The Value of An Education

Auto-ethnography Linear Version

Many people who live in the United States who were born in a different country have drastically different ways of viewing life and the world around them. Immigrants born in “third-world countries,” who have experienced struggles that the average middle-class American family could not imagine, often appreciate the opportunities available in this country on a much greater scale than natural born American citizens. Trinidad and Tobago is one of these countries. A small island of just under two thousand square miles and the southernmost island of the Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago is the home of many immigrants who currently live in the United States. In Trinidad, a common mantra is “education, education, education,” for at a very young age children are taught that knowledge is one of the most powerful things that you can obtain in life.

My father was born in Trinidad and Tobago in 1962 to two parents who did not pursue college educations. He grew up in a household where both parents had to work extremely hard to make a good living for him and my two aunts. From the time they first started going to school, my grandparents stressed the importance of doing well in school in order to be able to be successful later in life.

In Trinidad, the students have to take the Common Entrance Examination, which determines what secondary school they will attend. Of course, the students who do best on the Common Entrance Examination go to the better schools in the country and vice versa.

For my first interview, I chose to interview my father, Derek. Here is how our conversation went:

**So how old were you when you came to the United States?**

I was 20 going on 21.

**And why did you come?**

To go to school.

**Was that a decision you made on your own or was that influenced by friends and family?**

Ummm, was it influenced by friends or family? \*pauses\* It was a combination.

*I was feeling like he was being a bit dry towards me. I sensed maybe he was a little uncomfortable or questioning of this whole interview.*

**Elaborate for me, please!**

Simply put, there was and exam called the GCE Advanced Levels and I didn't do as well as I should have so I didn't get in to the right program there so I came to America to give it a shot, you know?

**Yes, okay. What did you see for yourself like when you decided you were going to come to the US? What did you envision yourself doing?**

Well I came with the intent of trying to do medicine.

**Okay you did that. We know you did that so, let's see... Did you have a lot of support from home while you were in school?**

Yeah! Yes.

**Do you feel like you were successful? In whatever your own personal definition of success is? Do you think that you reached that?**

*Here he paused and I was expecting him to give a long answer....*

Yes.

**And does your level of education have to do a lot with what you think makes somebody successful?**

Yeah. Because in my culture it is education, education, education. It takes precedence over everything.

**Okay, true. Do you think that if you grew up in the United States you would have valued education as much as you do now?**

NO.

**So you think that Americans are lacking in their education?**

Yes, the American education system is biased toward the affluent. And it doesn't push kids to their full potential.

**How was school different here versus in Trinidad?**

Well I told you about common entrance right?

**No…**

Well... The primary schools were our choice, and there was an exam we took when we were like 11. And based on how well we did on the exam determined what school we went to. And so the brighter kids went to the better schools. So you were always in a system where you were with people of equal intelligence. So you were continually being pushed. You weren't being held up by the ones like in this country because they live in the same area.

**Mmmhmm, oh!**

*At this moment I took a pause because I never thought of the American public school system in this way. His point was a valid one, but I do realize why that could not always work here like it could on a small island like Trinidad.*

**Yeah that makes sense... that makes sense. So were you considered one of the brighter students once you got here?**

In college, yeah.

**Did you notice that you discipline and habits for school were different or the same as other kids?**

No! I was way more disciplined than the other kids.

**So you didn't go out and party like the other kids?**

Not in that sense.

**And do you take a lot of pride in your degrees and accomplishments? Being able to say that you are a doctor when you talk to people from home?**

*I asked this question because I realize now in American culture, having a degree is now almost "required" to get a good job. Not everyone takes as much pride in their degree because they are so common.*

Well they kinda knew why I came here. So yeah, I don't like rub it in their faces if thats what you mean.

**No. You're just proud of yourself right?**

Well yeah. I am proud of myself.

After doing this interview I had some time to think about the answers he gave. I always knew that my dad was very serious about education. However, I did not always understand why he believed the school system he grew up with was better than the American school system. However, I did agree with what he said about the American school system being biased toward the wealthy. Private schools in America offer better education than public schools, but these schools charge tuition for attendance. Because of this, families with more money are the ones who can afford to provide this quality of education for their children. Some private schools offer scholarships for students who are smart enough, but cannot afford it, but these are usually very limited and the richer students are still the majority.

If there were entrance tests for high schools like there were for colleges, the playing field would be evened for students at a younger age. The level of competition would be more equal in high school and there would not be hindrances for students that cannot keep up. Many times in urban public school systems, brighter students cannot flourish because teachers have to focus on keeping the students who struggle, up to pace. Attention is given to the lower level students because they need the help in order to be able to perform adequately. I do understand why the American school system has to function the way it does. The United States is exponentially larger than Trinidad, so it would be very expensive to separate students by their academic proficiency before college. In Trinidad, many students were in walking distance of the schools or driving would be very short.

