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Educational Biography

My educational opportunities have led me to becoming a South Carolina Gamecock. It all started when I was 6 months old, I was adopted by two American strangers I would soon call mom and dad. Had I not been adopted, I most likely would not have received an education. As a young girl in China living in an orphanage, I would have learned how to cook, clean, and take care of the other babies who were waiting for a family. My life would have been completely different if I did not get adopted. I owe everything to my parents. I am an only child, not including my dog who my mom treats as a human. They brought me to the United States where my opportunities were plentiful. We lived in New York, on Long Island in particular. Here, they made sure they moved into a highly rated public-school district. My mom, being an educator, knew exactly what to look for when choosing where I was going to get an education.

Parental Involvement

Before I started elementary school, my parents enrolled me in Tutor Time. They made sure I had endless opportunities to grow and learn. In elementary and junior high school, I was on the soccer team, the cross-country team, and I took art classes. I even went to summer camp every summer with my friends. In high school, I was encouraged to join whatever clubs I wanted to. My involvement with student government, national honor society, key club, and sports helped me not only academically but socially as well. I was given these opportunities by my parents at a young age but unfortunately, not all children have. Duncan and Murnane (2011) suggest that brain development plays a vital role in a child's life. They say, "A child's everyday interactions with sights, sounds, and supportive caregivers are important for allowing the brain's wiring to progress

appropriately (Duncan & Murnane, 2011, p. 9).” Children who have the opportunities for enrichment such as summer camps, pre-school, or sports at a young age are more likely to develop quicker than those who have very limited opportunities. Higher income families spent about \$2,700 more per year on child enrichment than lower income families in 1972 to 1973 and this number had almost tripled in 2005 to 2006 (Duncan & Murnane, 2011, p. 11). This means that children from lower income families are developing slower than those from higher income families creating a gap in the education system.

Parental interaction at a young age goes hand in hand with enrichment and extracurricular activities. When I was in elementary school, my mom worked but my dad was already retired. Almost every day after school, my dad would be there when I got home to help me with homework or take me out to get ice cream. My mom was a teacher, allowing her to be off on the weekends and during the summer, facilitating family vacations and outings. Duncan and Murnane (2011) suggest that exposure to “novel” places, places other than the home, school, or day-care, play a role in developing background knowledge that makes learning social studies and science easier (p. 12). Lower income families are more likely to have parents who work one or more jobs because of their monetary struggles, making it more likely that their children stay at home alone or with a babysitter.

When college decision time came around, my parents helped me weigh my options and brought me to college fairs near and far. We traveled to Maryland, Delaware, Florida, Rhode Island, and South Carolina to tour different campuses and see which one was the best fit. They continued to support me in anything I wanted to do. My want to become a teacher stemmed from my mom. She was a second-grade special education teacher. When I was younger, she would bring me to her classroom, and I would watch her teach. Noblit’s (1993) narrative about Pam reminds

me of my mom. Her classroom was colorful and inviting. The children would come in everyday, hang up their backpacks, and start the “morning warm-up” activity. Like Pam, my mom’s classroom had rituals that promoted consistency (Noblit, 1993, p. 34). My mom showed me how to care for her students. Now retired, she helps me with my education courses and tells me stories from her 27 years of teaching. Without my parents, I do not think I would be where I am today. They provided me with all the opportunities, love, and support I needed to prosper and thrive.

Although family income affects all children, no matter their socioeconomic status, family dynamic takes priority. As stated by Books (2009), “all parents and caregivers, regardless of family income, want the best for their children and care about their education (p. 10-11).” They want their kids to have what they could not have. They would do anything to get their children what they need. Regardless of race, religion, or socioeconomic status, parents care about their children, and that is all that matters.

Tracking

My classmates and I experienced tracking from a very young age. Starting in fourth grade, we were tested on our reading and writing skills. Our teachers split us up into different reading groups, with each group being at a different reading level and students who were in the same group had similar skills. By the time I entered sixth grade, I had been tested on my math, science, and reading skills and placed in a certain class based solely on my grades. When it was time for us to move up to junior high school, we were given a schedule with classes based on our performance in elementary school. I was placed in honors classes, surrounded with a bunch of unfamiliar faces. As the years went on, I continued to take honors classes which then turned in advanced placement classes (AP) and the unfamiliar faces turned into friends. Nothing changed as we transitioned into high school. I had the same friends who took all the same classes and the same honor and AP

levels as I did. There were many benefits that came with advanced courses. The AP classes allowed me to take AP exams which would then become college credits and my advanced placement did not limit me from taking any course I wanted to. I was recognized for my academic achievement by being inducted into the National Honor Society and my diploma even had special emblems that represented my “excellence in math and science”. But the notion of advanced and regular students created a divide in the student body.

