

Educational Autobiography

My high school is a combination of three different neighborhoods: Huntington Woods, Oak Park, and Berkley. My neighborhood, Huntington Woods, is of the highest socio-economic status and a primarily Caucasian neighborhood, while the other neighborhoods tend to fluctuate and have much more diversity in religion, social economic status, and race. While my preschool, elementary school, and middle school classes were untracked, I am now aware of the discriminatory practices that occurred in my high school and the segregation that occurred within most extracurricular activities. Better communication between the administration, counselors, teachers, extracurricular group coordinator, and fellow students could lead to positive educational reforms and an overall better environment for learning about academic material and learning about one's own self.

Since I was in elementary school, I traveled to middle school and high school with fellow students from my neighborhood. In high school most of the students from my neighborhood tended to join all of the honors classes, which not as many students from the other neighborhoods attended. Recently I have realized that the friends I have made from the other neighborhoods, whom take honors classes, tend to know everyone in the senior class. On the other hand, I hardly knew half of my own classmates when hearing everyone's names at graduation because there were not many other students from Oak Park or Berkley that joined me in my honors classes or my extracurricular activities. Pedro Noguera pointed out that these behaviors may not have been by coincidence, "racial separation is not limited to the clustering that occurs outside of the school. It shows up in classrooms and clubs throughout the school, and these forms of separation

are not voluntary. Rather, they are products of the school's sorting practices and its structure" (Noguera, 65). While I enjoy meeting all types of people from different cultures, I tended to get to know and be friends with the people I was around the most. I did meet some students from other activities such as tutoring and sports; however, generally I spent most of my time and found most of my friends in the marching band and within my classes. While I was unaware of this situation at the time, there was a form of tracking present in my school district. Tracking can be hard to point out, "although the separations created by tracking—the practice of sorting students into courses based on some measure or estimate of their academic ability (Oakes, 1985)—are less visible, their impact on student outcomes is far more profound" (Noguera, 65). While tracking can be hard to see, there were negative consequences of the tracking that occurred in my high school.

School systems need to be aware of the dangers of tracking and consciously work to stop segregating students based on their neighborhood, socioeconomic status, religion, or race. Tracking not only hurts the members of the lowest track, it also hurts members of the upper track, "one conclusion emerges clearly: no group of students has been found to benefit consistently from being in a homogeneous group" (Oakes, 7). I learned this lesson during my senior year of high school when my Spanish teacher created the concept of a link student for two students in her classroom. Being a link student entailed coming to class everyday for a Spanish 2 class, which I have already taken, and tutoring two students during the entire class period as the teacher instructs the entire class in Spanish. On the first day of class I was very apprehensive because I realized that the entire class was Caucasian and the two students I was asked to tutor were African American. I was at

first worried that the two students would resent my help or wonder why they were being singled out from the rest of the class. However, despite my fears, I decided to treat them the same as I would treat any person I tutor and just help them both the best I could. Fortunately, I was accepted by the students right away. During the first semester they had given up trying to understand what the teacher was trying to say in Spanish, “students in low-track classes have been found to have lower aspirations and more often to have their plans for the future frustrated” (Oakes, 8). Rather than continuing down a path of frustration, their teacher made adjustments and found a way that they could get extra help. They appreciated my extra assistance and did not seem uncomfortable from being singled out. Tutoring these students was a great experience not only for them, because they now understood the subject matter better, but also for me. I learned a lot about them, their likes and interests, and they would include me in all of their conversations. At first I felt awkward when they would talk about getting their hair wrapped or a rap artist or movie that I had not heard of, eventually they taught me about types of activities I would not have known about from the friends I have. I learned that teachers should be actively studying each of their student’s progress and teachers should not be afraid to make special accommodations for students who have difficulty with the material or students with learning disabilities. “Adjustments sometimes need to be made. This is something we seem to want to be very responsible about. But this very concern over correct and fair placements underscores my point” (Oakes, 6). Oftentimes students are put in a certain track or moved to a lower track, even though they have the potential but are not receiving the right instruction or resources from their teacher. Not only do educators need to

reinvent the standard tracking system, they need to reconsider the present ideologies about test driven curriculums that exist in our school systems.

As far back as I can remember tests have been the main method of evaluation in almost all of my classes in elementary, middle, and high school. Since I have always struggled with testing, I explored many different strategies to study for exams. Rewriting has been one of the most helpful strategies. If I had an exam about one chapter in a book, I would go through the chapter, paragraph by paragraph, and write one or two main points of that chapter. I would also take highlighted words or vocabulary words that I did not know, and rewrite them on flashcards. Flash cards have been one of the best resources for my studying. Flash cards allow me to quiz myself when I do not have the opportunity to study with a fellow classmate and they allow me to quiz myself after I have spent time studying with classmates. Lastly, when studying I would look over all homework assignments. In particular I would look at the study questions in a text book; I would do the problems assigned or any other questions multiple times. All of these different strategies for studying and the large amount of time I spent studying assisted me in matriculating to the University of Michigan. Once I arrived at the University I was introduced to practice exams and practice problems, which helped test my knowledge on a subject. Yet, taking the prerequisites for the business school, studying the most I have ever studied and receiving the average grade on exams was an incredibly frustrating experience. No matter how many more hours I spent studying, I could not break the average score and I was destroying my self confidence. Later on I found my true passion in English, Sociology, and Education. These outlets allowed me to find my passion in essay writing, which is preferred method of evaluation. My college experience has made

