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Where Awareness Meets Responsibility: An Examination of the Urban Education Crisis and its Effects on One Philadelphia High School

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Introduction

Since I can remember, I have resisted the idea of a career in education. I never once desired to work in a classroom; rather, I imagined myself working in a profession where I could see an immediate turnover of my efforts. What is more, as I became further informed about the current education crisis in the United States (LeBlanc, 2013), I grew more and more conscious of the burden modern teachers face and the seeming hopelessness surrounding public schooling. Perhaps part of me fought against my natural inclination to teach because I understood that an inner obligation to act oft accompanies modern teaching careers. The burden of awareness admittedly intimidated me. By choosing not to involve myself in the education system, I had the luxury of ignoring the alarm found within.

While I did not desire to work as a teacher, I could not ignore my interest in the subjects of educational pedagogy and policy reform. Myself a product of a public school system, I felt it important to stay educated on relevant topics. During the fall semester of my sophomore year at Villanova University in Pennsylvania, I registered for a class entitled “Urban Education,” taught by Dr. Jerusha Conner. The course sought to “investigate the social, economic, and political legacies that have led to the unequal distribution of opportunities and resources in urban schools,” as well as analyze responses to “the challenges of urban schooling” (J. Conner, personal communication, August 26, 2013). Included in the course was a service requirement, which entailed traveling to High School of the Future (SOF) in West Philadelphia once per week to assist senior students with their schoolwork. My expectation for the course was that it teach the intricacies of urban education systems and unearth the obstacles urban students face as compared to suburban and rural students. In this regard, the course certainly met my expectations, but I failed to predict the complexity of class discussion topics and the frustration that would accompany both course lectures and the required service component. In retrospect, my vision of what I would learn was much too simplistic.

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The keystone of my education in urban schooling this semester was undoubtedly my volunteerism at SOF. Because of this requirement, not I nor any of my classmates could get away with learning passively; instead, each Friday we spent two hours working with Philadelphia high school students and learning about urban education hands-on. The high school seniors’ English teacher at SOF, Mr. Thomas Emerson, works with Villanova’s Office of Service Learning to find undergraduates each year to assist him in executing the state-mandated “senior project,” a research project required of all Pennsylvanian high school seniors before graduation (“High school…,” 2013). The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania proclaims that the purpose of the project “is to assure that the student is able to apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate information and communicate significant knowledge and understanding” (“High school…,” 2013). Each senior project encompasses reading, writing, research and, at SOF, a set number of service hours. Given the intricate nature of these projects, students require ample amounts of attention from educators in order to satisfactorily and punctually complete each section. Mr. Emerson’s class sizes are generally too large for him to provide such personalized attention on his own. Villanova students’ volunteerism compensates for this dilemma. Our assistance is especially needed this school year (2013-2014) as SOF, along with the rest of Philadelphia’s schools, bears the burden of an under-funded school district.

Background

The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) is currently in crisis, which some experts pin on noteworthy budget cuts, “archaic property taxation,” excessive leadership discontinuity, and deeply engrained poverty in inner-city areas (LeBlanc, 2013). On recent budget cuts, Robert Jean LeBlanc (2013), a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education, writes, “In 2012, the city faced a $300 million deficit brought on by a political reticence to reassess local property taxes, a state budget crisis…and stalling tactics in Harrisburg.” In response, “the School District of Philadelphia’s School Reform Commission…proposed to enact what became known as ‘the Doomsday Budget’,,” which: issued layoffs by the thousands to teachers, assistant principals, librarians, and secretaries; closed numerous schools; and cut funding to all extracurricular programming (LeBlanc, 2013). As local public schools fall into disarray, many parents are pushing for greater “school choice” in the form of charter and private education options; however, University of Pennsylvania professor James Lytle claims that “poor families and homeless kids are becoming even more disenfranchised when choice models are put in place” (Zankey, 2013). The media portrays Philadelphia schools as some of the “most dangerous” (Effron, 2013) in the country, stifled by a “climate of violence” (Sullivan, Snyder, Graham, & Purcell, 2011). As the site of more than fifty
percent of the “worst schools” in Pennsylvania, the city of Philadelphia is in dire need of education reform (Woodall, 2013). By volunteering at an affected Philadelphia high school this past semester, my classmates and I attempted to be change-makers in a site of great national importance, with no better way to immerse ourselves in the country’s urban education debacle.

The hardships which the SDP faces trickle down to SOF, where students – not unlike those at other Philadelphia schools – tend to internalize criticisms of the school district. Some convince themselves that they are solely responsible for their difficulties in school, though they learn in crowded classrooms and must fight for attention from their teachers. This year, SOF received the displaced student body of University City High School (UCHS), which closed as a result of those same budget cuts responsible for the aforementioned ‘Doomsday Budget’ (Jack & Sludden, 2013). Tensions between the two student bodies were high this fall semester. The merging of the two schools was especially a source of tension for seniors, who were in the midst of college applications during the fall semester; teachers did not know UCHS students well enough to write strong letters of recommendation for them, nor could they compensate for the shortage of teachers available to write recommendation letters, given the expanded student body. Furthermore, early on in the fall semester, the majority of extracurricular activities at SOF were cut for lack of funding, leaving the students with nowhere to go after school hours.

