Meghan Sanchez

Ed 266: Schools in American Cities

Film to Review Urban Education

04/12/15

**Formula for Success?: Two Black Boys and their Road to College**

*American Promise*, a documentary created by the parents of one of the two boys observed in the film, follows Idris and Seun throughout their educational careers up to college. In the beginning of the film, Idris says that this is a "film documentary about two black kids going to a white school."[[1]](#footnote-1) A lot of what this film grapples with is the question: how do I, as a parent, provide and create an environment where my black son can succeed in school and in life? Initially, both parents of Idris and Seun send them to the Dalton School, "one of the most prestigious private schools in the country."[[2]](#footnote-2) What later develops over the next thirteen years of school, speaks greatly to how race is perceived in American schools and begs the question, is there a formula for these black boys to succeed in American society?

As kindergarteners, Idris' parents say that he is "curious and sensitive" and in the "top 2-3% in educational testing."[[3]](#footnote-3) His father, Joe, says that a school like the Dalton School will "open doors for him for the rest of his life."[[4]](#footnote-4) Seun's parents describe their 5-year old son in a very similar way: his "creativity is exceptional" and he is a "physical child" that has a "sense of self."[[5]](#footnote-5) Seun's parents' motivations for sending him to this highly prestigious school seems to be motivated by the fact that they want to give him more than what they had growing up. His mom says, "District 3 (where they live) is not a good area for schools."[[6]](#footnote-6) By enrolling Seun in Dalton, "he will be exposed to so much more than [his parents were] exposed to" and it will be a chance for Seun to "be comfortable around white folks."[[7]](#footnote-7) While 25% of the students that attend Dalton are students of color, i.e. African American, Latino, Caribbean, and Asian, both boys encounter instances where they want to fit in and be just like everyone else. For Seun, this is seen when he tries to brush the color of his gums off, making them bleed in the hopes that they will turn pink. Idris confronts this issue when he is in 8th grade and has a hard time with girls. He says, "I bet if I go to another school, I'd be fine. I bet if I was white I'd be better off...at this school."[[8]](#footnote-8)

These interactions and conversations made me ask several questions. What is the curriculum like at Dalton? Yes, from the footage shown in the documentary, the school puts a lot of effort in students exploring individuality, creativity and excellence, but is there culturally relevant teaching? What kind of cultural capital are they learning? To me, it seems that the cultural capital that is learned is that of the dominant culture: a white affluent culture. Yes, the school incorporates some things like a sand mandala installation to celebrate the school's 90th anniversary, but what is the culture throughout the school? Even one of the faculty at Dalton said that "there's a cultural disconnect between independent school and African American boys. [These boys are] not being successful. Why?"[[9]](#footnote-9) This strikes me as very odd. The faculty and teachers at this school know that they do not cater to a particular demographic. What can be done or changed to do something about this disconnect?

Drawing on our readings from class, I thought that culturally relevant teaching might be a way to reshape these classrooms and in-class experiences. Part of this teaching includes giving students the cultural competence to "recognize and honor [students'] own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture."[[10]](#footnote-10) But how can this be applied to a classroom where the majority of the students already have the cultural beliefs and practices of the "wider culture"? How can a school that is composed heavily of white, affluent students create room and space for a culture that they do not know, a culture of the minority students?

This documentary is slightly different from the conversations that we have had in class. Much of what we talk about deals with students in urban classrooms trying to negotiate their own culture with the dominant culture. The parents of Idris and Seun might maintain their own culture at home, but in school, they often conform to this dominant culture.

Once Seun leaves the Dalton School after 8th grade, he attends the Benjamin Banneker Academy in Brookyn. This school is a great example of what culturally relevant teaching looks like in the classroom. It is a community composed of African American and Latino families. In Seun's history class, his teacher discusses slavery and says that those that were "slaves" were actually "enslaved Africans". They were "not willing participants, [but were] taken and stolen" from their homes.[[11]](#footnote-11) In juxtaposition from this scene of the film, the next scene shows Idris in his 9th grade history class, learning about the French Revolution. This is a stark contrast to the kind of culturally relevant teaching that Seun seems to be getting from his new school. In order to succeed, do these boys have to give up their culture and history and take up the dominant culture and conform to this idea of what society wants them to be?

One thing that Seun has noted since he changed schools is that he "feels some kind of comfort when [he's] with people of the same race." He even joins the African Tours Club at his school, a club that plans to make a trip to Africa during spring break. Once he arrives in Benin, the locals of the village welcome the students by saying, "You are back home. Forgive the kings that worked in the trade of human beings."[[12]](#footnote-12) Seun's classmates discuss this apology that the king of the village made to them. They feel that they are "a product of the diaspora" and that they were "stolen from Africa."[[13]](#footnote-13) While Seun does not say much about his personal feelings of being in Africa, could he have had an opportunity to go to Africa and witness this experience at Dalton?

At the end of their high school careers, both Idris and Seun get into college. For Idris, his entire educational career up to this point has been heavily influenced by his parents' constant persistence for him to do work and do well in school. They sit with him at night, creating a planner with every hour of the day accounted for. After years of teachers telling him that he has trouble paying attention in class, he is diagnosed ADHD. Despite the fact that his parents continually tell him he his lazy, his father lets him know that he is "hard on [Idris] because [he] wants [him] to be a better man."[[14]](#footnote-14) For Seun, he was diagnosed early on with dyslexia. His parents got him a "homework helper." His teacher in high school was a great support system. After his brother died in an accident at home, and Seun "really [didn't] care about school at all," his teacher realized that she "needed to give him support so that he can graduate."[[15]](#footnote-15) This documentary shows the long road that both boys took to try and succeed in the world. While one stayed at an elite and affluent school, and the other went to an urban public school with African Americans and Latinos, both boys succeeded into getting into college.

Who is to say what is the best path for success? The parents of Idris and Seun want what is best for their sons. They want to give them a life and education that they did not have, yet they are struggling within a system that is not working in their kids' favor. It becomes a trade off for minority families. Either they conform to the dominant culture so that they can be what society deems "successful", or they maintain their culture and identity and may never be entirely "successful". What this documentary does well is problematize what many people consider an "excellent education" that will lead to a path of success. Both parents did what they thought was best for their children. They wanted to try and give them the same chances that white, affluent students have. Since the dominant white culture holds the most power in American society, their parents felt that their sons must conform to this culture. Despite not conforming to this notion of success, Seun still gets into college, which holds a promising future for him. I think that this film shows that even when parents do everything they can to help improve their children’s lives, the dominant society still has a large effect on their lives.

**Bibliography**

*American Promise.* Dir. Joe Brewster and Michéle Stephenson. Ro\*Co Films International, 2013. Netflix.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. ""Yes, But How Do We Do It?": Practicing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." In *City Kids, City Schools: More Reports from the Front Row*. New York: New Press, 2008.

1. *American Promise.* Dir. Joe Brewster and Michéle Stephenson. Ro\*Co Films International, 2013. Netflix. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ladson-Billings, Gloria. ""Yes, But How Do We Do It?": Practicing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." In *City Kids, City Schools: More Reports from the Front Row*. New York: New Press, 2008. P.170. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Brewster and Stephenson. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)