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RCSSCI 365: Excellence, Equity and the Politics of Education

Education and the Underdog

Underdog stories hold a prominent place in American culture. Popular talent shows like *America’s Got Talent* and *American Idol* glorify hidden and unlikely talent. Some of the most celebrated sports victories of all times involve underdog teams rising to conquer reigning champions, as illustrated by the film *Miracle on Ice,* documenting the 1980 United States victory over the Soviet Union in Olympic hockey. Many people, including myself until recently, view schools as a place where underdogs, given equal resources and opportunities, can rise up and pursue success among the best and brightest. Many hit movies, like *The Blind Side* and *Freedom Writers*, commercialize education’s instrumental role in transforming the lives of at-risk, minority youth, warming the hearts of Americans and exalting education. In reality, underdog stories are the exception to the rule in American education. A long history of caste-like stratification in American society and a perpetuation of that caste system in unequal schools dampens the actual impact of education on low-class, minority students, particularly black adolescents. Underneath the rosy ideology of American schools, which even most minority students believe in at first, is the reality that most black students do not gain the same benefits from education as do their white, middle-class counterparts.

Roslyn Mickelson, professor at University of North Carolina at Charlotte, explored the contradiction between black students’ attitudes towards school and their achievement in *Attitude-Achievement Paradox Among Black Adolescents*. Mickelson used the concept of abstract and concrete attitudes to explain the pervasive tendency of black adolescents to revere education and still consistently underachieve. Mickelson explained that blacks hold overwhelmingly positive opinions about the theology of education, believing even more strongly than whites that education fosters opportunity. Yet their concrete beliefs about education, influenced by the experiences of their family and community, suggest that education does little good for the people they are surrounded by. I imagine that most children arrive for the first day of kindergarten curious about what school may hold for them, without a preconceived negative view of education. Over time, although black children still believe in the potential of education, they come to the conclusion that that potential doesn’t apply to people like them and that, therefore, their performance in school is largely inconsequential.

Last year, while serving as the national representative of Distinguished Young Women, a scholarship program formerly known as America’s Junior Miss, I traveled across the country sharing an outreach program, called “Be Your Best Self”, with children in various classroom settings. I witnessed the disconnect Mickelson acknowledges. My presentations focused on ways to become your best by being healthy, involved, responsible, ambitious and studious. In light of Mickelson’s theory of concrete and abstract attitudes, I recently reconsidered a visit I made to an inner-city elementary school in Greensboro, North Carolina serving low-income and minority children. During my presentation, I gave each child Play-Doh to create something that represented being healthy. One little boy, named Demetric, took painstaking care in creating a colorful fruit cart. Impressed, I asked him if he wanted to study to become an artist. With wide eyes, he looked up at me and said, “That would be wonderful. But, no, I can’t. I have to be a football player so that I can send money home to help my mom.”

Why did Demetric, engaged, seemingly happy to be in school and self-motivated to put extra care into his work, think that football was his only option? Why didn’t he think he could just as plausibly study and bring home money as an artist, CEO or dentist? Something caused his abstract enthusiasm to give way to a concrete belief that school wasn’t the way for him to succeed. Since, according to Mickelson, concrete attitudes are the greatest predictors of performance, it is crucial to understand why children like Demetric develop negative concrete attitudes towards school. Authors Ray Rist and John Ogbu both attempt to explain why with two contrasting ideas of castes and their influence on education.

In a study entitled *Student Social Class and Teacher Expectations: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy in Ghetto Education*, co-president of International Development Evaluation Association, Ray Rist, defines a caste system as the stratification within a classroom. Rist, who observed a class of students from kindergarten through second grade, found that teachers formed evaluations on the potential of each student on the first day. Each evaluation was based on first impressions, information provided by parents or previous teachers and facts about the family’s status, such as whether or not the family was on welfare. According to Rist, a teacher based his or her opinion of each student on whether or not the student possessed qualities revered by the middle class, such as tidy appearance or easy interaction with adults. These factors, largely based on opinion, involved little information about the students’ actual academic potential, a disconcerting fact considering that the teacher’s judgment ultimately dictated the caliber of education the student would receive. In Rist’s observations, teachers grouped classes based on such opinions, creating a classroom organization that established who they thought was most likely to succeed and who was not. Since teachers passed evaluations on to the next teacher each year, there was little, if any, mobility between groups from the first day on. The teacher’s obvious expectations of each student had a profound impact on the student’s performance through a rigid organization that Rist compared to a caste-like system.