me question the present educational system. I agree with Lantieri and Patti when they write, “our society needs a new way of thinking about what it means to be an educated person.” (Lantieri and Patti, 3). I would further this statement by arguing that our society also needs new ways of evaluating so that we can be fair to every student’s specific needs and talents. Cose argues whether “scores [are] in fact based solely on meritocratic factors—achievement and aptitude—or are they based in part on students’ race, social class, or economic?” (Cose, 11). While I am a member of the white middle class, I still question whether the current test systems are the fairest way to measure students’ abilities. As our society becomes increasingly diverse, we need to recognize that not all individuals will excel best in our traditional method of lecturing and testing. Communication is needed by administrators, teachers, and students in order to change and develop educational reforms that allow students opportunities to perform to their fullest potential.

Not only is there a traditional method of testing in place at almost all school districts and universities, there is also a hidden curriculum that needs to be questioned at most grade schools. Schools often use the school as an agent of socialization in order to convey cultural transmission (Lecture, January 9th, 2008). The school system is the place where students learn how to behave. Starting with elementary school, students are required to dress in a certain way, come prepared to class with materials, sit in an orderly fashion, and listen to a teacher’s instructions. Pai and Adler argue that the “school promotes the learners’ motivation for academic success and their desire to practice the norms and values of the larger society for the established systems of rewards” (Pai and Adler, 135). Rather than developing new norms and values, schooling is used to constrict

creativity and settle students into an already established system. While the formal curriculum is generally laid out in the school's mission statement, the school also has an informal set of practices that they use to socialize learners, "the expression hidden curriculum refers to the school's indirect means of helping young people learn the norms and values of their society" (Pai and Adler, 135). Examples of the hidden curriculum include reinforcing self-involvement, assertiveness, and competitiveness by rewarding behaviors, such as expressing one's opinions, participating in a group project, or asking for extra credit in order to achieve a higher grade (Pai and Adler, 135). All of these behaviors were present in my school from elementary school through my experience here at the University of Michigan. Guarasci challenges major themes underlying the core of our school system and of our society, "we need new definitions of democracy, community, and difference. Our old definitions of these concepts are unable to offer us a vision of a new kind of community that prizes our multiplicity" (Guarasci, 3). While, the curriculum may be slightly different at each institution, the underlying hypocrisies and guiding practices remain the same at the core. Not only do we need to be aware of the hidden agendas the school systems set in place, we need to constantly reevaluate the teaching practices and relationships teachers have in place with their students.

While the school board places tremendous value on the traditional core classes, the most important classes to my personal identity development and the most challenging classes I participated in during my high school experience was with the many bands I was involved in: Marching Band, Symphony Band, Pit Orchestra, and Jazz Band. "Above all, excellent teachers are engaged every day in intellectual work, the kind of serious undertaking that demands considerable attention and thought. They devote substantial

time and energy to their teaching and, over time, they develop extensive expertise and confidence in the work they do” (Nieto, 76). My middle school and high school conductor, Mr. Voight, took the time to head every one of the bands I was involved in, and he was one of the people that challenged me the most during my high school career. Mr. Voight was a pivotal actor in my development and the long term relationship I had with him was very rewarding. Sonia Nieto argues that “if teachers are to improve what they do and gain more satisfaction from their work, building critical and long standing relationships with their colleagues is essential” (Nieto, 78). I would argue that this is also true regarding teacher and student relationships. For example, during my junior year of high school I became section leader of all four bands. While I was nervous about my abilities, yet my conductor always encouraged me and challenged me in every band. In pit orchestra my junior year, jazz band my junior and senior years, and symphony band my senior year, my conductor gave me a solo in every ensemble. While at first I would play very quietly, he challenged me in front of the whole class to play loud and with confidence. While this might have been a frightening experience with a teacher I did not have a connection with, our long time relationship enabled this situation to bring out the best in my performance, rather than scaring me from every taking on a solo again. Jazz band in particular was one of the most challenging solos. While the other bands I had mini solos in a few measures, within jazz band I was the soloist during the entire length of two pieces. My conductor, knowing I am a very technical player, chose pieces perfect for me in difficulty and within my interest. While other soloist had impromptu solos, he gave me two slower pieces that were very romantic sounding, including “When I Fall in Love” and “Misty.” Starting off with these pieces, I gained confidence in my playing.

