
VOICES

Twenty-Five Years of Excellence in Education

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The Touchstones Way: Touchstones in School

Giuliana de Grazia, Stefanie Takacs, Joan Croker

In addition to getting word out to educators about what Touchstones can do for their classrooms, a major aspect of our work is supporting teachers after they choose to implement Touchstones. Consequently, last August, two Touchstones staff embarked on a five-month odyssey observing newly launched Touchstones programs in several Maryland elementary, middle, and high school classrooms. Here is a glimpse at some of Giuliana de Grazia and Ryan Phillips' weekly work at one particularly interesting site: the Walter P. Carter Elementary and Middle School in Baltimore City.

At Walter P. Carter, where more than 88% of the students are economically disadvantaged, the students will be among those at highest drop-out risk by the time they reach high school. Baltimore's drop-out rate is an alarming 65%—the third worst in the country. Setting aside the dire social implications of this reality, one is floored by the staggering economic cost: \$193 million annually in lost workforce in Baltimore City. The challenge therefore is to ensure that all students, from the earliest stages of education, develop the skills and self-knowledge critical for successful academic experiences. Whether as part of language arts, math, or social responsibility curricula, Touchstones teachers nurture active and engaged learners—kids who *want* to stay in school.

During our five months observing and documenting the use of *Touchpebbles*, Touchstones for elementary grades, we saw consistently more respect demonstrated by students to their peers and

their teachers, improved speaking and listening skills, greater accountability for individual and group conduct, and markedly enhanced classroom management.

When interviewed, here is what a few of the kids in Touchstones classes had to say, "Touchstones is fun!" "When we do Touchpebbles it helps me speak more in school," and, "I like Touchpebbles because I can do it!"



Two students engage in a Touchstones discussion in a Baltimore City school.

Though students relished expressing themselves in the Touchstones' setting, change was not always easy. Often, students and teachers worked through complicated and emotionally charged discussions—about revenge, truth, justice—before they understood the significance of their activity. While teachers eagerly anticipated their students' discussions, it took about a month of effort and plenty of patience, discipline, and flexibility before more notable changes emerged.

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Ms. Davison, a first-year fourth grade teacher, maintained optimism throughout her first year of Touchstones. Early on, she was sometimes unsure of where she and her class were headed. After a couple of months, though, she had this to say about one Touchstones class:

“Today I felt really satisfied because I was not only the leader—the kids just accepted me into the discussion. They turned it around and asked *me* a question. They said, ‘...we want to know what *you* feel about this and why.’ That made me feel great because they were thinking about everything... and they’ve learned from me.”

Ms. Davison’s focus, leadership, and persistence made this transformation possible—she and her students worked hard *together*. Her commitment gave students time to practice various approaches to dialogue, to experience success and failure, and eventually to correct themselves and each other in positive, respectful ways. By December, Ms. Davison felt that she had developed greater mutual trust and understanding and that she could better meet individual students’ needs. When asked if she planned to continue using *Touchpebbles*, her response was immediate. “Yes! My kids may kill me if I don’t! It helps them so much, and they’ve grown so much.”

Alec Hajimihalís, the school’s RIST coordinator, shares her enthusiasm. He and other faculty are particularly excited about how Touchstones translates across classroom settings:

“The main feedback I’ve received has been from the teachers and how much their students look forward to having the sessions. There has been carry over... carry over as far as waiting their turn to speak. Students are answering better, in a way that is in complete sentences, referring back to the topic of the text, giving examples, making personal connections.”

Seeing how Touchstones impacts students’ sense of efficacy—watching them thrill at their own successful collaboration—leaves one energized and gratified. These children are tomorrow’s teenagers. Soon enough, they will become adults and will face crucial decisions about their own lives, families, communities, and potentially the world. It is Touchstones’ belief that the real pay off in giving kids a chance to express themselves, to make connections across subjects and arenas, and to think critically and reflectively about issues—sometimes big issues—is that they will have a real chance to beat the odds.

Touchstones would like to acknowledge and thank the following teachers for their partnership in this project: Melanie Davison, Natalie Lane, Sandra Bonilla, Rona Warner, and Alec Hajimihalís.

A Look From Inside the Board

Why I Give to Touchstones (And Vice Versa)

First, any program that has prisoners arguing Plato (or African bureaucrats discussing Simone de Beauvoir) has my attention. But Touchstones is more than an intriguing idea. Its magic—unlike so many organizations with intriguing ideas—is that the program actually works. We’ve proven it with students of all abilities in all circumstances. We’ve seen it in higher SATs, dramatic increases in collaboration and leadership skills, and decreases in bullying and recidivism.

Our results are remarkable because our mission is. What we’re up to is as simple—and as radical—as teaching people to think. As in—before you act. As in—“therefore I am.” Touchstones helps develop a reflex of thought, an understanding of consequence and an empowering sense of possibility.

