CHALK TALK: Of Dreams and Aspirations

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Who are these people in front of us? This is a question every teacher ponders on the first days of school, as we share who we are with our students and seek to get a sense of our young companions for the year ahead.

Like many teachers, I begin the year with activities designed to ground ourselves in the classroom community. One of those projects — the Dream Scene — provides me with an understanding of the aspirations of my students and allows for some interesting insights into how my 11-year-old sixth graders envision the future unfolding for themselves.

This Dream Scene project has three main guiding questions:

What is your aspiration?

Why is it so important to you?

How will you go about achieving it?

This activity has taken on many forms over the years of my teaching. I started using Dream Scenes, which was borrowed from some teaching journal and is not my own creation, in the earlier stages of my teaching years. An early iteration of the Dream Scenes was done on a single piece of paper. In later years, as we explored the potential of technology, the project shifted into a digital story format.

Next, we worked on our dreams and aspirations with a webcomics format. For the past few years, the Dream Scene project has allowed me an early entry point to teach my students about Google Slides, and how to think about the intersections of word, image and theme.

As with all of our writing assignments, I bring my own ideas to the table, too. An earlier version of my Dream Scene had me sharing about a desire to play some of my original music on the stage of the Iron Horse theater with the band I was in. (OK, that dream still persists).

In recent years, I've shifted my aspiration to a more writing-centered concept. Now, my Dream Scene revolves around my hope to one day write and publish a novel. I aim to get there by
writing every day, which I do, and seeking out different ways to think about publishing stories, which I need to do more of.

I am always amazed at not just by the breadth of aspirations of the young people in my orbit, but also by the deeper reflections they have of those dreams. This year, we have future cancer researchers, who view entry into the medical field as a way to better the world; we have entrepreneurs, already thinking of opening up bakeries, restaurants and other small businesses; we have our athletes, wondering if their passions at this age will lead to a sports-related career later on; we have space lovers looking to the skies and the International Space Station; and we have a wide assortment of artists, of video game designers, of marine biologists, of lawyers, of BMX bikers, of teachers, of pilots, of songwriters, of professional YouTubers.

The scope of what interests them is inspiring.

Of course, some students struggle with this assignment. To imagine their lives 10 or 20 or maybe even 30 years down the road can be challenging. They’re only starting to discover who they are, and what their talents might be. Looking ahead to next week might be tricky enough for some. Remembering the night’s homework assignments might be more than enough to worry about.

There’s also the humble reality that they might find their niche in a field not yet even created, never mind dreamed of in the present. That’s OK. We still work to explore something we might consider important in our future lives. Some students have expressed a dream of finding happiness, of nurturing a stable family, of going off on hikes or explorations. These are all legitimate dreams.

As adults, we know some internalized aspirations sustain us, motivate us, drive us to work harder than we would have done so otherwise. We also know that some dreams fade with time, replaced with other possibilities or changed by reality. As teachers, we hope to nurture a future of possibilities for all of our students, and sometimes, that begins by articulating a vision for yourself.

So, dream big, and aspire from there.

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