SHADOW CITIES: LITERACY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

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Abstract: An educator draws on her experiences in India and across the world to argue that those who are impoverished or otherwise marginalized may share locations and cultures with their privileged counterparts, but still experience the world far differently. She discusses the need to recognize the universal underlying factors of poverty and oppression that can lead to an underclass and social unrest across countries and cultures, among natives as well as immigrants. Education, when delivered properly, becomes a powerful tool in creating a more peaceful and prosperous future for all. While different countries seek to address this issue in different ways, the author argues that building strong critical literacy skills can be a useful first step in creating a social and cultural currency that allows the marginalized to become socially mobile.

Keywords: Critical Literacy, Gangs, Poverty, Social Mobility.

Introduction: When I was a young girl growing up in Hyderabad, India, my friends and I would often take a short cut to school. It was not a pleasant walk, but it saved us nearly 15 minutes to cut through "untouchable alley", where the people who cleaned latrines, cremated the dead, and worked in other unspeakable professions lived. As we rushed to school with our backpacks, in our neatly pressed uniforms and our polished shoes, we tried not to breathe in the pungent air, full of the stench of human excrement and burning coal.

There was no plumbing in the dark one-room dwellings that lined both sides of the narrow alley, nor was there running water, only a single pump from which all the women brought back pots of water to use for cooking and bathing. We never walked through the alley at night, for there was no electricity and it was lit only by cooking fires and sputtering kerosene lamps.

But during the morning and the afternoon, in the clear light of day, we saw dirty children playing either naked or in ripped clothing, gaunt women sitting on doorsteps, or tired men sleeping under the open sky on woven string mattresses. It was a strange and foreign world, which even as we passed through, we never sought either to understand or question. This was simply the way things were. Whether in the Hindu quarter or the Muslim quarter or anywhere in between, there were the rich and the poor, the haves and the have nots, so that the story of Hyderabad, like that of so many cities around the world, was really a tale of two cities, one of rich Hindu culture and regal Mughal splendor, and skilled artisans, goldsmiths and silversmiths, the other, a sprawling collection of slums, poverty, and silent desperation.

As a former teacher and now a teacher educator, having traveled to various parts of the world, and having worked with underprivileged students across the United States, I've come to see first-hand that nearly every city has a shadow self, one that is not widely known, and which has very little to celebrate. It is the children in this shadow world who would benefit most from an inclusive system of education that emphasizes literacy.

Amsterdam: On a recent trip to Paris and Amsterdam, I was reminded of this fact once again. These two cities have always been synonymous in my mind, and I'm sure for the vast majority of people, with beauty, culture and romance. In Amsterdam, we drifted down picturesque canals, were swept away by Van Gogh's art, and delighted in the cheese making and the wooden clog factories.

As part of our academic tour, we visited a very impressive Technaseum, a school where students were learning vocational skills as well as academic skills, preparing for jobs as carpenters and careers as doctors. I found it slightly troubling that the students were being tracked as early as middle school and being separated into vocational or academic tracks based on school officials' assessments of their aptitude. The education ministry official who spoke to us admitted that the students in the vocational track were overwhelmingly minorities and students of color, and that many came from impoverished backgrounds.

Later we went to a neighborhood where the children lived in cheap tract housing far outside the city and were a mostly immigrant population, many from Africa and the Middle East. The elementary school we saw however, was a beautiful one, newly constructed, and with cutting edge technology and curriculum to serve children. As we spoke to the principal, who was quite proud of the innovations they were making in his district, he also shared his concerns that these children needed more than merely an education. Though the schools were trying hard to serve all students, there were no picturesque canals and art museums where these children lived, only drab housing and deep poverty.

Paris: As we wandered the streets of Paris next, capturing the Eiffel Tower on our iPhones, awed and inspired by the art at the Louvre and the breathtaking landscapes of Versailles, we were blissfully ignorant of the other Paris, one that was darkly hinted at in our visit to the French Ministry of Education, about the suburbs and discipline problems and the need for vocational skill building.

