Education through the Eyes of the Student

Education, where do I begin? First of all I am writing this narrative because I have been asked to reflect on poverty and my internship this summer. Great! Really, I thought at first “great!” because education is what drives me. I want to fight for children and their right to a good education, but I have learned that the more I say that phrase and reflect on that thought, I find myself useless and incapable of understanding our educational system today (as well as sounding very cliché). Why are there discussions on a “failing educational system?” Why as a volunteer and now a Bonner do I seem to find myself serving at afterschool programs that are supplemental to schools? Is this because there is in fact a failing educational system in need of these supplemental programs? What is the problem? What is the solution? How do we solve it?

I am sorry if you thought this narrative was going to contain more answers rather than questions. If this was your thought, sorry to disappoint—you might as well stop reading at this point. But the more I involve myself in education, the more I find myself asking questions. Before I begin speaking about my internship with the Harlem Children’s Zone, I have to give some of my background with my education so you can understand where I am coming from. This will not be an autobiography, do not worry, but it will let you understand my point of view.

I migrated to the U.S. from Peru when I was around 6. My family was fleeing from a corrupt government and terrorism to the land of opportunity: the United States. We were moving to a country where we could achieve our dreams with an education I would not be able to receive in Peru, my parents would tell me. I came to this country only knowing the basic English of a three-year-old; too bad I was going into the first grade.

I remember elementary school being a time when I was trying to learn the English language as well as trying to be the best student in the class. The teachers I remember to this day come from my elementary school, and all that remains of this school today is a pile of dust. I remember learning English rather quickly, since I remember being able to communicate with my teachers and peers by the time I finished first grade. I remember having friends.

During the rest of my years in elementary school I was pulled of class for my English as a Second Language tutoring sessions, to the point that I was being pulled out to be an interpreter for the school. Towards my fourth and fifth grade years, I remember having to interpret for the principal or secretaries when Hispanic families and students came to the school. I felt honored to do these jobs.

I was quickly excelling in all of my subjects, especially math and science. At home, my parents, especially my mom, would help us with everything they could in order for us to receive a 100% on our homework. Even when I did not have homework, my mom would play math
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games with me. Math quickly became my favorite subject, and reading and English became my least favorite. Sounds innocent, right? Every child has a favorite and least favorite subject.

My middle school years were the same; I was excelling in academics as well as socially. I was a straight-A student involved in numerous clubs and sports. Sounds like the ideal student and daughter, right? High school came along and I felt the same the first two years. Junior year came along and for the first time in my life, I felt behind and uncomfortable in the classroom. I am referring to my English classroom. I had never felt like this before; I felt dumb. Why did I not know the same grammar as my friends?

April came around, and it was time for all of the juniors to take the ACT. I was a little nervous, but honestly, I really did not know what exactly was going on. My parents did not know what the ACT was, they were learning through me. My score came back, and disappointment does not even describe how I felt. May came along and again, my grades were straight A’s. I worked hard—or so I thought. So why did my ACT not show this? Why were my English and reading scores THAT low compared to my math and science scores?

Senior year came along, and it came time to apply for college. My parents were telling me to shoot for the stars and to apply for any and all schools. I did. In the back of my mind I was thinking: how am I going to get into these prestigious schools with this ACT score? I had taken the maximum amount of AP classes offered at my school, five. You would think that I would at least have those credits and scores to impress colleges, but in my school’s history, nobody passed the tests. We sometimes had one or two students pass.

Why was I not capable of passing my AP chemistry test if I had a 100% in the class? Maybe it had something do with the amount of action movies we saw, and how easily we could finish a worksheet and later leave the classroom to do what “high-schoolers” love to do: roam the halls. I do not put blame to one person or thing, but where did my education seem to take a different path?

I was afraid in high school that I would not get accepted to college because I felt as if there was a lot of emphasis on the ACT and, well, my ACT was not balanced. My grammar skills and capability to read quickly and comprehend were not as impressive as my peers who, on the other hand, did not have my grades. Why was this the case? Why did I not feel behind until high school?

