

The Meaning of Community at Democracy Prep

School culture supports students and their families

by KALIMA DESUZE

HER FAVORITE MOVIE is *Frozen*. She can recite almost every line. After learning one day that her favorite song is “Let It Go,” I encouraged her to sing it in her near-empty classroom at Democracy Prep Endurance, a charter middle school in central Harlem where I am a social worker and Hope is an 8th grader.

She walked up to the front of the room, picked up a pencil, positioned herself as any diva would, and started to belt it out. Her words were a little hard to understand, but her rhythm was undeniable and her exuberance unmistakable, so words didn’t matter. This young girl has Down syndrome.

Children with Down syndrome often suffer from a false sense of inadequacy and a fear of building relationships. As she was going into the last stanza, Hope’s class was filling the room. She turned her back, her makeshift mic visibly shaking, and continued to sing. The class snapped her up—our signal of support—and although she couldn’t see it, there were almost 30 sets of fingers moving wildly in the air to send her love and encouragement.

Poet Gwendolyn Brooks wrote, “We are each other’s harvest; we are each other’s business; we are each other’s magnitude and bond.” Democracy Prep Endurance is our village; we are “each other’s business.” We are committed to truly seeing one another. This is particularly important for young people like Hope. She’s different, and difference is not easily accepted or understood.

I saw in Hope’s turning her back a response to years of bullying and teasing, the inevitable “I don’t understand what you’re saying,” and the general meanness of people who simply don’t understand her.

Hope is being raised by her dad. Her mom is largely absent from her life; the void is real and tangible. With the exception of Democracy Prep Endurance and her afterschool program, Hope and her dad operate as a small island. He works a full-time job and pulls second shift once he picks her up in the afternoon.

Like many single parents I work with, he texts at all hours. I don’t mind. I am available even when it’s inconvenient; life



doesn’t happen on a schedule. Meeting and understanding the parents of our scholars is critical to my work.

One morning, Hope’s dad said outright, “I need your help. There are things I can’t talk to her about; she needs a woman.” He had officially welcomed me onto his island; he expanded his village.

More often than not, despite possibly having similar family dynamics, there are clear class, race, and educational differences between families and our staff. Humility demands that we remain conscious of our privilege and power in relation to the families we serve. So, instead of bolting to answer, I acknowledged his angst and set out to explore what Hope’s dad actually knows about

“this woman stuff.” It was an interesting conversation filled with laughter and moments of silence, yet so human.

Many of our students (known here as “scholars”) come from complicated family systems with myriad obstacles: single parenting, immigration struggles, foster placements, homelessness, and unemployment. Our scholars often carry with them family histories rooted in unimaginable trauma. They’ve internalized expectations that are so low that, before we do the work of educating, we must do the work of loving these young people back into their full humanity, to believing they are much more than they have been told they are.

Before she walked off her imaginary stage, I asked Hope to open her eyes. I wanted her to see the love and support in the room. She sucked her teeth as she walked past me, and I saw a small smirk in her left cheek. She was happy, yet reluctant, to trust her village.

She mouthed thank you to her classmates in response to their “that was nice” or “you go, Hope!” Her smile became more pronounced as she took the risk of seeing them as if for the first time. Even if for a split second, I know she considered us part of her village and that was progress. “We are each other’s magnitude and bond.”

Kalima DeSuze is an activist and educator committed to gender, economic, and social equality.