

Reflections on *Reading with Patrick*

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When I began to read *Reading with Patrick*, my first impression was that the book was yet another story of how someone outside the Black community came to the rescue of an African American youth. However, because first impressions are often wrong, I was happy to discover that the story was not a typical rendering of a white person's rescue of an African American. The book is not the story of how well-intentioned white people intervene in the lives of people of color to save them from the circumstances of their lives, a theme of too many books that have wide appeal. *Reading with Patrick* is different and tells a new kind of story.

The Story

Michelle Kuo is Asian, the daughter of Taiwanese immigrants, and grew up in Kalamazoo, Michigan. After college, much to the disappointment of her parents, Kuo decided to dedicate a few years to teach in a minority community, in effect putting her ideals into practice by working with the poor. Toward this end, Kuo volunteered to become a teacher in the Teach for America program. Kuo was assigned to teach at a special school in Helena, Arkansas.

Kuo first encountered Patrick Browning, the young man who is the central figure in the book, as a 15-year-old student in her literature class at the special school in Helena. Although she admits that a teacher should not have favorites, Kuo became especially fond of Patrick because of the way he responded to her attempts to have the class develop their own voice in the writing assignments. Kuo saw in Patrick a student who came to value literature as much as she did.

After leaving Helena and graduating from Harvard with a law degree, Kuo learned that

Patrick had killed a man and was being held in the Phillips County Jail, waiting to be tried and sentenced. Kuo felt compelled to return to Helena, believing that she had left Helena too soon and needed to finish what she had begun during her time as a teacher in Helena. Delaying a move to California where she was to practice law, Kuo returned to Helena and spent increasing amounts of time with Patrick as he awaited trial.

Her tutoring of Patrick in the Phillips County Jail—the changing nature of her relationship with Patrick during the time of tutoring—becomes the essential story of the book. The time spent “reading with Patrick” is a time during which a teacher begins to realize that the act of teaching is not about imparting knowledge to a student but more the development of a relationship in which the student becomes a person with their own thoughts and genius.

Reading with Patrick is a narrative that tells how a relationship between two people from vastly different backgrounds can develop into a friendship in which both parties become better persons, each equally enriched by the encounter. The tale that Kuo tells is not about how an outsider saves a person of color from the desperate circumstances of their life but refreshingly a story of how a relationship can transcend the inequalities of life as two people open themselves to change as they come to value each other despite their differences.

What’s a Classroom for?

In speaking about *Reading with Patrick*, Kuo (2017) relates that she hopes readers would think about the personal connections people make with each other. Kuo observed,

What kind of connection is made when two people have incredible inequality between them? Patrick and I come together in a classroom and as we both grow older the inequality grows....Can you still create spaces where truth and beauty connect you or where you share a similar love of words and poetry and stories?

As noted in the book, Kuo found that her time with Patrick, despite coming from very different backgrounds and cultures, was able to provide spaces in which they both could grow and flourish. It was as a result of her time with Patrick in the Phillips County Jail that she came to a realization that her tutoring was more than her imparting knowledge to Patrick, as is often predicted in classroom environments, but was rather a time in which they both grew in an understanding of each other, despite their differences, as well as in their self-understanding. The classroom became a space where a common love of literature and poetry allowed each of them to be themselves. For Kuo, moreover, the great insight in her life was that there was a point in her tutoring of Patrick where she no longer was leading him in his development as a learner. She had become a partner with him in the experience of learning, recognizing that Patrick had his own voice and was no longer in need of her in expressing himself.

The notion of *critical education* is an appropriate way of understanding the relationship between Kuo and Patrick. Critical education rejects cultural replication in the classroom, seeking rather to awaken students to the reality of their circumstances in order for them to achieve their own voice in society (Beyer & Apple, 1998; Freire, 1998; Hirsch, 1996). Pablo Freire (1998) coined the term “banking theory of schooling,” in which the role of the teacher was to deposit into the minds of students the cultural norms and obligations of society, educating students to take their place in society as had been predetermined by their societal status. For many students, education is not only about the subjects they study in school but also the hidden curriculum by which students are prepared to take their place in society (Beyer & Apple, 1998). Freire believed that education should be liberating, freeing students from imposed cultural restraints that were predictive of their futures.

The journey of Kuo as a teacher is one in which she begins to understand that her role in

the life of Patrick is not to deposit in him what she believes it is important for him to know as a person of color. Her initial attempts at teaching in Helena helped her to understand that what students came to know about themselves through their own explorations was more important than what she wanted them to know. Kuo had read broadly about the Civil Rights Movement and had come to believe that people of color had been denied their rights as Americans. What led Kuo to teach in Helena was her conviction that African Americans had been disadvantaged in the United States, and she wanted to redress the injustices of Black life in America by contributing to the education of poor African Americans in the South.

However, what is remarkable and surprising to Kuo, in the wake of her initial failures as a teacher, is what her students respond to in her classroom. Exercises in the classroom in which students are able to explore their own interests and to develop a sense of themselves through writing awaken Kuo to an understanding that her students are not receptacles for what she wants them to learn but individuals with their own interests and voices.

Particularly with Patrick, the reader experiences with Kuo that moment when she realizes that Patrick is no longer regurgitating what she is teaching him. Patrick finds his own voice and reveals an ability to speak for himself apart from his tutor. From that point on, the story is no longer about what Kuo is doing for Patrick. Rather, their time together and the space that they shared become a meeting of minds and an opportunity to share equally their fascination with words and literature.

Whose Agenda?