The kindergarten class Rist observed was divided into three tables, with Table One housing the students the teacher considered most likely to succeed. The unpromising children placed at Table Three were often belittled by the teacher, ridiculed by other students and were even unable to see the board from their table. The children at Table One received favoritism and extra help, obviously getting a different quality of education than Table Three students, who couldn’t even see the board. In effect, the classroom’s caste-like organization solidified each student’s place in society as the teacher determined, becoming a reflection and reinforcement of the larger class system.

Perhaps the most devastating point of Rist’s research is that the students, most of whom were naively optimistic at the beginning of school, internalized feelings of either superiority or inferiority based on differential treatment. Taking social cues from their teacher and peers, the students at Table Three began calling each other “dummy” or “nigger.” Yet, they never called a student from Table One such a name. The organization of the classroom into groups based on the teacher’s subjective first impression became a rigid caste-like structure that endured throughout a student’s education. Tragically, the resulting feelings of superiority, or inferiority, also typically endured. It is no wonder why, in the face of distinctly unequal schooling, certain students lost faith in the promise of education. When a student cannot see the board and is belittled day after day, can he be expected to hold fast to his belief that education opens the door to opportunity?

Nigerian-American anthropologist and professor, John Ogbu, addressed the concept of caste systems relating to education differently in *The Consequences of the American Caste System.* Ogbu defines a caste as a minority group of people, such as black Americans, incorporated into a country and then relegated to a lower social position by the majority, who structurally subordinate the minority with an overarching ideology. As a result, the minority grows to resent the people within the majority and anything related to their ideology, including their education system. Ogbu says that over the years, such subordination creates a belief that the minority’s odds for survival are more likely if members work together to manipulate the system with a collective struggle against prevailing ideology. They come to blame issues like unemployment or failure in education on the system, rather than on themselves. The behavior problems and demeaning comments Rist observed among the children at Table Three are an example of collective struggle within the microcosm of classroom castes. In addition, black students may have more difficulty receiving as much from education as white students because they typically possess a different type of intelligence. For years, blacks were assigned to menial jobs and not given the opportunity to develop middle or upper-class skills that cultivate critical thinking and the type of intelligence often measured by IQ tests. The issue isn’t that blacks are less intelligent, but rather that the type of intelligence they often possess isn’t conducive to what schools test.

In addition, the caste system cultivates a black epistemology that may hinder students. Since many blacks view schooling and the symbolic meaning of intelligence tests as yet another manifestation of the majority’s ideology, they struggle to enthusiastically embrace the education system. Many black students are also surrounded by overwhelmingly discouraging evidence of the fruits of education in their own families and communities. If a black student is enrolled in a school that champions opportunity but lives with an older brother who graduated from the same school only to work at Burger King, it is understandable that he may develop a hindering attitude of disillusionment. In the face of a rigid caste structure in society, Ogbu asserts that the effort of schools to provide an equal education and give students positive self-perceptions is critical to combat prevailing concrete beliefs. However, as seen in Rist’s study, education is often unequal. The disillusioned blacks working in menial jobs and blaming the system were perhaps once the tragically optimistic kindergarten students, largely unaware of their predetermined value in the eyes of their teachers and of society. Perhaps Rist and Ogbu’s contrasting concepts of castes work together to create a vicious and usually inescapable cycle of inequality in education for black children.