Volunteerism

In the midst of such an overwhelming time in the SDP, our role as volunteers at SOF was to provide a sense of stability and offer students personalized attention. In truth, our jobs were two-fold: on one side, we were responsible for supervising students’ academic work to ensure that they were making adequate progress on their mandated senior projects, but on the other side, we acted as their personal cheerleaders and made every effort to connect with them personally.

During our first visit to SOF, rather than immediately begin working with the students, my classmates and I first sorted through project proposals the students had submitted to Mr. Emerson and determined how to group similar proposals together, as well as modified those proposals deemed unfeasible given the limitations of student volunteerism and the time frame of the school year. As we worked, we read each proposal thoroughly. It was during this visit that I learned of the students’ ambition and deep understanding of mature issues, such as suicide rates or drug abuse in their local communities. SOF students sought to solve advanced and complex issues with their senior projects, which demonstrates great determination and civic-mindedness. After we had grouped together similar project proposals, Mr. Emerson paired roughly two or three Villanovans up with each senior project group, and Villanova volunteers were to work with these same students (our ‘learning partners’) all semester long.
I had the privilege of working with two different senior project groups this fall semester, since our time commitment to volunteer with Mr. Emerson’s English classes covered two class periods. During the first period, I worked with a group of three girls who aimed to address SOF’s lack of an English as a Second Language (ESL) program by starting an after-school club focused on the practice of written and spoken English. During the second period, I was paired with a group of four boys who sought to establish a greater sense of community between the SOF and UCHS student bodies by creating a unified senior yearbook.

Each week at SOF followed a similar pattern: Mr. Emerson would introduce an assignment to be completed by the end of the class period, I would guide my groups in the right direction as they completed said assignment, and my learning partners would submit their work as well as decide on a course of action for the coming week with regards to their projects. During class periods, conversations between my learning partners and I about the assignments at hand were periodically interrupted by more personal discussion. We would ask each other how our weeks had gone, if there had been any developments at SOF in relation to Philadelphia’s education crisis, or “getting to know you” questions about our families and future ambitions. Sometimes, strengthening my relationships with my learning partners took precedent over completing the day’s assignment, since Mr. Emerson often allotted students extra time to finish their work. Throughout the fall semester, I worked with my learning partners on three different components of their projects: their problem statements, their surveys or interviews, and their analysis of extant research.

The Urban Education class lectures and assigned readings supplemented my experiences at SOF, and dug even deeper into the challenges of urban schooling to address topics such as: oppression’s role in education, youth responses to the nation’s education crisis, and the development of new pedagogical techniques. As the semester progressed, it became increasingly obvious that the issues within the education system are complex, and cannot be solved by any one reform. Rather, the education system is a string of constant experimentation, with policymakers aimed at finding the holy grail of education practices but never quite succeeding.

By the midpoint of the semester, I had grown pessimistic that an answer could be found at all for the challenges facing urban education. The myriad sociological, economic and political factors that hinder urban schools and their students seemed to build a wall so thick no reformist could ever break through. The ideas and policies already implemented to quell the urban education crisis (e.g. “school choice,” tracking, small learning communities, etc.) have either had unintended negative consequences or negligible results – sometimes both. These policies most often become counterproductive when they are layered on top of each other, as evidenced by the combined effect of standards-based reform and school choice policies on public school closures (Kirshner, Gaertner & Pozzoboni, 2010; Ravitch, 2010, p. 137). This suggests that policymakers...
are not yet on the right track to fixing the problems in urban education. With the knowledge I had accumulated thus far in the semester, I knew something needed to be done immediately, but I harbored a mounting frustration as our class seemed to be moving farther and farther from a solution.

This frustration infringed on my time at SOF. After seven separate visits with our learning partners, very little academic progress had been made. Most groups were still perfecting their projects’ problem statements – the first assignment on which we worked with them. Winter was fast approaching, and still these high school seniors had yet to take any action to solve their chosen “problems” within the community. This seeming lack of academic progress felt symbolic of my own lack of progress in understanding systems-level solutions for the SDP; neither I nor my learning partners were achieving what we initially set out to do, and the hopelessness of this reality was overwhelming.

With just weeks left in the semester, I feared my efforts were not making a difference. I was reminded of the parable in which villagers discover tens of babies floating down a river, and in response set up a rescue team along the riverbank in order to keep constant watch and rescue the babies that they see. The rescue team grows more and more overwhelmed as the number of babies floating down the river increases exponentially, until one day a villager suggests that someone head upstream and discover where all of these babies are coming from in the first place (“The parable…,” n.d.). At SOF, I felt like a member of Philadelphia’s own rescue team. I was doing my best to help high school seniors already affected by the city’s crumbling school district, but not heading straight to the sources behind Philadelphia’s damaged schools. Even with my added help, high school students city-wide still lacked proper guidance counseling, dealt with school closures and displacement, and were deprived of proper resources. I felt I had hit that aforementioned wall created by sociological, economic and political factors, and there was only so much I could do.

