

Final Paper

EDUC-323

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Introduction

“The right to a quality education is, I believe, the perfect path to bridge the gap between different cultures and to reconcile various civilizations. Without such a right, the values of liberty, justice and equality will have no meaning. Ignorance is by far the biggest danger and threat to humankind.”

- *Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned*

This quote is an excerpt from Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned of Qatar’s speech in the Opening session of the Thematic and Interactive Debate on Education in Emergencies at the UN on March 18, 2009. ^[1] In her deep and moving speech, Mozah bint Nasser suggested an executive work plan under the auspices of the United Nations, with the participation of all countries to put in place a mechanism for the protection of educational institutions in areas of conflict and crisis, making them a safe haven. This quote is notable because while addressing the importance of education, she also extended a goal for educators around the world – to build a bridge between different cultures. As Nasser advocates for educational institutions in areas of crisis, institutions in some of the most developed nations around the world, with populations so diverse, seem to have forgotten this goal and all cultures other than the dominant one.

Through this paper, I seek to discuss my ideas about education of the minority and how they have developed throughout the course of the semester. This paper is divided into four sections –

my past perspective, my in-class learnings, my on-site learnings and my conclusions, with the goal of providing a description of my developing civic, political and moral identity.

Past Perspective

I came to Penn two years ago with the hopes of studying Digital Media Design and eventually working in an animation studio. For almost a year and a half, I was blinded by the amazing stories that some of my favorite animation studios told to realize what it meant to be working there as a Technical Director, the job that I was aiming for. However, the night of the results of recent presidential election, when my future in America seemed bleak as an immigrant, I was able to put things into perspective. I came to realize my privileges – being able to study at a top school of quality education in a country like America was a position of the highest privilege for someone from the small city of Indore. I felt that my interdisciplinary education would be a waste if I didn't use it to make the lives of others less fortunate than me better, instead of expanding my privilege by working in a big corporation. This thought was followed by a loss of identity. So, taking this class was a step towards discovering myself and whether in the future, I want to work in the field of education.

As I mentioned in my Goals Essay^[2], I always had my qualms with the quality of education a small city like Indore had to offer. Despite my education in an expensive private school in India, I faced many difficulties in adjusting to Penn, thus making me feel that the education system in America was one to look up to. Were I to work in education, I wanted to learn American ideals and take them back to India and provide the people of my country with a well-rounded

education, replacing one that focused solely on examinations, a system borrowed from the British.

Because of my background, I had little idea about the problems faced by the education system in America today. To me, other than the obvious existence of classism and sexism, everything seemed better than mine, so I never had the chance to question it. It wouldn't be wrong to say that I came into this class with an empty slate about the American education system. However, I did come in with the firm idea that everyone deserves the right to a good education, regardless of their racial, financial or cultural background. I also came in strongly opinionated about the necessities of equal opportunities for all.

Over the course of the semester, I developed a much clearer view about my own identity, the American Education system, my civic, political and moral opinions and my goals for the future.

In-Class Learnings

Before going on to synthesize my learnings from the weekly readings, I have to acknowledge my experience as a student in the class. Unlike most of my other classes, in this class I spoke up. I contributed to the development of a conversation as an Indian, an identity that can never be taken away from me. Like I mentioned in my Goals Essay^[2], I would always struggle with contributing to class discussions, coming from a high school that did not expect student participation. In this class, I felt encouraged to speak up because I felt that my opinion was valued and that despite knowing little about the American education system, I had much to add to the discussion. In addition, class activities like smaller group discussions nurtured these

thoughts. I believe that this classroom setting very well reflects what follows – the goals set by educators and researchers in our assigned readings.

Understanding Development

Piaget's theory of development^[6] is a dominant force in developmental psychology that focuses on the development of intelligence in children. There is much to pick up from this theory to implement in the education of children. Generally, there are four stages of development – sensorimotor (between birth and age 2), preoperational (between ages 2 and 7), concrete operational (between ages 7 and 12), and formal operational (between early adolescence to end of life). Piaget also identified three basic development processes: assimilation, accommodation and equilibration. The study of these different periods and how the basic processes occur in each of these gives us understanding of what children know at different points and how they reason. Children cannot learn modes of thought much advanced than those that characterize the current stage. For this reason, it is important to suit the curriculum to teach children what they can learn based on their stage. For example, 5-year olds should not be taught conservation, class inclusion and seriation problems, because they are likely to fail.

