



LEARNING IS **LOUD**

In his new book, ***Ratchetdemic: Reimagining Academic Success***, Dr. Christopher Emdin believes it's time for students and teachers to embrace their ratchetness – and let ***authenticity and joy*** rule the classroom.

BY JENNIFER L.M. GUNN

Even a casual conversation with Dr. Christopher Emdin is like an impassioned masterclass on educating from the **heart and soul**.

If you've ever heard him speak at a conference or listened to one of his TEDTalks, you know the **real-deal energy** he brings.

With his trademark churchlike cadence, Emdin preaches pedagogical principles to educators who leave **moved, inspired, and more than a little riled up**.

At a conference a few years ago in New York City, Emdin gave a rousing keynote, circulating the rapt audience as if in concert. When he was finished, the audience gave it back; at once erupting into an ovation unlike any I'd seen. Perhaps the most telling reaction, however, was from a New York City high school senior named Xavier, who was volunteering at the event. In stunned disbelief, he turned and said, "Wow, I've literally never heard anyone speak about education like that." It shouldn't be rare... but it is.

Read one of Emdin's books and you'll feel much the same, each page brimming with candor, revelations, and truth-bombs about the humanity of teaching and learning. One can't help but be galvanized by Dr. Emdin, who was previously an Associate Director of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education and Director of the Science Education program at Teachers College, Columbia University, and is now the Robert A. Naslund Endowed Chair in Curriculum

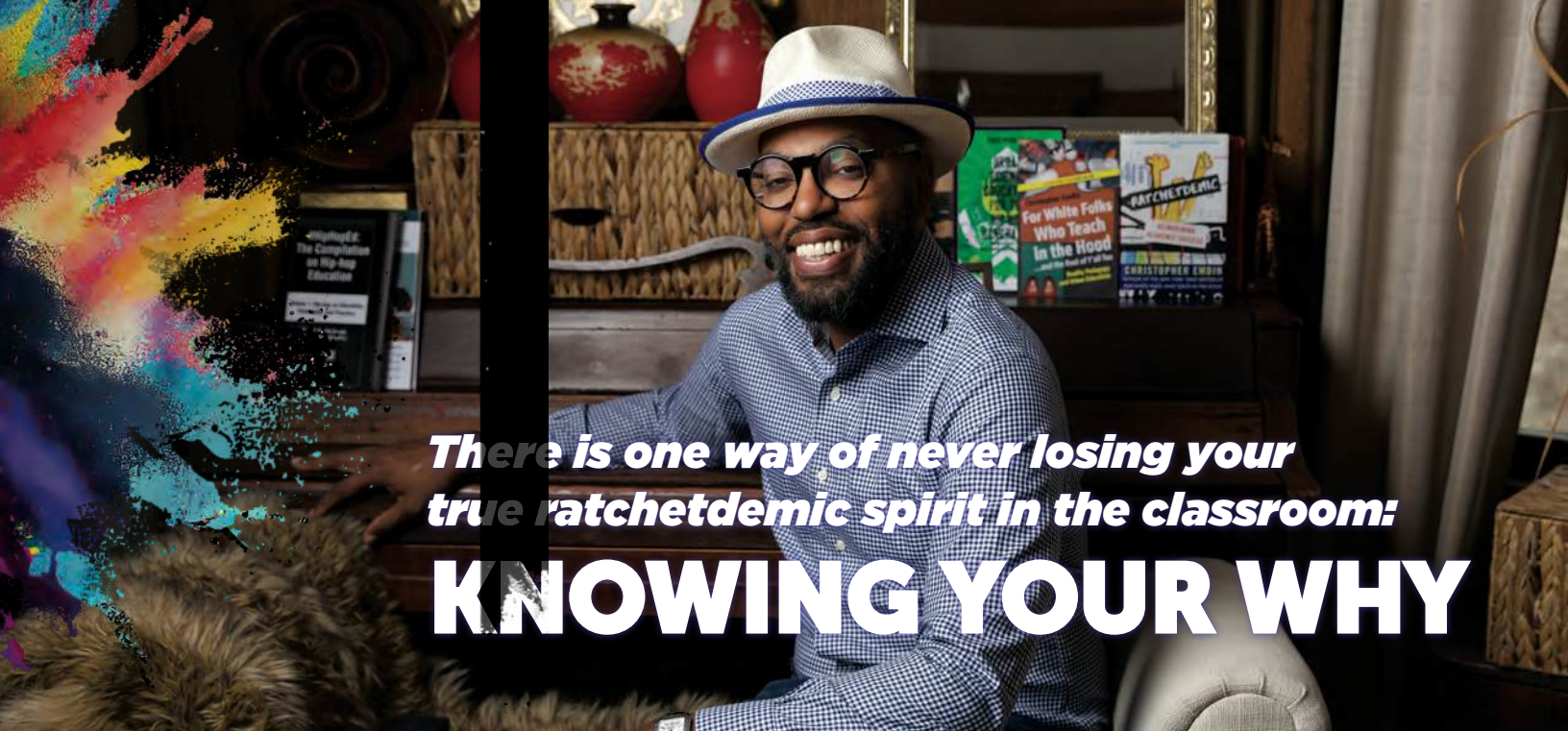
Theory and Professor of Education at the University of Southern California — where he also serves as Director of Youth Engagement and Community Partnerships at the USC Race and Equity Center. He doesn't want his energy to be the exception, he wants to make it the rule.

