School System Improvement: Public vs. Independent Education

Dichotomy between the Rock and the Hard Place; in the Lenses of an International Educator and a 16 Year-Old US Teenager

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ABSTRACT

One of the most robust findings in years in education, research, and policy implementation is that some policymakers usually know shockingly very little about education per se; and problems for which they purport to make policy. Striking to note is the gap between what one observes regarding accountability, overinvestment in testing, underinvesting in capacity building, and frail knowledge on turning around failing schools in the wake of over-crowded classrooms. Lest we forget; there could be tons of highly educated professional educators with plenty of BIG ideas, but simply accompanied with weak political authority and zero influence. Why? Well, partly because they are fragmented professionally and lack strong cooperative theories on how to improve the enterprise. At the bottom of the societal academia ladder, are parents and students who usually; are people to whom things happen. The degree of separation between school improvement, problems of educators dealing with accountability systems in a non-sympathetic public discourse, plight of vulnerable students transitioning from elementary and middle school to high school, parents, and some policy makers of whatever ideological stripe who find complaints of educators about linear accountability to be out of touch and whiny; is astronomical. This phenomenon of high-performance educational knowledge treats people in learning environments – adults and students alike – as "learners". That voids labels like "failing school" with bad teachers and bad students and/or "achieving school" with good teachers and good students. We are all learners and do not learn in one-size-fits-all, tailor-made, incremental, linear fashion. Guided by our individual differences, we dissect and tear down stereotypical old preconceptions, try out new cognitive demands that stem out of our cultural practices, and inject affective and behavioral responses into operating framework(s) at both the individual level and collective universal model. This article re-visits and de-constructs mythologies of public school versus home schooling.

Keywords: Qualitative research, descriptive narrative(s), public, home school, higher education, transitions, elementary & middle school to high school, structural inequalities, bullying, gender-based violence, teenagers

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on an ethnographic, qualitative research study carried out in the USA, over a period of time between the educational peregrination of 2012 and 2015. The paper provides a reconnaissance of questions, comments, explanations, narratives, and descriptions. A quest for the path toward a solution would require that global educators, policy makers and community at large come together with a conglomeration of ideas on how to address our fundamental confusion about the roles we expect our schools to perform. To some extent, such discussions of basic theoretical ideas are often tantamount to opening a can of worms, thus unpopular in a realm of practice like education, but there is nothing to be gained by being murky, taciturn, myopic, feckless, mordant, pusillanimous, or nonetheless ambiguous to unpopular necessities. The utopian intellectual virtue that belies the oldest idea about education is that we should intransigently teach children what they need to know in order to participate effectively and productively in the society's global economy. That germane goal of education is what we sometimes call "socialization".

The exigency of the criteria that determine how, where, when and what to teach children in this kind of education are the current values of the society plus the diverse set of skills required for survival. Ever heard of the term: "….*survival of the fittest*?" Yes! It was used in the 1 B.C. times, plus it is still a term that is alive and kicking in 2015 A.D. Sounds brackish, does it not? Reader, it is not as ludicrous as it appears in print. Here is the deal. In the ancient past, our ancestors spent quality time teaching children how to successfully garner and hunt with tangible results qualified with outstanding honors; animals of various sorts including the vicious African saber-toothed tigers such as the Megantereon and Afromilus 500,000 years ago (Christian, N. and Shuker, K.1989). Wonder where from? These animals were found in areas now coined with names such as Zimbabwe, Congo, Angola, Kenya and Sudan – places that were colonially divided up to be conquered and ruled following the 1600s scramble for Africa's mineral wealth, colonization, and forced migration into slavery.

Talk of ancestral excellence in educating children using indigenous ways of knowing; they were coherent in passing on peremptory educational skills and knowledge on not only how to reconnoiter, but also to fetch edible roots and food to fight nutritional hunger among their societal communities. What lessons do we get here? Are we educating the current generation with excellence as in those days of old? Is the old school gone to the dogs as we sporadically try to teach the 21st century children to learn the ABC's in order to become literate or to numerate enough to perform day-to-day jobs? Of course; the answer is obviously yes and no. However, the correct answer would come with twists and turns, if we were to ask ourselves whether we are educating for success or to have the bulk of our children only to end up unemployed. As an international educator interested in school, school improvement, and independent education, I oscillate the idea that when a medical doctor makes a mistake, society digs a grave and buries the mistake. Tragically, when an educator makes a mistake, that mistake lives on to roam the streets, fill up society's jail / prison walls; and in worst case scenario, untold misery coupled with untimely circumstances that lead to six feet under the earth. Decades of research support the growing consensus among policymakers and parents alike that teachers matter when it comes to student achievement. However, teachers cannot make it alone, hence the importance of embracing mixed methods and qualitative research on factors that might impede or empower a child's ecology for a road map to higher education and future career pathways.

