about that." And so long as there are balanced ways so that if somebody wants to talk about political torture, and somebody can't hear it or wants to talk about how they make apple pie, that those places can coexist. And to me, that's becoming the newer challenge. To think about who wants to tell and who can hear. And I don't know. I mean I get crazed when I hear people in my not work life tell stuff. Like my partner will tell me about whatever. I don't want to hear it. That's like really violent stuff, I don't want to hear it. But, well who else can I tell it to?

Nancy Fritz

Dear Janet,

As I think about writing what I have learned from the domestic violence project, I hardly know where to start. I've learned a huge amount. Part of the reason I learned a lot was because I hardly knew anything about DV when we started. I joined the group mostly because I "sort of knew" that domestic violence was a problem with women on welfare and I was curious to know more about it. Now that I know more about it, I'm convinced that violence of all kinds probably has a profound impact on most of my students.

The way I'm going to try to organize my thoughts is to first put down in writing the facts and ideas that have had the biggest impact on me and then to talk about the changes that I intend to make in my teaching. There's a lot of overlap and I know I'll be leaving out a lot, but I'll try to hit the main points.

The first eye-opener for me came at the presentation at the Women's Center when I learned that domestic violence is not only physical violence but can encompass a wide range of controlling behaviors such as psychological manipulation, economic control, rule-setting, isolation, etc., etc. Somehow I hadn't realized this before. Almost all of my students have been in bad relationships with men before (who hasn't?) and a lot of them have been subject to these kinds of controlling behaviors. Whether or not they were ever physically struck, a lot of damage was done to their psyches and self-esteem. In all fairness to their partners, this kind of violence was also perpetrated by parents, school personnel, relatives, and in some cases, strangers. The upshot of this fact is that the teaching suggestions made by Jenny Horsman in *Too Scared to Learn* are good for just about everyone in my classes.

I learned that trauma can be the cause of learning problems. In some cases, if a child experienced abuse at a young age when s/he was trying to learn to read, s/he may have missed large blocks of instruction and was never able to catch up. Violence in the past or present can affect a person's ability to concentrate and make learning in a classroom very difficult.

A common perception of the problem of domestic violence is that it is something that a woman can 'get over.' If a woman has had problems with domestic violence, she should go to a counselor, get cured, and then come back to the learning situation and get on with the

learning. Jenny points out that there is no returning to 'normal' after an abusive situation. The learner will bring the effects of that violence into the classroom with her.

A *New York Times* article stated that studies have shown that between 25 to 30% of women on welfare report having been sexually abused as children.¹ I was shocked at this huge percentage. It's difficult to say what percentage of an ESL population would report sexual abuse, but when you add in the fact that many immigrants have suffered trauma due to war and political violence, I'm sure the percentage would be very high. In my class last year, one woman reported being repeatedly abused by an uncle in the Dominican Republic at the age of 7. Another student, from Liberia, witnessed a pregnant woman being killed and the baby being ripped out of the dead woman's womb. A third student (male) lived on the streets of Cambodia from age 5 to 10, getting food any way he could. I don't know any more of his story, but one can only imagine.

1 November 28,1999,
<http://www.nytimes.com/library/national/112899wis-welfare.html>

I learned a lot about some of the possible physical signs of violence (skittishness, hypervigilance, withdrawal, depression, inability to concentrate). There are also many ways that domestic violence may manifest itself in the classroom. Students may have an "all or nothing" mentality; they may have great difficulty being "present"; they may have issues with control and problems making connections with other people. These manifestations of DV have a lot of implications for classroom instruction and I hope to put some of Jenny's ideas into practice this fall (I'll explain more about what I hope to do a little further on).

I realize now that the topic of domestic violence needs to be brought up in the classroom if it doesn't surface in student discussions. Many students are too embarrassed to bring up the subject and/or they may feel that it is not appropriate for the classroom. In many of the countries that our students come from, issues like DV are not discussed in classes (if at all). The whole issue of domestic violence needs to be made much more visible so that it's not a shameful secret for women to bear in silence.

I feel now that I don't have to worry about not being a therapist or be afraid of what might come up. I know that I don't have to be a therapist. What I need to do is listen, provide support, and provide referrals if a student wants them. I think I've worked through the appeal and the fear of being a rescuer and realize that what we want to do is to help learners develop their own strengths and potential. I need to learn more about the resources that are available locally so that I can refer with confidence.

I've learned that it's important for us as literacy workers to take care of ourselves. It's important to build in opportunities for reflection, sharing, debriefing and getting away from it all. Otherwise, burnout is a big danger.

I've learned that it's really important to draw attention to the issue of violence whenever possible. We can't let high levels of violence become the normal situation. It's also important to advocate for the needs of our learners who may have difficulty learning in our somewhat traditional learning situations and schedules (two years in school and you're out on your own). Many learners need more time or opportunities to study part-time while working.

Most of my ideas about changes that I want to make in my classroom came from Jenny Horsman's ideas in Too Scared to Learn. What's great about these ideas is the fact that they are good adult ed. teaching practices in any case, but are particularly important if students are victims of domestic violence.

Jenny talks about the fall of nothing mentality that many learners have. To combat this, she suggests paying special attention to showing learners their increments of learning. People need to see that they're making progress; realizing their progress can help greatly with self-esteem. I know that this is important and I hope to do a better job at this during this coming year. Incidentally (and ironically), documenting progress ties in nicely with the current accountability/ assessment movement.

I found Jenny's discussions about presence to be very relevant to any classroom situation. This is a concept that I've never discussed with my students before. I think it will be interesting to talk with students about what helps them be more present. The ideas of distracting problems and how to deal with them should be helpful to everyone. With my students, I hope to explore different ways of helping people focus (yoga and deep breathing are a couple of ideas) Related to this is the realization of the fact that if someone is not paying attention, it is not necessarily that s/he is bored with the class. There can be any number of other reasons that s/he is not 'present' and I shouldn't blame their lack of attention on their lack of interest or my boring teaching style. I also like Jenny's idea of providing ways for learners to stay with the group even if they're not "present." Providing a chair where someone can sit and listen even if she doesn't want to fully participate seems like a good solution and an idea I want to try.

We've had a few discussions about the issue of control and how difficult it is for women who've had very little control over many aspects of their lives to come to school. From these discussions, I've gotten the following ideas that I think are useful:

1. Having a definite structure to the class and a calm atmosphere is helpful to people who may not be used to having a pattern in their lives or who may have lived from crisis to crisis. Students will learn to count on a predictable schedule in their classes (this may be very difficult to achieve!)

