

GEMEINSCHAFT CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY IN SCHOOLS: CASE STUDY OF PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Sergiovanni states that "our traditional view of schools as formal organizations fails both students and teachers" (1999: 12-38). Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) yearly updated websites, from 2000-2010, lists twenty-six educational jurisdictions in Maryland, USA with Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) ranked twenty-five. Also, 50% of all teachers in PGCPS leave their job within the first five years of employment, creating a teacher-attrition rate of more than 50%. What are the causes of such attrition rates in American schools? What are the solutions to improve basic education? This paper set out to find answers to those two questions. Among the causes found were: school leadership ineptitude, large staff-student-ratio (SSR) of 45 per class, dilapidated and leaking school buildings, books from the 1960s, students' grade falsification by school leadership, administrative non-enforcement of Code of Student Conduct, social promotion of failed students, dysfunctional parenting, large scale student truancy, school gang activities by gun-wielding hooligans, student violence and student disrespect, the last two stand out as the root causes of American school failures and the catastrophic performance of the most affluent, wealthiest, African-American County in the whole universe. The solution is that we change our mentality and realize that education is not a commodity, rather a way of life. The solution lies in "emphasizing control over what students do, ... the dominant themes in leading a democratic life are obligations and duties, not rights and freedoms". Again, the solution lies in applying zero tolerance to student lawlessness while strictly enforcing the Code of Student Conduct. Furthermore, the solution lies in abandoning social promotions in American schools.

Keywords: Gemeinschaft, teacher-attrition, zero tolerance, social promotion.

Introduction

I make two observations in my paper. My first observation is that according to published statistics from 2000-2010 on schools in the State of Maryland, USA (<http://www.mdreportcard.org>), Prince George's County Public Schools has failed to improve its penultimate position of number twenty-five out of twenty-six educational jurisdictions in the entire State of Maryland, USA. What percentage of the blame is attributable directly to incompetent leadership in Prince George's County Public

Schools (PGCPS)? Schools in PGCPS have very often been used as battlegrounds by gun-totting teenagers and lawless parents from dysfunctional homes. I make this observation based on raw facts, based on published material, and based on a non-hypocritical approach to the reality of the rottenness in the schools in Prince George's County Public Schools in Maryland, USA.

My second observation is that with more than 50% attrition rate of teachers in majority African American schools in Prince George's

County Public Schools within their first 5 years of employment, coupled with a scandalous majority of African American 8th graders who read at 3rd grade level, we need to adopt radical measures of strict discipline as a prerequisite for a meaningful interaction of teaching and learning. The question therefore arises: what are the causes of such attrition rates in American schools? What are the solutions to improve the situation? In subsequent sections, we will consider some theoretical framework that gives rise to the above observations. In particular, we will analyze the writings of a renowned educator and writer, Sergiovanni (1999), as well as other works, and local newspapers. We will also consider first hand experience of the writer of this paper who spent seven years in the Maryland State school system and had the opportunity to observe at very close range the realities and the paradox of an educational system in the wealthiest and most affluent Black dominated County in the world. Finally, we offer informed solutions to the unvarnished observations that we make in this paper in the sincere hope that elementary and secondary schools in America will awake from the current rottenness and rebound to the excellent image for which American schools have been known in the past all over the world.

Just by way of factual incidents, we recall the July 2011 Georgia State Governor's Investigation into cheating in State's Standardized Tests whose Report "confirmed widespread systemic cheating in City Schools dating as far back as 2001" where teachers and Principals were found to be directly involved in the criminal activities. He stated: "There is no doubt that systemic cheating occurred on a widespread basis in the school system. Further, there is no question that a complete failure of leadership in the Atlanta Public School

system hurt thousands of children who were promoted to the next grade without meeting basic academic standards". In March, 2011, USA Today reported standardized test score manipulations from 2009-2010 in six States in the USA including the nation's capital even as some college education professors and experts (Marion Brady, Diane Ravitch, Erich Martel) have arrived at the same conclusions as contained in the Governor's Investigative Report.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

After those two unpleasant observations, one may rightly pose the questions: How did I arrive at those observations? Is there any research that supports my call for zero tolerance for student disrespect and violence?