It was around this time that I was introduced to a journal article written by Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne (2004) that discusses different types of citizenship and explains how each type contributes to solving social problems. The authors contend that there are three types of citizen: the personally responsible citizen, who contributes to solving social problems by acting responsibly and having good character; the participatory citizen, who contributes to solving social problems by taking action within a community structure; and a justice-oriented citizen, who contributes to solving social problems by restructuring the established systems that “produce patterns of injustice over time.” It struck me that each type of citizen is important in order to enact change, and no one type can solve social problems without the help of the other two. As a volunteer at SOF I was acting as a participatory citizen, not necessarily addressing the
sources of the urban education crisis, but certainly making an important impact on the students with whom I worked. I saw the fruits of my efforts in my learning partners’ expressions of appreciation for my assistance, or their comfort in reaching out to me with personal problems. The Westheimer and Kahne (2004) piece renewed my appreciation for Villanova students’ work at SOF and boosted my efforts in assisting my learning partners. I realized I was not powerless in my role at SOF, but rather enacting a different type of change than I had anticipated.

As such, my contributions this semester to solving the social problems within education were not systemic in nature, but rather were simple, individualized contributions. To my seven learning partners, I offered personal attention they would not have otherwise received in the classroom. What is more, as a true learning partner, I counted on them to attend class each Friday and held them accountable for their work. From an academic standpoint, I proofread all of my learning partners’ completed assignments and corrected any grammar or spelling mistakes. I was also able to put each of my groups in contact with a Villanova faculty member who works in a field related to their project, so as to expand and enhance their research. Though I did little to reform urban education as a whole, I certainly achieved my more modest goal of guiding my learning partners’ projects to fruition.

Conclusions

The end of our time at SOF brought with it no real sense of closure. I felt that we had just started to make headway on the senior projects when our semester of volunteering ended. However, I have committed to return to SOF for the Spring 2014 semester to work with my same learning partners and oversee the completion of their projects.

I am fortunate to have built a truly reciprocal relationship with these seniors, and so would be remiss if I did not mention the valuable lessons my learning partners have offered me in return. They presented me with an invaluable student perspective of the current circumstances of the SDP, which I found especially enriching, as the majority of the discourse in urban education comes from an administrative viewpoint. Their personalized accounts heightened my understanding of the consequences of various education policies, and were the lynchpin of my studies in urban education. Our shared time at SOF was truly a collaborative learning experience.

In reflection, both my education course and my involvement at SOF exposed me to new ways of thinking about urban education. For one, the students at SOF proved that anyone, even a young student, has the ability to enact change in the face of social injustice. The seniors’ ambitious projects and remarkable drive demonstrated that students need not be reliant on politicians to create change in a flawed structure. In fact, research into youth organizing shows that sometimes youth can have the loudest voice of all (Conner, Zaino, & Scarola, 2012).

Second, my experiences emphasized that expectations should not be adjusted for students simply because they come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Mr. Emerson truly believes that his
students are capable of exceptional work, and stresses that expecting anything less sends an insulting and disheartening message that handicaps them later in life. If the bar is raised, he argues, they will meet it – and his students’ advanced understanding of the course material in his English classes proves this point.

In addition to challenging common conceptions surrounding urban education, my experiences also altered my overall understanding of civic engagement. It is a difficult thing to appreciate the value of service efforts when they are severely limited in scope. My role at SOF, however, defied my expectation of immediate gratification, and showed me that even those efforts limited in scope can have a significant impact. I have come to realize that a commitment to localized service is integral to making a difference in the larger schema of education, as with any cause, and thus should not be disrespected as a mode of change.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I learned from my experiences that being an informed citizen and being responsible to act are one in the same. At the beginning of the semester, I naively thought that I could educate myself about the failings of urban schooling without feeling obligated to take action. The truth is quite the opposite: should our class, a group of capable and now fully informed citizens, choose not to act, then the message will be sent that those students and professionals directly affected by the education crisis are deserving of less in society. Indeed, awareness is responsibility, just as knowledge is power; the two are concurrent, and once we begin to separate them, societal injustices arise.

Inspired by our time at SOF, my fellow classmates and I are taking further action by organizing a virtual college guidance program for SOF juniors and seniors. This program will provide support for students throughout the college application and financial aid processes. As a part of this project, a peer and I will gather information about financial aid and scholarship applications and distribute it to the students during the coming spring semester (2014). I am moved by what I have learned thus far about the urban education system, and am excited to get back to work with my learning partners after the holiday recess.¹

Works Cited


