

Interview with Rodney Gillead
Conducted by Hannah Bahls
University of California, Berkeley
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Hannah Bahls: Where did you go to school when, when you were a child?

Rod Gillead: Oh, I grew up in New York city public school system. Went through, you know, from kindergarten straight through high school graduation.

Hannah Bahls: How was that experience for you?

Rod Gillead: I was good. I was a good student. Generally in the honors classes. And stuff like math, science, and English, you know, college prep, all that good stuff.

Hannah Bahls: What brought you to OCS?

Rod Gillead: Well, I had, I had finished my state credentialing, so I was authorized to teach in public schools, but none of the districts around the Bay area were hiring you. As a matter of fact, they were laying off teachers, and so I was also getting a master's degree at San Francisco state, and I spoke to the Dean there and he suggested that I go over and speak to Ericka and see if they could use me. And I guess the rest is history. I spoke to Ericka, I was pretty much hired on the spot And I think that was kinda like in June and July. And then I came on board in August of 1974. I was there for two years.

Hannah Bahls: How was it when you first, when you first got there at the school, how were your first days as a teacher?

Rod Gillead: It was interesting. Because it was a very, very warm and welcoming environment. That was, you know, one of the fundamental fields for the school that, you know, you felt comfortable being there. I guess the aspect that I've never been able to attain anywhere else that I've taught in all the time that I've been teaching was a group of intelligent and sensitive and caring black folks that, that were willing to explore the fallacies in their own education and make sure that we're all in the process of developing inquisitive minds that can research, that can read, that could read between the lines in terms of understanding what their self interest is. You know, that that was phenomenal to be part of those discussions.

Hannah Bahls: Yeah, I imagine. Well, what were some of the ways that you took that philosophy of encouraging questions and critical thinking, and, how did you create a curriculum and a class environment that reflected that?

Rod Gillead: For the grade level I was with the kindergarteners and first grade. All right. Well, no, no, they actually, the first graders, uh, coming out of this. Kindergarten program. So the main thing was a reading curriculum and math recognition facts up to 100. A lot of group reading, a lot of play. Well, I would call it just free play. You know, with blocks and other games and other things in the classroom. It was, for me, you know, it was all built in. I just had to fall in line and support what was going on.

Hannah Bahls: Were there any things that you especially emphasized in your curriculum?

Rod Gillead: You know, I always remember the admonition that was asked of anybody that made a statement of what they considered a fact would be, well, "did you investigate?" And that was called for whatever, whatever age, you know, back up your argument with some verifiable information that you sought out to justify your position, you know? And that was just, that was early, you know, in the curriculum.

Hannah Bahls: Did you have that experience in any other schools that you went to or any other schools you've taught at?

Rod Gillead: No. No. As I say, you know, to be with a group of highly dedicated African American young people with a lot of energy and a lot of questioning and searching--no, I'd never, never been in that kind of environment. And then under the leadership of somebody like Ericka Huggins, who as you get to know her, is such a gentle, sharing spirit. Being around her and being around the kind of discussions we had to make sure that the curriculum was providing for the students as we thought it should be. Those are very enlightening discussions. And as I say, none of us are educators. Really. None of us were really. The teachers were Party Members primarily, and many of them had their children in the school. And the woman that I taught with, Haven Henderson, was responsible for the younger children's dormitory after we left the school building to where the dormitory was. So they were some very dedicated people wearing many hats to make it work.

Hannah Bahls: Could you speak on that a little bit? I think I remember you telling me you were a bus driver for a while and helped with the martial arts program?

Rod Gillead: Oh well I had a Volkswagon van, and in the mornings I would go pick up one single child and two brothers in San Francisco, then I would go to West Oakland and pick up another two kids, and then I would drive them to school and do the reverse on the other end.

Hannah Bahls: that's a pretty long way

Rod Gillead: I'd leave my house at 7 in the morning, and generally I'd get back to my house at 7 in the evening. All that time was part of how I was able to contribute. Also because I had a Volkswagon van, whenever the Karate team went to competitions, I would be one of the drivers who could handle five kids to transport them to and from the tournaments. And that was a good insight into the quality of young people that I was dealing with.

Hannah Bahls: Being able to have that time with them?

Rod Gillead: Well being able to see them in a more natural environment. It's more leisure time than on-time when you're being an instructor. So it's just a different environment. But you know, they have discussions, they have opinions, they have debates about stuff.

Hannah Bahls: On that note, about the relationship between yourself and students, how did you feel like OCS dealt with the power dynamic between students and teachers, and were there any ways that you feel that either OCS helped there not be so much of a power dynamic where the teacher tells the student what to do and the student has to do it?