As in—being able to transcend one’s limitations, even if there are prison walls.

I work in advertising in New York City and I am honestly in awe of the power and the caliber of Touchstones discussions. To hear prisoners or middle-schoolers grappling with ideas (and each other) at a level rarely found in American business is humbling. And, nice as it is to spend my workday helping women find the right mascara, sometimes one hungers for more. That’s Touchstones! So, to anyone interested in seeing the power of thinking—how it can transform a person, a group, a *future*—do yourself a favor: Volunteer or donate to Touchstones.

*Alice Ericsson
Chairman, Touchstones Board of Directors*

Reflections: Thoughts from Prisoners

“I’ve always been a loner . . . but Touchstones made me work in small groups. Now I see the benefits of cooperation. I wasn’t comfortable exposing feelings and thoughts, but I learned to do it. Cooperation helps make the texts easier to understand and also teaches respect. Respect makes doing time easier.”

—Mark, Maryland Correctional Institute at Jessup

“Through Touchstones I realized my pride owned me and brought about my self-destruction. I can’t justify my past actions, I can only hope to better my condition.”

—Byrd, Maryland Correctional Institute at Jessup

Looking Forward: Tanzania Part II

Howard Zeiderman, Touchstones President

From the Tanzanian perspective, we were there to initiate a change of mindset or a “transformation of consciousness,” as Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete described it.

Now, at a semi-secluded hotel on Zanzibar, we awaited the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar’s Chief Minister to open the third session of the Enhanced Public Service Leadership program. To our knowledge, this is the only such program where public and private sector leaders will allocate dedicated time together over three years to overcome the habits, conflicting ideologies, and presuppositions that thwart collaborative leadership.

After encouraging opening words, eighteen Permanent Secretaries, agency Directors, and CEOs plunged into an exploration of Plato’s allegory of the cave. As in all Touchstones’ programs, the texts are selected strategically. They are tools that enable the group to explore and modify the beliefs and attitudes we inherit from our culture, language, professions, and ideologies. Plato’s allegory stayed with us through the week as a mile marker.

The story that is still a work in progress began in the early 1960’s when Julius Nyerere, “Father” and first president of Tanzania, instituted what he called African socialism, which has deep roots in the extended family structure of the traditional African village. Nyerere’s leadership lifted concerns and community responsibilities to a national level. But after 20 years of heroic effort and many substantial accomplishments, Nyerere announced in 1984 that his economic policies had failed, and he stepped down. His injunction to government and private sector leaders to collaborate in a common national task underscored his action. Even still, for another 20 plus years Tanza-

nia made little progress. Then, three years ago, a group of Tanzanian CEOs and government leaders agreed to approach the problem systematically. Touchstones was asked to design a program to help them realize their goals. Our work this May and June marked the successful completion of the first phase of an exceptional and rare opportunity to work with dedicated leaders willing to learn new paradigms for their country’s sake.



Naomi, Ayub, and Saidi strategize on how to run a Touchstones class.

Over ten days, two groups explored power, competition, and collaboration. The very shape and barriers of their deepest opinions—those invisible threads we never notice—were revealed in the mirror of the texts and the group members’ diverse perspectives. They formed a nascent organism in which individual and group needs interpenetrated, and they experienced the very collaboration required to chart a united future for their country.

When Permanent Secretary Michael Mwanda, a participant from one of last summer’s sessions, came

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from the President's office to officiate the closing ceremony, he asked jokingly if the groups were out of the cave. I replied half-seriously that perhaps I'd sent them in deeper because the participants now had a

real sense of the hard work that they had undertaken and would need to persist at together. In the future—both in the EPSL program and elsewhere in their lives—these brave leaders will consciously continue their climb, through joint effort, creativity, and intelligence to forge a better future for Tanzania.

Volunteers and Support

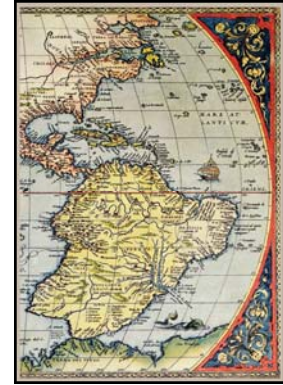
A recent article in the St. John's College *College* magazine has led to several calls and emails from people volunteering to start Touchstones groups in their areas. Thank you for your interest!

If you are interested in starting Touchstones programs for Seniors, Prisoners, or students in your community, please contact Executive Director Stefanie Takacs at st@touchstones.org. For more information, please contact us at (410) 263-2121 or visit our website at www.touchstones.org.

Thanks again to all for your continued interest and support!



Howard Zeiderman, President



Touchstones: Bringing the World Together Through Dialogue

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