Education, as defined in the Encyclopedia Britannica, "is an attempt on the part of adult members of a human society to shape the development of the coming generation in accordance with its own ideals of life" (Flurry 1996). Sergiovanni (1999: 54-57) refers to Etzioni (1988) when he writes that people's actions and thoughts conform to what they have been programmed (Hofstede 1991) to do from infancy and, very often, people are themselves unconscious about their own cultural influence on their lives.

Let me recall a historical fact in American history where scientists, sociologists, lawyers, respectable politicians, statesmen, and some of the best minds in America conducted several researches and came to the false conclusion that the African-American skull is smaller than that of the Caucasian, and that the Negro is incapable of achieving high academic goals, and that the Negro is an inferior species, and that the Negro is incapable of critical thinking and always portrays a give-me mentality,

and so on and so forth. There is also the United States Supreme Court's "Dred Scott decision of 1857 in which Chief Justice Roger Taney resolved that the [American] Negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit" (Pierpont 2004: 50). We all know they were dead wrong! German-American anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) demonstrated the lie in the scientific claim of Black inferiority proving that the plight of the American Negro was rather the product of racism (Pierpont 2004: 50). That truth notwithstanding, think of how many millions of African-Americans were brutalized by Caucasians because of those evil scientific conclusions. Think of the evil Caucasian conduct that brought on the Civil Rights movement in America in the 1960s. Think of all the critical thinking Pan Africanists like Dr. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana (1909-1972) and his African-American classmate Thurgood Marshall (1908-1993), and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) and Mr. Bill Cosby. If those Pan-Africanists had behaved as the majority and kept quiet and docile, and had been nice and chosen nice language, African-Americans would still be under institutionalized oppression and slavery without any political and academic freedoms in the "land of freedom".

I recall that history to re-echo Sergiovanni's view to challenge the status quo! I recall it to say that there is a level of honesty and truth that compels you to come to the right conclusion after seeing the facts. If the facts are 1, 2, and 3 then the next logical conclusion must be 4, not 7 or 8. In light of the above radical analyses, I have encountered some rebuttals such as: "Prince George's County Public Schools is not a failing school system", "I will not say it like that but be more positive", "I don't believe that PG schools are rotten", "individual teachers are doing

well", "one AYP failure will fail a whole blue ribbon school", etc, etc.

Writing in the Philadelphia Trumpet on the subject of education, Stephen Flurry (1996) observes that there is cause for every effect, but the most "educated" men and women of this day are completely ignorant of this fact! Let us look at some statistics, several of which come from Flurry's article in The Philadelphia Trumpet (1996).

Since World War II, and in spite of movies, programs, books, pamphlets and articles on the subject of love, marriage and sex, every two marriages in America end up in divorce. Why so many divorces in the abundance of so much information, Flurry asks? Sergiovanni (1999: 43) seems to agree with Flurry when he states that cheap and high divorces have negative impact on children and these problems reflect in our schools. In 1980, 11.6% of Americans lived below the poverty line. In the early 1990s, that number increased to 14.2% (36 million people). Needless to say, hungry children cannot learn, and hungry parents are angry parents. Yet these are the statistics for America – the richest, most prosperous, most educated nation in the entire world!

Mankind has initiated the most horrific wars in history at the same time as we have recorded man's persistent acquisition of massive amounts of knowledge. For example, millions of students are going to college than ever before. In fact, since the 1950s, according to Flurry (ibid.), the number of colleges in the US has almost doubled! Over 45% of all Americans over 25 years have gone to college. Yet in 1990, only 4% of men between the ages of 18 and 21 were enrolled in college. Why the paradox?

In ancient times, the great scholars in Greece and Rome placed much emphasis on constantly gaining new knowledge in the pursuit of a better

society. Both of those empires eventually crumbled. In the United States today, many of the most prestigious schools like Woodrow Wilson High School and Harvard are located in an environment of moral and social decay and like those great empires before us, we will also eventually topple as a society unless, as Sergioivanni (1999: 6-8) rightly points out under "gemeinschaft" (meaning community), we change our mentality and realize that education is not something you go out to purchase as one may buy a commodity from the store. It is rather a way of life. But the great "educators" and teachers will continue to be ignorant of this fact, producing book after book, until the society falls apart!