Rod Gillead: Well, there were clear expectations, and there's enough information for the teacher to be able to tell the student when they're not meeting an expectation and could put in more effort or whatever that is. But, for infractions of what I call the ground rules then you were sent to the Justice Court, which was your peers, representatives from each class represented to the justice court and they decide what kind of a reprimand or punishment would be meted out for whatever the infraction was. No, the adults didn't have a part in that other than saying, look, you need to go to justice court and get this straightened out. So that was a lot of responsibility on the students. And again, you know, when you say, "Look man, you can look at TV for a week or read some books and you need to read a book on this," that's the kind of peer pressure that they would put on you to come into compliance with behavior norms.

Hannah Bahls: And was the justice board happening your whole time at OCS?

Rod Gillead: Oh yeah. It was part, it was built into the governance of the school. Kids were accountable to kids, not adults per se. I mean, for instance, you expect it to obey what you teach is instructed you to do. You are not meant to disobey or be disrespectful in that, in that exchange,

so when you were then, you know, you were sent to your peers and they could judge your actions and then meet out whatever the consequence was going to be.

Hannah Bahls: And because so many of the members of the staff were also parents or party members and held different roles within the school, do you think that changed, the relationship between the staff and the students? And how did it feel when you were inside the school?

Rod Gillead: Well, you know, if I could say, it was a cocoon of family caring and having a high expectations of everybody to function at a high level and be respectful of the process of learning. No, it was it was quite a feel to be in that environment there on East 14th street, International Boulevard. Yeah. And the the community's presence in the environment for various, you know, for various activities was, was worth saying too.

Hannah Bahls: When you say OCS was an Oasis, could you describe: an Oasis from, from what? And can you describe how Oakland was at the time?

Rod Gillead: So during the school day it was a school. All right. And it served three meals a day, breakfast, lunch, and dinner to practically any student that walked in off the street wanted something to eat and then they had other programs. I know they had the choir, that was a big one. And then they had the jujitsu group. They were always practicing [...] late. But parents would come out see performances and use it as a community center. Or they could also get various other services supported, like medical, voter registration, hospital visits, dental trips, you know, all of those things were available free of charge in the community.

Hannah Bahls: I remember Ericka Huggins talking about teaching the whole child and like, sort of supporting the whole child. Could you tell me a little bit about how that played into your teaching experience? Have you had any experiences relating to that?

Rod Gillead: Well, one of the ethos of the concept of the community school was serving the community or not. It was not, and again, it was about meeting the needs of the community that required a high quality, free education for children. And so that commitment allowed for, what I'm just going to say with some very enlightened approaches to developing, independent thinking, young people that had a lot of questions and knew how to go about getting answers.

Hannah Bahls: I just, I have to say this as an aside, it sounds like a really, really incredible place and I wish I could visit.

Rod Gillead: Yeah. Well, you know, when we were going through it, we knew it was special because of the results we were getting in the children that came through the process. But there

was no real parameters to record the progress of our kids against the cohort of public school kids. But the level of self confidence and the ability to express your concerns and your issues in an articulate way. That was, that was the crown jewel of what we accomplished. And some of those kids, they went on to very good schools and getting educated and becoming professionals in their own right. So, yeah, it was a good experiment.

Hannah Bahls: Could you speak a little bit more on the self-confidence part and how you instilled that in students?

Rod Gillead: One of the, one of the jobs of we who were educators was to instill in our young people the ability to express yourself: to have an idea and articulate that idea and even be in a position to argue for your idea if you know, if you've come to that. Along the way is a young person, a lot of confidence in their word and how to justify their word. So that's, that's part of the confidence building process, but also in confirmation of their search for deeper understanding that you can take it all kinds of which ways, particularly with African, African American or people of color, examples of people who were freedom fighters, not just passive indulges. Now barriers where we're meant to be brought down. So having that understanding is part of the confidence building process. They know they stand on some other people's shoulders.

Hannah Bahls: Would you mind describing just like a day in your classroom and what you would do throughout the day with students?

Rod Gillead: Well, they would start with us having breakfast. Maybe breakfast would be over by 8:30. We go in the classroom. Generally we'd have a daily circle and outline what you know, what's going to happen, then listen to any questions or concerns. And then they would break into about three or four groups. Haven would be with the one room I'd be with another group and another group of students would be playing free play on the rug. Generally during that time we would read a story to the kids and those that are proficient enough could pass the book and read parts of the story. And then after that, you know, if it was a Dr. Seuss book we'd read, ask questions about what's the moral of the story, what character you know, was for, what character was against. In that discourse, you start the critical thinking necessary to question texts, which is a skill that needs to be taught. And then after that we probably then have snacks and that's kind of like free play time too. They're encouraged to get a book and read while they're eating this snack. And then after that we would switch groups and probably do something with math or maybe science. I don't know. Depends what we've planned. And then after that would be lunch, after lunch they play outside. When my group comes back from lunch, they take a nap. That's usually from one until two.