If I had known my weakness was English, then I would have done something to change this. Obviously, I got into college, and a rather prestigious college. As we all know, colleges do not only look at scores, but the entire student as a whole, and I was pretty involved and passionate. Now I am here at Centre, feeling privileged and thankful. Sound like a good story, right? A student overcoming struggles to find herself at Centre College receiving a rigorous
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education bringing pride to her family here and in Peru, making the fifteen years of separation worth it. Was it worth it?

Yes, obviously it was, because if not, I would be here writing this. My point from that question and the background of my education prior to college is, why did I not feel behind until my junior year in high school? At what point did my education take a different path than the one I thought I was on? These are questions I ask myself today, but not necessarily related to myself but to the young students whom I interact with.

At Centre, I work with an Afterschool program which is mainly targeted towards migrant children or children coming from non-English speaking homes. Over the past three years, I have gotten to know these children and their backgrounds. I have made an effort to go to each one of their homes and to speak to every single one of their parents. These children have parents who work two or three jobs and sometimes are not even home when we drop the kids off at 6:30 on Tuesdays and Thursdays. How do I relate to this?

Well, I had a stay at home mom until middle school and a dad that to this day works all day at a factory. I had a mother who was available at home to help me with my homework, my math homework. She would do anything to help my brother and me with our studies. Today, I go to the homes of these kids, and some mothers are exactly like mine and others are not. I cannot help but feel guilty and over-privileged. I was blessed to have parents fight for us to succeed, to the point where my dad would go and still is going to work at 3 a.m. and coming back at 7 p.m.

My family was even one of the lucky ones that after four years of waiting, were finally accepted for a visa and could come to this country legally to pursue this education. What about my students in the after school program and others in this country? Did they all have this privilege? I had to teach my parents about the college application process. We were privileged enough to have a computer at home on which my dad would constantly be doing research on colleges, ACT, and SAT.

Our after school program helped two students apply to college as well as for scholarships. We gave their parents the information and resources they needed for the common application as well as other applications. They are now both attending college and we could not be more excited for them. Just like I had to teach my family about the process our afterschool program, I had to teach these two families. I did not have this program to help me in high school, but I did have my dad. What about those students and families that want to pursue higher education but do not know where to start? What if our afterschool program had not been there for those two students? What if my father had not been in my life?

I talk to parents, and many of them are willing to fight for their children like mine did, but I cannot go to bed at night without thinking about the children with parents whom I could even
introduce myself to. I want to help these students in any way I can, because I do not want them to get to their junior year in high school like I did and realize how behind or held-back they feel in a certain subject. I do not want them to feel like they do not have the capability to succeed and attend college like their friends will, the ones they have grown up with, and furthermore, received the same education with. The students coming from supportive migrant families will have help with their education, but from the experience and feedback I have received from parents, they cannot help them with their English homework.

Here is where my education also began to become unbalanced. My mother would constantly play math games with me, but when it came down to my reading and English homework, she could not help me in the ways she would have loved to. She was at the same time trying to learn English. I remember having to translate paperwork for her that the school would send me. I look at my students today and understand the struggles they are going through, because I also went through them. I call homes and tell the parents to make sure to send a note to the school allowing their kids to come to Centre and they tell me okay, I will have my son write it for me. If the parent cannot write a simple note in English, just like my mother could not, how are they going to help and develop their child’s grammar?

In the same way I speak for migrant families, I speak for families born in the U.S. How about those children growing up with a parent, parents, or guardians who did not graduate high school or plainly do not know how to read or write? Or how about those students who go home to no support? I cannot forget about them. Writing today is very crucial and these students are suffering at a young age. Here is where my education started taking a different path and just like me, my students are all also taking this path.

This summer I worked with the Harlem Children’s Zone, specifically TRUCE Media. I was working with a high school summer and afterschool arts program. The majority if not all of the students were African American or were from African-descent families. Students are paid to attend TRUCE because it is supposed to simulate a part-time job. So in order to keep these students off the streets while engaging them in their academics through the arts, they pay them according to their merit. Therefore, if they do not attend a program day, do not participate, or if they misbehave, their pay check will be deducted. On the flip side, if they do more than told and take the extra step, they receive a bonus. Sounds like an easy and fun going summer, right? Wrong.