FACTS AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

My passion as a teacher is built on strong discipline, informed reasoning, a deep desire for higher order thinking, and problem-solving skills with relevance to real life situations. When I make the judgment that Prince George's County Public Schools system is a rotten place, I rely on raw facts and unvarnished data such as:

- Prince George's County is the most affluent African-American County in the whole universe.
- Prince George's County has the largest concentration of highly educated African-Americans in the whole of the USA, and yet
- PGCPSS is 2nd from the bottom of a State-wide academic performance index, only better than Baltimore, on a list of twenty-six schools.
- More than 50% attrition rate of teachers in Prince George's minority schools (noted the Maryland State Teachers Association President, 2009 - Pat Foester).
- The Board of Education of Prince George's County Public Schools records infighting and corrupt contract award practices each year such as Oracle and Leapfrog.
- Large class sizes of up to 48 students in

Fairmont Heights High School in a social studies class in 2005.

- Asbestos ridden schools, 1962 carpets, 26 Prince George's County Public Schools with leaking roofs where students have to catch dropping water with buckets and offensively dilapidated structures in 2007.
- Books are sometimes dated 1960 and sometimes, there is complete lack of instructional materials and teachers are forced to buy teaching materials from their own salary.
- Several Prince George's County Public Schools administrators have been involved in the nefarious act of students' grade falsification year after year, and some administrators have actually had teachers removed from their positions when they dared to challenge the fraud.
- Administrators who arrived in their position through nepotism and corrupt influence peddling and therefore shiver at parents' bogus threats.
- Administrative non-enforcement of Code of Student Conduct leading to disciplinary breakdown in several schools.
- *Social promotion* of students who arrive at College/University and are unable to write one paragraph of good English. *Social promotion* means that the child is promoted to the next upper class not because that child has attained some education but because that child has added one more year to his/her age.
- Majority of the 8th grade students in PGCPSS read at 3rd grade level.
- Demographic records at the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) show that Caucasian children do far better than African-American children across the board.
- Dysfunctional parenting and households where children don't even know why they are going to school.
- Parent nonchalance to teacher cooperation, and widespread parent violence against teachers.
- Not only is Washington, DC the Nations HIV-AIDS capital but also statistics broadcast on National Public Radio reveal that, of the total numbers of AIDS patients in the Tri-States (Washington DC, Maryland and Virginia), African-American youth

- account for 70% of AIDS infections.
- 17,000 violent car jacking and thefts in 2004 in Prince George's County.
- About 80% of African American males constitute the total number of inmates held within the US criminal and penal system.
- More than 400 homicides in 2004 in Prince George's County alone. Thirty-five (35) homicides from Jan-March 2005 while Montgomery County had only two (2) for the same year.
- High student truancy rates among PCGPS students.
- Several African-American children walk in public with revealing pants/trousers displaying their dirty underwear.
- School gang activities in schools with about 80% unsecured school doors through which gun-wielding hooligans gain unimpeded access into school hallways to endanger staff and students.
- There is not a single day that a teacher is not assaulted in schools across Prince George's County
- 35 murders were committed in Prince George's County between January and March 2005 (see The Gazette News January-March 2005), with only 2 murders in neighboring Montgomery County
- Children and adults in Prince George's County burglarized, carjacked, and stole 17,000 vehicles in 2004 when only 248 cars were stolen during the same period in neighboring Montgomery County

QUESTIONS ARISING

In chapters 1 and 4 of *Building Community in Schools* (1999), Sergiovanni discusses how our traditional view of schools as formal organizations fails both students and teachers. He admonishes that "to restructure schools, we need to think and behave differently" whereby "a proper school community is one where the mentality of the individuals has been transformed from the "I" into the "WE" mode", in other words the mode of the "*Gemeinschaft*", meaning community. In chapters 6 and 7, Sergiovanni (1999: 96-138) emphasizes school discipline, a position that supports my position of strong discipline and structure in Prince George's County Public Schools. He writes in chapter 7: "emphasize control over what students do, ... the dominant themes in leading a democratic life are

obligations and duties, not rights and freedoms".

The stark and unpleasant reality though is that a majority of the failing children in Prince George's County Public Schools are African American. Therefore, I am led to pose a strange question: Is it genetic, or is it the culture of raising the children that accounts for the high rate of African American failures? The 2003 data of the National Center for Health Statistics show that 34.8% of all births (that is 26,050) in the State of Maryland were by unmarried women, a figure slightly higher than the national level. Now when you begin to dissect those numbers, you find out that "African Americans are impacted most negatively...since many African Americans live in poverty, Black children who grow up in a single-parent household can face even greater difficulties" (The Gazette News Thursday April 7, 2005, p. A-21).

