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The Walls Within Our Classrooms

Abstract

"Sinful hearts are prone to build walls that cause others to be excluded, but God has given us the ministry of reconciliation (II Cor. 5:18) that we are to bring to our classroom communities."

Posting about breaking educational barriers from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-walls-within-our-classrooms/>

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in things

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The Walls Within Our Classrooms

Mary Beth Pollema

A recent visit to Mexico impacted me in a profound and visceral way that I did not anticipate. I have been contemplating the barriers that immigrant students and their families face in U.S. schools for at least the last year as this is the topic that I'm delving into for my dissertation as a culmination of my doctoral studies in multicultural education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. At this point in my Ed.D journey, my mind is bogged down with theory and statistics and ponderings of what to do with all this information and how to teach Christianly in response to this issue. Standing in the shadow of the wall on a beach in Tijuana, that formidable dividing line between the U.S. and our neighbors to the south, brought a new wave of understanding to me and a deluge of questions, a few of which I will try to address in this short essay.

Please don't misinterpret the intention of this article as a political statement regarding "the wall" or any other physical boundaries that divide countries one from another. Rather, I want to use that image as a conversation starter to help us consider the various socio-emotional and ideological ways we allow walls to be constructed in our classrooms that marginalize some students, a few ideas regarding what we can do to deconstruct these barriers, and why, as Christian teachers, we are compelled to do so.

As I peered through the rusted metal beams that constitute "the wall" on the border, I gained a deeper sense of what it might be like to be on the outside looking in and yet I humbly acknowledge that there is so much I cannot truly understand because of my own position of privilege. Even as I stood there on the beach, I was fully aware of the visa tucked away in my passport in the cinch sack on my back which allowed me full access to the life I desire to live and the communities to which I belong. Our Uber driver, Mario, had a different story that he shared matter-of-factly as we zig-zagged through the cratered streets of Tijuana at breakneck speeds. His was the story of a visa that was

confiscated at the border four years ago preventing him from crossing over to San Diego even to visit his daughter and grandchildren. Without judging why his visa was taken from him, I couldn't help but recognize how different Mario's reality was from my own.

This whole experience made me wonder how much I miss when my perceptions of those around me and their ways of doing and being are filtered through my "insider" perspective. It led me to also consider the students in our classrooms today who are on the "outside" for various reasons, culturally and otherwise. Marginalization takes on many forms. My mind quite naturally gravitates towards students who are from diverse cultural and lingual backgrounds, but that is a somewhat limited view. Any school's anti-discrimination statement will help us build awareness of the various profiles of students who are in danger of being left out. How well do we know these students? Do we know their stories? Their cultural backgrounds? Their values? Do we know which barriers inhibit them from accessing their dreams and aspirations? Can we do anything to reduce these barriers? If so, are we?

These are questions that I have as I conduct my research, but I am also hopeful that a conversation of this sort will positively impact classroom practice on a broader scale. In this conversation we, as teachers, must consider the "walls" that become those formidable barriers between our marginalized students and the goals they hope to accomplish and the communities of which they wish to be a part. I believe the foundation that most of these walls are built on is a lack of understanding. Steven Covey, in his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, compels us to "seek first to understand and then to be understood. Many times, we know our students as students, but it is quite a bit more challenging to get to know them as whole persons. Doing so requires building relationships that go beyond the classroom and a level of concern that transcends academic performance and behavior. Getting to know a student as a whole person also means that we seek to understand their family's cultural background, history, and the student's current lived experiences.

Teachers who "seek first to understand" recognize that oftentimes the majority culture, which includes the school, has a particular way of "knowing" which may overlook or even come in conflict with epistemological structures and values of many minority cultures. For instance, nearly 70 percent of all cultural groups, including Latinos, adhere to collectivistic values that emphasize the interdependence of the community, especially the family. The cultural values of most U.S. schools, on the other hand, feature more individualistic practices such as the competitive and comparative ways we rank students according to GPA and standardized test scores. Teachers who understand both the collectivistic value system of these minority cultures and the individualistic culture of U.S. schools can build bridges with culturally sensitive pedagogies that honor both home and school.

Where there is a dissonance between the values and viewpoints of majority and minority communities, we need to be careful that the differences are not automatically viewed as a problem to be fixed. These differences can also be seen as an asset. Luis Moll encourages multicultural educators to consider the “funds of knowledge” that minority students and their families bring to the learning community. Recognizing and affirming these culturally developed bodies of knowledge and unique skills can be an empowering practice that is likely to foster a greater sense of community.

Welcoming and including marginalized students into the learning community is much more than an effective teaching strategy; it is a Biblical imperative to all teachers who desire to instruct students in a distinctly Christian way. Romans 12:13 explicitly commands followers of Jesus to “practice hospitality.” *Philoxenia* or “loving strangers” is the Greek translation for the word “hospitality.” I have taught a number of “strange” students over the years. I am sure you have, too! They are not usually the ones that are easy to teach or to connect with in an interpersonal way. They don’t readily get on board with what I’m doing in the classroom or initiate conversation and I’ve usually been too busy working with the conventional students to notice that they’re quietly drifting to the perimeter of the community. Of course, we are called to love all our students, but Scripture urges us especially to love the “stranger” ones.

When I do take notice of the environment that I am responsible to set and recognize that without my intentional effort to set a tone of equity and reciprocity some of my students will likely be marginalized, I am reminded that I, too, at one point was on the outside looking in, Spiritually-speaking. Ephesians 2:12-13:

“...remember that at that time you were separated from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise...but now in Christ Jesus you who were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.”

Sinful hearts are prone to build walls that cause others to be excluded, but God has given us the ministry of reconciliation (II Cor. 5:18) that we are to bring to our classroom communities. Doing so will not only provide all students access to effective learning but it will also proclaim God’s grace and the truth of the gospel. It is in this truth that we find community based on our identity in Christ as dearly loved children of God, created in His image. This is truth that equips us and our students to extend hospitality to all within the learning community and to go out as ambassadors of reconciliation into the world with the peace of Christ to deconstruct walls of hostility wherever they may be found.