Emdin's passion is the very spark of authenticity that he knows is missing from mainstream academia. Instead, too many classrooms are stuck perpetuating colonial and industrial frameworks of compliance and silence, driving a wedge between learners and learning. For Emdin, learning is loud, passionate, and joyful. And that's more than okay, it's cultural truth. In his latest book "Ratchetdemic: Reimagining Academic Success," he calls for embracing "ratchetness" in the classroom as the real pathway to academic success, especially for often-marginalized students.

GETTING REAL ABOUT "RATCHETNESS"

Most high school teachers could tell you a basic definition of the word ratchet. It's not generally considered a positive word, used mostly to insult someone's behavior, manner, or fashion as low-brow, vulgar, or as stereotypically representative of more urban culture. Emdin, however, argues that youth of color should embrace the term. "It's a word that's always been used to say you're less than, you're useless, you're not worth anything. And in response to that, certain populations have appropriated the word and used it like a weapon to fight back; to say, no, I am a king, I am valuable, I have worth," argues Emdin. "This is a term of endearment. My use of ratchet is in much the same way as in the African American tradition of taking words that are intended to demean and leveraging them to empower."

Instead of giving ratchetness power as an insult to denigrate people of color, Emdin instead says that embodying ratchetness merits honor. It's hardly the new philosophy of urban America; it's hardly the worrisome trend that suburban pearl-clutchers fear; it has a rich history. Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard was among the first to suggest authenticity was the highest



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KNOWING YOUR WHY

virtue in his contributions to a theory that later became known as self-actualization. Authenticity is key to being your best self and embracing ratchetness, argues Emdin, is a crucial step on that journey.

Dr. Emdin told us that “ratchetness is a way of knowing and being that is more concerned with authenticity and less concerned with respectability. It’s a mindset that says, I’ll be unconcerned about how society views how I should be, and I’m going to dedicate myself to what makes me most free and most comfortable. That’s it. And this is an ideology and a philosophy of life that has been taken up by a lot of populations that don’t find acceptance within institutions like schools.” For it’s schools that so often attempt to curtail, correct, and overpower “ratchetness” in the name of academic advancement.

THE TRAGIC CHOICE: BE ACADEMIC OR BE YOU

When public education became widespread in the early 20th century, its main goal was to take our previously agrarian, then-expanding society and provide a foundation of education and training in order to build a new industrial workforce. We’ve all heard the adage that school is for our betterment. The industrial model of education still reigns, and the philosophy

still is that education will prepare students to be qualified, civilized, and worthy workers. “It is not until they are thrust into institutions that convince them that the endless pursuit of better is the chief currency for being successful that they begin to question themselves,” says Emdin in his book. “When students encounter educators who are convinced that the purpose of school and life is not learning for the sake of gathering information to use in the real world, but learning to be seen as better by someone they don’t know or see, students begin to internalize that philosophy and start to see themselves as less than.”

This model, Emdin argues, subjugates non-white culture and cultural expressions seen as non-compliant, non-academic, uncivilized, or unprofessional... but it subjugates much of white culture, too. It’s top-down. Children begin receiving these messages early on. “Schools are like ‘if those kids are sitting down and paying attention and raising their hands, they must be ready to learn. They must be academic.’ Can you imagine then when a child is like, ‘Well, I’m expressive. I like asking questions. I like to be out of my seat. I’m excited.’ They start thinking that who they are is not academic,” says Emdin. “And so this false binary is constructed where children will say, ‘Well, I’m either going to be academic as they define it or I’m going to

be myself.’ And then what’s happening is they start constructing a perception of misperception. That being themselves is not academic. ‘If I’m not academic, then maybe I’m a gangster. If I’m not an academic, maybe I’m a thug.’” Students, and particularly students of color, are forced to make a choice between their authentic selves and the so-called refinery of academia — and that choice involves 13 years of hearing that who they are needs fixing.