That week, we visited a banlieue or suburb, where we first discovered that the City of Light also had ghettos. Graffiti covered vans, narrow streets, small neighborhood markets and grime covered buildings heralded our entry into this side of the city, one where poverty is rampant, and public housing is overcrowded and substandard. Children attend schools similar to the one we visited that day, an elementary school in a musty old building with no playground except for a stretch of bare concrete, where at recess, children ran and shouted wildly, letting out their youthful energy.

The principal shared her struggles working with a population that lived in tenements, or in homeless shelters. She felt compassion for the children, but was frustrated by the challenges she faced in trying to educate them properly. She felt that the disjointed efforts at education reform that had swept France recently had resulted in confusion and chaos for the students, who were now inundated every afternoon with enrichment activities that took away time from necessary foundational classes.

That afternoon, we drove to yet another neighborhood, to visit a high school, also focused on vocational education. We visited a classroom where ten shy young women, most of them from a middle-eastern background, were learning how to cook. Their instructor shared that not only was she trying to teach them cooking skills, but also the domestic skills of housekeeping,

cleanliness, proper food preparation and storage, and nutrition, life skills she felt they needed to acquire. They too came from the housing projects that surrounded the school.

Finally, we visited a classroom full of smiling young women and men from West Africa, who were learning chemistry. They were about to embark on an exchange trip to Chicago as and were extremely excited at the opportunity to step outside their circumstances and see the world. We left Paris with mixed feelings, since once again, we could see a sincere intent to provide useful education, combined with a social divide that didn't seem fixable through educational reforms alone.

Our Own Backyard: I don't believe that any country, including our own, intends to create slums where poverty, illiteracy, and lack of opportunity tend to foment rebellion and violence. The United States, for example, is no stranger to urban ghettos where the impoverished live sequestered from the cultural and academic riches of the cities they inhabit. We too have cities that are shadowed by huge immigrant populations with limited access and opportunity. While they may not choose terrorism based on religious ideologies, as is often the case in Europe, many impoverished youth form gangs and roam the streets bent on taking by force what they cannot have by right. This too is a terrorism of sorts. This despite the countless educational reforms that have been introduced in the past few decades, aimed at supporting and scaffolding students who continue to fail and to drop out (Moreno & Francisco, 2013).

The educators in France and the Netherlands are quite aware of the challenges presented by growing immigrant populations with low or no skills entering their countries. They have been open to such immigration and equally generous in their welcome. They are constantly trying through well-meaning reforms and new curricula, as we saw in both Amsterdam and Paris, to address the needs of all their students including the impoverished, the immigrants and children of immigrants, in order to help them become useful and productive members of society. Their failure to do so is remarkably similar to our own.

So Why isn't it Working?

Perhaps we need to go back to the untouchable alley of my youth as we continue to explore this question further. The parents in the alley worked very hard, albeit at menial and often disreputable occupations. Their status as untouchables kept them apart from mainstream society. But much as we shuddered at the conditions in which they lived, they were grateful for the alley since they no longer had to sleep on the sidewalks. Often, immigrant parents around the world work very hard at low skilled occupations in an effort to survive and keep their families fed and sheltered. In that superhuman effort, true to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, survival is foremost and bettering one's circumstances further comes a far second (Maslow, 1970). They too, like the untouchables, are often refugees from a condition much worse than the one they find themselves in. They are content to put food on the table and have a roof over their heads without being persecuted.

The children of the alley were a different story. While their parents were content, the children grew up in squalid surroundings as they watched us parade back and forth with all the things they would never possess: money, comfort, rich food, nice clothes.

Like many impoverished parents, the parents of the alley, while unable to help students academically, nevertheless valued hard work and high academic achievement (Coll & Marks, 2009). They wanted their children to go to school and get an education. They did whatever

they had to, to pay for books and pencils and faded uniforms that were passed from child to child. And while the parents stayed in the alley, the children trudged off to school, where they were pointed at, looked down upon and treated poorly by the rest of the children, who knew they were different.

As these children got older and continued to be treated as outsiders, it is small wonder that many often dropped out of school or became delinquents who roamed the streets forming gangs and getting into trouble despite their parents' hopes. (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960) The underclass theory, which recognizes the class dichotomy which posits a dominant class and an underclass, argues that being divested from positive social opportunities leads to discontent and gang formation. (Miller, 1958; Cohen, 1969).