Throughout my schooling career, I was surrounded by the same group of students with every honors or advanced class I took, everyone knew who the “honors kids” were. I barely interacted with students who were not in my classes. Oakes (2005) comments that schools’ group similar students together, creating homogeneous classes (p. 151). Tracking is socially detrimental because it labels and divides students into groups. The students are surrounded by the same people almost every day, limiting social interaction with those who are in lower level classes. The groups that are formed usually go as followed: The smart kids at the top and everyone else at the bottom. Students who were not in honors or AP classes were labeled as “stupid” or as “losers”. The labels students receive due to tracking not only effects them socially but mentally as well. When students are labeled as “low achieving”, they have no motivation to move up. Research shows that these students have lower self-esteem, low aspirations, and negative attitudes (Oakes, 2005, p. 14). Oakes (2005) suggests promoting “heterogeneous classes in schools (p. 151).” By doing so, students are given the opportunity to interact with more people than they would if classes were sorted homogeneously. Mixing higher achieving and lower achieving students would be beneficial in many ways. First, lower achieving students can learn from their higher achieving peers. It is said that, “when the lowest-achieving and worst-behaved students are grouped together for instruction, everyone in that class performs far below potential (Oakes, 2005, p. 151).” Not only does

homogeneous grouping discourage moving up academically, but it also limits socialization between classmates. Students are quoted saying, “students in this [low track] class are unfriendly,” and that they “often feel left out of class activities (Oakes, 2005, p. 16). This is due to their negative attitudes towards school fostered by their labels of low achieving. Studies show that average and low achieving students perform better in heterogeneous classrooms and they these classes have the friendliest relationships (Oakes, 2005, p. 151). Heterogeneous classes would be beneficial to all students both academically and socially.

Tracking also promotes bias when it comes to teachers and their teaching styles. Oakes (2005) also discusses the differences in teaching for higher level and lower level classes. During research called A Study for Schooling, Oakes (2005) was able to conclude that student in high track classes were provided with more opportunities than low track students (p. 16). Once students are placed into these groups, it proves difficult to move out of them because of the substantial differences in the levels of teaching. Teachers who taught the high track classes were found to spend more time interacting with students, teaching, and were more enthusiastic than low track teachers (Oakes, 2005, p. 16). Students are being taught in completely different ways depending on the track they are on. Oakes (2005) found that in high achieving English classes, students were taught content that was considered “high-status knowledge” which could be used for college, such as how to write thematic essays, book reports, and accelerated vocabulary (p. 15). On the other hand, the English classes that were considered low achieving were not exposed to these same skills. These students were given worksheets, expected to write small paragraphs, and taught how to fill out job applications (Oakes, 2005, p. 15). The differences Oakes found between the levels of teaching unmask a need for change. His findings correlate to the experiences I had in high school. At the beginning of each new school year, some students from the low track classes would take

their chance and move up to the higher level with little success. They would end up dropping out of the higher-level class within the first few weeks of school. The issue with high and low tracks is that there is no in between. Some students that take low level classes find them to be too easy, but the higher-level classes are too challenging and often move too quickly. There is no middle ground for students who are excelling in the general education classes but are struggling in the honors classes. This puts students in a tough predicament which usually results in staying in the classes that are too easy. By staying in courses that are a walk in the park per say, students are not reaching their full potential which hurts them educationally. I do not blame the students who chose to stay in classes that they are acing, I would rather be succeeding than failing too. The bottom line is that students who are in the lower tracks suffer because “their education is of considerably lower quality (Oakes, 2005, p. 16)”

Students who were placed into the honors and AP courses not only receive the benefits of a higher status socially, but they were also gifted a weighted grade point average (GPA). My school district provided multipliers that would be added to the GPAs of student who were enrolled in honors or AP classes. Grades for honors courses were increased by a multiplier of 1.06 and AP courses received a multiplier of 1.08. To put this into perspective, my school district gave grades on the 100-point scale. If you were taking an honors geometry course and your grade at the end of the year was an 85, it would become a 90. If this was an AP course, it would be a 92. The justification for this system was that honors and AP courses are more challenging and weighted GPAs was the way to compensate for that. While my friends and I benefitted from the weighted courses, it created a bigger gap in the student body. The school was essentially making the smart kids smarter and in comparison, the ones who were struggling seem like they were doing worse than they actually were.