For my third interview, I spoke with a family friend named Linda:

**What do you remember about school in Trinidad?**

Well I went to an all girls school all the way until college. I remember that I took it very seriously. School was always my priority. And we had competition amongst each other. My classmates and I. But it was mostly friendly, we encouraged each other do to better and envied the girl who did the best.

**What was your parents' views on learning and education?**

My parents were very strict about education. It was a priority in my house. My parents did not get to go to universities, so they made it their own goal to make sure that their children did. I was constantly asked about my grades and they checked in on me with my teachers frequently. To make sure that I was performing well and that my behavior was well, too.

**How old were you when you decided to come to the United States?**

I decided to come to the United States after secondary school. I had some family already in the States that I was able to stay with while in school. I don't think I would have been able to come up if I didn't have them there for me.

**Was that a decision you made on your own or were you encouraged or discouraged by peers or family?**

I was definitely encouraged to do that by my parents. But it wasn't forced. They explained to me what the States had to offer so I eventually wanted for myself what they had wanted for me all along.

**What was the perception of the Unites States that you had in your mind?**

I believed it was a place where there was a lot more competition. I assumed their schools were better than ours because the country is rich. I figured I would be less smart or behind the other students in college.

**What was that like once you got here?**

Once I got to the states, I realized it wasn't as intimidating as I thought. I was more disciplined with my work. It was easy for me to say to no a party or to drinking or to going out. I stayed focused, and because of that I was able to do better than most of my peers. I did enjoy everything that the university I attended had to offer. And I enjoyed exploring what "America" really was.

**Are you proud of your success?**

I am proud of my success. I think that I  have a job where I am able to help people out and I am happy about that. And I have some authority around other nurses at the hospital and I think my hard work payed off to earn me this position.

**Do you think your education plays more of a part in your success than the amount of money you make?**

Not for most people. I think most people and Americans associate salary with success. The more money you make, the more successful you are. But for me its more than that. I know that I have a good head on my shoulders, and I'm knowledgeable. Money can disappear at any second for any reason, but nobody can take my education from me.

After speaking with Linda, I noticed a similarity between something that she and Derek said. They both acknowledged that once they got to the United States, they were able to excel in their respective colleges because they had more discipline. Schools in Trinidad were much more disciplined than the other schools. Teachers could actually punish students for not behaving appropriately in class. When the generation of my interviewees was elementary school age, their teachers could physically reprimand them. They could be spanked in class similar to what their parents would do at home. The Trinidadian culture believed this was appropriate and parents approved of this sort of discipline at school for their students. Once they got to be older, teachers could still punish students by having by giving them extra homework to do at home. My father even told me a story about one teacher who would make students write “The way of the transgressor is extremely, exceedingly, extraordinarily difficult” hundreds to thousands of times depending on what they did wrong in class. There was even one story about a student who had to write the phrase 500 times using red, black, and blue pen and writing with a different color for every letter. Discipline in the classroom fosters more respect for teachers from students. Students learn to act appropriately and class and complete their work to the best of their ability in order to avoid the possible consequences.

When these students got to college in the United States they were able to apply what they had experienced growing up to their studies. Being late or behind on work was not acceptable. What they actually did was work ahead on things to be ready for class. The teacher’s expectations had to be exceeded and not just met. If they had work to do on the weekends, they had to say no to parties and going out and having fun. These students did not leave their home country to do anything but excel, and failure was not an option.

Growing up with a Trinidadian father was an experience. When it came to school, there was no excuse for not giving complete effort and getting the best grades possible.

My father was not very involved with my schoolwork, he never sat down to help me with a math problem or an English essay. The unspoken understanding was that the grades I brought home had to be impeccable. It was up to me do figure it out, I shouldn't rely on anyone else to help me find the answers. Part of learning was experiencing the struggle of "figuring it out on my own." So that is what I did. I always felt bad when someone offered to give me the answer to something I couldn't figure out on my own. My father's face would always pop up in the back of my mind. "Would he approve of this?" "What would dad have to say about this?"

I believe it was a product of his own upbringing. My dad's parents were not college educated and he was the first of my Trinidadian family to go to college and graduate. So for him, there was no mom or dad to go to for the answers. When he was home and had trouble figuring things out, it was solely up to him to use his brain and what little resources were available. My father was able to graduate at the top of his class in high school, and eventually medical school.

I think that father wanted to pass those ideas on to me, being his oldest and only daughter. Because I grew up more privileged than most kids, my dad believed it was important for me to learn to work for what I wanted in life, and that meant working in school. Reflecting on himself, I believe my dad saw that he was able to reach great success in life and that all of the hard work he did in school is something his children should also do and they will be successful as well.

Sometimes I felt like I wasn't doing good enough. I would fear that if I made anything below an A, my father would be disappointed or angry with me. However this motivated me to do extremely well in high school and it made me proud of myself for persevering through!