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### Who Gets Taught?

There are two main influences to education; the effort of the student and, the dedication of the teacher. American educators tend to see faulty education primarily as a student's problem, rather than a question of how they could teach children better. Whether it be a disability, the child's socio-economic background, or simply their accent, many teachers in the United States feel that the student is to blame for learning slowly. They therefore often ignore the slow learner or even place them out of their classroom. When in truth, every student learns at their own pace, even the seemingly 'normal' students can fall behind. Warped views of education like the above have led to the need for establishments like the Refugee Progress Facilities(RPF) (name has been changed for privacy reasons), which I learned through volunteer work, help all ages of refugees adjust to life in America. When education is only viewed through a narrow lens of blame then students who fall outside the box have little to no chance of receiving an equal education even with outside programs like the RPF and college scholarships.

The RPF is invaluable to the refugees of Lansing who benefit from the legal requirement that "all refugees are expected to be self-sufficient and independent in a short period of time" (RPF webpage). It also provides tutoring, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for adults, driving lessons, and a computer lab; which all comes in very handy to people just starting out in this country. As well as helping with learning, during my time there I assisted with at least two parties designed to raise spirits and help indoctrinate these children into American culture.

It is a huge responsibility for just one, non-profit, all volunteer organization to take on its shoulders and many students fall through the cracks. Children often talk back without any concept of manners and nobody, from the adult supervisors to the student volunteers corrects them. At times there are too many children and not enough tutors, because tutors would skip, and children would be able to go straight to the computer and watch music videos. It is in the nature of such organizations to be understaffed and underequipped but it does not follow that it is impossible for places like this to make a significant difference in the lives of these refugees.

During my time working in the RPF I worked mostly with two young men, one named Enzo from South America and the other named Umair from the Middle East (names have been changed for the sake of privacy). I met Enzo on my first day, he wanted help with his geometry homework but we both quickly discovered that the only thing I could help him with was English as I am horrible at math. From there our relationship grew as it turned out that he was graduating and was about to take his ACT. I helped him prepare, with a fellow tutor Abby, and we even went over the science and math sections. It turned out that I had a wealth of knowledge, not only about the ACT (which I had taken classes in) but also about college in general. Soon he would seek me out for help, bringing in his college essays or simply coming up with a problem that he thought I could solve. Enzo had trouble writing and I pushed him to be a better writer because he made the mistake of telling me his grade point and I knew he could do it. He was just as capable as any other student in his school but when he made a mistake or didn't understand something he very quickly wanted to give up and have the answer given to him. I

believe that is part of the reason Enzo used to ask if I was coming next week at the end of every study session, because I never gave up on him he had no chance to give up on himself. Also, if we were ever to go through a whole day and he didn't need my help I made sure to stop by and check up on his progress and encourage him with his writing.

Umair was a very different kind of student, not only was he already in college but he also was much harder to make a connection with. He came in to the RPF with his laptop and his papers already virtually complete, he just wanted an advanced spelling and grammar check not a conversation. The first few times I helped him I was called in as a consult with other tutors who were unable to figure out how to help him with his writing. Then one day he picked me over another tutor, and then again the next session. It was fascinating reading his work, the depth of emotion and personal details he revealed were stunning. It was that second time that he started to bond with me more than just on paper. And I realized, like Enzo, he was also self-conscious about his writing and his place in this country. I often felt less like a teacher and more an equal with Umair because whenever he got a bit of grammar wrong he could recite the rule to me but he didn't understand how to apply it. It was challenging for me because I never put much stock in grammar rules and being corrected when I'm trying to explain a concept really made me question how much I knew. In the end though I think we both learnt from each other, Umair learned to put more faith in himself and his ideas and I learnt that I need to buy a grammar book.

