Topic #4: Insights and hope in *Holler if You Hear Me* vs. *City Schools*

Student Informed Reform

Greg Michie is like the Queen from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*[1], believing six impossible things before breakfast, then going to work to realize the impossible. The lens that Michie looks through in his work*, Holler if You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students*, sheds light on subjects that many would consider impossible – the successes, big or small, that students achieve amidst impossibly hard realities, or a teacher's extraordinary perseverance and commitment to helping these students. As he records his students' reflections alongside his own experiences, Michie provides the reader with insights on the importance of listening to students, on the factors that influence students' lives, and on the impact a caring teacher can have – all of which could inform effective educational reform strategies in urban schools. These insights come through from a writer whose ground-level perspective and student-centered focus leave me, as a reader and prospective educator, feeling more hopeful about what I will be able to accomplish in my future career.

A dominant theme in *Holler if You Hear Me* (henceforth: *Holler*) is that students have a lot to say about their education -- if only adults would listen. One such student is Tavares, who reflects on the need for students to have some control and responsibility in their own learning:

> "It's like this—let's say you don't know how to drive a car and I'm gonna teach you. I can say, 'Well, you're gonna have to do this, you're gonna have to press down on the brake, and throw it in drive,' but after awhile, I can't do too much more talking. You're gonna have to get behind the wheel and do it yourself" (Michie, 1999, p. 16).

[1] "Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said: 'one *can't* believe impossible things.' 'I daresay you haven't had much practice.' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast'" (Carroll, 1898, p. 152).

Tavares' comments suggest that for students to learn, they sometimes need to be given some measure of control over their learning, just as a new driver actually needs to sit in the driver's seat to learn to drive a car. This example and many others like it from *Holler* seek to show adults what could be accomplished if teachers would ask for and genuinely listen to students' ideas and opinions. The implication that Michie's insights have for educational reform is that effective reform strategies must take into account what students have to say about their education. To do so, reform measures could draw directly on student input, they could be tested in classrooms, and they could be modified according to student feedback.

A second chief theme of Michie's work is that his students' lives are complex and shaped by many forces outside of their control, and often beyond the control of their parents and communities as well. He demonstrates through students' first-hand accounts that many middle-schoolers have hopes and dreams that are sabotaged by these life circumstances. Michie shares Hector's story, in which Hector describes joining a gang to gain respect: "What affected me most growing up was my environment. You hear people say, 'You live in a bad neighborhood, you ain't gonna do nothing for yourself.' The guys in my neighborhood tell me that" (Michie, 1999. p. 39). Besides neighborhood conditions, which Hector points to as a factor in the choices he has been forced to make, other formative forces include race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and instability in the home -- just to name a few. The implication that this insight has on educational reform is, of course – for this has been similarly concluded by other scholars, such as Jean Anyon (1997) and Pedro Noguera (2003) -- that reform measures must be part of broader efforts to address the social and economic context in which students grow up. But Michie also offers a slightly different take on this solution. Describing his thoughts at eighth grade graduation time, Michie says, "I want to be hopeful for their future, and not in some vague, wishful, collective

way, but genuinely hopeful that each child has a true chance to realize his or her potential" (Michie, 1999, p. 167). Michie's added insight here is one that gives a face to those who are affected and calls on educational reformers to implement reforms that do as he does: see adolescents in urban schools as real people with real potential. For example, this could mean that effective reforms that address community-wide problems are also rooted in child development theories that take into account what it means to be an adolescent forming one's identity.

Directly related to this is a third important insight that comes out of Michie's work: that caring teachers can make a difference in students' lives. Michie's collection of anecdotes and students' personal accounts point specifically to the role that caring adults can play by being mentors to adolescents and giving students opportunities to raise their voices and be heard. For example, Michie discusses his role in helping one student, Reggie, pursue a lawsuit against police brutality. But a more common experience Michie describes is his expectation of forming relationships with students. He knows that "a handful [of graduates] would continue to seek out my guidance in the coming years, and with a few of those I might develop some sort of lasting tie . . . over time our bond would grow into something deeper, more meaningful. A friendship" (Michie, 1999, p. 172). In terms of effective educational reform, what Michie's example means is that more teachers and adults should be recruited to serve as positive role models and mentors for students. Perhaps this would take the shape of an increased presence of mentorship-based non-profit organizations in communities, or in the hiring of more teachers to create smaller class sizes, allowing teachers to form more closely-knit relationships with individual students.

These insights that Michie offers in *Holler* leave me feeling more hopeful about meaningful school reform than do the solutions offered by Pedro Noguera in *City Schools and*

the American Dream. I attribute the difference in my level of hopefulness to the differences in perspective and focus in the two works. Alternately throughout *City Schools*, Noguera speaks about school reform in California school districts from the point-of-view of a parent, teacher, city employee, researcher, community member, and student. These multiple perspectives, coupled with his multi-level suggestions for reform, make me feel as though as one person I will not be able to make much of a difference (especially when compared to Michie's individual successes in *Holler*). Take, for instance, a passage that Noguera writes on addressing violence in schools: "those who object to current policy must move beyond critique and take the step of putting forward alternative policies . . . Educators must even go a step further . . ." (Noguera, 2003, p. 131). Passages such as these leave me, as a pre-service teacher not even just begun, feeling overwhelmed (I must change criminal justice policy?) and not-quite-hopeful about the impact I can have on making schools better places for students.

On the other hand, Michie's *Holler* is an on-the-ground, honest account of his experience in urban schools that documents both his successes and mistakes in teaching, demonstrating how caring teachers can positively impact students' lives. Comments such as the one Marisa makes about the reading group Michie runs are proof of a teacher's ability to impact and support students: "It seems that when we come in here we get to express ourselfs and say things we can't say in other classes" (Michie, 1999, p. 63). Furthermore, Michie's focus in *Holler* – the students and what they have to say – helps me empathize with their struggles, and creates a powerful, hopeful feeling in me that I, too, will be able to create spaces for students to express themselves and learn from each other.

References

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