Before this summer, I had never worked with students outside of Kentucky or a large amount of high school students. I had worked with students who I only had to tell once to stay focused and do their work. On my first day with my students in Harlem I was told, “Can you please be quiet, I am not talking to you.” I had two students run out of my class and fight in the hallway. I had lost the respect and attention of my classroom that day. There was no way of getting them
back to focus after the fight. I was not the only teacher in our classroom; we had a total of four teachers for thirty students, but at the point of the fight, yes, I was the only teacher in the room. I was, needless to say, overwhelmed. I did not know how to control this classroom. How was I going to get their attention? If I yelled and got in their faces in the same tone they were using with me, then we would only be going back and forth.

Prior to this first day we had lesson-planned and were very excited for the summer. My fellow teachers would tell me that if we did not have fun lesson-planning, there was no way the kids would have fun in our class. I will hold on to this advice forever, but how come on this first day, two of my students decided to get into a fist fight? I had also been told MANY times by MANY staff from TRUCE that if at any point during the summer I needed to step outside for a breather, I should. I did not really know what they meant by that. After my first day, I did. I never took offense to the disrespect I felt from these students because obviously to them this was the way they were supposed to talk to their teachers. I was not any different. I knew tomorrow, the student who told me to be me to be quiet would not even remember what he did. I was never introduced as an intern to my ninth graders, I could have been working for TRUCE for years now and they would not know the difference. Nevertheless this day I was hurt.

Once all of the teachers came into the room I had to step out. I took one step out, and then all of a sudden I felt like I had been hit by a truck. I turned the corner and the tears started coming. I could not stop crying and I could not breathe. What was happening to me? Hello Kendra, you are having a panic attack. One of the teachers from my classroom came out and saw me and talked to me. He talked about his past and how he got to the point where he is now, and I know it was a good story, but I honestly cannot remember much of it. Then the director of TRUCE walked by and saw me; he also stopped and talked to me for a while.

While talking to him about the program he told me, if you can teach at TRUCE you can teach anywhere. When he said this, I made it my goal to make sure I would do everything possible to somehow connect with these children. These were all great thoughts and all, but I was still crying and hyperventilating. Why was I so upset? As I started to drink the five water bottles I was given, I began to catch my breath. I began to say words after I would take a breath in.

As I was speaking I began to hear what I was saying. I was frustrated. I was not angry at my students or hurt about the way they were speaking to me. I was angry because they were angry. These students act up and misbehave because they are masking their inability to read at a ninth grade level. My students would tell me how smart that kid in the corner is, the same quiet kid that would get made fun of because he would not be wearing the same sneakers as they were. Then the quiet kid opens his mouth in a presentation and is no longer quiet, the classroom is. He grabs everyone’s attention; they listen to the so-called quiet kid. They tell me, “Oh hey Miss Kendra, he is smart.”
I think to myself and want to PREACH to them, you are smart too! I tell them that if they take the ten minutes given to them to research they too can form strong arguments and sound “smart.” I think I make progress with one student, but then two students out of nowhere insult each other and break out in a fist fight. Everything is lost. The concentration and impact we made before is lost to the distraction of the fight.

As I continue to stand outside and reflect on these thoughts, I continue to cry because I am confused and lost. I am here at the Harlem Children’s Zone, a well-known educational program, a program known to improve the education within 96 blocks of Harlem. I am here and made it here because I want to learn about the ways in which this program has succeeded in sending 100% of their seniors to college. Why am crying? I was mad. I want so much to help these children, but they do not want to succeed. How can I connect with them? They do not care, they tell me over and over again. Where in their lives were they told it is okay to not care? How did they get to the point where they feel like they are incapable of sounding “smart?” Why had I painted an image of my internship at the Harlem Children’s Zone as rainbows and children speaking only when called on and viewing me as not only their teacher but as someone they can count on?