Having a definite pattern to a class may help students feel a greater degree of safety. Safety can also be fostered by always letting students know what is going to happen in the class (to the degree that this is possible

2. It's important to always offer choices within a structured framework so students retain the ultimate control. It's important that students always have the option to 'pass' on any activity.
3. It's important to discuss and demonstrate different learning strategies so students can try them out and find out what works for them. Students with limited educational background may not be aware of different ways of learning. The more a student can learn about what works for her, the more she will feel in control of her learning. If a student finds a certain strategy that works for her, it can give her a degree of hope.
4. Students with control issues may want to stop coming to class for a while. We need to find a way to make that acceptable and not question students' 'motivation' if they are not able to attend classes for a while.
5. Because it is difficult, if not impossible, for someone who feels that her life is out of her control to be able to set goals, I plan to de-emphasize long-term goal-setting in my class this year. As someone said, "How can students set goals if they don't know what the possibilities are?" Instead, I'm going to help students set really short-term goals, like reading a very short book or finishing a project.
6. Journal writing may be a way to give students another degree of control if they decide whether or not anyone else can read their journal. The writing process in itself can be very therapeutic for those who choose to write about troubling issues.

Related to the issue of control and to the idea of presence is the importance of talking about the effects of violence on people's ability to concentrate and learn in the classroom. I plan to have discussions about factors that help learning and those that hinder learning. I hope that students will understand that the fact that they may have difficulties with learning does not mean that they are stupid.

I want to place more emphasis on building connections among the students in my class this year. I have felt good about the feeling of community in my classes before, but there have also been elements of rivalry and jealousy. I see now that this is quite normal and will accept it and try to help people move beyond it.

I hope that I will have greater patience this year because I understand a little better where my students are coming from. Sometimes in the past I've felt very frustrated when people didn't seem to be learning even though I tried everything I could think of. My new mantra is "It takes as long as it takes, and that's O.K."

A couple of other notes:

I thought the session with Richard Hoffman was very good. It was wonderful to see his courage and to hear first-hand about his experiences.

I thought it was a great idea to have the sessions with Margie and to have her available to all the participants. Just knowing that she was available was comforting and I think she had some valuable contributions to our discussions.

I wish that I had kept a journal as you asked us to do. I started one in the beginning of the project but it soon fell by the wayside. I know I've forgotten a lot of thoughts and impressions I had along the way. (My memory is failing and we've been at it for quite a while). Hopefully, the ideas (for example, from Judith Herman's book) are somewhere in my brain and not lost forever.

Sally Gabb

JOURNAL NOTES: Domestic violence and learning - Janet's research

Domestic violence. Violence between people who have a close connection - spouse, child, parent. A contradiction in terms. An assault on the sense of things. Emotional contradictions as barrier to learning. Experience of violence like a disease that stops growth, growth as learning. Violence and learning.

FALL NOTES: Thoughts on effects of violence - recollections of Marilyn W. - literacy learner I tutored during the 80's - Hers was the violence of separation from all others than her crazy Mom - I remember that language experience was this incredible release for her - the words poured out of her, finally the violence that had been done to her like puss from a boil -

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CONFERENCE Was especially impressed by survivors who have formed a policy change/political action group. But worry about their clear anti' male stance - not that I necessarily disagree = bit is it reasonable strategies that will draw many to cause?

Half the House - a personal journey with the effects of child sexual assault - the violence of sexual assault. Found this powerful to read - his story mirrored my experience with Marilyn - that the writing released the poison - his ability to 'become' was halted by the wall of violence, the assault to his 'sense of what makes sense' --

Stories from Genesis - I was subbing in an evening class, thinking of a 'nice' verbal exchange - A large mixed class - Latinos, Asians, and Liberians. Some talkative, some silent. Teacher wanting to draw them out, to encourage the 'social learning'. D., a Liberian woman, especially quiet. A face with no affect - blank, a wall. to encourage learners to talk about their children, their ages, where they are in school - to encourage involvement in education - such noble sentiments. Our small circle included several Latino women, a South East Asian woman, a Liberian woman. People began naming their children. Denon named three - a son four, twins who were eight. Then the innocent query - where do they go to school? The Mom's share - good teachers bad teachers, easy talk, fear - then D. I don't know. I lost them in the war. I LOST THEM IN THE WAR The words reverberate - where do I go with this information - what can a teacher offer in response to such devastating news? The silence was broken by a soft cry - Marcella, Latina who expresses easily and often her strong and heartfelt emotions. My heart paused - was this another woman with a similar tragic loss of child?? Actually, through her tears, Marcella explained - her pain came from the very thought of losing a child. D. reached and touched her arm. She talked a bit of the experience. I thanked Marcella for the eloquence of her heart. The ability of one woman to express empathy across cultures, across the globe.

The experience changed me. Another millimeter of consciousness opened up. The innocuous questions - so I thought - for an English lesson - had opened the gates to the flood

of traumatic experience. A reminder not to demand answers, to point questions at individuals, rather to allow choice - but also to realize, in my innocence, I had also set the stage for Marcella's reaching out - Is it dangerous, too, to be over sensitive - to create a 'kid gloves' environment that will make all exchange like walking on glass?

SHARED STORIES - STEPPING OVER BOUNDARIES??

March. After meeting with you, Jan, began thinking of the issue of trust and confidence - at Genesis there's lots of talk. Classroom stories spill out in the lunchroom, in the halls - we don't monitor our sharing. Asked for discussion of confidentiality - the psychology of it, the law?

Discovery We HAVE a policy, which everyone signs I signed it. But like many things at Genesis - probably in many settings, we don't really discuss, consider the consequences - Was aware that this discussion of confidentiality became a setting for sharing, disclosure - teachers wanting to gain support.

February. A situation in the kitchen. Young woman learner, with child in child care, discloses abusive situation. Child care sees effects on child. Learner shares with male teacher in kitchen. Male teacher, forties and single, clearly is attracted to young woman. Extends support to her far outside his job description. He suggests to another Genesis Staff that 'he thinks he has a live one' - he is giving her a ride home, baby sitting her child, etc. She comes to speak with me about her situation. Says she has been in a shelter, won't go again. I give her the information, encourage her to try again.

Next thing I know, chef has gotten her a job - she leaves program. Were there alternative strategies here? What about staff development for male staff with egos vulnerable to needy gals? Awareness for guys? Should I provide training in a mixed group?

March - STORY OF LAURA

We wrestle with this one. Laura comes to class drunk. She has three young children - no partner. Is she leaving them alone? If we challenge her, will she stop coming, end the linkage for possible referral? Ginny speaks with her - she agrees she needs help. WE make an appointment with a multicultural substance abuse office - she breaks the appointments twice. She is still coming to school smelling of alcohol. Ginny confronts her - says she should only

come to school when she is not drinking. Talks with her about the children. She vows that she doesn't ever drink when they are around. Yet we know she comes to school, bringing her young children, with alcohol on the breath.

April. Laura has stopped coming to school Her friend says she is 'working'. Doesn't know where. CaseWorker tries to call no answer. Social worker tells us we should have called DCYF - What if they took the kids? Can we handle doing this? Can we handle NOT doing it?

TOO SCARED TO LEARN Response

Reading Jenny's book. Aware of some 'resistance' behaviors among some teachers. One especially. Interesting, as she talks herself of having been abused. She is VERY hard on learners. Calls them 'lazy', 'unmotivated'. Am concerned. Want help in constructing staff development that subtly addresses the issue without pointing fingers. This is a serious, committed teacher. But harsh. As coordinator, how do I handle this? For some learners, she appears to be excellent. Well organized, conscientious. Serious. (Boy is she EVER serious.) I am sure, however, that she enhances negative feelings, prohibits sharing or disclosing. A tough question.