And then after that, play with the blocks math kind of stuff, they could read or they could, uh, fantasy play in the kitchen or the doll house. And then that would last until their parents came

to pick them up or took them to dinner, which was usually around four o'clock. Right. And then we'd eat dinner pretty much from four to five. And then I take my students back to where I picked up in Oakland and San Francisco and get home at about seven o'clock at night.

Hannah Bahls: It sounds like there's a lot of emphasis of critical thinking and there's also like a lot of time for playing, which just sounds really wonderful. And I have heard that, you know, young, young kids will now be assigned homework, in school and that they have to start to approach school in a way that's a little bit less fun sometimes at, at a young age. And so was that, was that an important part of it for y'all? Just the time to play?

Rod Gillead: Age appropriate activities for a young child between, I guess you'd say two and a half to seven. Their education is not so much about the rigors of a cognitive understanding, but the tools you have, and having them use their imagination in the creation of their learning environment. Free play is a part of the developmental process of deciding information for yourself. Right? So that's built in that, that at a very young age, you're developing what I'm going to call a level of critical awareness about what you're experiencing, what's what's really happening.

Hannah Bahls: Correct me if I'm wrong, but does that word critical awareness come from Paulo Freire?

Rod Gillead: Oh, well, well, you know, all of us read Paulo and you know, he was like the pied Piper behind this whole movement of community specific education. One of the things, one of the things that happened with the party is when Bobby Seale went to see chairman Mao, chairman Mao told them that the party grew too big. It was all over America. You need to consolidate, choose a community and put your effective programs in place there. Oakland became that place and the recruitment of party members from various parts of the country to come together basically on a very volunteer basis. I mean, they didn't get paid very much if they got paid at all. And many of them had jobs that were 24 hour days. There was no private life. That was just a condition of how it functioned. I was one of the paid staff. I was not a party member, party sympathizer, never a member.

Hannah Bahls: With so many people devoting their lives to the school and the different survival programs and the party in general. Um, how did, how did you feel about that element of it? That there were very long days? How did you avoid burning out or did you feel a sense of burnout?

Rod Gillead: Well, no, you know, there was a level of dedication and you know, for the level of dedication that the staff engaged in and the manner in which young people were dealt with. It requires a conscious consciousness of what you're actually doing. And with a group of people

that, that pushed and refined, and helped redefine what the process was all about. That was very exciting. Yeah, and as a young educator, you know, um, again, as I say, to be involved with, you know, 23, 24, 25 year old college educated, intelligent black folks. Never had that experience again in my life.

Hannah Bahls: Would you mind speaking a little bit more on that? Are there any moments of being with them that you really remember, any staff meetings that stand out in your mind as formative for you?

Rod Gillead: The whole aggregate of the level of discourse. First of all, it was always at a high level, and there was an implicit understanding of the kind of students we want on the other end of the process: thoughtful, caring, inquisitive, knowing how to ask questions and get the information that you want out of the situation. You know, those were, those were kind of built in from the beginning to watch it, blossom and to watch it deepen over the years that, you know, I was only there two years, but as I say, some of those children, they were born there, they spent their whole elementary life as students of Oakland community school.

Hannah Bahls: Have you gotten to connect with any students who are now adults?

Rod Gillead: Yes and no. I've run into some, I've heard about others. Um, a couple of students just, you know, of both community schools, long discussion. But no, I haven't really stayed in touch with anyone really except for Ericka, she keeps bringing me into events to talk about the experience.

Hannah Bahls: And looking back on it now, do you feel like you, you changed as a person, as an educator during your time there?

Rod Gillead: At the time in my career it was definitely an inspiration to be in that kind of environment. But you know, I wasn't getting any retirement, I wasn't getting any health insurance. And again, I was young and healthy and those things weren't important to me, but I needed to move into the public school system. So after two years in Oakland community school the enrollment increased and I think I started out in Oakland and then right after that, I think it was 1983, somewhere in the early 1980s I went to San Francisco unified school district.

Hannah Bahls: And how was that shift for you?

Rod Gillead: Well, you know, it was very different. It happened to be a special middle school that we were starting, that we started out on the top floor of a building and eventually had a building built and I served on the building committee. So that was a very interesting dynamic,

particularly with the background of this was supposed to be an innovative school math and science, math teacher. But no, it was a totally, totally, totally different dynamic.