Another strange question arises from this fact: statistics show that about 80% of all persons in criminal jails in America are African American males and they are being held in jails across America. That means that majority of African American children have been and are being raised by women only. Also, women account for more than half the current teachers in Prince George's County Public Schools. The question then arises: is there any connection between the majority of women raising the children, the absence of male figures in the life of these children, and the current dismal failures and violence and disrespect by African American children that we see daily in our schools? Further research is called for because preliminary hypotheses show that when majority of African American fathers played a dominant and disciplinary role in raising their children in a two-parent (male and female) household, before the 1980s and 1990s era of scandalous explosions in divorce rates for the most flimsy of excuses, we saw that such strict discipline produced a majority of the responsible African American adults of the 1990s.

Poignant questions and critical comments notwithstanding, let us also remember the danger in conformist mentality and its manipulative potential especially when one considers the complicity of the German population, their unwillingness to stand up to the truth, and their subsequent manipulation by Hitler to annihilate the Jews (see Goldhagen, 1996). Remember also how the danger in conformist mentality and the fear to stand up for the truth allowed such a poisonous atmosphere in America whereby all those who challenged the Iraq war lies

of the Bush Administration were vilified, harassed, attacked, and branded as anti-American and unpatriotic only for the truth to surface a few years later that "America was dead wrong" in going to war in Iraq (see the United States Presidential Investigative Report of April 2005).

Therefore, it is foolish to point to a few well-supplied schools that are doing excellently when the majority of African-American students in Prince George's County Public Schools can't write a simple correct paragraph in standard English. With the apparent lack of understanding of "*the gemeinschaft concept of community in schools*" as Sergioivanni (ibid.) elaborates, and the speculative and emotional repudiation of proposed strong solutions, it would not be surprising to see Prince George's County Public Schools continue to wallow in the same ineptitude. Sergioivanni writes that in order to change, "we have to challenge practices that have always appeared sensible". Here are some of the challenging questions that Sergioivanni (ibid.) wants us to pose: why do supervisors evaluate teachers when the criteria for professional evaluation are largely very subjective? Does hierarchy equal expertise? Does the fact that a person is an administrator or superintendent of schools mean that he/she has superior moral responsibility?

SOLUTIONS

- Basic discipline can be taught at home without waiting for Federal dollars. It does not take Federal dollars to teach American children basic values such as: "you do not use abusive words to an adult especially your teacher", "you turn off the TV and read your school books", "you must finish your homework before you sleep", "you do not hit or kick an adult especially your teacher", "education is your ticket to good life"... This home-made discipline has to be there before the child arrives in class so that the teacher can build good economic and citizenship skills on that foundation. The parent is the first teacher of the child not the school teacher, and therefore the first motivation for education must come from the parents, not schools teachers, all things being equal. Furthermore, parents do not need Federal allocation to instill that kind of discipline at home!
- Decentralize and create small schools of 240-450 students maximum (Sergioivanni

1999: 15, 35), and abandon the 3,000 capacity mammoth High Schools where staff and teachers do not even know who the students are.

- Apply strict discipline to the students by enforcing the Code of Student Conduct.
- Teachers must read their contract thoroughly, as well as all administrative procedures, and be ready to raise the matter with their teachers' union, or with a higher authority, or even walk away from the job when school administrators ask teachers to falsify students' grades contrary to the contract.
- If a child is lazy and refuses to attempt class work, look straight into the parent's eye and tell him or her that the child is lazy without mincing words!
- Apply zero tolerance to student lawlessness and remember that America became economically prosperous because Army Generals led the way after independence with disciplined approach, and also because American industrialization was unforgiving with lazy workers. 30-40 years ago schools did not countenance the sloppiness and intellectual laziness that our youth exhibit today with the tacit approval from adults.
- Ensure school security for teachers against violent students and parents.
- Stay with the same students for at least 5 years. The more a teacher knows a pupil's background and home life, and the more the pupils know the teacher, the less disciplinary problems there will be (Sergioivanni 1999: 51).
- Many teachers and administrators tend to say that teachers and administrators must respect students; they must stand at their door and greet students as they walk into class as a show of respect. A total reversal of the roles is called for where students know their lower position, recognize that position vis-à-vis their teachers' position of authority, and demonstrate recognition and respect by greeting their teachers when they walk into class just as it is done in the Military. It does not matter that many teachers and administrators will be against a reversal of the roles. Majority does not essentially mean right. Majority of Germans connived to murder Jews but that did not

make it right as Daniel Goldhagen points out in his book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996). Sergiovanni (1999: 67) supports a reversal of roles when he writes: "In order for students to be accepted and loved, they need to comply by obeying the rules and to achieve by learning what the teacher asks them to learn. Failing either of these, they are rejected. Sometimes the rejection is psychological. At other times it is both psychological and physical: students who do not comply and who do not achieve are isolated from others".