Critical Thinking, Problem Solving and Creativity

Currently, the teaching acts contributing to the core functions of teaching are giving information, asking questions, giving directions, making assignments, monitoring seatwork, reviewing assignments, giving tests, reviewing tests, giving homework, reviewing homework, settling disputes, punishing noncompliance, making papers and giving grades. In addition to this, the role of a teacher also extends to keeping records, conducting parent conferences, attending

staff meetings, and carrying out assorted school duties. This, as noted by Haberman^[3] is the pedagogy of poverty. However, this does not work. It is important to raise expectations beyond an emphasis on basic skills to the teaching of critical thinking, creative thinking and problem solving.

According to Marzano^[5], educators can develop critical thinking in students through introducing each of the habits of critical thinking, which are being accurate and seeking accuracy, being clear and seeking clarity, being open-minded, restraining impulsivity, taking a position when the situation warrants it and being sensitive to the feelings and level of knowledge of others.

Similarly, educators can develop creative thinking by introducing the habits of creative thinking, namely, engaging intensely in tasks even when answers or solutions are not immediately apparent, pushing the limits of students' knowledge and ability, generating, trusting and maintaining the same standards of evaluation, generating new ways of viewing a situation outside the boundaries of standard convention. This can be taught by reading inspirational stories or setting examples.

In addition, students should be taught to identify situations in which each habit for both critical and creative thinking is most useful and developing strategies for each of the habits.

Problem solving skills can be nurtured asking students to extend and refine questions before, during, as well as after they engage in learning experiences. These should include comparison, classification, conclusion, prediction, error analysis, constructing support, abstracting, and analyzing perspectives. Students should also be encouraged to identify the extending and refining questions that they would like to answer.

Motivation

Students should be motivated to make an effort to learn in school. The current system of education is designed under the traditional external control theory. However, this theory has many failings – nearly half of the secondary school students make no effort to learn. A better alternative while thinking about reform might be Choice Theory, as suggested by Glasser^[4]. If we want to get students to make an effort to learn, they must believe that there is a payoff for them if they work harder. Students currently are unaware of the benefits of education; it is the diploma or the degree they value. Therefore, it is important to make students see the benefits of learning. According to the Choice Theory, all we do is behave, all of our behaviors are chosen and we are driven by our genes to satisfy our five basic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. With this theory, Glasser proposed the idea of learning-teams. This would lead to a belief among students that they are important in school, which would lead them to make an effort to learn. While the readings do not provide much about how this theory does in practice, I have, on a personal level, experienced several times the validity of this theory. To reiterate, in reforming education, we must do away with the external control theory for good and think about ways in which we can make students see that the payoff of them learning is high. In tutoring, this can be done through teaching them something that they are interested in. Another way is form a connection and reward them with appreciation and respect whenever they make a positive effort. Tutees will be enthusiastic about learning only when there is something in it for them.

Ideals of Equity, Fairness and Justice

Given the current political scenario, teaching children the ideals of equity, fairness and

justice is extremely important. Currently, as McIntosh^[8] notes, whites (or people of the dominant culture) are carefully taught not to recognize their privilege. Describing white (or the dominant culture's) privilege makes one newly accountable. Schools currently give no training in seeing the privileged as oppressors or as unfairly advantaged. Real progress in the society can only come when everyone has the opportunity to make a difference. If people in minority are oppressed and denied fairness based on their culture and people in majority aren't told of their invisible package of unearned assets, the society as a whole will be at a loss because only the dominant culture's contributions to development will stick, thereby lowering the rate of progress.

Students need to be taught how to identify oppression first before they learn how to tackle it. As listed by Young^[7], the five faces of oppression are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. Every single one of these can be easily shown in just a day's newspaper headlines to students. The next steps to being able to identify this oppression is to call it out when it's happening, support someone who is suffering and learning to never be the perpetrator. These qualities can be instilled in children from the very beginning years through telling stories and showing educational documentaries.