The most interesting difference between these two young men is how they expressed their personal histories to me during our time together. I believe in a 'don't ask' policy, if the student is ready or willing to talk about something then they will. Enzo was able to talk to me about his parent's death and the gangs and drugs he was trying to escape from in his home country. While Umair wrote quite comfortably about his father's death at the hands of the Taliban he could not discuss it though it had been seven years. Both boys have scars on their faces, which they got in their homeland and neither boy wants to talk about it. Strangely enough, Umair was comfortable enough to talk about his life as a young gay American man but Enzo was unable to discuss any part of his American life except education or school clubs. For Enzo this was because his number one goal in America, even before he came to America, was a chance at an education because he had never been to school before. Of course neither boy had any problems asking me questions about my life, education and history; all of which they found enthralling. This difference in expression reminded me of the danger of labels; when we look at all refugees as people with a horrible past who were forced to escape their country we overlook their individuality and become incapable of truly helping them become acclimated.

Of course Enzo and Umair were not the only students I worked with at the RPF, I also worked with various other students depending on the day. On a couple of days when I arrived at the RPF before my scheduled hours I was able to help adults work with the driving simulator. The driving simulator is a machine that allows adults to get practice driving a car before they take their road test. It is

positive because it helps refugees learn the rules and basic skills it takes to drive but it also has many faults. The machine itself is out of date and often breaks down. It cannot recognize gearshifts and it has no concept of blind spots or explaining errors. The young adult man I was working with the first time I encountered the driving simulator was unable to speak English and had great difficulty with the machine. Whenever he encountered a problem with the rules, he would tell me through hand motions that the machine was not working. It became very difficult to explain to him that it was his driving that was wrong, but he had an epiphany when eventually I ended up demonstrating for him what he was meant to do.

The other group I worked with on the driving simulator was a group of two young girls and three boys all crowded around trying to get a try on the 'game'. The young women were taking it very seriously but whenever they had trouble keeping the wheel straight or figuring out the parking brake, one of the young men would step in and grab the wheel to show her how it was done. It was also disconcerting how often they teased one another considering none of them could stop from crashing into the walls of the virtual world. It seemed that this group of graduating students didn't take this learning opportunity seriously and didn't respect each other very much. I gathered that they had low respect for one another for the same reason the other man had blamed his inability to learn on the machine. A broken down machine in the corner of the room that is separated off by a barrier leads individuals to believe that are not important and that they are also viewed as broken. It is the idea, talked about in class, of surroundings reflecting how a student

sees their own self worth; a dilapidated school would lead a child to feel neglected and thus they would stop trying to achieve.

I also worked with younger girls during my time at the RPF, the girls that stood out to me the most were those with behavior problems. A young girl, Bethany (names have been changed for the sake of privacy) and I would often play memory card games together. The game was simple; you flipped over all the cards and then by guessing on your turn you tried to make pairs. If you made a wrong match (a fish and a girl) then you had to put the cards back. What upset me about playing cards with Bethany was that she cheated. When it was just the two of us I let her get away with it because I didn't think it mattered but when another younger girl, who couldn't speak any English, joined us and she continued to cheat I got very upset. Trying to enforce the rules that late in the game only led to confusion and stubbornness on her part. She didn't want to play by the rules when she knew how much she could gain by cheating. It was my own fault, I had believed that the game didn't matter, that cutting her a break wouldn't hurt her in the long term and so I let her cheat. When teachers overlook cheating or ignore students who need extra help they are making the same mistake and can create undesirable patterns in these children's lives.