Standardized Testing

In 9th grade, my classmates and I began taking the New York State Regents Exams. These exams are a series of tests that you have to pass in order to earn your high school diploma in New York State. There is a total of four history tests, two English tests, four science tests, four/five mathematics tests, and one foreign language test that you have pass with at least a 65 percent by the end of senior year. A lot of my classmates struggled with these tests and some even had to retake a few of them. An article written by David Hursh (2005) states that the New York State Regents exams have been “criticized for having poorly constructed, misleading, or erroneous questions, or for using a grading scale that either over- or understates students’ learning (p. 611).” The tests we were forced to take did not produce any true results. Hursh (2005) goes onto say that the grades can be skewed from passing to failing “depending whether the State Education Department wants to increase the graduation rate” or not (p. 612). These tests are controlled by people who are financially invested, people who do not care about the students. Standardized tests were deciding our futures even though they do not define one’s intellectual capability. As Kohn (2003) said, “no single test is sufficiently valid, reliable, or meaningful that it can be treated as a marker for academic success (p. 4).” Schools all of the nation are using standardized tests to determine students’ futures. Many students, including myself, are not good test takers. I took all honors and AP classes in junior and high school but still could not perform to the best of my abilities when taking a test. As stated by Kohn (2003), “most teachers can instantly name students who are talented thinkers but who just don’t do well on these exams – as well as students whose scores seem to overestimate their intellectual gifts (p. 4).”

Students whose scores overestimate their intellectual ability are prime examples of the “bunch o’ facts” model presented by Kohn (2003). The “bunch o’ facts” model is the lecturing and

memorization of information without actually knowing what any of it means (Kohn, 2003, p.4). Similarly, the Core Knowledge model is a curriculum of standards that requires students to learn hundreds of facts and skills (Kohn, 2003, p. 7). Both the “bunch o’ facts” model and the Core Knowledge model suggest that students are “interchangeable receptacles into which knowledge is poured (Kohn, 2003, p. 7).” Kohn’s models go hand in hand with Freire’s “banking concept” of education. The banking concept sets the teacher as the narrator and the students as containers just for receiving, filing, and storing information (Freire, 2011, p. 117). Freire (2011), also suggests that the banking system assumes that the teacher knows everything which the students know nothing (p. 120). These models and concepts are becoming the standard in schools all over the nation. In my schooling career, I have learned to memorize facts and information for the sole purpose of testing. For instance, when the time came around to take the SAT and ACT, my parents got me a tutor. This tutor was not teaching me new information like vocabulary or reading concepts, she was teaching me how to take a test. I learned strategies on how to take a test in the best way possible. I learned that if I got the answer “C” three times in a row, one of them was most likely wrong. Even after my tutoring session, I still was not able to perform as well as I knew I could. Even though my score was slightly above average, I felt as though I could have done better.

It is easy to blame your teachers and school district for forcing you to take all these standardized tests but, we need to look back and find the root. The “No Child Left Behind” act was passed by former President Bush and his administration. The goal was to “raise the achievement levels of all students, especially underperforming groups, and to close the achievement gap that parallels race and class distinctions (Darling-Hammond, 2011, p. 419).” The NCLB mandated the regulation of standardized testing as a way to track every students’ progress. Although this plan had the best intentions, it proved to have many downfalls. Schools were required to meet a certain

percentage of achievement because if they failed to meet these standards, there would be consequences. Some of these included, a loss of federal funding, transferring of students, and the label of a “failing school”. The NCLB failed to recognize that the schools that were failing were the ones “serving the neediest students (Darling-Hammond, 2011, p. 420).” Failing schools were usually the ones in the lower income neighborhoods with students from low income families. Author Darling-Hammond (2011) talks about a school called Luther Barbank which has no working heating system, rodents in the gymnasium, only two bathrooms that are always out of toilet paper, soap, and paper towels, no librarian, and only a handful of textbooks (p. 421-422). A child cannot learn in conditions like these. The NCLB is pushing non-achieving students further and further away from success by ending federal funding to their schools. Without federal funding, schools cannot afford to fix the issues within the school which will ultimately continue to get worse. Not only does the actual school and its amenities get worse, but teachers also begin to leave schools who are labeled as failing. In order to better the NCLB, Darling-Hammond (2011) suggests that the NCLB should create achievement targets “based on sensible goals for student learning (p. 431).” This would give lower performing students goals that are actually accessible. She also suggests that schools who do not meet the achievement goal should be given resources to help fix their school instead of taking it away (Darling-Hammond, 2011, p. 432). This includes funding to provide students with better supplies like textbooks or a library as well as more resources to help teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2011, p. 432-433). Despite the good intentions of the NCLB, the standardized tests only push low achieving students further and further away from being successful.