QUALITATIVE STUDY

A classic qualitative research finding of the 20th century reads:

> "*One of the most widespread and powerful obstacles to educational Progress and school improvement is the fact that the ideas of most adults as to what constitute education are based on recollections of their own school days…..More often, outcome is a kind of stereotype, a stencil picture of what schooling should be"*

(Eastern Commercial Teachers' Association, 1929)

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As an adult interested in children's education, I realized there are treasures revealed when one could stop and give quality time to carry out an in-depth qualitative study that is as mundane as the stretch of imagination could be. On a daily basis, I would embrace the academic side of each teachable moment in life, and narrate for both intellectual and lay person to read and share information. I investigated in-depth, what it is that makes school or education fun in the eyes of a teenager. Questions I tossed around included problems and joys succumbed by students when they go to school walking, or by bus / car riding. Further, I explored what could be the contributing factors to school drop-outs, bullying, low academic achievement rates in especially reading and mathematics. Out of curiosity, I garnered questions that would give me a hint on the hurdles students face when transitioning from elementary and middle grades, to high school and beyond.

DESCRIPTIVE RESPONSES

"*What problems are faced by students that go to school by bus*?" The answers were: "Getting up early in the morning is a headache. Then comes dressing up and that means designer shoes, designer jeans, fancy back pack full of heavy books, lap top, make-up for the face because looks matter especially for girls. Do not forget the hair, a topic that can easily bring stress." I asked how hair could cause stress and I was surprised from the response: "If you have Afro-hair like mine, you can easily attract name calling all day on the school bus, in school hallways, playground, in the cafeteria and everywhere. You become prey for bullying. Every single day, I had to endure the name calling: "Poodle" just because my hair looked woolly, kinky, and curly. Did you know many Black girls end up wearing wigs or straight weave in school in order to fit in and avoid the name calling? I hate weave on because my hair is naturally long, so I had to put up with the name calling." I asked about money and school. "Money for lunch can make you happy or sad. The more money you have, the more popular you are, and the less money, the less friends." When I asked about *the likely dangers a young growing student transitioning from middle to high school might face when commuting to far distant school from home*, I received educative and alarming responses such as: "Walking to the bus stop might not as safe as one imagines. You have to be driven to the bus stop for safety issues, and if the family does not have a car, that is tough! Many parents are scared that children might get abducted and disappear into thin air. A school mate X who was only 14 years old at the time, once tried to walk alone to the bus stop early in the morning to catch the earliest school bus that would allow her to go and have breakfast in school before classes began. She had to walk alone that particular day because both her dad and mum had driven early to work. Guess what? She was followed by an adult male and this was just between not-so-many blocks of buildings and the bus stop. The guy, wearing sagging pants, made a loud cough to draw the girl's attention. When she looked back, he pulled and started waging his private parts right in front of her eyes. She ran screaming to the school bus which had just pulled in to carry the awaiting students. This was the last time she ever walked to the bus stop alone in order to catch the school bus". As the interviewer, this revelation of some of the ordeals faced by growing children trying to achieve the 21st century educational dream left me dumb-founded. I tried to allay the fears by commenting that at least X was lucky that the school bus had just pulled in right on time for her to jump on the bus. As soon as I mentioned that comment, she said: "Talk of school buses coming on time? Sometimes the bus arrival can be delayed for 30 minutes or one hour, while you stand anxiously asking yourself if you missed it or not. When it finally comes, you get on the bus, travel for a little while, and the bus breaks down. You wait for another hour. By the time you get to school, you have missed your first class of mathematics. The good thing is at least you do not get a "Tardy Slip", but you get a "Bus Pass" stating the bus has been delayed, and it is also announced over the school intercom. Students delayed by this school bus would have to decide whether to go and eat breakfast in the school cafeteria and miss the second class: language arts or not. It is a catch 22 because you cannot eat at home because you are in a hurry to go catch the earliest morning bus, which might not come early enough as expected. Robotics, a fun computer class would come before lunch, and that made it exciting and fun. Lunch break would be for 30 minutes, time too little for you to sit down, relax, and eat. No wonder many students either ended up obese because they had to gobble up very fast or skinny because some would just take two or three bites and toss the rest of the food in the trash can, so that they would not be late for the next class after lunch. By the time social studies class came, many students would be knocked out. I would try all the time to stay awake, but it never worked. I tried several strategies including becoming first in line for the lunch cafeteria, but still by the time you sit down to eat, the bell to go to class would ring. Even if you got the food, you still had to eat in a big hurry. If you were in the middle of the line or last in line, as you got your food, the bell still rang; you shove your food while carrying the tray, head straight to trash can to throw away the remainder of the food." At the end of this interview, I really began thinking outside the box. Part of the conversation had highlighted the reasons why poor children are being left behind in achieving progress in the area of mathematics, reading, and others. I concluded that when the transition from elementary or middle school to high school is not psychologically and emotionally supportive to the student, that alone constricts critical thinking, reduces academic prowess, hampers motivation, and increases the high dropout rate of students especially among African American and Hispanic groups (Chigubu, M. 2015). If the school bus picks up the students late, or breaks down on the way to school, students miss mathematics and language arts classes. Should we not say that the school(s) have failed low income families? These disadvantaged students rely the most on schools for learning, and most of these families often lack the time and resources to fill in learning gaps. When schools fail students, they fall farther outrageously behind their peers. By end of high school, the average 17 –year-old African American and/or Hispanic student reads and does mathematics only as well as the average 13-year-old Caucasian student (Campbell, Hombo, & Mazzezo, 2000).