A little over a month ago, a tragedy shook my own community to the core and brought media attention to the discourse on unequal education for blacks. Every morning for four years of high school, I spent 30 minutes in a homeroom class with A.J. Marion, a nineteen-year-old black football legend whose athletic fortitude was rivaled only by the brilliance of his smile and goodness of his heart. A.J. and I received the superlatives for “Most Talented” in our senior class and I still remember when we got our photos taken together. As a joke, I posed in an intimidating stance holding his football while he held a microphone and pretended to sing like I do. Remembering that time and his contagious kindness, I feel sick to my stomach. A star athlete in our high school’s football program and local celebrity in our town, A.J. received offers from top football programs his junior year of high school until suffering a knee injury his senior year, from which he never recovered. That year, A.J.’s optimism, charismatic smile and kindness never wavered. A few months ago, A.J. was shot and killed by a police officer after a lengthy foot chase. Allegedly, A.J., whose college offers evaporated in the wake of his enduring injury, attempted a burglary, was pursued by police and eventually shot after he dropped his weapon and didn’t cooperate. The news of his death shocked and devastated my community. A journalist working for the Asheville Citizen-Times wrote that he couldn’t make sense of how the promising young man who always called him “sir” could be dead at only nineteen.

A.J. was driven in football, but seemed to lack the same drive in academics. It was understandable. He was a star football player with a promising career in front of him. I doubt that many people, whether family, coaches or teachers, encouraged him to focus on critical thinking skills or to challenge himself in higher-level classes. Although I do not believe that anyone maliciously, or perhaps even intentionally, discouraged A.J. from pursuing anything beyond football, I do believe that my school did A.J. a disservice by seeing him as an athlete, not as a student. I am saddened by the role education played, or rather didn’t play, in A.J.’s life. If A.J. graduated with marketable skills other than his prowess on the football field and took the kinds of courses that would have given him purpose and drive to go to college immediately despite his football injury, would things have been different?

Caleb Pressley, a high school teammate, said in a newspaper interview that if A.J. had gone to college, everything would have been different. In an interview with the Asheville Citizen-Times, Ben Councell, a teammate who went on to play football for Notre Dame, called A.J. during a difficult time in college when he felt like giving up. A.J. told him to keep on going and keep on working. Several of A.J.’s friends said that he still talked about going to college, but seemed to be adrift after high school, rather than proactive. Why didn’t A.J. believe in himself academically like he did his friends? Perhaps A.J. didn’t think that education could do for him what it could do for others. He was accepted to a local college a year late, but changed his mind and instead worked at Burger King and Autobell Car Wash to make money. He made plans to attend a different college the next semester. A.J. had a college course placement test scheduled for the day after he died.

To see a hometown hero, a young man of dignity, respect, enthusiasm and seemingly limitless possibilities fall victim to the disillusionment Mickelson, Rist and Ogbu discuss is devastating. How do we avoid such tragedies? How do we equip schools to give all students, regardless of starting credentials, race or social class, an equal shot at a quality education? I know that there is not an easy answer, or we would have implemented such a solution years ago. All I know is that having known A.J., the excuse that our schools are just as good as they are going to get is no longer good enough for me. It is not enough to simply be heartbroken by stories like those of A.J. Marion and Demetric. There is an abundance of pity and heartbreak in America. What we need is motivation to actively seek and implement a solution.

The solution must involve a rewiring of the caste-system mentality within both schools and communities. It must address unequal education holistically, encouraging teachers, parents, and community leaders to be active instruments of change. Not all children enter school as equals. Many children do enter school as underdogs, but they shouldn’t be destined to leave as underdogs. A child may enter kindergarten at a lower academic level than his peers and without a family that encourages education. Yet that child has no less of a right to pursue life with the full benefits of an education. All children, whether a white lawyer’s son or the black daughter of a single mother, must be equally encouraged to take advantage of a well-rounded education with the belief that, with commitment and hard work, it can open doors that athletic skills or jobs at fast food restaurants alone cannot. Of course, the reality must match the vision and doors to a brighter future must actually be equally open to all students once they graduate. Rewiring a way of thinking and teaching cemented by years of caste-like systems, not only in schools but in entire communities, will be an uphill battle. Yet, when I remember the glimmer of hope in Demetric’s eyes and the promise in A.J.’s smile and stature, I believe that the possibility of someday achieving equality for all children is worth the difficulty of the struggle.

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