

To Teach My Students, I Had to Learn First

*Dr. Meria J. Carstarphen, Superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools (APS), is authoring a series of blogs on the impact of social emotional learning in an urban public school system. This month, she has invited **Timiko Gray Sinclair**, a teacher at Dr. Benjamin E. Mays HS in APS, to provide her perspective.*

During the summer of 2017, I received a call to attend a training for a new 9th grade transition course set to begin in the fall. The course, designed to be student-centered in a supportive environment, would include a district adopted curriculum, but would also allow for student choice topics. I was heartened to hear that our freshmen would receive direct support on the skills and tools to manage the many changes they would experience in their new school - they would work on self-awareness and self-management, learn to build positive relationships and to resolve conflicts, and ultimately they would be better prepared for college and the workforce. I was on board!



It wasn't an easy start. In the beginning, no one was comfortable sharing their feelings or details of their personal lives - including me. Those early days in class were so difficult I remember going home and telling my family that I never wanted to teach the class again. The lessons required me to open up my own life and I resented having to give so much of myself from such a vulnerable place. And the pushback and disrespect my students showed as I tried to engage them in meaningful discussions became too much for me to manage.

But slowly, after almost two weeks of an emotional roller coaster, a shift began to take place. My students started opening up and participating in the lessons; they began to talk about their feelings and actively engaged in the discussions. We soon entered a space where they became comfortable with one another and trusted me; I became more comfortable sharing as well. This opened up an entirely new relationship. Their stories were raw and real, and I felt honored to be there listening and learning.

One young lady faced the class and told us how she had battled stage 4 cancer that had returned 3 times -- the same type of cancer that took the life of her grandmother. She told us what living her life in gratitude meant to her even after all she'd been through. On that day, the student became the teacher and she taught us all to value our lives differently.

Another student revealed that his father had been killed and that his mother was not coping well. Because of the trauma he had experienced, and the fact that he was an only child, he told us he had trouble making friends at school and wanted to know what he could do. I have to admit I had a moment of panic as I didn't have a ready answer for him, but I was honest and asked his classmates to help with ideas. It didn't take long before two other students shared that they had also lost their fathers and vowed to have his back and be there for this student. Real connections were made that day. These are just two of many stories our students have; stories I wouldn't have known if we did not have that class.

When I started, I had no idea this class would also be an emotional boot camp for me, a course that would require me as a teacher to drop my ego and content expertise at the door. I think this is the first and only time in my teaching career that I have sat in the classroom as a "peer" and truly allowed the students to take control of their learning.

This year, I have witnessed something beautiful. My students have experienced a transformation and now show an eagerness to be vulnerable and learn as part of this new family we've made. Personally, I now feel no fear and anxiety about opening up to my students.

This journey has made me stop obsessing about the outcome. I don't have to know it all. If I don't know something or have the best answer, I can say so and rely on my students as we all walk through what the day will bring. I used to have hard days and go home feeling defeated. Now I leave that building each day with such gratitude in my heart that I can hardly speak. This class has taught me how to be a "whole" teacher.

There's a saying that we often teach that which we need to learn. The opportunity this curriculum and class has given me to become a better teacher, a better mother, a better wife, and a better human is undefinable. I think every teacher should have the opportunity to connect with their students this way at least once in their career. Our relationships have strengthened and the benefits to our day-to-day experiences in school are enormous. I'm glad to be on this learning journey with my students.

Photo: Ms. Gray in her classroom this summer preparing for a new class. (Courtesy of Timiko Gray Sinclair) Timiko Gray Sinclair has been a science educator at Dr. Benjamin E. Mays High School for 13 years. She has a love for environmental education and all things outdoors. Find her on Twitter @mikogray.