

Education & Individuals

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Oral History Final Paper

Oral History Interview

“Are you guys twins?” or the dreaded “are you younger” are the questions that have plagued my sister, Caleigh, and I our entire lives. While I am 17 months older, growing up we experienced many of the same events and were held to the same educational expectations. We were raised in Olympia, Washington with the expectation that we would attend the University of Washington to pursue a career based on our skills. Caleigh is a current high school senior planning on attending the University of Washington to pursue engineering; she has attended public schools in the same school district her entire life.¹ These experiences have also made us aware of our own privilege in reaching and focusing on college preparation. However, I know that over the course of this year my own views on education, democracy, politics, etc have changed, so I was excited to talk with Caleigh to see her values on the purpose of public schools is in a democracy.

Bluntly, I began by asking her this question and she explained what we had been raised on: “people to go on to further their education and eventually go onto get a job... [public schools provide] the basic education for this.”² This is the context in which we were raised; we did not think about other options and wholeheartedly wanted to go to a university. For Caleigh, she stayed firm that whatever path the student is on everyone should have the opportunity to reach higher, particularly through standardization and teaching the fundamentals of schools such as

¹ Caleigh Stagnone, interview by the author, Seattle, WA, May 15, 2019.

² Stagnone, interview by the author.

history, mathematics, and English. Caleigh said that “if what is taught is not controlled by the federal government, then not everyone will be taught the same thing”³ particularly due to the fact that each person should be prepared to succeed and go to college. Although she acknowledges that this would be a challenge to setup, as teachers will not all teach the same way or the same curriculum.

One class that the government is failing to support/require is a class on culture. Caleigh is currently taking an Ethnic Studies class and we had a really rich discussion on the control of local communities versus federal control. Having been raised in a city that is primarily white (70% white at our high school, 1.6% African American⁴), we both believed that local culture wouldn’t be beneficial in our classrooms. She comments that it is necessary to be “taught more than just your culture in your community because you see that a lot, so you should be taught more about general impacts your privilege, your race and different races that are not your own.” For her, this has been an incredibly enriching experience, one that without this class she wouldn’t have learned until higher education. This class “taught about our privilege and how race plays an important aspect in life” which are themes that we did not experience in our community growing up, yet she was able to understand them from a single class. She also mentioned a program called *Raza* that is in Arizona that focuses on a Mexican Culture present in that town. Yet, this class received resistance from the state government because “they thought that it was anti-american.”⁵ From what Caleigh has learned in this class, she described the impact of privilege and the reasons for push-back against this class, saying the state government “see

³ Stagnone, interview by the author.

⁴ Washington State Office of Superintendent, "Olympia High School, Olympia School District," State of Washington OSPI, last modified September 2018, accessed June 3, 2019, <https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/102969>.

⁵ Stagnone, interview by the author.

this education as a threat.” The Raza Program and her class differed in that her class focused on current issues happening whereas others will focus on culture, songs, and practice. Her Ethnic Studies class received no city wide criticism, but Ethnic Studies classes are not common. Caleigh hopes that many more people receive this education to create larger cultural change in society.

Caleigh believes other classes that would be beneficial - in a standardized way - are financial literacy and computer classes. Creating classes that focus on relative skills, she argues, not only enables more access for people in lower economic classes who aren’t able to access this information outside the classroom, but would be beneficial for all students. Skill based classes are also found for people with intellectual disabilities and Caleigh thinks that there is “no difference in purpose between these two groups. General Education students take their classes for granted whereas Special Education students find that their education still has the purpose of preparing for their future.” Over the course of the conversation, she shifted from talking about education as solely being for college preparation to being about self-improvement and finding your own purpose/passions. For her, the purpose has been college preparation and preparation for a career in engineering. She describes how “through education [students] can figure out what [they] want to study, whether [they] like English or math... this helps you figure out the purpose of their education.” Because ultimately, Caleigh believes that “each student has their own idea of what they want for their future and it shapes ... how they view each class.”⁶

⁶ Stagnone, interview by the author.

Reflection

“The decisions I made after that moment were not the ones she would have made. They were the choices of a changed person, a new self. You could call this selfhood many things.

Transformation. Metamorphosis. Falsity. Betrayal. I call it an education.”

- Tara Westover, *Educated*⁷

Education has been one thing in my life that I have complete control over: the classes that I take, the grades that I receive, the drive that I have. While getting good grades was always an expectation, by the time that I reached high school, my parents never checked grades, never asked about tests, never made me do my homework. The level of independence I enjoy is unparalleled and driven by their parenting as well as my teachers support. My identity is rooted in my education which has given me my own sense of self much more than any hobby ever will. It was something that my otherwise overly-involved parents trusted me to decide on. My background is the baseline for why I believe that the purpose of education is determined by every student and it supports their community, identity and self-determination.

The school community in which a child learns is critical to their development and the quality of education that they receive. As mentioned in the Oral History Interview, Caleigh and I were raised in a supportive community with a large support system. Our community impacted our decisions to attend the University of Washington and some people are not afforded these privileges. We had role models from a young age that encouraged our own development and educational goals; these things are critical for children’s success later in life as shown by

⁷ Tara Westover, *Educated* (n.p.: Penguin Random House, 2018)

Malcolm Gladwell. In his podcast, “Miss Buchanan’s Period of Adjustment,” Gladwell states that black students who have a black teacher between 3rd and 5th grade have a 40% lower chance of dropping out.⁸ This proves that the classroom environment and students’ role models are able to influence children’s futures, careers, beliefs, motivation, etc. Both the school and personal communities influence a child's desire to learn and having a positive experience enables students to make their own decisions.

