

I am writing this letter to my sixth grade Math and Science teacher. Please do not sympathize; I simply wanted to share my experience so that everyone can learn from it.

Dear Mr. \*\*\*\*\*,

You probably do not remember me and you probably do not remember my name. I was the only Arab student in your sixth grade classroom. I am writing this letter to you because I would like you to reflect on an experience that you made me go through when I was 12 years old.

I will never forget that day. We came to your classroom to learn Math; not knowing that the first American soldier was killed in Afghanistan that morning. After everyone had settled down in their seats, you turned around and wrote a big T on the board. On one side you wrote 365 and on the other side you wrote 1. You said, "We killed 365 of them and they killed 1 of us". Then you looked at me and smiled. I remember that day so vividly. I remember, that some of my classmates glanced quickly at me and looked uncomfortable; but did not say anything. I remember that others stared at the board and did not understand what you were saying. They were children.

I was a child.

I was scared and I was shocked.

But I have learned from that experience. I have learned to be compassionate to the minority students in my classroom. I have learned that hate and revenge does not get us anywhere. In fact, they destroy us. They destroy us as individuals and they destroy us as a society.

I did not write this letter to criticize or ridicule you. I wrote this letter because I care. I care about you; and I care about the world; and I care about every child who faces injustice in this education system.

Referring to Muslims as "them vs. us" is a discourse developed by Huntington (1996) in his book *The Clash of Civilizations*; media then popularized the ideology. I realize now that you probably believed the propaganda and failed to understand your praxis as a schoolteacher.

I am now studying for a Masters degree at K-State University. At KSU I have experienced many epiphanies. I attempt to summarize some of them in this letter. I have learned that there are three types of curriculum; the explicit, the implicit (hidden) and the null curriculum (Eisner, 2002). The hidden or implicit curriculum according to Eisner is "profoundly more powerful and longer lasting than what is intentionally taught or what the explicit curriculum of the school publicly provides" (Eisner, 2002, p.88). Eisner also states "For those who have analyzed the implicit curriculum of the school and what it teaches, these lessons are among the most important ones that children learn" (Eisner, 2002, p.90). During

that incident in your classroom you unintentionally demonstrated to my classmates that bullying Muslims is acceptable and somewhat encouraged. You also implied, perhaps unintentionally, that the lives of Muslims are cheap and worthless. That is the hidden curriculum. Eisner explains

Furthermore, it is important to realize that what schools teach is not simply a function of covert intentions; it is largely unintentional. What schools teach they teach in the fashion that the culture itself teaches, because schools are the kinds of places they are (Eisner, 2002, p.93).

You may wonder, why I did not respond to the bullying, why I did not retaliate, speak up or complain. This is also due to the hidden curriculum that I was fed in our traditional school system from first grade. Jackson explains

The quintessence of virtue in most institutions is contained in the single word: *patience*..... the participants must learn to “labour and to wait.” They must also, to some extent, learn to suffer in silence..... if students are to face the demands of classroom life with equanimity they must learn to be patient. This means that they must be able to disengage, at least temporarily, their feelings from their actions. It also means, of course, that they must be able to re-engage feelings and actions when conditions are appropriate. (Jackson, 1990,p.43)

In my course at KSU I learned about different educational theories and perspectives. I learned about the four different educational philosophies; which range from a traditional ‘realist’ to a progressive ‘pragmatist’ approach (Ornstein, 2011). A progressive approach is one that treats students with equity providing for each of their individual needs. It treats students as unique individuals and accommodates for their differences. Many schools claim to be built around progressive theory, however when reading Counts I had an epiphany moment; which made me realize what Progressive Education truly means. Counts states:

If Progressive Education is to be genuinely progressive, it must emancipate itself from the influence of this class, face squarely and courageously every social issue, come to grips with life in all of its stark reality, establish an organic relation with the community, develop a realistic and comprehensive theory of welfare, fashion a compelling and challenging vision of human destiny, and become less frightened than it is today at the bogies of imposition and indoctrination. (Counts, 1978, p.10-11)

My greatest learning epiphany so far came from *The school and Society* by John Dewey. In his chapter 'Waste in Education', Dewey completely changed my view of the traditional education system and its role in educating the child. The author emphasizes the need to relate the school experience to life, arguing that the present ‘traditional’ school system is an artificial system that we must reflect upon before we consider it a matter of necessity (Dewey, 1915). He emphasizes that there must be a ‘natural

connection' between the everyday life of the child and the environment around him. He states that the concern of the school should be to clarify this relationship and liberalize it, not by introducing subjective studies like geography and arithmetic but by "keeping alive the ordinary bonds of relation" (Dewey, 1915, p. 69)

My all time favorite quote from Dewey is the following:

From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at school. That is the isolation of the school – its isolation from life. (Dewey, 1915, p.67)

I would like to see the commitment to progressivism that these philosophers call for. I wish that Dewey's and Counts's words could somehow jump out of the books and find their way to the minds and hearts of every teacher in this world. I wish that more schools become aware of the hidden curriculum and adapt their teaching philosophies towards a progressive approach that treats their students equitably. Surely that would cause a change in society and maybe that way we can attain peace and justice for all.

Finally, I would like you to understand that I had much respect and admiration for you as a teacher. I simply wish you had exercised your prudence in that classroom and understood your praxis as a schoolteacher, before making me feel as if I am the enemy. I understood your anger and your rage but I want you to know that it was directed at the wrong person.

The main learning epiphany that I take from reflecting on my readings and my experience is that the school, the society, the child and the curriculum are so intertwined together to an extent that it is a fallacy to separate them from one another. In other words, my experience is a small part of a bigger picture. The undeniable tendency of western governments to bully innocent Muslims is very relevant to my experience. The same social injustices are being reflected and executed in this nation's schools.

I would like to finish my letter by some Arabian words of wisdom; which I have translated to remind myself and everyone of the power and importance of reflection. "Reflect upon your thoughts because they will become actions, and reflect upon your actions because they will become habits, and reflect upon your habits because they will become your nature, and reflect upon your nature because that will determine your fate" (Arabic proverb).

Sincerely,

Majd Alomar

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