The Crisis in Pre-Collegiate Urban Education: Selected Aspects

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In this article, I address two critical points that merit further investigation: schooling vs. education in the public school system and the lack of proper training for teachers. There is a difference between what schooling is designed to do and what education is designed to do. Schooling satisfies societal needs for assessing achievement. However, since the current curriculum is European-centered, schooling is done with little regard for the cultural, social and educational goals of those students who are not of European descent. Because of this contradiction, the achievement of students of African descent continues to lag.

The first step in preparing teachers to effectively teach a diverse student body is to make an honest assessment of how we look at the world. Additionally, wholesale changes in the teaching/learning process are necessary. With regard to the teaching/learning process, I offer several recommendations, among which are, to adopt an attitude that dictates that if children cannot learn in the way that we teach, we will teach in the way that they learn; and to reflect on our own biographies. Reflecting on our own biographies forces us to look at our lives, confront our biases and acknowledge that these biases have distorted the way that the content of schooling is delivered.

Finally, I provide recommendations for those who are part of the leadership teams in the public school system.

Introduction — The Crisis

Mwalimu J. Shujaa, in his book, *Too Much Schooling, Too Little Education (1994)*, argues that there is a clear distinction between schooling and education and that students of African descent, in particular, have received more than adequate schooling—but not enough education. Schooling, he contends, is designed to meet societal goals. It speaks to the mere movement of students from one grade to the next. It is the perpetuation of the stratification and credentialling functions of schools.

Education, on the other hand, according to Shujaa (1994), addresses the need to meet cultural goals. Through education students learn about their culture, about life and about where they fit in the society and in the world. It is this notion of education that has been missing from the experiences of many students.

This information is neither new nor surprising. Ron Edmonds (1979) said that we already know that which we need to know in order to improve the education of all stu-dents. The problem, Edmonds contended, is that we do not have the will. Evidence of this truism is that in 1999 a consortium of 30 organizations was given 23 million dollars from the Office of Educational Research Initiatives (OERI); yet, the organizations could not decide how to spend the money in the area of research on improving teaching (*Education Week*, 1999, p. 1)—because there is nothing left to study.

There are several issues that should be addressed regarding the educational system and the product it offers. We must first recognize that teachers vary in skills, information, experience and interest. Too often these truths are not taken into consideration when teacher in-services are organized in schools and school districts. There is an assumption that "one size fits all" (Shujaa, 1991). Interestingly, Education Week (1999, p. 12) reported on a study in which teachers acknowledged their lack of training. Indeed, the overall quality of teaching—particularly in inner city schools—is quite poor, but this is not a reflection on teachers as much as it is an indictment of the system.

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Also of concern is the way we look at the world—our world view. For example, if we think of the concept of a continent—specifically, what is a continent? How many continents are there? What are the names of the continents?—invariably, we think of seven continents, i.e., Africa, Antarctica, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America and South America. Although we know that, by definition, a continent is a large body of land surrounded by water, we include Europe in our list. Europe is neither a large body of land, nor is it surrounded by water. Similarly, our notion of what a continental breakfast consists of—croissant, juice and coffee or tea—focuses on Europe as the point of reference, as though only Europeans eat breakfast (and as though Europe were a continent).

Further, when asked to consider classical music or classical musicians, the allusion is generally made to Europe. Classical music is, by definition, music that lives forever. Indeed, all groups of people have classical music and classical musicians. As a final example, when people are asked about the holocaust, they typically refer to the Jewish holocaust. However, while the killing of any number of people is horrible, how can the killing of 6 million people (Jews) be considered THE holocaust when we know that, even by conservative estimates, 50 million Africans were killed prior to, during and following the middle passage? These distinctions in our world view and shortcomings in how teachers are trained to disseminate information, lead to confusion, lack of motivation and ultimately poor performance of the children—especially those from under represented groups—in the U.S. educational system.

Crisis Management

We have tried many different kinds of training programs for teachers. We have tried takeovers of schools—by colleges, by municipalities and by the private sector. In Michigan, the Governor proposed that mayors take over urban districts (Education Week, 1999, p. 16). The problem in most of these efforts is that rarely does systemic reform occur; the effort ends up being little more than a "Band-Aid" approach—with little, if any, long term benefits.

More than once—most recently in the eighties—we also tried wholesale educational reform. The reform of the eighties in U.S. education had its impetus from two sources—an international source and an intra-national source. Internationally, there was a growing concern that U.S. educational achievement was slipping far behind that which was being demonstrated by students in other so-called developed countries. In comparison, U.S. students fared unfavorably with Japanese, British, German and other students of the more developed world. This was a concern for many reasons, not the least of which was that businesses feared that their status in international markets would be threatened by the "rising tide of mediocrity."

The intra-national pressure for the educational reform movement resurfaced because of a desire to bring about educational equity for the children of so-called "minorities" and for the children of the poor. Differences in academic achievement along race and class lines had been documented throughout the history of education in the U.S. Therefore, the reform movement of the eighties was not the first that had been precipitated as a result of a concern for minimizing or eliminating these gaps.

Several implications can be gleaned from the literature on the reform movement of the eighties. First, there was an inappropriate emphasis, in the movement, on academic achievement. The product—academic achievement—was unduly focused upon, at the cost of minimizing the importance of the process—what happened in schools. Educational excellence, it was argued, was a collective societal responsibility rather than an individual option. And those who could not be excellent—those who could not excel on achievement tests—were left out. The thrust was toward an elitist approach to reform. We were told that, in the interest of the country, everyone had to be excellent; whatever happened—one must wonder—to adequacy? Was that all of a sudden unacceptable? What of the fate of those who could be no more than adequate—for whatever reasons? The movement, then, incorrectly described adequacy as mediocrity and, in so doing, continued the cycle of exclusion for so many poor and so-called minority students in the U.S.

