

EDUC 893: Reflective Essay

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Introduction

The purpose of this Reflective essay is to provide a synthesis of my learning and new knowledge generation that has resulted from completion of EDUC 893: Anthropology in Education Seminar, in particular, engaging in the various required readings, collegial discussions, course feedbacks, assignments, collaborative presentations and supportive research. Yet, more importantly, my reflective essay will discuss the profound impact that this course has had on me, in terms, of how it has influenced my thinking as well as my research interests as a result of the aforementioned activities. This process of reflection and making connections is crucial as I enter into the next phase of my doctoral program. In preparation for my 2nd Portfolio Review, over the next several months, I will work to develop my conceptual framework and in so doing attempt to establish connections with my personal experiences as a STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education practitioner (practice) with my emerging theoretical interests (scholarship) and passions which will serve as the basis for my future research and work.

Synopsis of Recent Academic and Professional Experiences

Throughout my career advancement, it was vital for me to continue my educational advancement. In 2006, I obtained my Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT). I have always been fortunate to work in leadership positions where I positively influence issues that are aligned with my professional interests and core beliefs. Upon entering the doctoral program at George Mason University in spring 2009, my viewpoint has expanded to encompass a global perspective as well as issues that extend beyond K-12 STEM education. My past work as a classroom practitioner is rooted in ensuring equity and excellence in STEM education and promoting culturally responsive

teaching practices, recently I have identified educational policy as the preferred vehicle by which to achieve this goal.

As a direct result of my past and current professional experiences as a state science supervisor, district-level science supervisor, an Albert Einstein Fellow and Ph.D. Student, I see the significance of examining educational policy from a critical lens and not the traditional method birthed in 'unquestioned' capitalist ideology. Additionally, I would like to further explore implications of critical race praxis and learn how it has been implemented in current educational settings. Consequently, I feel there is a larger role for me to play as I seek to address issues of inequity on various fronts in my current capacity as Executive Director of The McKinney Foundation, Inc, a nonprofit organization committed to ensuring educational equity and excellence in health, entrepreneurship and environmental responsibility.

In addition to this course, there are numerous courses and experiences that have impacted my life and served to shape my philosophy and educational methodologies, most notably, Current Trends in Multicultural Education, my tenure as an Einstein Fellow, EDUC 800 Ways of Knowing and EDUC 870 Process, Context and Politics. The first course helped me to realize that education is one of the single most political fields and is chiefly responsible for the continued economic and health disparities, which exists in this country and across our global community. The system of public education in the United States is greatly influenced by peoples' belief systems or what Marx (1848) calls a dominant ideology determined by economics. Secondly, the Einstein Fellowship helped me to understand that effective and thoughtful policies are required if positive and sustainable improvement is to occur. And, that I need to be at the decision-making table to affect change. Then, EDUC 800: Ways of Knowing provided me a solid foundation of classic and nontraditional literature from which to build. In this course, I encountered a vast array of

intellectually stimulating and novel research that served to enlighten me to innovative thought, critical practices from new and familiar scholars, new terminology, diverse frameworks, and lesser known historical contexts. Essentially, this course helped me to name my experiences of growing up Black in America from a scholarly perspective. Lastly, EDUC 870 helped me to see policy as a conduit to transform society.

Implication of Course on Future Work

I am a third generation educator with a track record of success working with K-12 public schools systems. I have a passion for addressing issues of equity, moving the agenda forward in STEM education and preparing our students, teachers and school systems for the 21st Century. I desire to focus my work and attention on the national and international level to improve conditions that will benefit schools, teachers and communities locally. As an emerging scholar, the Professional Project assignment provided me with the opportunity to familiarize myself with the larger Community of Practice as well as to further explore various professional organizations that exists so that I may become involved on a deeper level and expand upon my existing networks. The importance of doing so was emphasized throughout this course and I greatly appreciate the guidance and encouragement to work collaboratively with other members of the cohort.

For this assignment, I worked in collaboration with Nicole Sealey to complete and submit a grant proposal to the African American Success Foundation, Inc., a nonprofit organization, based in Florida, that provides financial support to students and professionals who conduct research to study African American success, particularly in the area of education. Our selected topic is, “Identifying variables at Historically Black Colleges and Universities and ‘minority-majority’ communities that contributes to the success of African American undergraduates in STEM

disciplines”. This grant writing assignment was especially useful to me in my new role as Executive Director for The McKinney Foundation Inc. and as an educational researcher. It is critical to cultivate the skill and practice of identifying grants, conceptualizing and writing proposals, working collaboratively with colleagues and submitting grant proposals. My specialization is Education Policy and International Education and Conflict Resolution. I see a unique opportunity to impact educational policy, P-20, with the new knowledge that will be gained from conducting this study. I look forward to continued work and collaborations in this area as it relates to equity, policy and advocacy.