April. The workshops with World Ed/ Jenny. Extremely impressed by Jenny's description of her most recent work with women's group. Real strategies to make space 'safe'. Want to try it, encourage creative ways to bring such strategies into Genesis.

May. Learner is interviewed about family literacy - praises program. Proceeds to disclose about husband who is depressed, doesn't want her to come to school. Find out that teacher feels she may be LD because she 'can't concentrate, often look out window, doesn't seem to GET it' - have one on one talk with teacher = some casual discussion of strategies - realize need for more specific dialogue/training

Planning for next year - aware of need for more specific support for staff - staff dialogue which will address issues of disclosure, negative responses in class that may result from violence current or past. I know I need to create ongoing support and dialogue as we learn about this together, and with our learners. Am considering a women's group possibly a reading group which may address this issue. Want to use the film made in Mass (Together we Bloom).

Date: 25 Aug 2000 0000 To: "onthescreen" <onthescreen@coollist.com>

From: "Sally Gabb" <sgabb412@hotmail.com>

Subject: program management: addressing violence

Hi all- I had sent a compilation of various incidents at Genesis involving violence/violence and participation in learning/ violence and challenges of appropriate responses in classes/by program. Janet challenged me to go deeper – what are program issues? staff development issues? staff/learnercommunications issues?

I personally have been profoundly affected by the research about violence and learning- both in terms of looking at myself as a learner/teacher, and in terms of our collective and individual response (or lack thereof) at The Genesis Center. During this year, a teacher and our case manager have been deeply involved in our efforts to build greater awareness at Genesis - we have shared staff discussion, worked as a team on appropriate responses. Yet I feel that we have a limited program wide awareness in many ways.

I can see that teachers/staff keep 'safe screens' carefully erected; some are the safe screens of those who have experienced little direct violence - the just 'can't imagine it' - something in their horror of the thought of some kinds of violence they have the habit of walking carefully around it ('but I'm not a therapist....')

As I approach the fall, and a new program year, I am considering some vastly different approaches, some that challenge staff members/teachers to work from their own experiences as a base for understanding. I will work with Nancy and Bernice to design some interactive sessions in which we attempt to break down the 'safety screens', yet keep it safe for individuals. This is the touchy part. For male staff members, too, the issue of sexism as violence can be very touchy, especially if they are not from white Euro Am culture (or maybe more so if they are!!)

One clear issue is how to identify need without being too intrusive in learner's lives. If learners disclose, they sometimes withdraw, and don't want to revisit - or deny that anything is really wrong. Also, if violence was in the past, dealing with present emotional systems that are protective can be really hard - like passivity, spacing out, nervousness, defensiveness, etc.

A second issue is how to create support groups in this setting for women and/or for men and women who have experienced violence. Should I trust interested teachers without background in counseling? Is there training for such groups?? Would Jenny design a training?? I really want to explore issues of violence in other cultures - accepted violence that is

unacceptable here. But also, to recognize the violence of cultural transition itself - the 'othering' - the subtle and clear discrimination - just dealing with the incredible materialism of this culture.

Another issue are the prejudices among cultures, and the violence of rejection within our population. Cultural understanding/tolerance has to be a part of dealing with trauma and learning. One very real issue in some classes is the reality of racism against African Americans here, and the ways that immigrant populations adopt white attitudes, or suffer because of it, depending on their own skin color. I remember so well my Cape Verdean friend who is VERY black telling me that her family were always 'Portuguese' until the Civil Rights movement years. Also, among Latinos, there are violent prejudices between groups, such as between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans.

Classrooms can be supportive, but they can also be vicious and brutal. These are issues I plan to address in our fall orientation/staff discussions. I plan to start with our own 'trauma and learning' issues. Note for the mention of one teacher above: she is leaving! But others may come with similar issues. I need to get immediate ideas for how I can address some of these issues in September.

At the Genesis Center, we consciously approach our learners in terms of strengths and talents, but violence of many kinds can clearly stand in the way of openness to learning and sharing.

Finally, I am interested specifically in the effects of trauma on LANGUAGE learning - is there a greater effect? Is this an individual issue? OF course, aging diminishes certain receptiveness to language learning for most people - and some just don't have ear/facility. Nevertheless, the emotional issues connected with communication must have some 'gates' that close with trauma - and if so, how can we help folks open them without further damage (re experiencing memory??)

Janet and all - these reflections are a result of our year long inquiry. I will continue to dredge my thoughts as I review my scattered notes. Please respond, anyone, if you have ideas for me!! Thanks all, especially Janet. Sal

Interview with Sandy Kelleher 28 August/00

Sandy met with me in August to discuss the work the project had tried to accomplish and especially to speak from the perspective she brought to the work as a former adult educator now working in child protective services.

During the winter, Sandy had developed a survey that she'd wanted to ask residents of area shelters to complete in order to get a sense of what the needs for education might be amongst shelter residents. In the event, we did not pursue this, for a number of reasons. Surveys such as this are problematic in that although women might trust the confidentiality of the survey, I'm not convinced that it's necessarily an accurate way to gather information or to assist women in naming what they need. This process of identifying needs and resources needs to occur with an advocate, a counselor, someone to facilitate a process. Surely, many victims of violence are able to articulate their own needs and interests; I'm not sure, though, that asking them to do so on paper while living in transition is necessarily the most useful way for them to share information or for us to ask it of them. Sandy's survey is here, though, in the event that others might find more useful ways of framing these questions and seeking this information.

draft survey

We are a group of adult education workers who are trying to help women in transition address their learning needs. We hope you can tell us more about what you think are important things for us to know and think about in helping women think about learning – schools, reading, and other forms of learning.

Number [instead of name, for anonymity]

length time in shelter

number/ages of children, if any

[translator, if needed – should this survey be available in Spanish and/or other languages?]

education: last grade completed, HS, GED, college, or other program (job training, for example)

What education or help with learning do you think you'd like to pursue and/or need now?

Would learning be easy or hard for you today? Why?

Would you like more information about educational programs? If yes, please let [shelter contact] know and we will get this information to her to give to you.

Would you like to speak to one of us about teaching and learning for about an hour-long interview?

interview follow up (interview)

Please tell me about your experiences with learning/school.

How do you like to learn new things?

What do/did you enjoy about school? What do/did you not like about school?

When is learning easier for you? Why?

When is it more difficult? Why?

What would make learning really comfortable and enjoyable for you?

What do you think adult education teachers should know about helping survivors of violence to learn?

Do you think survivors have particular learning needs or strengths?

Sandy began our discussion in August around the issue of building trust. She spoke about the women she's encountered through her work in child protective services. She observed that many of the women she met in homeless shelters faced domestic violence as a primary problem. She spoke of women she'd worked with with chronic histories of abusive partners, of drug abuse, and with little, if any, follow up for the most part from service providers with whom they'd interacted. One woman, she said, couldn't care for her children, but would find a relative, instead of allowing child protective workers to place the kids in foster care.