Throughout my summer I had to work hard to gain their respect. We would have one day where we were shocked by the way they were participating. They loved doing the debates. These students loved arguing anyways, so why not allow them to do it in a structured form? We knew they did not like to be “stumped” by their friends, so they had to do their research. We as teachers would help them with strategies on how they could have a strong argument. We gave them one-on-one attention. Not every student wanted to participate, so we took them outside and would talk to them about why they were participating. We took students out of the classroom every day. Granted, we did not constantly meet our lesson plan, but every day we did feel like we made at least an inch of progress.

I noticed the one-on-one attention to be the key in getting our students to cooperate with us. When we took the students out who misbehaved, we had them tell us what was wrong. We listened. We listened to their concerns and frustrations with us as teachers, the program, and themselves. Most of the time the program would not even be what was causing their reaction, it was their peers. Sometimes the students would be bored, so we would do something about it. We had to approach those students differently, because they learn differently.

Then some students would tell us about something that was going wrong outside of TRUCE. Every student had a different story, and every student had to be talked to in a different way. We had situations where I did not even know where to start. I did not feel trained to deal with some of these situations, and honestly there was nobody in our building trained to deal with these situations. We did everything we could, even if it meant skipping lunch and staying until 6
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pm. I also realized quickly how fortunate I was to go home to a safe dorm room at NYU while some of my students were going home to a one-bedroom apartment shared with 12 of their siblings. Our students were constantly told of the two safety buildings the Harlem Children’s Zone has which is made available to them 24/7. How did we get to this point? Why are they not safe? Not every case was like this, but many were. My students would tell me of the streets I should avoid and the streets known for drugs, and more specifically the Burger King known for drug sales. Note, my ninth graders knew this. Some of my students would only talk about their mothers or only their fathers letting us know the other parent is not present in their lives.

More and more I would learn about these students through the staff about their home lives. Our ninth graders and seniors having to act as parents for their younger siblings. A family of five, eight, and even 12 living in a one-bedroom apartment. I remember those days, too. I remember sleeping with both my parents and brother in a pull out couch in our one-bedroom apartment. I was blessed though to have both parents and a stay-at-home mom who pushed me in my education. What about my students who do not have the support at home? I got to the place I am now because of my support at home. What about my students? Who is going to support them? Their teachers? Their teachers are constantly trying to do the same work the teachers I work with are.

The difference here is that we had four teachers in my classroom of 30 students. At school, there is only one teacher per classroom. Are these teachers trained to deal with conflict? Is the school giving them the support they need? Working at TRUCE was an experience not only with my students but also with the management. I was coming in as a new staff member, but the other teaching artists that had been there for years also were feeling new to the game because they had a new director. TRUCE has been through three directors in the past two years. How can there be a strong program for these students if there is no consistency?

Our students would complain about how they could not trust new staff and how we could expect respect from them if they were just meeting us. Granted, these students need to learn to be respectful to anyone they come across. But they have a point. How could they really respect and connect with staff members if they are constantly being fired and replaced? So what was I doing at TRUCE? Was I not also going to leave after this summer? Students only seemed to respect and follow the instructions of staff they had a connection with. I had finally made a connection with my students, but I was leaving next month. Am I only contributing to their anger? Was I even making a difference?

Education is not an easy topic to talk about. Education is influenced by many factors. My students in Kentucky and in New York may be living in completely different communities but they are going through the same struggles. They may not express their frustration in the same way, but because one student decides to get in a fight about it and the other decides to stay
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quiet and invisible does not mean one is more important than the other. In both of my experiences with students, I have worked with a majority of minorities and children in poverty. I have personally seen the homes of my students in Danville. I have been invited to sit on their couch and have a conversation with their families and I cannot help myself but remember that I was also one day living in these conditions. I may not have visited the homes of the parents from my TRUCE students, but I did interact with a couple of mothers and some in tears because of the frustration they were going through. They would tell us how proud and safe they felt of sending their child to the Harlem Children’s Zone, but only realize to be hurt by the pain their kid is going through because of the bullying or the fights that are occurring in our building. What can I do to relieve this? What can I do to help this? Is there anything I can do?

No. The answer does not lie in one person. The solution to these questions and frustrations will not be solved by me or one person. In order for education to get back to its main goal of EDUCATING our youth, we need a community. The blame is not on our students. How can we blame the kids? Children mimic and form their personalities based on their surroundings. Hate to break it you, but we are the surroundings. We make up the schools, streets, homes, and government. These students are angry and not performing well because of us.