LEARNING IS LOUD AND JOYFUL

When students are deeply engaged in learning, it may not look like a silent classroom of mere note-taking or essay writing. Most teachers have experienced a truly magical lesson — with high engagement, where students are passionate, full of questions, lit up, and excited to learn. We know that children are naturally curious and over time school has a way of dimming



or taming this natural curiosity. The academic model most of us grew up with involved sitting in rows, taking tests to show our memorized knowledge and sitting quietly unless called upon. We learned to be docile, receptive and compliant — likely missing out on so much more because we were taught to be passive.

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As educators, many of us perpetuate this practice, even if we entered the teaching field with dreams of doing so much more. Active hands-on learning, experimentation, inquiry, collaboration, and project-based learning help build 21-century skills that today and tomorrow's leaders require. Not only that, these modalities build confidence, leadership abilities, and social skills not found when students merely learn to be obedient and passive learners. "A child can come in and be loud and what you consider to be abrasive. In reality, they just simply want to ask more questions," says Emdin. "The closer we get to recognizing that we cannot pass judgment on young people based on how they express themselves or how they show up in the classroom, the closer we get to allowing them to be able to find that their own selves and their potential selves actually are intrinsically academic."

Further, there's a deep racial component. According to Emdin, students of color are more often suppressed and taught that their cultural norms, attitudes, and even mannerisms are crude and in need of correction for the learned, professional world. "It's about plantation pedagogies that were enacted by white people during slavery that are still being carried out today by the majority-white teaching force," says Emdin. According to a Pew Research Center analysis released late last year, based on data from the 2017-18 school year, the latest compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics, 79% of U.S. public school teachers identified as white. And Emdin contends that the continued old custom of disregarding the norms and mores of people of color and replacing them with white standards of acceptability is not only overtly racist, but obstructing learning and progress for students of color.

RIGOR & RATCHETNESS

So often when a classroom is full of joy, noise, and spirit, questions inevitably surface about rigor. "But where is the rigor?" administrators may ask when they see a noisy classroom, or a vigorous outside-the-lines lesson. This is a troubling leadership response that searches for recognizable anchor points of academic conformity and compliance to signal so-called real learning. "Rigor is weaponized," says Emdin. "There are a few words that are floating around in educational spaces that are utilized to demean teachers or to make them justify the enabling of problematic practice. It's used as if it equates to care. Like, 'If you care about young people, you'll be rigorous.' But they don't define what rigor means. And oftentimes what they mean by rigor is to create spaces that are lifeless to make young people be ready to be complicit in the real world. They don't really mean rigor. They mean complicity. They mean lifelessness. They mean the absence of agency."

Instead, Emdin argues, rigor should be found in the passion, engagement, and challenge of the learners and the learning tasks. "Ratchetdemic, I think, is the actual definition of rigor," says Emdin. "For me, a rigorous classroom or rigorous curriculum

is that the content level is always right outside of the reach of the students, but the conditions are created where joy moves them to be able to leap from where they are toward that thing that's outside of where they are right now. The joy and passion are what provides the trampoline so that students can reach new heights."

When students are free to be their authentic selves, when there is joy in learning, when they feel safe to express curiosity without being shut down, and when their self-expression is validated rather than reformed, they no longer have to choose between self and academia. They can instead use the classroom's joy and freedom to safely excel. "If a kid is reading on a fifth grade level and the texts are at an eighth grade level, but the ratchedemic classroom is so joyous, the rest of the classroom is the trampoline that makes them jump to levels that they were not at before. You hop into a ratchedemic classroom and you leap into the skies ... in a way that you never have before in a classroom," says Emdin.

THE MODERN WORKPLACE IS RATCHETDEMIC

Most teachers have heard — or maybe even said — something like "You won't get away with that in college." Or, "You can't act like that in the workplace," creating an enigma of a real world devoid of humanity that only celebrates the pliant rule followers. The thing is, times have changed. Today's college classrooms are different. Today's workplaces are different. The skills these institutions value have evolved and K-12 schools need to adapt. Modern companies value diversity and celebrate distinct dispositions. College classrooms are full of passionate discussions, where asking deep questions and challenging beliefs are encouraged.

According to Indeed, employers aren't merely seeking deferential direction followers. They now seek analytical thinkers, active learners, problem-solvers, strong communicators, creative thinkers, innovators, collaborators, and leaders who



can express opinions and engage in ideation. “I think education’s always behind because in any endeavor or setting, folks will find your authentic self and those who have the credentials and the knowledge of what they’re engaging in are the ones who are most successful,” says Emdin. “If you go to the Google offices, they create space for folks to be able to have fun, and they understand that the workers are more productive when they’re enjoying the work that they’re doing.”