As shown in the Early Days of the Republic Schooling, Kaestle describes how, “schoolhouses of this period were not red; they were log or unpainted clapboard. Nor were they in idyllic locations.”⁹ The early conditions described, impacted students ability to learn in that there was simply too many students of all ages to teach without formalized textbooks or education themselves. Kaestle explains how the community had complete control over what was learned by supplying the books and holding the teachers accountable.¹⁰ This inequality is seen throughout the history of public schools and still continues to today: richer schools are able to have newer facilities, better teachers, and personal computers, whereas schools with limited funding are unable to attend to all the needs of their students. These schools are reflected in their community, poorer schools are in low-income areas which restricts the student growth just like in the early age of schools. While the federal government attempts to support the schools and create equal programs, there is a lack of equity which holds back students from less privileged areas. The community that a school is part of continues to limit or improve students’ success and play an important role in determining students’ successes.

⁸ *Revisionist History*, “Miss Buchanan's Period Of Adjustment,” episode 3, Chanel, hosted by Malcolm Gladwell.

⁹ Carl F. Kaestle, “Rural Schools in Early Republic,” in *Pillars of the Republic* (n.p.: Hill and Wang, 1983), 13-14.

¹⁰ Kaestle, “Rural Schools,” 17.

However, community can also be an enriching part of the school experience and should have some control over the subjects taught. Community culture enables students to become more immersed in their own identities. Such was the case for Mexican-American Students who received cultural classes from Mexican-American teachers as discussed by Donato.¹¹ Teaching about these topics at school supports the diversity of curriculum and the growth of identity. As my sister discussed in the Oral History Interview, having the ability to learn about the culture through an Ethnic Studies class was a very enriching experience that allowed her to analyze her own privilege in society despite coming from a primarily white city. I believe that within a democratic system it is necessary to have standardization, but also cultural themed classes within the school system. The federal government can set the level of knowledge that students should gain from public schooling, yet they are unable to specify other necessary topics to learn about the community. Having standardization is important to ensure credibility and equality in education, but not all students' intelligences are seen from these tests. Forming community curriculum to teach about their culture in comparison to other cultures provides a gateway to understanding the world more fully and not being limited by the community that you were raised. This would be a major change in our current system and difficult to mandate or regulate, but setting a mandate to offer a cultural class at some grade levels would enable students to learn about culture, whether it was their own or others.

An issue that could arise from this could be whether the schools judge the Ethnic Studies Class "appropriate" or not. Schools/governments would judge based off of what is "safe" for students to learn, as in the course theme of safety zones. As Donato describes, "cultural and

¹¹ Ruben Donato, "Schooling in Pre-Brown Era," in *The Other Struggle for Equal Schools* (n.p.: State University of New York Press, 1997), 11-31.

linguistic differences were used as a pretext to keep [Mexican-Americans] apart.”¹² The Mexican culture was perceived as unsafe for them to practice or have around other students, only the American culture was acceptable to learn in the school house. As Caleigh mentioned in the Oral History Interview, these are the problems that continue to arise today as the Raza program continues to face backlash for offering classes about one of the city’s cultural group. This is why a cultural class requirement could be controlled at a community level and mandated to have a representative population making these decisions. Giving students access to achieve their goals empowers students to make informed decisions which allows for the pursuit of their passions. Through a class focused on culture, whether local or broad, students are empowered to choose what they believe and learn about themselves.

All of our held communities influence the way we think about society, ourselves, and our lives. Through an education we have the power to interpret these communities and our own thoughts. Who decides how to teach and what to teach impact every student’s personal identification, especially if an idea is deemed inferior than others. The United States political culture supports the divide between what is safe and what is not. All too often this balance is decided by the people in power because of the desire to have a dominant culture, so I believe there should be credibility to improve equal and equitable education. Our democracy is rooted in having collective opinions for millions of individuals. Individualistic thought supports our individual identities and our identities impact the groups that we are part of. Similarly, individualistic thought is the power of civil disobedience and creating change, but enough people must adopt these changes to create the collective opinion. As De Tocqueville, said about

¹² Donato, "Schooling in Pre-Brown," 13.

democracy: “for such a society to prosper, all citizens’ minds must be united... each of them [must] occasionally draw his opinions from the same source.”¹³ This is the important balance that we must go through on a daily basis: convincing others that our views should be valued and they should be held by others, yet not forcing the correctness of any information. The balance between community and government is one indeterminable by any one person or group, it is subject to be unique for every person. Everyone should have the power to decide what they want to learn and this gives students an individual experience; individual experiences must also be equal in that they have the same opportunities to reach their goals. Giving students choices about their future supports them in making their own choices and developing their thoughts.

This is the atmosphere I would like to foster as a future educator (not formally in a classroom). I will have the power to inform individual thought and support different viewpoints in order to give way to a broader understanding. By supporting discussions, each person can give their opinions and everyone can grow. While we can share a collective knowledge, we can still voice our opinions differently and I would like to support each student’s voice. From my own education and community, I have grown into my voice from what I have been taught which supports my belief that the purpose of education is one that is determined by every single student, creating the individual.

¹³ Alexis De Tocqueville, "The Principle Source of Beliefs Among Democratic Nations," in *Democracy in America* (n.p.: Penguin Books, 1835), 499.