Although I believe standardized testing does not show a person’s true intellect, it’s difficult to find another way to measure one’s abilities. Both Freire and Kohn suggest ways to remedy the

education system. Kohn references The Met School and their ways of testing their students. He says that they focus on “social, empirical, and quantitative reasoning, communication, and personal qualities (such as responsibility, capacity for leadership, and self-awareness) (Kohn, 2003, p. 9).” This way of testing also eliminates the possibility of using the “bunch o’ facts” model or the banking concept. In addition, Freire proposes the idea of “problem-posing education”. Problem-posing education is based on creativity and focuses on the process of becoming (Freire, 2011, p. 125). Educators should rethink their curriculum so that a single number is not the deciding factor for success. While I was going into my senior year of high school, my school initiated a new system that allowed you to move up to a higher-level class based on teacher recommendation instead of just your grades. I’ve seen some of my classmates have mental breakdowns and break down in fits of anger when they get an unsatisfactory test score. Students are so focused on their test scores, that they forget why they are there in the first place. I applaud my high school for incorporating teacher recommendations, I think it is a great first step towards making a change.

The purpose of education is to give students the ambition to keep learning. I want to become an educator to show children that education and learning has no limits. To be educated does not mean you have the highest tests scores. To be educated is appreciating the knowledge one has and taking that knowledge to move forward in life. Although our schooling systems are so dependent on standardized tests, I do not believe this should be the sole factor that dictates whether or not a person is “well educated”. I am a full supporter in the fact that a lot of colleges and universities are starting to minimize the importance of test scores and I hope that this continues.

Teachers Who Care

My kindergarten teacher Mrs. McNally was one of my favorite teachers. I can vividly remember the engaging activities we did with the alphabet, numbers, and colors. For instance, we

were each assigned a color and for homework we would go home and bring something of that color to school the next day to share with the class. I can recall going home and being so excited to pick something, with the help of my parents of course. Another one of my memories from Mrs. McNally's class was our weekly activity of writing letters. We each had our own mailboxes and every Friday we would write a letter to another classmate. This was one of my favorite activities because it gave me a sense of responsibility but also fostered my writing and hand-eye coordination. Having this activity at a young age was significant because "essential properties of most of the brain's architecture are established very early in life by genes and, importantly, early experience (Duncan & Murnane, 2011, p. 9)." As graduation came around, Mrs. McNally's class came full circle. As I flipped through my yearbook, I came across my kindergarten class photo and a note from Mrs. McNally congratulating us on our successes and on our future endeavors. She genuinely cared about us and continues to care about her students, even after they have left her classroom.

My 10th grade English teacher, Mr. Oatis, became a shoulder to lean on. He helped me when I would struggle in school as well as when there was drama within my friends. He wrote one of my letters of recommendation but most importantly, he helped me write my college essay. He helped me brainstorm ideas during his off periods and he revised my papers when I needed help. He gave the best advice when it came to college decision time saying that the most important thing was that it felt like home. Going into high school, I hated English. I always struggled with reading comprehension and despised writing essays. I was in Mr. Oatis's first period honors English class. I walked into the classroom expecting the same boring curriculum of long, confusing novels and endless papers. Mr. Oatis's class was different. He was fun and engaging, when he made a mistake, he apologized just like Pam in Noblit's (1993) narration of her teaching (p. 28). He made sure we

knew that he was human just like us. We participated in group projects, and he graded us through discussions instead of tests. He uses the strategies described by Noddings (2009) that encourage teachers to ask their students to think out loud and then listen intently (p. 774). My favorite thing about Mr. Oatis was the fact that he wanted to hear what we had to say, he taught just as much as he listened. He always encouraged me whenever I would get a bad grade on a test, telling me that I should not let the numbers define me as a student or as a person. He showed me what a good teacher is like and I hope that I can use my experiences with Mr. Oatis to strengthen my role as a future educator.

My educational experience continues to change as I continue my journey as a USC Gamecock. Throughout my educational experience, I have endured a multitude of schooling trends such as amazing parental involvement, tracking, standardized testing, and teachers who care. All this and more has shaped me into the person I am today. My parents and my teachers have provided me with the experiences I needed to figure out that I wanted to pursue my career as a teacher. Educational practices such as tracking and standardized tests have shown me the struggles students go through. They have taught me to pay close attention to my students and to keep an extra eye out for those who need a helping hand as they move through their journey as a student in my classroom. I hope that one day I can make a difference in a child's life.

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