Stoking the Fire
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Written for Dr. Kelly Denton-Borhaug’s course

The majority of modern American public education is offering little to its pupils. A pedagogical structure lacking in substance runs rampant, failing to appease the hungry-minded. Absent are the mechanisms necessary to challenge those that crave knowledge. Those who wish to challenge the information that they are spoon fed fit best into my model vision of an educational system. Education is a necessary tool for the development of one’s future, not only monetarily, but as more of a deeper, personal evolution of the self.

The overarching view I have taken on of such an education system has evolved from reading writings of Henry Giroux and hearing the presentation on education from Dr. Gary Olson. The modern American education system can really best be described by the title of the first chapter of Giroux’s On Critical Pedagogy; “Critical Pedagogy in Dark Times”. Toxic concepts such as the banking method vex institutions and students alike, forcing students in particular into a mode of memorization and regurgitation. Nothing is truly learned under the banking method, according to Giroux. “…Young people were at one time and are now once again shamelessly reduced to ‘cheerful robots’ through modes of pedagogy that embrace an instrumental rationality in which matters of justice, values, ethics, and power are erased from any notion of teaching…”¹. The nature of the banking method intrinsically strips a student of rationale and critical reasoning, replacing these skills instead with short-term retention of information in order to recite it at a later time. This, in turn, is harmful to the students, and should not be the way the education of future generations should be treated.

Plato’s allegory of the cave, as presented by Dr. Olson, was instrumental in my realization of how our system is flawed. To briefly highlight the allegory, Plato sews the story of a false reality fed to a group of captives in the form of shadows against the wall of a cave. Eventually, one of the captives comes to realize the source of the shadows, but the others have developed such a strong complacency regarding their situation that they have accepted the knowledge forced upon them as their true perception of reality. The allegory fits the mold of the modern organization of public education. Students gain the knowledge necessary to perform well on standardized tests, but are not given ample opportunity to explore much outside of the rigid curriculum. It can be said that the American system indoctrinates rather than educates, supplying students with falsehoods about the country and its systems. Contrary to what is fed to students, the American public educational system does not measure up to the rest of the world. According to proficiency tests, states like New York barely measure up to the student population of struggling countries like Singapore. Often, students from wealthier areas struggle to show proficiency in areas such as mathematics. I am troubled by the thought that public education focuses on teaching to these standardized tests, but students fail to perform at a higher level. However, in reality, students are strangled by a constricting system forcing them to perform at levels for which they may be often unprepared. The American educational system leads to the consequence of setting its students up for failure with the structure of standardized testing.

So, if an education should not do all of these things, then what should it do? The education system of America should provide more outlets and opportunities for students to mentally develop themselves by challenging the information that they learn. The system should guide students

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towards a personal understanding of material as opposed to surface-level guidance. Modes of education should harness the power of critical pedagogy, encouraging students to think critically about the material, challenge it, and ask questions. Institutions of higher education also should sweep up this process for that previously mentioned deeper understanding. Rather than the goal being material and monetary at the end of the road of education, the obtainment of self-actualization should be encouraged and supported all the way through.

Growing up, I have been subjected not only to the trials and tribulations of public school, but the hardship brought on by having parents that did not seriously consider their education as an option for the future. Firstly, the experience of education as being taught to the test was apparent all throughout my twelve years in the system. I cannot comparatively speak for someone who attended a private school, as I did not, but there was great emphasis on the standardized tests we had to take all year long. High school, in particular, was watered down with talk of the PSSA tests, but the general atmosphere was less serious than in previous years in some ways. Scoring above a certain level on the tests was, in fact, a graduation requirement. The state mandated tests also become a key link to school funding by the state. At that point, the stakes are high for the school to get its majority scoring above a certain level. To quote Bill Ayers, the education theorist, “Standardized tests can't measure initiative, creativity, imagination, conceptual thinking, curiosity, effort, irony, judgment, commitment, nuance, good will, ethical reflection, or a host of other valuable dispositions and attributes.”

I can really invest myself in this bold statement. What if there were no standardized tests, but only an engaging curriculum? Schools should plant that creative seed and watch it grow. I cannot imagine what it would have been like to be encouraged to explore something over the weekend on my own instead of just reading the next

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chapter out of the book. It is hard to find and take initiative like that when your common practice is so deep seated after years of the same thing. In this reflection, I feel like something has been missing, never stirred from its slumber. I feel like the seed was not planted.

Even more so do I feel obligated to further my learning as a result of my parent’s choices in life. My mother did not graduate high school, dropping out in the eleventh grade, and my father was expelled in high school and never returned. Like many, I am a first generation college student confronting the realities of financial insecurity. After my father’s death in 2002, my mother struggled to hold a job year after year. As the job market crumbled in 2008, we ended up without a home, which lasted until she finally found work. Unable to obtain a secure position due to her lack of a high school diploma, let alone a college degree, I often feared the worst for our future. Living from paycheck to paycheck was, and sometimes still is, a struggle that I do not want to continue to have happen in the future. Based on my experience earlier in life, I look for job security and a secure future through my college education, but have come to realize that it is worth more than that.

The accessibility of education in our country also is something that strikes me as upsetting. To highlight the issue Jonathan Kozol raises in his work *Ordinary Resurrections*, there is a gross imbalance between the public education received by students on both ends of the economic spectrum. As Kozol describes the educational context of the students in the south Bronx, “Most disturbing to the teachers who come here to visit from the suburbs are the unabated inequalities in public allocations for the education of the children.”

Kozol raises the idea that contemporary debate asks whether higher funding is really the key disparity between low and high income students. Wealthy districts of New York, according to Kozol, spend almost twice as much per student than

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where the children Kozol worked with lived.⁵ I see the first step to correcting our system being the balancing and elimination of disparity and inequality. Funding should be even and ample across the board, without the variance that exists today. Besides a reworking of standardized testing, a greater balance in the quality of education can prove to be an integral first step to righting the wrongs.

Furthermore, outside the realm of economics, public education should really work on planting that previously mentioned seed. It could prove indispensable to provide opportunities for students to explore not only the material they work with, but themselves. The liberal arts style of education exercised by institutions such as Moravian College could prove to be a precious resource in planting the aforementioned seed. The exposure of students to topics outside of their main focus or field of interest can be a vital stepping stone to creating a more well-rounded and mentally engaged population. The system should also encourage self-actualization in its student body. To pull more from Dr. Olson and Plato’s allegory, I saw self-actualization as being a bridge between Olson and Giroux. Our education system should harness the potential of its students by making them realize that they do indeed have some sort of potential. Rather than focusing on just what is in front of them, students should be challenged to explore ideas outside of what they are comfortable with, but at the same time nurture their interests and develop them further. This model can, again, be seen in the liberal arts style of education. At the same time, institutions should use the curriculum to spark the creative fire waiting to be harnessed in each student.

The American student population is being subjected to a failing system as each day goes on. Day after day, potential is being wasted as more and more students drone through their work, urged on only by the looming threat of the standardized test. Instead, our system should support and nurture the creativity that rests inside each and every student. Helping them to learn to harness the

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⁵ See page 46, Kozol, Resurrections.
potential inside can ignite interests and open career gateways down the road. Years upon years spent in the system should help enhance one’s future, rather than harm it.
Works Cited