In undertaking her teaching assignment, Kuo has in mind what she wants to do before even coming to know the students whom she will be teaching. She has read widely about the Civil Rights Movement as well as the literature that pertains to the experience of African

Americans in the United States. This is what she hopes to impart to her students. However, during the course of her first year of teaching, she discovers that what she wants the students to learn is not necessarily what they are willing to learn. The agenda that she has set for herself in coming to Helena is rejected by the students she teaches. Kuo must adjust her agenda to fit in with the agenda that her students will set for her.

Kuo's journey is one of discovery. Coming to know the students she teaches leads Kuo to understand that what she wants them to learn is not what resonates with them or is appropriate to their needs. As Kuo begins to relate more to the wants and needs of her students, she finds that they begin to learn, and she becomes a more effective teacher. Setting the curriculum to the needs of her students leads to an educational experience for her students that is fulfilling for them as well as for her.

This is true also of her relationship with Patrick as she tutors him in the county jail. She remembers how Patrick had opened to learning when she was his teacher at the alternative school. During her time with Patrick in the Phillips County Jail, Kuo again comes to understand that what resonates with Patrick is not necessarily what interests her. However, adjusting the readings to Patrick's interests leads her to a relationship with Patrick that develops over time. Both Kuo and Patrick begin to understand each other, and the learning that takes place becomes a form of discovery for each of them, not simply because of what they read together but more what they share with each other as they read. The title of the book tells it all: Kuo is reading *with* Patrick.

When I arrived in New Orleans in 1984, I undertook ministering to a Black Catholic parish. I later became the Director of Campus Ministry at Xavier University of Louisiana, the only Black Catholic university in the United States. Subsequently, I founded Bishop Perry

Middle School with Dr. Rudolph Detiege. In order to help found the new school, Dr. Detiege resigned from the public-school system, where he was the principal of an elementary school that served one of the poorest African American neighborhoods in New Orleans. Bishop Perry Middle School was founded to serve young Black boys who fell below the poverty line in the United States. The school was tuition free and followed the model of schools established by the Jesuits in Manhattan, serving the needs of students from poor households at the middle school level in order to help them ultimately succeed in and graduate from high school.

After arriving in New Orleans, I attended the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University, a graduate program that prepared people to work in Black Ministry. One of the first things we had to learn was that ministering in the Black community required us to follow the Black agenda as set out by the African Americans we served. We learned from African Americans about the Black experience in the United States and how best to minister to African Americans according to the agenda they set.

The teachers liked to tell the story of a Black Catholic parish in Georgia. Three white Jesuit priests had offered to take over the parish, and they presented to the congregation of the parish what they would do for them if they became their ministers. The response of the parishioners was quick and clear. They thanked the Jesuit priests for their interest but then told them no thanks. They had their own agenda. If the priests wanted to follow their lead, then they would be welcomed in the parish.

During my time as principal of Bishop Perry Middle School in New Orleans, I met students who came from a culture and experience radically different than my own. Learning to relate to these young Black males and to their families required setting aside what I thought I knew in order to learn what I needed to know if I were to be an effective teacher and leader of

the school. Dr. Detiege was of immense help in this regard. Additionally, I read widely about the education of African American youth as well as the education of Black males. I took my direction from the local African American leaders who had invited the Edmundites to open the school in response to the need expressed by African Americans to work with young Black males so that they would graduate from high school. It was a very specific need, and I committed myself to working with the Black community in New Orleans in order to achieve better graduation rates from high school for young Black males.

It is a hard lesson for well-intentioned whites to learn. Becoming people who listen to those with whom we live and work, especially those from other backgrounds, cultures, or ways of life, requires that we set aside our personal agendas in order to be with those different than ourselves in a helpful and productive way. Taking direction from those different than ourselves can be hard. It means setting aside what we think best for others and allowing ourselves to be led by what those different than ourselves set out as their agenda for themselves. Pope Francis has used the term *accompaniment*, walking with others as they are rather than imposing our own idea of who they are or should be.

Concluding Reflection

Reading with Patrick resonates with me well. There is in the book a story of how one woman, in her idealism, sets out to be of help to others from a culture different than her own and a poverty that she has never experienced. Kuo's idealism soon gives way to reality, but she is the better for that. Kuo becomes an effective teacher because she discovers in her students the curriculum they need as opposed to the curriculum she wants. However, although her efforts had paid off and she had become a successful teacher in the alternative school, her first time in Helena leaves her unsettled after leaving. Upon hearing the fate of Patrick, a student with whom

she had especially identified, Kuo responds by setting aside her plans in order to return to Helena and to work with Patrick as he awaits a trial for murder. Again, Kuo discovers that teaching is more than imparting knowledge. She discovers that Patrick has his own ideas and perceptions. Learning becomes for her the relationship that she shares with Patrick, a relationship in which she and Patrick each relate to what they read in their own unique ways. Kuo now relates to Patrick as a person rather than a student.

The text helps us to understand the nature of education. For teachers, *Reading with Patrick* is a reminder that what happens in the classroom is more than the imparting of information, the teacher depositing what they know in the minds of students. The book hopefully awakens in students an appreciation that what happens in the classroom involves more than rote learning and subsequent regurgitation of material covered in courses. Learning is personal and involves a relationship between teachers and students as well as students' relationships with each other as all mutually seek to relate in profound ways to what they read and what they experience in the classroom. There will always be subjects to study and learn, but for an education to be profound necessitates that it be personal.

Teachers and students *accompany* each other in and out of the classroom. Each accepts the other as they are. Difference is of value, and respecting difference is essential. Awakening ourselves to the uniqueness of others allows us to learn in ever more profound ways because we not only encounter what is taught and experienced in the classroom, but we also learn to encounter each other in our differences. It is easy to learn the material assigned. What is more difficult is to appreciate and value each other as we learn together.

References

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