The experience at the RPF clearly relates to diversity in schooling and how type casting can create unequal schooling. When teachers ostracize students whose ability to understand English is behind that of native speakers they are implying that their IQ's are lower than that of the native students. This is also a prime example of how teacher-student relations can decay when the student believes that the teacher

doesn't care about their well being, "From these adults' perspectives, the way youth dress, talk, and generally deport themselves *proves* that they do not care about school". For their part, "students argue that they should be assessed, valued, and engaged as a whole people, not as automatons in baggy pants" (Valenzuela, 1999, pg 61). As well as the damaging effects such attitudes can have on the student's self-esteem and habitus, it can also damage the quality of education the student receives. Establishments like the RPF wouldn't need to exist if schools were doing their job and educating their students properly in the first place, or even if they did exist, they should be homework help not a first chance to learn the material. When students come to you at the RPF and they only have half of the notes or seem to have a week's worth of homework it becomes hard not to point the finger at the schools. ESL programs at these school are clearly not doing enough with their students, Enzo had never written an essay and was never told that there was an essay on the ACT, but it only comes back to the old argument that tracking is a byproduct of society not visa versa.

Even if tracking is based on society the circle has to end somewhere and why not with the next generation? The only result of tracking is poorer education for those in the ESL classrooms and a better education for those that have been deemed 'worthy'. As Jeanie Oakes said, "those who have the most difficulty learning seem to have fewer of the best teachers" (Oakes, 1997, pg179) and that is why tracking will never accomplish the goal of separate but equal education. Once you separate out a student you have labeled them, and their teachers know that label too. When you have purely ESL classrooms the learning stops and the memorizing and copying 'just

to get by' begins. Like the card game we played in class, if these students are kept in these under educated classrooms where they are not taught properly about society and it's codes they will be playing the game of life without the rules.

ESL students need more attention and their teachers, who often times haven't been trained in the proper teaching procedures, tend to give them less of their time because they don't want their whole class to fall behind. It is a challenge to run a heterogeneous classroom but the rewards are worth more than the drawbacks. All of the students receive the same education and the benefit of diversity among their peers; which is where half of societal knowledge is gained in schooling. Also, the breadth of opinions and viewpoints will increase due to the vastly different backgrounds of the students, which will benefit the students that would have been tracked into AP courses. Group work and projects will help better prepare the students for the real world, where diversity is not tracked out of your everyday life. Classrooms like these where every student is taught will help students to be more accepting of those who are different from them even if they aren't represented in the classroom. Teachers should be promoting tolerance and respect not tracking students so they never interact with one another.

As a student of teacher education I feel there are so many courses that would help make me a better educator. For starters psychology courses to better understand the damaging effects a violent childhood can have on how a child learns and participates in the classroom. Also, a language requirement, so as a teacher, I will have my years as a second language learner to look back on and will be better able to empathize with my students. World religions, I also feel would be of great



help not because it could teach me every religion or everything I need to know about them, but it would give me an insight into what it is like to celebrate a religion that isn't backed by the media. Some kind of intensive grammar course would help me better explain English to someone who is learning the language, there is so much grammar that we just pick-up without a thorough understanding of the rules. I truly feel a class about conflict resolution would also help me become a better teacher as I am not sure what I would do if a fight broke out in one of my classes. Thinking more along the mainstream, I would love to take a media class, a current events class and a CPR and medical emergency class. Experiences I need are more class time, because every time you work with a student, whatever kind of learner they are they teach you something about education. The very best resources are the opportunity to talk about whatever issue has occurred, whatever teaching problem I couldn't handle rather than readings or class activities. The most important gift experienced teachers can give me are their stories, their knowledge and their secrets; I can find teacher readings on my own.

This experience really changed the way I viewed the American school system, I have always been a firm believer in the achievement ideology, that if a student works hard they will succeed and if they don't succeed then it is their own fault. To see these students struggling to write a sentence or to comprehend a grammar mistake made me question not only my outlook but also justice in America. Where is justice if it doesn't exist in the education system? I can't say that working at the RPF makes me want to rush into becoming a teacher but it does remind me why I originally considered education as my future career. The RPF

made me feel unprepared at times, as if I wasn't ready for the job or the changing world ahead of me. I feel proud that I made it through this experience and also glad that I was able to help some children and hopefully improve their adaptation to America. I have never understood volunteer work before, as I have never been fully invested in what I was giving my time to, but this opportunity really opened my eyes to what volunteers can do and why it is so important to give.