- "High School diploma should be awarded based on the successful demonstration of mastery" (Sergiovanni 1999: 83), not on *social promotion* as is done in America and in Prince George's County Public Schools where pupils are promoted just because they have the right age even if they are unable to write their own names!!!

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Some persons contend that there are certain schools and teachers in Prince George's County that are doing well. I concur. In fact there are some excellent teachers and schools in Prince George's County. However, if we focus on individuals and individual schools, then we would be trying to reinvent the assessment criteria. The criterion, according to Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) is that all schools within a school system are considered as a collective whole, not individually. Therefore, making the argument that certain schools are doing very well in Prince George's County simply begs the question. Just as the collective system within Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) will be proud and share in the euphoria if PGCPS were to be top in the nation, so must the collective whole also share in the rottenness of the system!

Sergiovanni supports this paper's position when he writes: "children are worse off today than they were 10 years ago" (1999: 12). Most importantly, consider the reason that he gives: the lack of moral training, religious training, and discipline. Let me reiterate here that in several of my writings, I have never ceased to point out the hopelessness in asking teachers to go for training after training after training when the real untouchable rottenness in the American school system is *student and parent indiscipline, student*

disrespect and violence against teachers.

I am for change and adaptation and, therefore, I call on African-American students and parents to come to the table with something, and that something is respect. It does not cost Federal dollars for minority parents to teach their children to respect adults especially their teachers. Sergiovanni (ibid: 39, 40) writes: "Neither students nor parents will receive the respect they deserve unless teachers are respected".

This paper began with two observations, to wit: of twenty-six educational jurisdictions in the State of Maryland, PGCPS has ranked twenty-five between the years 2000 and 2010. Secondly, 50% of all teachers in PGCPS leave their job within the first five years of employment, creating a teacher-attrition rate of more than 50%. Consequently, the questions were: what are the causes of such attrition rates in American schools? What are the solutions to improve the situation?

Among causes such as school leadership ineptitude, large staff-student-ratio (SSR) of 45 students per class, dilapidated and leaking school buildings, books dating from the 1960s, grade falsification by school leadership, administrative non-enforcement of Code of Student Conduct, social promotion of failed students, dysfunctional parenting, large scale student truancy, school gang activities by gun-wielding hooligans, student violence and student disrespect stand out as the root causes of those school performance statistics and the catastrophic performance of the most affluent, wealthiest, African-American County in the world.

Among the materials that were researched are Sergiovanni (1999), (Flurry 1996), (Hofstede 1991), the US Supreme Court's "Dred Scott decision of 1857, Pierpont 2004, Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) schools data 2000-2010, The Gazette News, the United States Presidential Investigative Report of April 2005, and the National Center for Health Statistics data of 2003.

The solution is, as Sergiovanni (1999: 6-8) rightly points out under "Gemeinschaft", that we change our mentality and realize that education is not something you simply throw money at for the problems to disappear. It is rather a way of life. The solution lies in "emphasizing control over what students do, ... the dominant themes in leading a democratic life are obligations and duties, not rights and freedoms" writes Sergiovanni (1999: 96-138). Again, the solution lies in abandoning nepotism to

emphasize professional qualifications and applying zero tolerance to student lawlessness while strictly enforcing the Code of Student Conduct. Furthermore, the solution lies in abandoning *social promotions* in American schools. It is hoped that when the above reforms are applied, schools in America, and especially in Prince George's County, will rebound and flourish as centers of excellence as they did in the 1960s and 1970s. Fortunately, as

elementary and secondary schools in Ghana advance and become more sophisticated, Ghanaian educational authorities would be able to borrow a leaf from the mis-steps and decline that followed the introduction of "politically correct" but pernicious policies in Prince George's County Public Schools as described above and consequently avoid the irreversible dilemma of lost generations.

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