BACKGROUND

Delve into the narrative generated with time by an avid, studious, scholarly, teenage, high school student. She narrates some of experiences in 21st Century schools. Often, as adults who design curricula for children's education, we tend to bypass walking in the learner's shoes or acknowledge what is going on through their own lenses. The narrative looks at what it takes to ride the school bus, what it takes to be different, joys and stresses of transitioning from elementary to middle to high school. It articulates scenarios that questions how policy makers should tackle school improvement in terms of school buses, school meals such as breakfast and lunches, physical education, bullying and name calling, stereotyping, long distance schools far removed from students' homes versus community-based schools built within the learner's walking distance, impact of busing students on school improvement.

SCHOOL DAYS

Sixteen Year-Old Student's Narrative

By: Makayla Chigubu Tweeter Username: @xxxmakaylaxxx

Preface

I would like to thank all my teachers that I have had. When I look back, the sixteen years I have experienced on this planet have been nothing but a bundle of joy, fun, and sometimes challenging. As for education, every teacher has been a blessing.

Walking To School Built Within the Community

At times I ask: Before one is ready for college, is it better to attend a school that is within walking distance from home or not? Is it fun to ride a car or school bus daily to and from school? What makes an excited learner? When a school is a stone's throw away from home, does it make the learner view this school as part of the family in the community? I think a school close to home makes school days fun. If you forget your homework assignment at home, you simply run home, pick it up, hand it to your teacher without fear of losing points towards your final grade? Walking to school is good exercise, and when it comes to riding a car to school or riding a bus to a far distant school, I have reservations. Let us look at riding the bus.

Commuting

School bus, the yellow box with wheels that is dreaded by some students. I am grateful there is free transport for school kids, if it does not break down. For some unfortunate kids who take the bus to school, do not blame them for falling asleep during classes. If school starts at 7:30a.m, you wake up at 5:30a.m, if you want breakfast. Maybe even 5:00a.m if you want to straighten your hair and/or put on some makeup, a necessity if you are a young girl trying not to be picked on and called names. You run to the bus stop for a bus that might come an hour late at times. If you did not eat breakfast at home because you had to hurry to catch the bus that still would not come on time, for once let us just say: "That sucks for you". Why? You also have to be aware of what you wear, because school is a cube of judgment. If you want to "fit in" you have to spend money on the latest trends from expensive shopping malls. Clothes from thrift stores would not cut the deal, ever. Not to mention heavy school bags, there are the reasons why many kids including me, have lower back pain. We are not even adults yet, but we have to walk around carrying heavy back packs full of huge books that we might not necessarily read daily. That comes with the lap top sling bag. Many classes make you do assignments online. If you do not have internet at home because you are low income family, guess what? You are stuck. You would have to go to faraway places like McDonald's Restaurant that offer meals with free Wi-Fi. The problem is that free Wi-Fi, does not offer any digital security to protect your computer from malicious computer viruses. That lack of security sucks!

