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Essay Assignment #3

The struggle to create social change is a responsibility that must be passed down from generation to generation. Each new generation must learn lessons from their parents, teachers, and other elders, applying it to the world they now live in and building on these lessons as they age. To hope for a more just society in the future, we must instill such ideals into the next generation. James Baldwin's *A Talk to Teachers* reminds us that the views, opinions, and stereotypes a society teaches their children reflects the objectives of that society. Jonathan Kozol's *Still Separate, Still Unequal: America's Educational Apartheid* gives real life examples in which children are taught by their elders to conform to societal norms and remain silent. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should all be Feminists* excellently combines both of these observations. In analyzing each of these works, I find it evident that in hopes of a more just future, we should educate children properly and accurately, while encouraging them to use their voices, rather than to be silent.

Social change begins with education, and I believe, with children. In societal issues such as racial inequality, we as a global community tend to remain silent in order to benefit the more privileged majority. "The crucial paradox which confronts us here is that the whole process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society" (Baldwin, 678). Often times, in order to perpetuate the aims of society, children must be taught in a way that is not necessarily truthful. For example, some Southern schools teach children to refer to the Civil War as the "War of Northern Aggression". This fails to tell the complete, objective story behind the origins of the War. The Civil War began when the South became frustrated with federal laws, especially ones putting limits on the power of slave owners in regards to slaves. The South thus declared their desire to succeed from the Union, prompting the Union to declare war on the South. The term "War of Northern Aggression" portrays a more subjective view of the Civil War, potentially inspiring children to experience more hostile feelings towards

the North. In this instance, children who were taught this way without actively seeking more objective information may grow to believe that the South fought the war for justified reasons while the North had flawed intentions. I believe much of the unfairness of any population can, to an extent, be blamed on ignorance and a poorly informed public. Those in power tend to be very well educated and thus are equipped to take advantage of those who have little power. Therefore, if our education systems taught students more thoroughly, objectively, and truthfully, they may be more prepared to effectively face issues head-on. "If, for example, one managed to change the curriculum in all the schools so that Negroes learned more about themselves and their real contributions to this culture, you would be liberating not only Negroes, you'd be liberating white people who know nothing about their own history," (Baldwin, 683). Had the public been better informed of their history, the history of others, and the current dynamic of their community, they may have become better equipped to understand one another and thus, create a more just society. As children develop, extracting more knowledge from their schools, elders, and peers, they may be able to make more well informed decisions. As a result, they may have the confidence to speak out against aspects of our society that they deem unjust.

Students living in lower class neighborhoods and attending public schools in such areas are hardly ever given the same opportunities as those who attend public schools in more affluent neighborhoods. Kozol tells the interesting story of high school student, Mireya, who was placed by her school administration into a "Sewing Class" as well as a "Life Skills" class though she had hopes of becoming a doctor or social worker in the future. In middle or upper-class neighborhoods, public schools fill "The Technical Arts" requirement with more academic classes, such as higher biology or math classes. Kozol mentions that in public schools located in lower class neighborhoods, "this requirement was far more often met by courses that were basically vocational and also obviously keyed to low-paying levels of employment," (Kozol, 654). This lack of more encouraging academic classes pushes underprivileged students away from their dreams, encouraging them to settle for jobs that are less profitable. Therefore these young people are being silenced by the American school system. Had students like these been given the academic opportunities granted to middle- and upper-class students, they may be more likely to enjoy a brighter future. By telling a child that they will never have a future brighter than the life they

currently live, society is essentially placing obstacles in their educational and professional journeys before they have the chance to climb the socioeconomic ladder. This cycle only perpetuates the system of oppression, where people of lower classes enjoy less opportunity to impact society politically as they do not have the social influence as well as economically as they lack the social influence and the financial means to do so.