About connections between drug abuse and domestic abuse: "Often women have money because they get checks, do drugs with a partner, this keeps the partner happy; the women are supplying the money [tip benefits, work] money keeps the partner because the partner has no money but uses his power to get the money, then wants you to smoke with him until the money is gone and then he beats the crap out of you."

(This sentiment was echoed by a woman in a shelter where I work, who also spoke about a need for women in transition to find ways to avoid becoming [re]entangled with abusive partners).

“In the shelter setting, abused women are so traumatized that they’ll almost say/do anything to go along with what society expects that they should do.”

Sandy suggested that working with women in shelters should move slowly – “let them write, see films, not do huge goal setting, almost an AA model - one day/step at a time –it’s so overwhelming; women and children need so much.”

“When adult ed. centers do intakes, they need to help people understand the difference between a short term and long term goal, maybe work on short term goals [as opposed to supporting this idea of ‘I’m Going to get my GED’ – talking about all or nothing]. If we’re going to educate women, we have to break it down – even when people were tutoring for literacy volunteers, they heard, “I’m going to read/get my GED/whatever]”

“Many of the women and men we get in education programs are so traumatized, that they have to start almost from scratch you have to be content with drawing pictures, writing a few paragraphs, learning basic computer skills if it makes them feel competent.. [or risk] burnout for teachers” and their feelings of frustration – “I can’t bring her far enough...”

“I ran into 2 adult women [former students] the other night. One of them, MJ, had been severely beaten by the father of her two children; he took control over her. She’s tried with me, two or three times to get a GED; I helped her get a job but she had to be let go – too much time off for childcare. She still doesn’t have a GED, can’t make more than \$7 an hour - math is her big issue; she can’t focus long enough to do any of this. Her partner used to stand outside the classroom, make her walk behind him on the way home. She can’t focus on math. He’s marrying her best friend. The woman with her that night never finished her GED either, but she is able to control MJ; so MJ’s friend has replaced her abuser by now controlling MJ.”

“What could I have done differently with her literacy? – she could have been in touch, I’d given her my business card.”

I asked Sandy if we want to trust practitioners to be involved in this work?

“Educators have to be aware of it. Teachers are just a reflection of society, what’s going on with society. We’re middle class, pick up a few buzz words – family violence is both catch word and real. **Do** we really want to know what family violence is?” Sandy then mentions

burnout again. I suggest that regardless of who is/isn't victim; I need to know how to make a space safe for everyone. Sandy talked about Jenny's suggestion about finding other ways to make women comfortable (better chair, e.g.) and added, "Isn't it any educators' job to treat people respectfully? I've worked with people who do not treat people with respect. I don't know how we teach that? Don't you have to respect yourself first and overcome your own middle class values, judgements?"

We again spoke of some of the recommendations Jenny had put forward, such as granting students leaves of absence, rather than throwing them out of the program for non-attendance, for example. Sandy observed that it "could be the wrong time for the person to be there, but you need to maintain the connection; about attendance outcomes for funding: I don't know how you get around that."

"You have to make people feel welcome. The classroom setting has to be where you're nurturing – that might mean that you're having coffee, you're eating something, you have to take time to talk about things that make people feel accepted; work on relationships between students to effect any kind of learning – you have to build a bridge, build relationships ... [It's about] **respect** - even with the job that I have now, if I can build respect with my peers and those I have to interview - some level of mutual respect, the investigation/classroom goes better."

"You take a kid from where they are and move from there; teachers who couldn't do that had problems; teachers who couldn't accept that there were discipline problems."

We then spoke about violence generally. Sandy asked, "Do I think Vietnam had a bearing? Yes. The war was in our living rooms. Sex, drugs and rock and roll, too. Our acceptance of violence, policies have to do with this. She mentioned a rap group and said "if this is the kind of music we need to listen to in the classroom to work on language, [and to problematize the issues], this is what we need to do, then... you're teaching people with all kinds of language backgrounds, even through they allegedly speak English; you've got to work with and respect their language too."

And family violence - is this a euphemism? "It sells right now; the new brochure for the resource center in Boroughville says "family" violence – is it problematic – is it covering up the real issue? "People are afraid to put out "domestic violence" on a pamphlet in a rural area because no one would talk to them, but they **would** come forward to talk about family violence. Silencing/not silencing women about coming forward."

Sandy also spoke about building bonds in the community as a child protective worker, “... proving that you can be fair, telling a woman , “don’t fuck with me – I’m being square with you, you be square with me..”

I wonder where is the place between **not** controlling the woman, not revictimizing her , caring about her and understanding the consequences of her trauma?

“I see women abused emotionally and/or physically in three/fourths of my cases; a handicapped woman being abused by one of her service providers and by the mother of her partner. There’s no mandatory reporting for dis/abled adults. There are multiple forms of violence - because of a woman’s lack of ability to read, **she’s controlled by those who should be helping her.** - because I was on a ‘politically sensitive’ investigation., the boss told me to file a petition and just make it go away.” Sandy finds herself reminding herself/remembering, this job is about protecting the child.

I ask her about literacy issues and how they impact on the people she interacts with through her investigations. She said she hopes to make some impact, posts articles, shares information but has the sense that she has no chance of getting people to think/learn about/consider the issues, “they’ve been there forever, they’ve gotten their BS or BA, the first in their family, got a state job and that’s all they want to know/learn.”

“Getting a good translator - should be SOP; but even that isn’t. getting through technical translation, e.g. – with a Spanish-speaking couple, [I] suggested that they call an ESOL provider; try to figure out how to get English/citizenship . Their child’s hand was burnt; the family lived in a three storey tenement; an anonymous call came in reporting that the child’s hand had been burnt. Sandy called her translator, got to the house and spoke to the parties involved.

The translator said that she had seen that same kind of burn before. “Three hot water tanks, two were set on very high – no one knew that the water had been set too high, no one could read it – it wasn’t a submersion burn; the kid hadn’t pulled his hand away in time. It had nothing to do with abuse/neglect - the kid hadn’t pulled his hand back fast enough. The parent owned a house, but couldn’t read the thing, came from a country that could have lacked cold water tanks..”

This happens, too.

Julie Nora, September, 2000

On the Screen: The Effects of Violence on My Learning

Point of View

Before beginning to describe my involvement with *On the Screen* over the past year, I will briefly qualify the experiences that color my participation. I am a white, 35 year old female. I lived in a violent home from birth until my mother was killed by my father when I was twelve years old. Education has always been important to me. School was a refuge from my home life. It was largely due to experiences I had with certain teachers and the opportunities they afforded me to escape from my own life that caused me to choose to be an educator. Professionally I have worked as an educator for the past decade. I have taught ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) in adult, university, and K-12 public school settings. I am currently pursuing a doctoral degree in education.

Participation With On the Screen

I became a part of this reflective practitioner group approximately one year ago. These were my initial thoughts about my participation in the *On the Screen*:

Participating in this reflective practitioner group will enable me to interweave to significant aspects of my life, my profession and my personal history.