Eventually, during the last day of rehearsal my senior year, I gained enough confidence to attempt an impromptu solo within class. While this solo was only two to three minutes long, I had been scared of it for the entire two years I was in jazz band. Even though I played it only for the twenty people within the band, I was still proud that I conquered my fear and tried something new and challenging. Without my teacher's long term support and constant challenges, I would have never taken on so many challenging experiences and I would have never gained the strength and confidence to continue my band career as a member of the University of Michigan Marching Band.

While Mr. Voight was a key element to the marching band's success, he was also radical my senior year of high school when he bestowed some of his own power to let the seniors take a bigger role than they have ever taken before. "If faculty fail to demonstrate how learning is about conversation and about the ability to enlarge that discourse continually, they will fail our students; they will be teaching them that learning is only about institutional politics and not about the expansion of human personality" (Guarasci, 14). From our unique roles in our own learning, we gained new levels of team work and leadership that allowed the entire band to achieve a level that we have never come close to before. Prior to starting my last season of marching band, all of the seniors got together multiple times to discuss our new plans that we were going to develop for the upcoming year. Similar to Mallory and Thomas' intergroup dialogues and Sonia Nieto's inquiry group, we too discussed questions in our performance that mattered in order to validate the importance of our work as section leaders (Nieto, 78). Due to our four year relationship with one another and our talented senior class, we decided we were going to take action and conquer new challenges that none of the other marching bands in our

school history has ever attempted. One step we were apprehensive about was that we were going to have all of the band members memorize their music for the first time. Another challenge was a dance break that we were going to add into our show. Lastly, we wanted to participate in a marching band competition, so we decided to attend an invitational at one of the nearby high schools. While this was a lot of work, we decided each of us had to step up as section leaders and upper classmen to encourage the underclassmen to work hard in order to achieve these new goals. Our tight knit group developed into a community, which provided a great system for support and it kept the entire band going and improving. Managing a section can be very difficult, and with all these new challenges I gained support for my fellow senior saxophones to help instill a motivation in the underclassmen. Mr. Voight let each of the section leaders participate as a leader in a cooperative learning group, “students collaborating on projects in groups, each with an assigned role” (Orenstein, 30). We not only collaborated in small groups, but we also developed a Partnership Model within the classroom. Our teacher valued students’ knowledge and experience; he let us learn and teach from each other and allow all members of a variety of cultures share their own experience and share mutual responsibility for the projects at hand (Eisler, 23). This unique classroom environment allowed each member of the band to experience real world collaboration; the section leaders in particular developed a new leadership and higher self confidence that would translate to all new obstacles that will come their way.

Like this small knit community the seniors developed in my marching band, students have developed school wide clubs in which students are put in unique positions of power that lets students create change and reach out to the community. One group in

high school that I was not a member of but I often helped promote their activities and attend their functions was the Multicultural Club SAI or Students Against Intolerance. Through this club, I participated in a Day of Silence. The Day of Silence was an opportunity to support all types of people experiencing inequalities or discrimination, promoting gay and lesbian tolerance and equality in particular. Within this day, we went to our classes with pieces of paper letting everyone know why we were being silent today in order to show others, who might be ignorant, how much the cause meant to us. Activities like these were one method to spread information to fellow students, teachers, and administration. The SAI club also promoted school wide assemblies that taught students about the holocaust; the club also went to visit the local elementary and middle schools in order to hold assemblies promoting respect for multiculturalism. While this club was a great start to change the many ideologies and hidden curriculums the school system has established, we still need more communication between clubs and across the student body, teachers, faculty, and administration in order to make constructive educational reforms. I would argue that David Schoem's steps to transform undergraduate education could also be used to create educational change at the grade school level. Firstly, "it will take intentionality, a sense of purpose and mission, and openness to rethink and integrate the distinct initiatives of undergraduate education" (Schoem, 55). Next, we will need boundary crossers that are willing and skilled to collaborate with one another and take responsibility to create change for the whole curriculum. "And, third, this group must have a degree of control over its 'whole'" (Schoem, 55). This project would take a lot of time and it would require committed

volunteers from not only administrators and teachers, but also from students and extracurricular groups throughout the high school or even middle school

Only through dedicated commitment and communication will it be possible to challenge the conventional ideologies and create an outlet for educational reform. The current tracking system, the hidden curriculum, and standard testing practices all need to be challenged in order to cease discrimination and put fairness and democracy back into the schooling system. David Tyack confronted this major issue in his book when he wrote, “democracy is about making wise collective choices. Democracy in education and education in democracy are not quaint legacies from a distant and happier time. They have never been more essential to a wise self-rule than they are today” (Tyack, 185). We need to reestablish democracy in our school system so that we can provide gateways for cultural acceptance and personal growth. Teachers need to reassess their teaching practices, providing more room for student input and collaborative learning. Additionally, students need to dedicate their own time and collaborate more with each other in inquiry groups and intergroup dialogue in order to find the necessary changes to create revolutionary classrooms, new evaluation procedures, and more opportunities for individual development.

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