Hannah Bahls: What did you feel that you brought in from working at OCS to your classroom and to the school, and were there any things that you really missed from OCS when you transitioned?

Rod Gillead: When you mentioned that--there was somewhat of a culture shock when this African American girl who had stolen something, I can't remember right now what it was, and the tenor of a couple of people on my team was you know: "once a thief always a thief" and you suffer for the rest of your life for stealing something. And I was totally opposed to adults having that much authority that first of all didn't know anything about redemption and how to help people redeem themselves in a constructive way, put this punitive, nail into the wall crucified... I was like, wait a minute, you guys sound ridiculous to me. And then that got me into levels of conversation that I didn't need to go to because I was coming from a very, very, very different place in my understanding of how to help students function as opposed to debilitating them with adult crap.

Hannah Bahls: That sounds like a really different approach. I imagine that was hard to go into. Especially, cause I imagine you'd have a somewhat limited say in how, you know, everyone handles things.

Rod Gillead: Well, you know, I became the enemy of the administration, you know. Well, I got into a correspondence more with the principal who was basically trying to say that she had control over me. And letting her know: no, no, you don't have control over me. Right. You're the administrator, but you don't control me. And also I have academic freedom privileges. Right. Well, she didn't like that, but all of the time that I wrote her, I CC'd the superintendent and she didn't like that either. And the problem was I was smarter than she was and yeah. Anyway, that was another, that was, that was the first chapter after I went to public school education. Then I became a vice principal and a principal. Well all of that history now.

Hannah Bahls: That's an amazing, amazing trajectory. How did you bring in the ideas around resolving conflicts with students or resolving, you know, when they had an infraction, how'd you bring in ideas from OCS into those schools where you were vice principal and principal?

Rod Gillead: Well, you know, as I say, the fundamental approach as to what that outcome was was fundamentally different than a lot of my colleagues. You know, trying to instill an environment of inquisition, an environment of debate and environment of legitimate discourse. That's not what's happening in schools. School's all about that. If they are, they're reaching a

very, very, very small fraction of students that could be reached. So there's no illusion on my part that because I learned all this stuff at Oakland community school that I can change the fundamental dynamics of what's been going on. And what's gonna continue to go on. Over the years, it's gotten worse, particularly when you think about how isolated people of color are in urban districts and failing schools.

Hannah Bahls: How does it feel to see that now? Having worked at Oakland community school, having worked in the education system your whole life?

Rod Gillead: It's almost like history just keeps repeating itself. There's no real fundamental change, you know, incremental. Yes. That you'd want to measure it in that regard. But there's another piece of me says, well, you know, those that control it, this is how they want it or they would change it. And I don't see a lot of people trying to change the ethos of American public education to service the needs of minority and brown and black kids. I don't see that happening.

Hannah Bahls: Do you feel that that is because having that kind of education and being curious and unafraid to question is like dangerous in a sense.

Rod Gillead: Well, yeah, it's dangerous. You know, if you look at some of the quote unquote revolutionary conclusions, you know, the whole structure of capitalism needs to be overthrown. There's some false premises there that obviate people seeking their own freedom on their own terms. And if you acknowledge that, then one of the options is to throw the mothers out. We don't need em. But again, that's a radical interpretation. Well, I don't know how you accomplish that with the different factors that exist in, well in American culture in general. But some of the consensus is a very difficult thing.

Hannah Bahls: What advice would you give to young educators or young people thinking about going into education now?

Rod Gillead: Well, you know, I say if it's not a passion, don't get into it. You gotta feel you really want to do this because at least in my lifetime and over my career, the way in which educators have been demonized, have been ostracized, have been criticized for not getting the job done. You know, as I learned, after 30 years of being in and around education, you know, you get incremental change, but you don't get any sweeping fundamentals change. The souls that dedicate their lives to educating the next generation are a noble bunch, but never get recognized for what they actually do and provide for our culture. Good, bad or indifferent you know.

Hannah Bahls: So you have to be really passionate about it to sort of stick with it and have that drive even if you don't get recognized?

Rod Gillead: You know the number of people that do not make five years? And a lot of people think, Oh, I just become an educator. There's a lot to be an educator, you know? And I tell people to be good elementary school educator, you got to master all of the disciplines and deliver them in a way that children learn and grow. That's a lot of work. And like I say, five years later, people, people abandoned the profession.

Hannah Bahls: What do you think kept you, kept you going in education for so long?