As a teacher of middle school in Providence, I work with students who have seen violence at societal and personal levels. Some I am aware of, for instance when a Liberian student arrives from a country where there has been a civil war, and some I am not aware of because the violence is hidden in shame. Having lived the first twelve years of my life with domestic violence, I am very aware of the secret pact a young person has with her or himself not to let anyone in on the

secret, for fear of it costing friendship. However, hiding it does not eliminate its effects. Exposure to such violence affects among other aspects of one's life, one's ability to learn. The clothes one wears to school, the cleanliness with which one arrives, the habits of interaction, one's understanding of love, to name a few - all contribute to the identity of the student who enters a classroom. I can recall personally moments of extreme embarrassment caused by my realizing that my behavior or appearance had leaked out. This reduces a learner's ability to concentrate in a classroom. As a survivor of this, I aim to help young people not hide from their reality, but to overcome it.

While having great personal insight into the point of view of the child who experiences domestic violence, I know little of how to work with students who are in similar situations. It is my hope that through this project I can learn to understand the effects of violence on learning as a professional, not as a victim, and how to develop learning strategies which will aid learners in overcoming barriers. (September, 1999)

My involvement with *On the Screen* developed in direction and in ways that I had not anticipated. Here I will trace my journey over the past year, attempting to reflect on what I have learned in the process about the effects of violence on my learning.

Right about the time I began working with *On the Screen*, I also began to volunteer at a local women's shelter and to "research" a service learning program affiliated with this shelter for a class I was taking. I chose the setting, and volunteering at the woman's shelter seemed at first the fulfillment of a lifetime's goal to work with those, who like my mother, were living in proximity of violence. I approached the increased involvement with domestic violence issues with enthusiasm. I felt for the first time in my life I would be able to combine my personal history with my profession of being an educator. I was not prepared for how this increased involvement would affect me.

In a class one night when I was to present the results of my "research"—a fairly benign report about the service learning program—I had what I later learned was an anxiety attack. I could not make the presentation to what was a familiar audience of 7 members of my doctoral cohort. This had never happened to me before. I had told the story of my childhood trauma many times, always to friends in informal settings. There was something about discussing the shelter/my past in a university classroom setting that contributed to my breakdown. The experience, while allowing another opportunity for reflection about my childhood, was not pleasant. I became disabled from performing the task of school and revisited great pain. It was the first time I became conscious of the effects of violence on my learning.

I changed jobs right about the same time. I was no longer a middle school teacher, but began to work at an applied research educational institution. Due to both my personal reaction to the work as well as the career change, the focus of my work for *On the Screen* changed from reflecting on how I could help my students, to investigating the effects of my own childhood violence on my learning at this stage in my life.

Activities

On the Screen provided several opportunities for my reflection to occur. Meeting physically and virtually with colleagues who were investigating the effects of violence in the settings where they work and live allowed me to discuss and listen in a safe environment. Reading *Half the House* (Hoffman, 1995) and *Too Scared to Learn* (Horsman, 1999) and having the opportunity to meet and talk with the authors of these books provided alternative mechanisms for contemplation about the issues. In the past year I also began my own therapy sessions, which gave me yet another instrument to begin to decipher the effects of violence on my learning.

Acceptable Violence

In the past year I have contemplated the notion of acceptable versus non-acceptable violence. Society is replete with certain types of violence: Columbine, natural disasters, car chases on so-called “reality t.v.”. These publicly appropriated episodes of violence are frequently followed by sound-bite therapy sessions on the 11 o’clock news: “Tonight on the 11 o’clock news we will provide you with tips on how to talk to your children about violence.” This all occurs against a backdrop of a lack of public acknowledgement of domestic and community violence. The trauma that the unfortunate children and teachers at Columbine experienced is what many experience in their homes on a daily basis, but which they are not allowed to share.

A story to tell

Telling one’s story is therapeutic. I have often felt a compulsion to tell my story. In some ways, I wear my violent past as my badge of honor. It provides a window into the complexities that formed me. Survivors of violence have described how survivors’ stories can be gifts to victims of violence. For example, a survivor of domestic violence may give the gift of her story to other woman who live her past in the present to let them know they can escape (Herman, 1997). For me it is slightly different. I have never told my story to those who currently are living in violence. My story-telling episodes have occurred in personal settings. One thing that I have learned in the past year that telling my story publicly, specifically in a classroom setting, is a challenge. Perhaps this is because of the unacceptable type of violence that colors my past. As an educator, it prompts me to consider how we can allow our students to tell their stories—to wear their badges of honor—without subjecting them to the anxiety I experienced in class that day.

The telling of living with violence is not only important for the individual who experiences such violence, but for the greater society as well. Jenny Horsman (1999) urges us to see

victims of violence as “canaries in the mine”. Miners traditionally used canaries to detect gases. As canaries are more sensitive than humans, their early detection of gases helped to keep humans from entering toxic zones. Victims of violence similarly can warn the greater society of the violence that is toxic to us all:

..as a society we might view traumatized women’s reaction to violence as a warning that violence is toxic to us all. We might see these reactions as useful warnings that societal violence needs to be brought under control, rather than seeing traumatized people as needing to reduce their reactions, heal, and increase their tolerance of violence. If society is a toxic mine, there is no place free of the toxic irritant.” (Horsman, 1999:50)

Similarly, we must see violent experiences of the learners who enter our schools as warnings and work to not try to reduce their reactions and get over it. Personally, I never felt this opportunity was available to me. As a child, I somehow knew that my experiences would not be valued in this sense. In my most recent experience of telling my story to my classmates, I as an adult do not this my story was valued in this way. I believe my cohort, compassionate as they were, never viewed my experience as a kind of warning for them or the greater society. They merely pitied my individual experience.

A language about the violence surrounding all of us—canaries and miners—needs to emerge. Can this occur through the release of a victim’s story? How can victims’ stories emerge without causing the kind of breakdown I experienced? How can we bvalue such stories as warnings for all of society? Jenny Horsman encourages the use of alternative settings for education. My own experience this past year that the classroom was not a comfortable place for me to tell my story. Not because it was dangerous as Horsman (1999) describes it. I do not normally fee threatened in a classroom. I have actually been very successful in school. The classroom where I was telling my story was a doctoral level class, evidence—if nothing else—of the fact that I have spent much of my life in classrooms. Yet I was still not comfortable telling about my violent past among a cohort whom I am normally quite comfortable sharing my opinions. I was able at the same time to share my story with members of *On the Screen* in a setting other than a traditional classroom where I was more comfortable. Beyond the actual physical space, what is it about “alternative” settings that can make the telling of such stories safe, and what is it about classrooms that can make it unsafe? What are the implications of this for K-12 students who do not have the opportunity to choose “alternative”? I do not know that I have the answer to such questions. Only that my personal

experiences over the past year confirm the complexities of the contexts in which the immersion of such stories can comfortably occur and that as educators we must be aware of this.