School Lockers

The good news about school lockers is that I could keep my personal lap top and belongings secure, yet something wrong about schools of today are lockers. Every time students hear the word *locker*, we cringe. Let us see what happens in over-crowded hallways. You have four minutes to get to the next class that might be on the other side of school. Great! Four minutes is enough time. Oh! No, you just forgot that you have to go to your locker to get your books for the next class. It is not looking so great for you now. Oh yeah, and just when you thought things could not get any worse, you start having troubles opening your locker combination key. You panic looking for paper with your combination key. How wonderful! The adrenalin shoots at 102% cutting through your head, and before you knew it, unsuspected passers-by get on your nerves by name-calling.

Bullying

Being different in middle school and junior high is tantamount to bullying. I remember the nicknames, the bus, lockers, etc. Adults say, "Oh, we made it through". Oh well, news flash! I always think that school was not as hard back in the days. In public school, I enjoyed being around friends and loving teachers, but I did not have fun in the repeated routine: Waking up, shower, put everything in your bag, sometimes eat breakfast in a hurry, run to the bus stop, stand behind running cars to keep warm, get on the bus, go to your locker, get your books, run to your math class, walk to your literature class, walk to your robotics class, run to your science class, run for dear life to the cafeteria, walk to your history class, walk to your gym class, run to your art class, run back to your locker, worry about missing your bus or the bus not coming, get on the bus, ignore some of the rowdy kids on the bus, get off, walk home, take a shower, do your homework, eat dinner, go to sleep. It became a never-ending boring hurried-cycle to a point that turned you into a robot. The name calling made days longer. I remember one of my school mates who were a very short boy, would always get picked on and be bullied. Speaking up against bullying made you the center and you would get bullied next. I always kept my hair naturally Afro, kinky, poofy and wooly. Like it or not, that resulted in me getting the nickname "poodle". Great, I do not even like poodles, and the more I resented that nickname, the more the bullies enjoyed the saga, which paved my way into home-schooling and independent education.

Home Schooling

Insisting that our schools should fix all problems of US society is unreasonable. Parents and educators would be foolish to assume that schools can eradicate all society's inequities. Consequently, my family's decision was to reconnoiter the home schooling alternative, which has its ups and downs. Overall, it is a dream come true in terms of mental maturity, which has helped me transition to high school with high self-esteem, fearless avidness to learn, and with bulls-eye goals of pursuing higher education, and targeted future career goals.

CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative research study clearly shows that the transitioning is a critical point in a student's academic career, a time often characterized by increased intellectual atrophy, disengagement, decline of grades, demotivation, lower attendance, and school dropouts (Chigubu, M. 2015). Many students enter 9th grade lacking the preparation to successfully navigate the new, academic, social demands of high school. Failure to meet these challenges is linked to school failure and significant implications throughout high school. Unsuccessful transition to high school is associated with higher dropout rates, delayed graduation rates, and low achievement (Herlihy, 2007). These challenges are more prevalent in urban, high-poverty schools and among African American, Latino and students with disabilities (NHSC, 2007a, 2007b). The Educators and parents need to provide students with the necessary academic and socio-emotional supports to make smooth transitions to high school. Research supports that implementation of transition programs and interventions are linked to positive student outcomes, higher student engagement and lower dropout rates (NHSC, 2007a, 2007b).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Easing students' transition to high school should be top priority. Parents and educators should create personalized learning environments that decrease students' sense of anonymity and address individual needs. At state level, provide guidelines on how middle and high schools can collaborate to promote high school success. Districts should provide ongoing professional development to train teachers on working with struggling students. Schools should engage and create partnerships with the community, employers, institutes of higher education, the home schooled, and families. At home, from the novice, dilettante, uneducated, to the highly educated parent, the bedrock of education is the empowered child!

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