

Critical Pedagogy: Notes from the Real World

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Excerpt and Author Commentary

A Team and B Team is taken from:

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Wink, J. (2000). *Critical Pedagogy: Notes from the Real World*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. (pp. 89-91)

Looking Forward:

In what follows is one of the most powerful experiences I have ever had in my more than 30 years of teaching pre-K, middle school, secondary, and university classes. The students in the following story are all full-time graduate students and full-time teachers. The truth is that I have never been courageous enough to try it again. Perhaps now that I am sharing it in this new format, I will get the courage and patience to try it. I very much appreciate Lisa and the group at OneBranch.org for sharing this. I will look forward to any of your reflections.

The A Team and the B Team

A few years ago when I first came into contact with the idea of the A Team and the B Team, I decided to consciously create an A Team and a B Team on the first night of one of my classes. The experience was so powerful that it took us a few weeks to recover. The class of 38 arrived at 5 P.M. We were in a large room with all of the chairs screwed to the floor in straight rows. The teacher/grad students drifted in and greeted each other. Those who knew me and had been in my classes before began hugging friends, visiting, renewing friendships, and mostly moving towards the chairs in the front of the room. Before everyone was seated, I announced that those who had been in my classes before should sit in the front chairs, and those who had not should sit towards the back. Everyone immediately complied. The front of the room continued with happy noise; the back of the room became quieter. We started class, and I consciously directed my comments to those in the front of the room; those in the back received only token attention. For the next two hours, we continued like this: I would initiate an idea or thought and ask the students to discuss it. After their discussion, I would ask for whole-group sharing, but I mostly called on only those in the front. I consciously tried to assign status, power, and prestige to those in the front. I behaved as if they knew more and

as if their knowledge was more valuable. They thrived. The back of the room became quieter and quieter. Soon I was able to see angry, frustrated looks. During the small-group activities, I could tell they were sharing their anger with each other; I ignored it and walked among the students in the front of the room, who couldn't understand why I was making the new students feel so bad.

After the two hours, I couldn't take it any longer. The front of the room was confused; the back of the room angry. I asked how many of them were teachers; there were 38 teachers in the room. I asked them how many of them were involved with tracking in their class; 38 were involved with tracking. I ask why. The front and back explained to me that they had to do it because some students were ahead of and knew more than other students. They still did not see the connection to our class. I asked the names of the various tracks: yellow, red, green, blue. They all knew which students went in which track. I asked them if their assumptions about students made a difference in their students' achievement. The front and back agreed: Our tracks reflect what the students knew.

Although I could tell by looking at their faces, I asked the back of the room how they were feeling: furious, angry, worthless, and finally, ready to drop the class. The front of the room still could not understand why I was making the new students feel so badly. Finally, I just told them that I had created an A Team and a B Team so they could experience it. Experiencing is different from knowing about. The students in this class are all teachers who know about tracking, but when they experienced it, they did not like it.

Tracking is so institutionalized in the geographical area where I live that the very thought of challenging it is almost considered heresy. Even the B Team in my class tried to legitimize it and rationalize it. It took three more classes of dialogue and reading and writing before I felt that the class had come together as a whole, and they could see that I had manipulated them and the context into the haves and the have-nots. I had consciously reproduced a reflection of their world and their individual classrooms. I had socially

sorted on purpose to make a point that A Teams and B Teams always work to the advantage of the A Team. Five-year-olds know the difference between the buzzards and the blessed. It doesn't matter what color you label the track.

Looking Back:

As I reflect on this experience again, I now realize how sad it makes me to re-read the story and re-think the experience. At the time, the A Team teachers in the room REALLY did not internalize their own role in tracking in the local schools. In many ways it was as if our university classroom experience was meaningful at the moment only. The truth is that many of the teachers in our area are so entrenched in tracking that they didn't see the connections to their own classrooms in the local public schools. Even more interesting, is that the B Team, which I created that night, really did get it. I am fairly confident that they have never forgotten. When I now bump into some of them in the grocery store, they tend to remind me of it.

It also makes me sad to realize that we are now more tracked than ever in our area. I find myself living in the land of levels. I wish you happy reading, writing, and thinking.

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Note from Editor:

Because I was so moved by Joan's book, and the many lessons in it, I wanted to choose at least one story that I could share with readers. I asked Joan to think again about the story I had read in her book about the A Team and the B Team. After reading the story it hit me. Maybe parents could learn from examining what happens in situations where they or their children have been placed or have placed others on the B Team. It takes a lot of love, courage and patience to develop new relationships. I know that I have been on the B Team, where I was unable to contribute because everyone was already comfortable and new ideas are sometimes uncomfortable...I know that I have been on the A Team too, and have been comfortable enough with friends that I may have unintentionally overlooked a beautiful person with something to share sitting in the corner and waiting to be approached. I hope this story will touch the reader too, and help us all be aware of the importance of acknowledging the knowledge and experience that each person uniquely has to share. Hope your life is full of learning and sharing. Best regards, Lisa Westbrook Fall 2003