Resiliency

As educators we may not be able to create the non-traditional setting. However, we can create environments which promote resiliency. In the past year I have thought a lot about what about the relationships I had outside my home, particularly with educators, allowed me to “survive”. Though I never found the opportunity to tell my story comfortably in school, school for me has always been a viable way to escape the violence of my home. I was able to easily chose that option because my school was not a place of violence (Horsman, 1999). Research shows that a school climate which is caring, with high expectations, and that gives students opportunities to make decisions can reduce the risk factors that may threaten children (Williams, 1996). Additionally, curricula which makes small improvements visible and teaches what leads to successful learning will be useful to all learners, particularly those who live with violence (Horsman, 1999). Richard Hoffman described to us how this occurred for him in our discussion. His trust was restored through a baseball coach who taught him to pitch, and who did not want anything in return from him, unlike his abusive coach whom he’d know before. Such caring curricula does not necessarily need a lesson plan. In this past year I have thought back on the numerous teachers who restored my trust through such “small” episodes. Even if we cannot provide alternative settings to all children, perhaps we can work within traditional settings to reduce the violence of schools and provide the type of environments which reduce risk factors and restore trust for children living alongside violence.

Conclusion

I was one of those children who did not stand out as dysfunctional. I spent much of my energy trying to fit in and be accepted. I met many along the way who helped restore my trust. It mostly worked. I write to testify that such despite such outward signs of “success”, even tin the bast scenarios, such students are not unaffected, however. My recent experiences served as an all too poignant reminder that the violence of my childhood has had profound effects on me—who I am, what I’ve chosen to do, what I still cannot do. Though the effects of violence on their learning may not be revealed until later in life, they are still there. I was afforded many opportunities to develop resiliency, but I have never been allowed to tell my story. As educators, we must strive to provide safe environments for all

victims of violence, not only those who reveal their pain, to tell their stories. And we must value these as warnings to us all, not as illnesses for victims to overcome.

References

Benard, B. (1996). Fostering resiliency in urban schools. In B. Williams (Ed.), Closing the achievement gap: A vision for changing beliefs and practices (pp. 96-119). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Hoffman, R. (1995). Half the house. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company.

Horsman, J. (1999). Too scared to learn: Women, violence, and education. Toronto, Canada: McGilligan Books.

Dina Solomon contributed this reflection on her first year at Youthbuild and her participation in the project. Where many of the older participants in the fellowship work with students whose experiences of violence affect their learning, Dina's students, arguably, *are* the violence. Their energy, their day to day realities, their music, their language, their streets all make their way into classrooms in a manner that is palpably different from other 'adult' learning contexts. Dina herself says, "they're straight up thugs." You'll see from her writing that she doesn't say this flippantly and is passionate in her commitment to the students and in her belief that there are no bad students.

YouthBuild is an education program for out of school youth between the ages of 16 and 24 in the city of Providence providing academic preparation for high school equivalency work and beyond, construction training on site in various building trades as well as leadership development and work on career planning and goals.

Dina and I spoke about her writing and our shared anxieties of being unable to articulate our learning. When I pressed Dina for an analysis of her experiences with Youthbuild and the fellowship project, she said, "At this stage in my teaching career I don't think that there's any other answer – you just have to believe there's no such thing as a bad student. We spend a lot of time thinking about how to make our project replicable, so that anyone could walk in and see what we do/document and do the same thing we need to create that kind of structure and assessment for funders. What good is this work if it depends solely on individuals – but if you can move something that's part of a structure, it can be more effective." Dina stressed her hope that the qualities of teachers, as opposed to a cult of personality would contribute to Youthbuild's replicability.

"To me it's all about good teaching; good teaching is a trade and involves skills you can learn and hone over time. Anybody who wants to could do it if they're open to learning the tools of the trade – classroom dynamics, class structure, curriculum – but some of it, which is connected to these discussions are 'softer' skills – learning how to listen to what people are really saying and knowing that there's no such thing as a bad student." I argued that there are qualities that bring people to the work differently – the need, for example, to control a classroom, as opposed to the need to work with students to facilitate learning. Dina pointed out that sometimes you need to do both. I argued that you don't go to work with a control agenda or with the notion that you'll 'fix' those broken young people if you believe in the primacy of a strengths-based approach. We continued to try to unpack this notion of 'helping' Dina said,

"I have a way that I want them to be ... part of what we do is acculturation, laying out consequences." Helping people see where there are choices to be made, where they can control their own learning and where the points of resistance might be. Her writing reflects the power of her convictions and an element of adult education that practitioners working with older learners might miss.

My Education

I am the Leadership Development Coordinator at YouthBuild Providence. I work with out-of-school youth between the ages of 16 and 24. My job as an educator is fraught with issues of violence. When I applied to participate in broad discussions about violence, I wrote that my students were victims and perpetrators of violence. They experienced violence in various ways – emotional, physical, structural. They are the fallout of a society devised to divide people from each other. They need to be acculturate so they can earn enough money to survive. They are told they are rash, violent, irrational, angry, lazy, short-sighted. They are disconnected, isolated, unsupported. They have ties of loyatlies to gangs, families, people, neighborhoods economic networks that you wouldn't know existed, you know, if you're from where I'm from. Some of the lessons I learned from them in my first year of teaching are the lessons that every first year teacher learns. Some I learned from them specifically, mostly through series of failure to hear, understand, and interpret what they thought was clear and apparent.

There is a scene from early in the year when I had a frustrating day in the classroom, and I ended the day by hiding in the bathroom, too angry to even cry. Before I knew it, three pop in under the guise of being concerned and they laugh in my face "don't you know we're ghetto kids, see where we're coming from. .You're not gonna get us to do what you want us to do" Yeah, but what do you want to do? Why are you here? Thought you came to get some ideas about what you're doing. One of the lessons of teaching – see

where we're coming from means know us, understand us, hear us, see our fear of what you are asking us to do, with showing up in the morning in general, see our disbelief in ourselves, see our anger, and our frustrations with ourselves and the world. Try your math? You try our lives for a while. But then they aren't always really sincere in trying the math, either, and whatever the reason may be, legit because of personal history or whatever happened the night before or not, they're there to gain math skills which are not insignificant to their futures. There's already a "me and them." I can't deny that separation, the need for it, the need for me to be a figure of authority. And they need to be able to pull it off, and we can't bend on our standards, or it becomes pointless to have the program in the first place.

So we become deeply involved...

So we become deeply involved in our students' lives – some of them, but we demand that they finish what they start, and we tell them that in order to succeed, they have to get up earlier, stay later, work harder, and NEVER give anyone an excuse to judge them wrongly, because the whole world does anyway, the whole system is set up for them to fail before they even get off to a running start, and they have to know this, understand it, digest their anger, and be productive without turning on themselves and each other. And we lose people. But we change people, too, if they are willing to be changed, to lose friends, to shift the networks and lives that sustain them in the only ways they know to be possible.

We create a collective. We run around the block reciting the philosophy at the top of our lungs, and we talk about zebras hiding their stripes to protect them from the hunters. And we tell them to scream it towards city hall so they know we're coming. Then it backfires at times, and "As a community" becomes our mantra that we use against each other, it binds us, it becomes an excuse – "why didn't they have to help clean up? How come they got to leave early – as a community!" We are fighting for our individual lives, but we attempt to share the burden, even though we are all broken.