Now, I think it is time for us to do something about it. Teachers need to be supported. Good performing teachers need to mentor the teachers who are struggling in the classroom. Good teachers need to be rewarded. The schools need to make the children their number one priority. Forget about the title or the test scores; focus on what is affecting your young people. Why are they not performing well? Is it because there is something occurring outside of the school? Is it because 80% of your students are living under the poverty line? May I add that this is the case for one for one of our schools in Danville, Ky. If poverty is the issue, then maybe get to know your students one-on-one. See what is holding them back.

Teachers have one year with their students. In that one year, they can do whatever possible to get to know their students as people because, believe it or not, even first graders go through struggles their teachers will never go through. One must be able to mold themselves in a million different ways, because every child needs be approached and talked to differently. Schools need to take this into account. They need to give their teachers the proper training and introduction for the students they are serving. If they have a high population of migrant or non-English speaking children, then they need to make sure they are putting an emphasis on all subjects, especially on English and Reading.

Schools need to be the child’s main, and maybe even only, fountain of knowledge, because you never know what support they have at home. Schools need to do everything in their power to give their students a strong foundation as well as challenging them and not being satisfied with
a satisfactory student. Kids also need support and motivation from their parents, but this is always going to be difficult. The school, though, needs to make EVERY parent feel as if they can play a role in their child’s education. Parents need to be invited to come to the schools. Teachers, advocates, secretaries, and maybe even principals need to know the families of the students they are serving. Sometimes a parent knows best the strengths and weakness of their child that a teacher might not know. The schools need to support these families in a way they are making them feel included and not ashamed. They need to let parents know, they are there to help their child succeed every step of the way.

This strong foundation needs to be implemented early on in a child’s education and be as consistently strong through middle and high school. What good does it do if you have a strong elementary school and failing high school? Some students will be self-driven and the others that need a little push will be left behind to find themselves wondering, where did “I” go wrong? In elementary school they need to feel as if they have the capability to succeed by giving them a strong foundation, and in middle and high school, we need to give them the education they deserve to succeed.

It does not seem right for my fifth grader in Danville and for my ninth grader in Harlem to tell me that they will not go to college because they are not smart enough. How did we get to the point where students have given up on themselves? They have given up to the point where they do not care. They do not care about their education or the consequences of misbehaving. Why? Could it be somewhere along the line they were pushed from class to class because they were “intolerable?” We cannot let these students let go of hope or dreams.

This narrative was maybe supposed to have a focus on poverty and data to show the correlation of a failing educational system to poverty. I could have done that, but I cannot keep these questions silent anymore. I do not have answers or graphs to show the problem and solution. I have stories and I have experiences. I am still trying to unravel my thoughts. I have sat through panels on poverty and how the students who are under the poverty line are the ones who are underperforming. We have all seen this. We have all also seen that the underperforming students are also the minority students. How many times will I sit through talk where I am constantly told this?

I may hear a new approach at studying poverty and education. I may see a new fancy line graph, but this means nothing to me. Children are children. Middle class or not. Minorities or not. EVERY child is being affected by the education they receive. Why would a child born and raised in Harlem attending school on 116th receive an entirely different education than a student attending a school on 125th? Do they not have the right to the same education this country is so glorified by? Many families migrate to this country to escape extreme poverty or corruption, in order to have freedom and opportunities for their families. Do not get me wrong,
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I am thankful for this country because I would have lived an entirely different life if my family had not moved here, but how can these children succeed in a system that is letting them fall behind and the children not realizing the importance of their education or how far behind they are until it is time for them to graduate?

These families may not be going through the extreme hardships they would be going through in their native countries, but did they think education for their children was going to be a struggle in the U.S.? Families dreaming about entering the U.S. have an image of education here as the place where their children can become doctors, lawyers, or whatever their heart desires. Little did they know, for the children born in the U.S., education is a luxury. To receive the best education, you have to live in the correct neighborhood and maybe even have the appropriate income. Forget about race and forget about income: how is education evaluated now? Where does the problem lie?