

Small Disruptions, Big Results

Spontaneous small-scale reform can be used in tandem with larger systemwide changes to raise student achievement. Would you be willing to let this happen in your district?

During my two-week return visit to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, this past May—my first since 1967—I visited the school where I had taught ancient history and English for three years as a Peace Corps Volunteer: Tafari Makonnen (named after Ras Tafari Makonnen, as Haile Selassie was known before being crowned Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930). Now known as the Entoto Technical and Vocational Training College, Tafari Makonnen was during my days in Ethiopia an elite public secondary school with an extraordinary record of sending its graduates on to higher education in a country that desperately needed university-trained citizens.

We Tafari Makonnen teachers were keenly aware that our students would

most likely lead their country into a new era after the long reign of Emperor Haile Selassie came to an end. And the fact that the overwhelming majority of the students we taught saw education as their preeminent path to a rewarding professional career and a life of economic security—neither within the reach of the great majority of Ethiopians—inspired us to even greater effort in the classroom. I don't think any of us faculty members in those days questioned the importance of our work to our students' future lives and to Ethiopia's future development.

An unplanned classroom experiment

As I strolled around the campus of what had been Tafari Makonnen School with my Ethiopian friends Tesfagiorgis and Berhane, I was flooded with memories of my teaching days there. I'll share one especially vivid incident of a radical educational experiment that probably would have gotten me in serious trouble in the

States but that appears to have served a valid educational purpose.

As you read, put on your governing "hat" and ask yourself two questions:

1. Should our school board work with our superintendent and his or her top lieutenants in fostering this kind of spontaneous small-scale reform as a practical way to promote student achievement, in addition to more comprehensive, complex, and higher-cost approaches to elevating student performance in our district?

2. If our answer is yes, how should our district go about fostering such individual innovation?

Getting back to my tour of Tafari Makonnen School: Tesfagiorgis, Berhane, and I were in the foyer of the building that had housed the headmaster's office during my days there, standing by the newly re-installed bust of Ras Tafari Makonnen at the foot of the stairs leading to what had been the second floor common room, where we faculty members had prepared lessons and marked papers between classes.

I was suddenly transported back almost 50 years: It's late morning in October or November 1966, and I'm sitting at my desk near the door to the common room, correcting student copybooks, when I hear, "Psst! Mr. Eadie." Wondering what's going on, I go to the door and find my entire 11th-grade girls' Commercial Section English class lined up, single file, on the stairs.

Standing at the head of the line, the class prefect, Konjit, says: "We had a meeting after you left, Mr. Eadie, and we decided to come and ask you to return to class. We promise to work very hard from this point on." Thus ended, on a positive note, an experiment that might



Photo courtesy of Tafari Makonnen School on Facebook.

have caused me real problems with the school administrators, had they been aware of it. In the States, it would probably have cost me my teaching position. Looking back, I'm amazed at the temerity of my 24-year-old self.

So, what had led my 11th-graders to march almost a quarter-mile across campus to find me in the teachers' room? Well, earlier that morning, my growing frustration with the girls' lackadaisical work had come to a head when, once again, the majority weren't prepared for class. I was convinced they were a bright group of students who could perform academically as well as the boys in the Academic Section if they only believed in themselves and really tried, but they clearly didn't think so. With absolutely no forethought, much less any planning, I announced to the girls, "That's it. I work too hard to put up with this laziness, ladies. I know you can do good work, if you only cared, but you don't, and so I don't anymore. I'm leaving class now, and I'm not sure when I'll return, if I ever do. Konjit, please make sure the class is quiet for the rest of the period. Goodbye!" Then I walked out and headed across campus to the teachers' room. The girls sat there, mouths agape, stunned.

Now, after the girls had made the effort to find me and invite me back to class, what could I do but agree to return? So I walked down the stairs and back to class with my 11th-graders that morning, and I'm pleased to report that they became an exemplary English class, eager to learn and always prepared for class for the rest of the year. How's that for meticulously planned educational reform? Maybe my lack of good common sense at 24 was in some ways an asset.

Evidence of impact

After returning to the U.S., I'd think every now and then about my experiment at Tafari Makonnen School, and I'd wonder about its long-term impact.

One day in the early 1990s, my answering service called to say that it had a message from the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, asking me to call. Intrigued, I immediately punched in the number that'd been left, which connected me to the office of the Minister of Education.

When I identified myself, I was immediately put through to the Minister, who turned out to be one of my former students from that 11th-grade girls' English class, Genet Zewde. The first woman in Ethiopian history to head a national government department, Genet is now Ethiopia's ambassador to India. After we chatted a bit about milestones in our respective lives over the past 40 years, Genet explained why she had called.

"I was thinking about you a couple of weeks ago when I was speaking at a women's conference," she said, "and I asked my office to track you down. I want you to know that I told the women in my audience the story of a young Peace Corps teacher who, by abruptly walking out of class one day, taught me and my 11th-grade classmates a powerful lesson about the importance of believing in yourself, setting high expectations, and then trying your hardest to meet them. I just want you to know what a difference your dramatic little lesson that day has made in my life."

Well, I know that Genet's gratifying feedback is far from a scientific assessment of the impact of my unplanned classroom innovation almost a half-century ago, but it strikes me that her testimony should at least make us consider whether fostering such small-scale educational innovation might be worth adding to our student achievement toolkit along with more ambitious reform. Think about it! ■

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