Next, the media project and presentation allowed me an opportunity to probe into Marxist theory and to gain a better understanding of what Marx refers to as the “superstructures” in place that support the capitalist ideology. Several such superstructures exist in our society that includes law, politics, education, religion, art and the mass media. The mass media, which consists of newspapers, magazine, radio, television and movies, is a powerful tool and promotes America’s capitalist culture. It is a medium that provides continual and ongoing overt and covert messages to a majority of indiscriminating consumers to ‘racialize’ others, i.e. African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans and white women. In researching the western media’s portrayal of Haiti and the African Diaspora, I learned that the mass media plays a prominent role in perpetuating these racialized ‘social identities’ and reinforcing a hierarchy of social position (or value) on what Olsen (1997) calls the “racial map of our nation” (p.11). This process of ‘racialization’ serves to dehumanize, objectify and devalue individuals that are non- white and female. Marx says that members of the dominant class ‘buy in’ to the capitalist culture and develop a ‘false consciousness’ that prevents them from ‘seeing’

how the present structures in American society marginalize people from different cultures, ethnicity and religions.

The detrimental effects of these racialized social identities are ‘played out’ in our public education system. Foley (1990) study shows how schools are “sites for popular cultural practices that reproduce social inequalities” (p. xv). Schools become the stage where students learn their social identities and perform their future class roles. As discussed in the book, *Made in America* (1997), “Schools, reproduction theorists argued, are critical in this process because class relations and the capitalist division of labor requires a school system that reproduces a system of inequality by selectively transmitting skills according to which class people are in, sorting people by granting credentials from the school into appropriate social positions” (p. 11). Although, Olsen (1997) agrees that most educators in schools believe in integration, fairness, and equal opportunity, her study clearly points out that “educators collude in not seeing the active process of exclusion and sorting that goes on in the school’s program and practice, a sorting that consigns students by skin color, class, and English fluency into positions of very unequal access to resources, opportunities, and education” (p. 11). Olsen continues to say, “the silence of educators and refusal to acknowledge the social, political, and economic implications of their role in marginalizing immigrants and racializing children are a continuation and perpetuation of myths that inequalities are the result of individual capabilities and effort” (p. 250). The end result is that schools are preparing America’s children of color and children from low socioeconomic status (SES) for very different futures. This compelling history provides a strong rationale and direction for my future work to critically look at ways in which educational policy and current school practices are being used to perpetuate such inequalities.

Throughout my secondary education, I never cared for history, but it is imperative to have a historical context in order to understand how this ideology was formed. Things did not just start out this way there were a series of events that occurred motivated by greed and domination. The capitalist culture that prevails today dates back as far as Christopher Columbus and his voyage of discovery or better stated voyages of conquest, which served as the impetus for colonialism and later legal and permanent slavery of people of African descent by the French, British and Americans. In Valenzuela's book, *Subtractive schooling* (1998), she affirms that "schools are an instrument of the maintenance of colonial relationships in that they constitute an arm of the state through which belief systems and cultural relationships are taught" (p. xvii). This critical history is not what I learned in school and now as an adult, I am just discovering it for myself. In some ways, I feel that I am on a journey, a pilgrimage in pursuit of truth, if you will, piecing together all of the fragmented pieces of lost history that are dispersed in hard to find places. As example, during my research for the media project, I first learned details of how Haiti became a liberated nation in 1803 and how it has suffered as a consequence.

Olsen asserts that "Schools are contested territory in struggle with whether they will serve a democratizing purpose of inclusion, creating access and level playing field in our society, or will be institutions that simply reproduce current class, racial, and language relations". This statement is very striking because it suggests that there is hope for improvement. EDUC 802: Leadership Seminar taught me that change is a process and to employ effective strategies. I believe awareness can be gained through critical discourse by school leaders and classroom practitioners in collaboration with the larger community, students and parents. To ensure that transformation of school culture occurs, it is important that a critical approach to be adopted and strengthened by research, policy and practices. Olsen says that "our nation's public schools offer a microcosm

of society and an experiment for constructing the America of the 21st Century”. As an emerging scholar and researcher, engaging in a critical analysis of these required ethnographies has defined a clear path for me, which has direct implications for my future research, writings and practice. I believe that schools can level the ‘playing field’ for disadvantaged students and can provide all students with opportunities to reach their fullest potential. Education is a civil rights issue and I see myself as a scholar, researcher and advocate in the global effort to transform schools and communities for the betterment of all.

Reference

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