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Brown Eyes, Brown Mind: What We Learn From What We See

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Brown Eyes, Brown Mind: What We Learn From What We See

Abstract

My summer days aren't spent in a house on the beach or travelling to different states or countries with my family or friends, forgetting about the worries of the rest of the year and wondering what could be better than life under the sun. They are spent in a school building, the first place my younger self would have been eager to escape during off time. This is the second summer I am working at the [LIU Migrant Education Summer School of Excellence](#). Unlike normal summer school, which usually consists of remedial classes for students who can't seem to get a grip on their multiplication tables or skipped class one too many days, the Migrant Ed summer session provides a quality and fun educational experience to mostly Latino students whose education is often interrupted as their parents move frequently to maintain work in the agricultural sector. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, education, summer school, migrant education

Disciplines

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Child Psychology | Civic and Community Engagement | Education | Educational Sociology | Sociology

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

BROWN EYES, BROWN MIND: WHAT WE LEARN FROM WHAT WE SEE

July 1, 2013

“Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them. They must, they have no other models.” – James Baldwin, “Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter From Harlem”

My summer days aren't spent in a house on the beach or travelling to different states or countries with my family or friends, forgetting about the worries of the rest of the year and wondering what could be better than life under the sun. They are spent in a school building, the first place my younger self would have been eager to escape during off time. This is the second summer I am working at the [LIU Migrant Education Summer School of Excellence](#). Unlike normal summer school, which usually consists of remedial classes for students who can't seem to get a grip on their multiplication tables or skipped class one too many days, the Migrant Ed summer session provides a quality and fun educational experience to mostly Latino students whose education is often interrupted as their parents move frequently to maintain work in the agricultural sector.

The program strives to keep students up-to-date with their education so they don't fall behind their classmates as they enter the next academic year. The part that really grabs my attention, though, is not their mission: it's the fact that the children *want* to be there. These kids have their parents register them voluntarily to go to school with their friends at a time when most go off to camp or on family roadtrips. Never in my life have I seen such a thing. Where I'm from, summer school is equivalent to a trip to the dentist to get a root canal with no sedative.

Fortunately for me, my grades and behavior never slipped so badly that I was forced to spend summers in school. There was a point in high school when I was failing, earning a 1.42 GPA, but I bounced back in time to get into college. However, a lot of (too many) Latino and Black kids that I grew up with weren't so lucky; they did poorly in their classes and even dropped out of school entirely. I only avoided it because, as much as I hate to admit it, my father was around to hammer into my head the consequences of my choices and made me feel fortunate about the opportunities I had. Parents, at times, weren't a factor in the lives of many of my peers, and when they were, it was difficult navigating their children through the school system when they are working minimum-wage jobs (at best) around the clock just ensuring food on the table the next night. As a result, kids ended up going straight to the workforce or into the streets, where many of them remain today. And this story isn't unique to my hometown or the big names usually mentioned like Los Angeles, Chicago, or New York.

The Latino population has always had its issues with the educational system, mainly due to the language barrier that typically bars children of newly immigrated families from keeping pace with their classmates. But that's old news. This has been partially addressed with ESL classes and other resources put in place to aid students as they attempt to navigate the maze, but for many reasons, the path is often just too long and winding. While some make it, many often give up, leave their mind at the last place where they gave a damn, and search for another place they can excel, like working in a body shop.... or cleaning bathrooms in a hotel... or running drugs for the neighborhood gang. Again, old news.

Attending college is sometimes as realistic of a goal as becoming the CEO of Google. Nobody tells them about financial aid or the scholarships that could help them realize the dreams that their parents couldn't even have had in their sleep, so what's the difference if they graduate or just go to work now? No one they can name has ever even gone on to finish school, let alone achieve the success they correlate with college graduation, so what would make them think that they were good enough to do it? They see white people get promoted before their parents (who have more experience and knowledge of the job) just because they could "afford a diploma." Meanwhile their older brothers have colored rags in their back pockets or tattoos with the most feared combination of letters in all of Latin America on their chest. It's no wonder most think that their destiny is dim.

I have no specific examples or statistics, but I'm pretty sure most kids who opt to join the likes of [MS-13](#) or other gangs aren't born killers. But while they may start out intelligent and willing to learn, the failures of the school systems soon become reality and take their toll. This is reflected in the fact that Wheaton High School, my alma mater, currently has a 97% fail rate on the Algebra 2 exam and a graduation rate of 74.1%. When their schools fail to provide them with any sort of useful education, it's not surprising that kids seek out new teachers and support systems in the streets. And this is in Montgomery County, the richest county in Maryland. Now imagine places like Baltimore or Prince George's county, where public schools in poor neighborhoods (where Black and Latino families usually end up) can barely afford to maintain the building, let alone afford necessary materials or quality teachers willing to stay. Discouraged youth isn't an attractive selling point, so many of the teachers who end up working in this school systems become discouraged themselves. My younger brother dropped out after his third attempt at tenth grade, and many of my peers joined gangs (probably best not to mention which). I was almost drafted as well but somehow managed to deflect the pressure.

So seeing the kids at the Migrant Ed program is something spectacular. Some of them have had it a lot worse than me, and they still pursue their education like not doing so isn't even an option. They've heard the same negative messages I did, but at summer school and in their community, they also have a support system strong enough to silence those voices. The program may not be perfect, and some of the kids won't make it to college either, but it's a whole lot better than if they were being "helped" by a local gang or some bad friends. While rural PA and the DC metro area are totally different settings, the possibility and expectation of failure is still there. My mentorship may not be the main factor influencing the decisions the kids make in their lives, but I'm more than happy to be a part of something positive. I could never afford a vacation anyways, and I'm not even supposed to be in this situation to begin with according to statistics. Suffice it to say, I'm having a pretty good summer.

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