It is easy in such circumstances to turn away and to find solace in groups of disenfranchised youth who, like all human beings, seek to fulfill their potential and find a worthy cause, whatever that might be. If the country they call home pushes them aside and their attempts to fit in or better themselves are met with scorn, then some of those young people will turn to a group or cause that welcomes them. Gangs, whether they are based on race, cultural differences, territory, or religion, tend to thrive in such an atmosphere of discontent (Klein, 1995; Gordon, 2000).

While well-meaning educators and reformers seek to introduce innovative approaches to education, some tend to perpetuate the cycle by tracking students at an early age and pushing them toward low level occupations with little earning opportunity. Others throw money at the problem, with more enrichment, more gadgets, more cutting-edge platforms, at the expense of the foundational skills students need.

How Literacy can Help: Without looking at the root cause of discontent, it is very hard to fix oppression and its accompanying disengagement solely through improved curricula and teaching methods. However, education can provide a counter measure, not by piling on enrichment activities or forcing students into strictly vocational tracks or academic tracks, but through providing students with the tools they need to express themselves, and through engaging them in critical thinking and critical literacy. While we cannot always fix the root cause of social injustice as quickly as we would like, we can help our students work through their anger and their frustration by providing them with language and literacy skills so that they can not only express themselves well, but so they can filter the tremendous amounts of information they are bombarded with (Comber, 2015). If a particular group or gang wants to recruit them, they need to possess the ability to see through the agenda and understand what is best for them. If they are angered by their circumstances, they need the skills to change them. If they feel silenced, then they need the language to speak out and raise their voices (Freire, 1979).

In my own work with students in the Central Valley of California, many of whom are second language learners and children of immigrant farm workers, I find that incorporating academic literacy skills such as reading comprehension and vocabulary, critical literacy skills such as questioning and multiple perspectives, and functional literacy skills such as public speaking, reasoning and persuasion contribute to a strong sense of student identity, confidence and academic engagement (Luke, 2018). By practicing all of these literacy skills through project-based learning and writing personal narrative, students emerge as strong readers and writers,

who consider themselves part of what Frank Smith calls the "literacy club" (Bathina, 2014: Smith, 1987).

It has been argued that literacy on its own cannot allow students to overcome the barriers to opportunity that class and race often pose (D'Amico, 1999). However, we need to look at literacy as not merely the acquisition of reading and writing skills, but an actual social currency which allows for social mobility (Gee, 1991). In order to effectively use this currency, students must learn to navigate the two cities, the one they know and that of the dominant culture. Literacy becomes the bridge by which they can cross back and forth from their own belief systems, language, culture, social structure to the dominant culture, thus becoming in effect, bicultural. Those who fail to do so unfortunately continue to be marginalized both in society and in school settings (Nieto, 1992).

A few years ago, I returned to India and was reminiscing with a cousin about the days when we would cut through untouchable alley. She told me it had since been razed to the ground, bulldozed in an effort to beautify the neighborhood and remove a long-standing eyesore. Shocked, I asked her what had happened to all the families who had lived there. She had no idea. Yet, when she hears about increasing crime in Hyderabad or disaffected youth who plant cycle bombs in the middle of crowded streets, injuring dozens and even hundreds of people, or fundamentalist youth gangs who wave their party's flag and rally for Hindu or Muslim or Christian rights and often engage in violent riots, burning buses and trains to make a statement, she wonders who these people are and what makes them so angry. We fail to make the connection between violence and lack of opportunity, rage and the feeling of disconnectedness, gang culture, terrorism and the need for education as a bridge between disparate realities.

Around the world, different countries are trying different approaches to bridge the gap and to reach all students effectively. But it is important to remember that education is more than merely mastering skills and passing tests. It can, if it focuses on literacy as both a skill and as cultural capital, become a safeguard against the siren call of gang culture and extremist ideologies and a way to counter the social imbalance that leads to violence. In fact, incorporating literacy practices into an inclusive education model can be an effective pathway for social mobility.

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