Rod Gillead: Mmm. I don't know. I didn't know, well, it was a calling, calling from me. I knew for a large part of my life that I wanted to be an educator, and I wanted to be a certain kind of educator and it took a while to develop, you know, that style, and with the confidence that, that the learning goes on with the student. All right. And so it's what the student's experience is. And one of the things I used to say is to take the threat of the teacher of the equation to make the group that is the peer group, their peer, right? This is peer learning. This is everybody helping somebody learn something. Alright? And you know, that's how I taught my classes as a middle school math teacher with relative success because as I said, you know, with algebra, the drop off rate is steep, especially when a kid can't get their question answered, right? And you know, unfortunately, once they can't get their question answered, they can't move forward, right? So hopefully in discussion with their peers at a table discussing the ways to do problems, surfaces in the group, either a group question for the teacher or somebody has an answer that satisfies the need, and that that's was different for a math class.

Hannah Bahls: It's harder to do peer work like that in a math class?

Rod Gillead: Well again, when I started out I had to experiment with making groups. So, you know, it was a learning curve. I got better at it the longer I did it.

Hannah Bahls: I remember you saying near the beginning our interview, I can't remember actually if you said this today or if you said it when we first met at the de young museum, but you said that the teachers at OCS were really willing to unlearn what they had been taught in order to be the educators that they wanted to be for students at OCS. And I was just curious about that unlearning process for you, if you felt the same was true for yourself.

Rod Gillead: Well, you know, it usually happened in staff meetings. Somebody might say for instance, "Oh yeah, when I was a kid, uh, you couldn't talk back 12 belts and even if you did, you got slapped across the mouth," and somebody saying, "Well, we're not going to be dealing with that." Alright, that's off the limits. There's no place for putting your hands on a child. So that was like a fundamental, "Ah-Ah." If we really respect kids, we don't be hitting kids. And so for

people who were brought up in a real "where they don't spare the rod, they gon' spoil the child" type environments, we had to learn something new about how we were going to get our message across to young people without the threat of corporate punishment.

And again, that was just, you know, the other, the other aspect, nobody was really religious. But religion always came into discussions about what you learned in church. All right? You know, decomposing it as to, you know, what's the truth of the matter and what's the church saying is the truth? UWe got to distinguish, you know, what those true things are. So, so again, it was just a discussion of how to deal and how to put in place an environment that supports full growth for our students. You know, we got into those discussions frequently.

Hannah Bahls: Was that part of the specialness of being with that group for you?

Rod Gillead: Oh yeah. The discussions for sure. First of all, you know, we as black people got a special way of communicating. All right. It's not, it's not the same way when you're in mixed company. So there was that advantage of you know, intelligent black people letting their hair down discussing some serious issues and enjoying the exchange and knowing that the exchange exchanges is a high enough level that you feel something special is going on.

Hannah Bahls: Did you miss having that group of African-American educators with whom you could have that kind of level of discussion with in other schools that you were at?

Rod Gillead: No, I was always in a well integrated environment. Usually I was one of maybe two males of color teaching an academic subject and um, no, very different, very different approach. Even walking into the building in the morning.

Hannah Bahls: How was that part of it different for you?

Rod Gillead: Well, I'm just saying it's one thing when you're around a group of fellow educators who are truly your peers, right. Ethnically, racially, you know, and then again, the common understanding that's there because we're doing something special and that's what brings us together. No, I never had that, no.

Hannah Bahls: Before we, before we start to wrap up, are there any other elements of Oakland community school or your time as an educator that you'd like to talk about?

Rod Gillead: In hindsight, it pales in comparison to all the other experiences that I've had as an educator. Unfortunately in big public education institutions, there's too much ingrained. We've been doing it this way for the last hundred years, and it hasn't been working, so let's try for another hundred years. I don't understand that kind of mentality, but that seems to pervade what the environment is, what it brings about, and how difficult it is to make fundamental changes.

Hannah Bahls: With that in mind, are there any hopes you have for the school system in general or education in Oakland going into the future?

Rod Gillead: Well, you know, when I think about what I would want as an end product in my graduate of my school system, right, as a general rule. Well, you know. When I think about what I would want as an end product in my graduates of the school system, as a general rule. No, Oakland is not producing it. In pockets, yes, but not as a general rule.

Hannah Bahls: Are there any places where you see something similar to OCS happening?

Rod Gillead: No, I think OCS had its place and its time, it's day in the sunshine. But all of us have moved on to other things and other endeavours. So it will require a whole new group of people with the time and energy to pick up the torch and run with it. But that takes a lot, that takes an awful lot.

Hannah Bahls: Thank you so much.

Rod Gillead: You're welcome. Don't hesitate to reach out again if you have any questions.