Merry Christmas

On December 25th, 2015, New York Times released an article about the West Windsor-Plainsboro High School District, our small little home about 10 minutes away from the coveted Princeton University in the heart of New Jersey. However, within the first couple of paragraphs, the smile on my face was replaced with a face palm when I reached their description of home. “It churns out Science Olympiad winners, classically trained musicians and students with perfect SAT scores.” They painted this picture of a not a beautiful education center, but rather an intense factory that has the sole goal of creating the ideal student: the student who gets the perfect grades and gets into those Ivy-League colleges like good old Princeton University. They turned us into products, into lifeless bodies stamped with GPA and SAT scores. But the saddest part of all was not that it was written, but the fact that it was true.

This article got me thinking about this idea of education as a factory, or more so as a school being the factory and the whole point of education as production. It’s scary to have it all written out in front of you, but it made us students confront the fact that we were really treated as products that were being transferred to the next stage of life. Looking back on it now, I can see the clear resemblance to the sort of ideas talked about in “Movements of Mind: The Matrix, Metaphors, and Re-Imagining Education”, written by Alison Cook-Sather. The theories presented in this idea revolve around thinking about education in terms of metaphors, or in a more symbolic context, and how this can be useful in evaluating the consequences of certain mindsets, but also limiting when the metaphor becomes reality. “Because metaphors not only foreground certain qualities but also obscure or eliminate others, they can lead people to assume or accept that one particular way of thinking is the only way to think and one set of particular practices is the only possible set (Cook-Sather, 4.)” Here, our practices were centered around becoming the perfect candidates for college, and we didn’t think of anything else due to the mere fact that we weren’t exposed to anything else. We grew up in this world were GPA and SAT scores were everything: they were an indication of your intelligence, a validation of your work ethic, and the end goal for life in itself. It wasn’t an error in methodology in one specific time; this stemmed from a systemic build up of an unhealthy atmosphere that pitted students against each other to be the best product produced in the factory.

Cook-Sather also mentions one thing in particular, that when in rereading the New York Times article, it brought light to the general issue of standardization. She draws from another reading to cite “students are ‘products to be molded, tested against common standards, and inspected carefully before being passed on to the next workbench (Cook-Sather, 7.)” This brought two ideas to my head. The first one is about how during the college application process, most larger public universities do not judge applicants using a holistic approach. They compare students’ applications to standards that they have established, for example whether or not the student had obtained a certain GPA. In some cases, they completely disregard an application if one part of their app does not meet the standard, like how Oxford Study Abroad won’t even consider you if you don’t have a GPA of 3.7 or higher. Some colleges have embraced the holistic approach, and that in turn breaks the metaphor of factory based education by breaking the idea of the ideal product. Cook-Sather allows us to draw this connection between standardization not only in the college prep process, but also in K-12 education. Growing up, we were always told in this district what the class average was after an exam, or what the” normal” student should have received on an assignment. Structured lesson plans derived from nationwide statistics and Common Core requirements have pushed for the all students to “reach” one level, and Cook-Sather’s article finally brings these ideals to life by emphasizing how they stem from the education as production model. Cook-Sather reiterates this point by mentioning how “This (education) machines works within a ‘time frame in which you have a set of goals and objectives that need to be accomplished. You take a student from this point to that point. (Cook-Sather, 8.)’” The bridge between the points becomes the college application process, and these “set of all goals and objectives” is exactly standardization, and this was highly prevalent in my high school while I was a student there, which most likely set up the basis for the competitive atmosphere.

Later on in the New York Times article, the author talks about how the superintendent of our district abolished midterms and finals, and also lessened academic stress by removing the advanced mathematics program for 4th and 5th graders and establishing “No Homework Days”. Here shows the limitations of the dangerous mindset WWP is stuck in. Since it’s trapped in the factory of education, it couldn’t see past superficial changes in order to really tackle the problem. Rather then raising conversations about mental health, teaching stress management, encouraging discussion and overall student input into their education, administration felt that it was ok to just take away certain academic stresses. They took away the causes of short-term stress and felt that by easing up the mechanical works, they can allow students to refocus on the goal that is to get perfect grades. The mindset here is that if we make the process easier for students, so they can get through it faster and feel better while they end up being molded into the product. The Matrix article brings up similar points in that it talks about how “students are commodities produced by others, prepared to enter and compete for purchase in what Sfard (1998) describes as an increasingly materialistic world (Cook-Sather, 5.)” This idea of fixing external issues (such as an academic work load) highlights this point about how students are “produced by others.” Rather than opening up the discussion about mental health issues, time management, and the true purpose of education, the focus is on fixing external factors which in turns increases the value on GPA and standardized test scores. As the quote says, students then enter college with the same, toxic high school mindset-they strive for perfection and thrive on competition. This competition then becomes the source of intrinsic motivation for certain students-yes they end up succeeding, but only for the scores. Like how Cook-Sather says, “Students enact the production metaphor themselves: studying to compete and complete rather than explore and examine (Cook-Sather, 10.)” What about the actual information they’re learning? It becomes irrelevant once the paper is turned in, or the exam is completed. Not only does this materialistic mindset support trivial or petty solutions from administration, but it also inhibits learning in general. By focusing more on the exam or the paper, students retain less knowledge as they go about the course quiz by quiz, not focusing on general themes or important concepts.

The Matrix article, however, does present the flip side of metaphors. When identified, understood, and most importantly thought about, these metaphors can act as learning opportunities for all parties, from administration to students. So many positive, endearing metaphors for education exist, such as education as growing (students are seeds that grow, but they need to learn how to do it themselves!) As long as we don’t allow ourselves to get trapped in metaphors, we can use them to analyze classroom dynamics and school atmospheres to understand critical issues in our educational system. It’s scary how accurate the New York Times was, but it finally allowed hundreds of graduates from the district to look back and reflect upon their high school experience.

Works Cited:

Cook-Sather, Alison. "Movements of Mind: The Matrix, Metaphors, and Re-Imagining Education." Teachers College Record 105 (2003): 946-977.

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