We live in a different time and yet schools are still largely preparing students to be workers in the industrial revolution. “It’s the factory model in the contemporary economy,” says Emdin. “Do you prepare young people to be able to follow instructions? Well, we live in a society where we need people to be able to have creative ideas and to be imaginative and to be thoughtful and to be knowledgeable. So the question always is, do you want to just create workers? No. We want to create thinkers and inventors and revolutionaries and folks who are going to go out there to change the world. The people who are engaging in the most cutting edge and transformative research are the ones who are enjoying what they’re doing and asking the most provocative questions.” That’s ratchetdemic.

WE CAN ALL BE RATCHETDEMIC

Being ratchetdemic is different for everyone, but Emdin argues we can all be

ratchetdemic. “The colloquialism ratchet is associated with urbanness and associated with Black youth and associated with hip-hop culture, but ratchetness is your core and authentic self that society has forced you to tuck away. Everybody has that,” says Emdin. “Everybody when they walk into classrooms is forced to perform some version of who they think they should be for young people. And young people just want adults in their lives who are real people. What is a piece of your identity? Bring that self to the classroom. It connects with the ratchetness of young people. We all have ratchetness and our forms of ratchet may be different, but once we express our ratchetness to other folks, we see each other, we model for each other, we get real authentic. And I’ve always said, you can’t be culturally relevant to young people if you’re not culturally relevant to yourself.”

STAYING TRUE TO YOUR RATCHETNESS

As teachers face a lot of pressure to comply with curricula, standards, and administrator expectations, Emdin suggests that there is one way of never losing your true ratchetdemic spirit in the classroom: Knowing your why. “The passion that made you decide to take the job is actually what you need to be able to be effective at the job,” says Emdin. “So many amazing teachers who had a calling to teach because they love just being in front of young people and being a part of transforming and changing

lives get into the school and get into the classroom and they end up being guided by the administration. And they end up being guided by the curriculum, and so they tuck away what brought them to teach to begin with.”

With a seemingly ever-mounting list of expectations set upon teachers, it can be easy to fall away from what originally brought us to this work. Emdin believes that’s the ultimate danger. “If you remember your why, every single day, it’s very hard for you to be, to be a victim, a ward of a state,” he argues. “It’s hard for you to listen to an administrator or district or politician that says all teachers are worthless when you know that you chose to do this because you were called to do this — you have to go back to our why as often as possible.”

Our why and our true selves are the energy sources that drive us through the challenges of this work. They’re also the beacons that keep us authentic — and ratchetdemic. That isn’t to say that knowing our why is a magic cure-all for all the injustices of education or the pressures we face as teachers. It’s not. But it is a step toward shifting teaching from a place of inauthenticity and oppression to one of humanity and liberation. “We have to go back to our ratchet selves as often as possible because that’s what makes us effective,” says Emdin. “That’s a battery that drives good teaching — your why, your truth, your raw self, your authentic self, the thing that makes your soul happy, the thing that makes you just step out of your comfort zone. That’s the battery that drives good pedagogy.”

Jennifer L.M. Gunn spent 10 years in newspaper and magazine publishing before moving to public education. She is a curriculum designer, teacher, teaching coach, and educator in New York City. She created Right to Read, a literacy acceleration program for teens, steeped in social justice. She also created the progressive learning models, The Big Idea Project and We the Change. Gunn is also co-founder of the annual EDxEDNYC Education Conference for teacher-led innovation. She is a regular presenter at conferences and frequently writes about education, adolescent literacy and innovation. Connect with Jennifer on Twitter: @jenniferlmgunn.

DR. EMDIN'S ADVICE FOR

KEEPING IT REAL

THIS SCHOOL YEAR



Have **fun** and **love** what you do

“ The success of the academic year is dependent upon the fun that you have as you teach. And people don't usually say this to educators, but you've got to enjoy what you do. **You've got to love what you do.** You've got to embrace the aspects of this work that make your soul be on fire. It's less about what an institution wants. It's more about how much you enjoy what you're doing and how much you do not lower expectations for young people. And there's a misperception that these things are opposites, but you can do both. ”

Rigor and **realness** are equally important

“ I think the biggest thing I want to share with teachers as they start the school year is that you can be equal parts as ratchet as you are academic. You can love young people and hold high academic expectations. **You can have joy and laughter in the classroom and still pass a citywide exam.** You can be jovial and have a sense of humor and still hold high academic expectations for young people. But the binaries that have been constructed by our society about what is required to be effective in schooling do not really exist. So don't fall for the lie that you have to choose one part of yourself to be effective in the classroom. You can and should do it all. ”