As a staff we choose our battles. Language is not always one of them. Once and a while we speak about the way calling each other "girls" when they fail at something is offensive and damaging. "Bust me up" means "give me half your cigarette..." We don't address the homophobia on a large scale. We sometimes embrace the media sound bite culture idea to make a point, to drive something home, for familiarity. We talk about the visions we see of hip hop, of black people, lack of asian people, of what family is supposed to be, of the American dream most of us will never have like the Huxtables or

the Brady's (wait, who are THEY?), of images of beauty and success. Can we do all that and teach math – if we're on our shit. WE address slurs, but we can't police. We use the excuse that we need to learn how to communicate in all environments, and we need to be able to switch our modes of communication for job interviews, classroom settings, etc. Drugs are sort of one issue we sort of address. Gangs are sort of one of them. We acknowledge, but in a world where the color bandana you're wear means you get beat up in certain places at certain times of night, where you can't be a punk, and where involving yourself in a certain level of conflict may save you later... we're not in Kansas any more.

We mediate battles, don't let people try to sabotage their way out of the program... Well, guess what, we're going to let you stay this time because we're not like other programs, we're going to work with you to get along with people, curb your anger, be professional, figure out what you want to do with your future, feel like you have a future.

Any given day

Andrea wrote in her journal when I asked her to picture her life five years from now "I hope I'm dead. I hope my kids are with my sister because they are happier with her than they are with me. I smoke hoping to get cancer, I shoot people hoping to get shot. I hope I'm not around in five years..." I pulled her in to talk about it and she said my two year old hates me, he won't listen to me, he always wants to visit my sister" I tell her all two year olds are like that, that every kid looks forward to leaving the house cuz it means someone's going to spoil them, pay them extra attention, treat them different. She had never though of that. No one ever said... No one ever told her all kids want is to be loved by their parents. That's all. They want approval. They don't know what to do when you go looking for it from them. Trust them. I trust no one, not even my kids.

And I feel like I'm whoring my students' lives in order to explain them, but all I have is their examples and the ways I care about them, and the things I've learned from teaching and from them as individuals...

Any day, any given day there are issues of violence. The one who likes to call himself Wyzdom stole a car at the construction site to jump Andrea's car because she was so heated she punched a wall 'til her knuckles broke. The construction manager left because he thought we should have sent Wyz back to jail instead of forcing him to pay reparations to the owners of the car he stole. He didn't feel safe, felt threatened by students who said they'd follow him home. A joke, I told him – a serious joke involving the release of anger just in its expression. Not too funny, I guess.

... Andrea and Tanesha in each other's grills, face to face like an umpire and a player who's out, clearly out – or not so clearly. A battle over the philosophy of nonviolence turned to example. A shining example of I won't back down I'll stand my ground won't be a punk won't let her punk me how she gonna keep running her mouth about me over something so stupid. Hate the messenger, not the message. And can't we silly white dykes who never had to DEAL see that it's always about the messenger because the message is everywhere. We know the message. We don't need to hear this. We are not revolutionaries, Dina, we're just kids and I'm just trying to get mines while you're trying to tell me I can't bang the motherfucker who stole my... and you wanna tell us how to protect ourselves from cops CAN YOU EVEN BELIEVE PROTECT OURSELVES FROM COPS? And you think they won't be looking us up in our beds flashlight in the grill get out of bed you puerto rican bastard if we try your nonviolent resistance bullshit, straight bullshit....

How can I ask you to be optimistic, to make you trust that the moral arch of the universe bends towards justice when you never seen any? That's downright irresponsible, unethical of me - who's fucking universe are you living in? Conflict resolution becomes a game. Disconnect between hearing ideas, believing them, yeah, that's true, I feel you, D, ONE LOVE, but one disconnected I love all my people's love necessarily has to turn into I am disconnected from them like everything else. I never had a family before YouthBuild, I live with my girl because I needed a place to say and now, y'know, she got me trapped and she's gonna have a kid. My girl, man, she be stressin me, delivered me my paternity papers on the day I got my GED what shit is THAT? This kid needs love that's why he's always hugging everyone, got his arms wrapped around somebody's throat, probably no one ever touches him and he doesn't know what to do with all that AS A COMMUNITY WE ARE ENGAGED IN A UNITED STRUGGLE to overcome the violence.... But it is within us, not as innate human nature as PROTECTION from each other, from ourselves?, yeah well bump you and bump this program and everyone in this motherfucker cuz – I ain't learning a goddamn thing and you be making us do all this shit up in here for what? I ain't got no job now. Yeah I can put up some sheetrock, but I ain't gonna go do that, Naw bump that shit. I can't be having someone tell me what to do all goddamn day. I'm gonna be a doctor, architect or something, get me a house in the country far the fuck away from here, have two shiny cars, yeah man, an Acura get the rims all nice, get me a nice girl who I can love, who's gonna be faithful, understand me. She said, I'm gonna get me a job so I can support my kids, I don't need no goddamn man.

Are you a fag? Are you a dyke? Ask me why I care? I don't want no punk ass bumrushing nigga up in here, I'm trying to learn. That's gonna disrupt my learning environment. That kind of shit right there is violent, violent against nature.

Can I use the phone? It's an emergency. My kid... yeah, what? He's got a cold? He skinned his knee? OH – you wanna get out of class? Being played. That's another thing – how can I trust them when they'll do anything to get out... Your kid's a big deal now, but not when you wanna see your boys at 10 tonight, right? Remind them of that – if you were blazing right now, would you leave to pick him up? Yeah, ok then go. You lose pay for the day and your homework's still due next class. And you don't give a shit about the reading? You're bored? That's right, the “how much am I supposed to give/ sympathize... when does my sympathy become an insult to their capabilities and a detriment to their development as people?” How much of their past and present experiences do I need to know to be understanding? When is it too much and I become a liberal? Good question. Of course you all tend to have more emergencies for real than anyone I knew growing up....

Well boys and girls, where is the violence? Is it in the media? Is it on the streets? Is it within us? Is it between us? IS it between us and them? Choose A B C or D, all of the above, E b and C only, F A and D only. Sorry time's up. We have already reached the point of no return. No fire next time, last time, some other time. Now and everywhere. Pervasive and impervious. All of our theories hold no water, so to speak. One love, see the end, the outcome, feel me.

We start the day with the roll call and philosophy. I take attendance and they yell their names. Lose 25% of your stipend for the day if you come in late in the first half hour – even 30 seconds. 50% if it's in the first hour. All if it's after that. Stand in a line face front don't talk listen up you might miss some important information about what's going on today. I SAID NO TALKING DURING FORMATION! Go on Yakim... Yakim, Carlos, Ellis, J-Rock, Corey, Carluis, Sareth, Misty, Katisha, Tanesha, Omar, Victorio, Ziggy, Eddie, Veasna..... As a community we are engaged in a united struggle to overcome the social, political, economic, educational, and spiritual inequities that threaten to destroy us as people. We recognize that as young people we are one of the greatest resources available to the survival of our community, therefore we stand ready, and willing and hereby pledge our commitment to rebuild and improve the quality of life in our community through collective work, responsibility and cooperative economics. To educate elevate and raise the consciousness of ourselves and others along the way. To develop our potential as leaders

and positive role models so we can proactively pursue justice equality and peace for all. All this we do with appreciation love dignity and faith that the collective will of our community is the greatest force conceivable. Woooo haaaa. “make it happen. See you at 8:30...” then it’s all forgotten and he said she said and I hate math and I can’t do it anyway. Until there’s a fight or a conflict or a confrontations and we remember why we’re here because we have to articulate it. That’s what got me hooked – the philosophy. I said to my former boss I wanna be here I don’t care what you make me do. I want to be a part of this. I don’t even know yet what I can give but I’ll make it up, figure it out as I go along, think on my feet (who thought that was a good idea – these are people’s lives not your fucking experience of personal growth) and I’m here for them and whatever this things needs to keep rolling and build.