The capabilities of women of all races, classes and other identities are repeatedly undermined by society. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie emphasizes this in her short book, *We Should all be Feminists*. Adichie tells stories from her childhood, which mostly take place in Nigeria, that display stigmas against women and the concept of feminism. She recalls an instance in which she was nine years old, attending primary school and wanted to be the class monitor. She, along with her peers, was told by her teacher that the position of class monitor would be awarded to the child who received the highest score on a test. Though Adichie received the highest score on the test, she did not earn the title of class monitor, as her teacher claimed the class monitor must be a boy. Her teacher, assuming it was obvious, had failed to previously mention the gender requirement for the title of class monitor and therefore Adichie was very disappointed that she would not be rewarded for her hard work. She recalls being upset that this “sweet, gentle” boy had no true desire to be class monitor while she was driven to assume the duties of the position. “If only boys are made class monitor, then at some point we will all think, even if unconsciously, that the class monitor has to be a boy. If we keep seeing only men as heads of corporations, it starts to seem “natural” that only men should be heads of corporations” (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 12). Adichie excellently articulates the point that the mentality that only men are capable of occupying certain professional positions is detrimental to our society as it puts limitations on what women are capable of. This flawed ideal is only perpetuated as our elder population is teaching young girls that they should leave the larger, more dominant roles to men. Similarly to points brought up in James Baldwin’s *A Talk to Teachers* and Mireya’s story in Kozol’s *Still Separate, Still Unequal: America’s Educational Apartheid*, older generations should teach children of all ages in an open-minded, honest fashion. We should strive to give the youth the confidence to work hard to reach their goals fearlessly and without feeling pressured

to doubt their own abilities. I believe this empowerment will allow all children to feel more comfortable speaking out about injustices as they all feel that their opinions are valid.

In many schools in the American school system, children are forced to participate in exercises that will teach them to conform to the societal customs taught by teachers. In his work, Kozol speaks of a teacher, Mr. Endicott, who conducted his class in a very strict manner. "Communication between children in the class was not prohibited but was afforded time slots and, remarkably enough, was formalized in an expression that I found included in a memo that was posted on the wall beside the door," (Kozol, 649). Though it is important to teach children order and proper speech, this approach may also influence children to silence their ideas outside of the classroom, as they are pressured by their classroom community to remain silent until prompted to speak about a particular subject. Naturally, teaching a child to be silent for long periods of time from such a young age may teach that child to feel the need to remain silent in adulthood. As an adult, an individual's words will often have more power. It is crucial that we teach children of the new generation to speak up when they feel discomfort, confusion, or any other emotion. This way, they may feel more comfortable to speak out and open dialogue about injustices they will see in their later years.

As a very young child, I grew up in the small island nation of Dominica. Surrounded by a relatively conservative culture, I was taught to be very respectful to my elders. This included staying quiet in situations in which my elders were speaking. I feel inclined to believe that this custom has led many individuals like me to become blindly obedient to authority. Therefore, like the children in Mr. Endicott's class, I was taught to be very quiet during instruction time. I considered this an attribute about myself throughout my younger years. I frowned upon other children who were more talkative in school. I believed it was very rude to challenge a teacher, even if what he or she was saying seemed clearly wrong to me. I feel inclined to believe that this custom of remaining silent in the presence of my elders had led me to become blindly obedient to authority rather than simply remaining respectful. I suppose this explains why I had grown up to be rather timid even in social situations, not feeling comfortable with speaking up and being the center of attention. It was only towards my years in high school when I realized my timidity hindered my ability to be myself. When my peers and even elders said things that I felt were wrong or that

I simply disagreed with, I said nothing, even when their words were hurting someone else. Upon realization of this, it occurred to me that I had been raised to conform to societal norms where children, specifically, young girls are taught to remain quiet, often allowing themselves to be oppressed by society. Now that I have realized the error in this sort of conditioning, I live by Baldwin's belief that "the obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it--at no matter what risk... This is the only way societies change," (Baldwin, 679). Society tries to create citizens who follow the rules and customs of the society, thus teaching children to obey such rules at a young age, before they are truly able to form their own opinions. However, in order to work towards a more just community for all of our citizens, we must analyze our world, speak up, and challenge it. Had I continued to remain silent like I was taught to do as a child, I would not be as well equipped to fight for a more just society as I believe I am today. This realization that one should not blindly obey authority, but actively listen, form their own opinions, and respectfully challenge authority when necessary is what we should hope for for all of our world's children.

In conclusion, we as a society must begin to change the future by changing the way we raise our children, giving them the tools they need to use their voices. Schools should accurately educate children on their own history as well as on the history of others. Students should strive for greatness, and be given the opportunities and encouragement to explore their own potential. Finally, we as a society should encourage our youth, not scold them for speaking up.

Works Cited

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