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*^[9] offers a libertarian approach to education and organizing and a lens through which to understand the systems of oppression in order to transform them. According to Freire, the primary goal of education is conscientization. Both the teacher and the student, or as Freire calls them, educator and educand should teach and learn from each other as partners. Education as a practice of freedom assumes that the world is interrelated and begins with context; the educand's "historicity", "dynamic present" and "incomplete future". Education is a dialogue about topics that the educand has some prior experience of and words are thick with meaning and transforming power. Overall, education

seeks to transform the society to rehumanize both the oppressed and the oppressor. This model of education, while controversial, is one that is solely for the benefit of the learners, not the profit making companies that educational institutions have become. Ergo, it is worth considering the ways to implement such ideas in a classroom setting.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

It is of utmost importance today for students to develop a greater understanding of cultural differences in all aspects of their education. The America we live in today needs everyone to have an understanding and sympathy for each other to live harmoniously. Gay's *Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching*^[10] provides the critical components needed in improving the school success of ethnically diverse students. Currently, teachers are seldom prepared to accommodate for a culturally diverse classroom. They lack the knowledge and tools to provide explicit knowledge about cultural diversity. They need to be willing to develop a symbolic and societal curriculum along with a formal plan that accommodates for every culture that is represented in their classroom. With the world available at the touch everyone's fingers today, it is absolutely easy to get acquainted to different cultural practices through the medium of photographs, videos as well as newspaper articles. These should be included in everyday classroom discussions and showcased in different ways around the classroom through posters depicting special recognition months, holidays and historical figures and idols. Teachers should master the art of cultural scaffolding because when students are taught their cultural heritages and positive ethnic identity development along with math, science, reading, critical thinking and social activism, in addition to heritages, cultures and contributions of other groups as well, they develop as citizens of the world.

Additional Goals

In addition to all the requirements listed above, students should also be taught interdisciplinary subject matter; they should be allowed to participate in deciding what they learn. Moreover, their learnings should be relevant to real life. They should be taught to critically examine their own assumptions and biases. Technology should be made the best of and students should be able to apply their learnings to day to day life. These ideas should provide a framework in designing any curriculum.

On-Site Learnings

My first day at Lea school, I walked in expecting to be assigned a tutee to spend the rest of the semester working with, as did all of us.^[11] However, the delay in an assignment offered me much to learn about the administrative difficulties faced by the school and priorities set by the administration.

During the first few weeks, I sat in homework help and interacted with students and tried to help whoever needed it. I was surprised at first by how little the students I helped knew about India^[12] and how their knowledge was limited to a mockery of a dance form in popular culture. So, I took it upon myself to introduce any new kid I met to my culture, while learning about theirs. This culturally responsive teaching^[10] helped me establish a connection with the students.

Homework help at Lea while quite irregular. Different classes would come in on different days. While on one day I was teaching third grade students, the other, I would be surrounded by

eager kindergarteners. This irregularity made me conscious of the lack of discipline that the kids exhibited.^[13]

I really wished that the Lea school had a concrete after school program so both the students and I could make the most of it. However, the way things seemed to work, the after school program seemed to be the lowest of the priorities for both the administration and the students.^[14]

I was only assigned a student in the end of the semester, giving me little time to bond and form a connection with him.^[15] While I did pick up on multiple intelligences and learning styles my tutee had, I never got the chance to implement a proper lesson plan with him or spend time learning more about his life and background.^[16]

Overall, the homework help and tutoring experience at Lea school was lacking. It did not have the structure and implementation that the administration was capable of, robbing the young students of an opportunity that they could have greatly advantaged from. However, I was able to observe some of the teaching practices in play while I was in the classroom for homework help. The classroom was decorated with charts and student art, encouraging a sense of belongingness to the community for the student. They also had a reward system in the form of a chart that placed students on a thermometer of which the highest temperature was “teacher’s pet”. Every time a student performed well, the clip representing them would be placed higher up. This was choice theory in action. At the same time, the teachers were also considerably rude and strict to the students, which shocked me, because this isn’t expected behavior and hardly ever gets students to perform the task required of them. The students were also taught false information and given bent facts in order suit a political agenda.

Lea School could benefit a lot from an efficient administration and I hope that change is underway because the students deserve it.

Conclusion

Taking this class taught me more about not just the American education system, but also my own. The diverse collection of readings assigned to us defined my perspective in cultural responsiveness, racial equality, and critical and creative thinking development. My experience at the Lea School taught me what it is like to go to an underfunded urban school and made me more sensitive to the alleviation of the problems faced by the administrators and the uplifting of lower class necessary through improvement in teaching practices.

I am now keen about being an active participant in bringing about reforms in India with the goal of equity. I look forward to learning more in education reform and policy, so I can help shape the future of my country and make out of my people global citizens and going back to Nasser's quote, to instil the importance of liberty, justice and equality among all.

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