We end fists locked in a circle, a break down of the day – classroom folks could have used a little more focus, get back to class on time after breaks because this is real life, it doesn’t start later, it starts now, make every moment count. Don’t forget that. Close your eyes, quiet on the circle. focus. Think about how you’re going to get back here in the morning. Silence. We look up, look in each others eyes, going back out into the world where we don’t have time to think about this shit “Be safe be strong” we say every day at the end of the day.

My education continues

How has talking about violence helped me be a better educator? How has attempting to understand where they come from make me teach better/ make them learn better? In some ways this is an idiot question, a simple answer – simply, you can’t teach without understanding. The fact that I understand has made me a teacher, because I wasn’t last year. If you don’t understand you take things personally. An old teacher of mine – a wonderful teacher , the kind of teacher who had students begging to get into his math classes year after year wrote me an e-mail in the beginning and said “ teaching is about looking into your students eyes, really looking, to see if they understand, really understand.” Simple idea, very hard to do. Because they lie, they lie to you and to themselves about what they understand and don’t understand. Part of what you come to understand working with any group of students is that you and your class are the last thing on their list of cares and concerns on any given day. You are the constant, the afterthought, the when I get my life together I’ll be able to make this a priority, but in the meantime I’m just trying to get through it, get over. So I become an entertainer. I am as clear and as

patient as possible. I treat everyone the same way as much as possible. I tell frustrated people who are far behind to hang on, I'll get to them one on one. I repeat jokes, explanations, I encourage them. I notice that falling asleep in class might mean I'm totally afraid of doing this because I've failed every other time I tried. Or I'm disruptive and resistant and I challenge you at every turn because this never works out for me. Or I tell you that I got locked up for beating up a teacher because you should know how little I expect of you and this whole situation. And myself. In the beginning, I encourage. I explain that we start easy not because I think people are dumb, but because I'm a little slow and it takes me a while to catch on to who knows what, so you have to be patient with me and tell me what you know. I tell them I wanna hear wrong answers because I want people to be able to try anything in my class and most important to not be afraid of it. I don't care if you learn anything as long as you have a positive experience. If I didn't know about them, where they came from, who they were, I would think they were short-sighted, distracted, rude, "bad students.."

And this is the lesson. There is no such thing as a bad student. There is no such thing as a student who doesn't want to learn, to please the teacher, to get recognition, to be successful. I want to scream this in every school in America. I want to write it on all the billboards everywhere. They'll tell you they don't give a fuck, they'll tell you you can go to hell and they don't need this shit, they'll tell you all kinds of stuff, but you have to look deep into their eyes and see that behind all the ranting and raving and distractions and fucked up insults and criticisms and complaining is someone asking – how am I supposed to reduce fractions? – I don't know my times tables...I've never figured this stuff out, how am I going to do it now...

...Jenny Horsman's valuable concept of all or nothing. I'm trying I'm trying I'm trying to try this time, I fucked up I'll never get it. Fuck this shit, who was I to think I was going to get it anyway. I had myself all amped up and for what? Fuck this. That was the last time. I just wasn't meant for this shit. I'm dropping out , I'm falling away.

So that's the simple answer. People who have been beat down feel beat down and it gets harder and harder to stand up when you keep getting beat down. It doesn't matter if you can see the faces of the people doing it or not. Sometimes you can, and sometimes there are too many of them and they do it without realizing who you are. We are all statistics in one form or another. My students are constantly aware that they are, that no one gives a shit about their development as human beings. They don't even know I'm on their side. I have to tell them. And they still don't believe me. Why should they trust me or

my information or anything else? Look in their eyes, Be the same, Treat them the same every day. Show love all the time. All the time, even in your reprimands, show love. And demand that they remember who they are – ALL of who they are, that they deserve to have this information, that they are capable of knowing it, using it, creating a future. Hope that's not the lie.

What I have learned is soft, it is reminders, it's not about hard facts and statistics. I have to remember to build opportunities to see and listen into my teaching style, I have to learn how I am interpreted, I have to hear the message behind the actions, I have to show strength and caring all the time, and never let people talk me into softening in my rules and expectations of them. That does no one any favors. We make the best attempt possible to treat people as whole people with pasts, futures, fears, dreams, aspirations, mundane tasks, beurocratic nightmares, court dates, good friends, bad friends, significant and not so significant others, good parents, bad parents, well-meaning parents, responsibilities, culture, beliefs, social dramas, shame, pride, love, hate, and habits. That's it. You become a human filter, let it all come through, sift, make it one with what you do. See every person every day, ask before you criticize, then call them out for the bullshit excuses.

The Influence of Education on Trauma and Violence

What do education and domestic violence have in common? Power!!!

In the case of domestic violence, a woman feels as though she is completely powerless and at the mercy of a dominant man. She feels that without him, she has no means for survival. The presence of children exacerbates this situation. With no way to support herself on her own (either because she feels she's incapable or unskilled), she stays with the man.

Education is a woman's escape hatch from a violent relationship because it shifts the power dynamic. Education forces a woman to think independently and to recognize her own self-worth. It's all about CONFIDENCE. Through learning, she gets to see an alternative version of what her life might be like and thus, is able to draw the strength to change things. (It's the whole concept of not being able to aspire to something more if you don't even have a concept of what that might be.) Education not only imparts the confidence necessary to change a woman's life, but also the tools to do it. (This can also be connected to why plantation owners didn't want their slaves to be educated; they would realize that they were being mistreated and were perfectly capable of existing in the real world on their own.)

A large part of domestic violence is ISOLATION on the part of the husband. He doesn't like the wife to have friends or a job. The more he can keep her isolated, the less chance she'll fathom a better life and seize the opportunity to leave. Thus, even getting abused women into a classroom environment can help them to heal socially.

In terms of a woman I've met, academically she excelled before meeting her abuser. Then, as the man gained control, her grades dropped off and she participated less in extra-curricular. Many women who have gone through the healing process and look back say that they were worthy and capable of making a better life for themselves. They feel that they had talents and abilities they should have pursued and were prevented from doing so by their abusive partner. THIS is what I think marks real healing because it shows that the woman is finally realizing her own worthiness as a human being separate from the man who abused her.

Just as a side note, it's interesting to note that education shifts the power dynamic not only because it empowers the woman, but because the man NEEDS the woman in his life to feel powerful. So, by empowering her and removing her from the abusive situation, the man's power is not only overcome, it's destroyed.

Nazneen Rahman/

International Institute of Rhode Island