A long list of prescriptions accompanied the literature on the reform movement of the eighties. Perhaps two of the most widely discussed remedies were increased high school graduation requirements and minimum competency for teachers. I will expand upon the first remedy.

Reformists argued that the goal of increased high school graduation requirements could have been met in several ways, including increasing the units necessary for graduation and requiring students to pass minimum competency tests before being awarded diplomas. Given the spiraling gap that existed—and continues to exist—between the academic achievement of, for example, African-descended students and their white counterparts, one could clearly see how increasing the high school graduation requirements would—and did—have a negatively disproportionate effect on African-descended students (New York Times, 1999). More specifically, since a corresponding effort was not made to decrease the achievement gap in the earlier grades, it should have been no surprise when the already disproportionately high level of African-descended students dropping out of school increased more rapidly than ever before.

In discussing what we need in order to begin the reversal of this trend, we must begin with a focus on the students. For them we seek academic excellence, social competence, and cultural acuity. Academic excellence is the development of an inquiring mind, an ability to learn from experiences, the ability to fit into and serve society and the acquisition of basic skills. Social competence refers to the development of self-respect and self-love, respect for others and concern for the collective. Cultural acuity speaks to racial pride; self determination; self expression; identity,

purpose and direction; and belief in one's self and in one's people.

To help our students realize success in these areas, the research provides several suggestions. First, we need to change the way that we look at the world—more than we need curricular change. Curricular change without a changed world view will be futile. Simple addenda to the existing texts is unacceptable. Textbooks must be corrected and revised to reflect greater accuracy and sincere inclusion. Further, as a society, we need to develop a greater sense of understanding, appreciation and respect for cultural differences.

We need wholesale changes in the teaching/learning process. Specifically for those of us who are teachers, we need the following: (1) an attitude that dictates that if children cannot learn in the way that we teach, we will teach in the way that they learn. Too often, teachers take the attitude that if children cannot learn in the way that they teach, that is too bad. This is not a reflection on teachers as much as it is a reflection on our educational system. Many teachers do not have the skills to deal with the diverse student population that they are presented with in today's schools—particularly today's urban schools; (2) to reflect on our own biographies, histories and experiences. We must acknowledge that they affect our teaching. We must participate in a personal transformation in order to be effective educators for all students; (3) a belief that all children can learn. This is a key determinant of student success. If we do not believe that our students can be successful, it will be reflected in our classroom performance; (4) to treat students as we would treat our own biological children—with love, patience and confidence; (5) to be prepared. Students learn as much from what we say as they do from what we do. If we reflect unpreparedness, that is what they will mimic. Equally important is the fact that our unpreparedness will impact on the effectiveness of the teaching/learning process; (6) be an example. Here again, students learn from what we do. We are key role models for them. This relates to the way we talk, the way we dress, our eating habits, our reading habits, et cetera; (7) to study beyond course work in degree programs. This is important because, too often, the course work that we are exposed to does not clearly link to our life experiences. It is only through extra study, on or own, that this link, in most cases, can be made clear; (8) to agitate the system—being actively involved in addressing the various challenges that exist in society [e.g., hunger, poverty, homelessness (8,000 children in NYC alone), illiteracy, drug abuse, violence, infant mortality, teen pregnancy, racism, sexism, classism, ageism, heightism, and other forms of illegitimate exclusion]. One example of agitation and of its potential risks unfolded in Chicago in 1999, where Substance, a newspaper published by school teachers, began publishing the text of the new Chicago Academic Standards for high school students. Their intent was to educate parents and other community members about the fact that the tests dangerously reduced complex ideas into simple sentences or phrases. Success, the teachers argued, would require an exorbitant level of rote memorization. This, they contended, was not what education was supposed to be about.

The school board sued the paper and its editor, David Landis, for $1 million. A U.S. district court judge issued a temporary restraining order and gave the school district the right to seize all of the remaining copies of this particular issue of the paper. Eventually, the judge lifted the temporary restraining order. The school district then attempted to get the editor, a teacher of 30 years, fired; and (9) to take care of our body. This is important because no matter how successful we are in the other areas, if our body is not willing, it will all be for naught. Taking care of our body includes eating right and exercising.

Finally, in my own research on principal leadership (1988), I focused on two role identities for leaders—both of which I see as important. The first, the bureaucrat/administrator role identity, focuses on: (1) goal development. This entails meeting with staff and collectively determining the goals for the institution; (2) energy harnessing. This encompasses the ability to bring various constituencies together to work toward institutional agreed upon goals collectively; (3) communication facilitation. This refers not only to being able to effectively communicate verbally and in writing, but also to having the skill to create an environment where others feel comfortable and indeed are encouraged to communicate with you. This is true two-way communication; and (4) instructional management. This is defined as involvement in (i) curriculum development, (ii) staff supervision and (iii) assessment of student success.

The second role, the ethno-humanist identity focuses on: (1) confidence in the ability of all students to be successful, (2) commitment in seeing that all children do well, and (3) compassion for all students and sensitivity for the communities in which they live.

The crisis in urban education is, at times, daunting. In an effort to address this situation, educators and policymakers have tried several diverse strategies with little success. There are, to be sure, some things that we know work. Our biggest challenge, as we approach the millennium, is to demonstrate the will to overcome this crisis.

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