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Essay for the Ahmed Zewail Prize

“A Civically Engaged Student Body...Changing the Future of Egypt”

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead

Not many will argue with the statement that Egypt is facing a great deal of issues at this point in its history. Political turmoil, poverty, illness, unemployment, sexual harassment, child labor, and illiteracy have become commonplace. The focus of political figures and political activists, who are the entities that generally have the power to affect change, tends to be on issues such as these with a largely macro level orientation. My essay will address three issues in the micro level that are mostly overlooked even though they have the capacity to greatly affect our nation, and propose a solution for them.

The Three Problems

The First Problem

The first problem is that the growing gap between the social classes in Egypt, which is regularly acknowledged in the discourse on the economic discrepancies that exist in our country, results in an extreme lack of communication between the upper and lower class. It is common for a citizen from the upper class in Egypt to live in a compound in an elite neighborhood and hardly ever engage in activities that lie outside of that circle, or if I may say “bubble”. In the same way, it is also common for a citizen from the lower class in Egypt to live in a slum area and hardly ever leave its vicinity. It is important and in fact necessary, for citizens in a country such as Egypt, at a crucial time like this, to be aware of the different segments in the population. This is the first very basic step for the upper class to become civically engaged and for the lower class to become hopeful and optimistic about the options that exist in their country.

The Second Problem

The second problem is that public schools in Egypt which represent the wide majority of schools in Egypt, since private schools educate only about 8% of Egypt's students (El Meshad, 2013), pay almost absolutely no attention to extracurricular activities. It is important to recognize that education should not only include the subjects that are required by Egyptian law like Arabic and social studies but that a holistic educational experience involves much more than just "the book". Extracurricular activities are a necessary component of a high-quality education that should not be overlooked. They help students acquire social, intellectual, and physical skills that a traditional education alone simply does not provide them with (Eccles, 2003). They give students the opportunity to experience life outside of the classroom in a setting other than their home and also give them a medium through which they can explore their talents (Stevens & Peltier, 1994). These opportunities inevitably lead students to harbor more creativity and critical thinking skills. Despite the importance of these skills, public schools in Egypt have an art class once a week at best and extracurricular activities are an unfamiliar phenomenon for the majority of students in Egypt.

The Third Problem

The third problem that my essay addresses is the lack of awareness about mental health in general and child psychology in specific in Egypt. Child psychology involves the study of how children grow socially, intellectually, and emotionally (Cherry, 2013). Parents who are aware of the basic tenets of child psychology are able to deal with their children effectively and lead healthier lives within their families. In the upper class in Egypt, it is common for a new mother to read books and watch television programs that talk about motherhood. This sets the foundation for the building of a generation of upper class children who are brought up by informed parent, and are thus raised properly. However, parents in the lower class in Egypt have

no exposure whatsoever to these same experiences that their counterparts in the upper class do. This could be a major explanatory factor as to why it is common in the slums of Egypt for children to be abused, neglected, beaten, and subjected to the labor force. An understanding of the mental health of a child would eliminate the element of ignorance when it comes to raising a child.

The Proposed Solution

Even though there are many ways to affect a social situation around us of which we are discontent, being active citizens by helping those less fortunate than us is definitely one of the best. There are about 4,000 private schools in Egypt, and this number is growing rapidly (British Council, 2013). We should look at these as a kind of resource that has the potential to help schools that lie at the polar end of the same spectrum which are public schools. This essay proposes that high school students in private schools should be required to do a certain number of hours of community service/development activities with other students in public schools in order to graduate. Now let us examine the impact of this solution on the three problems addressed above.

The Potential Results

The First Problem

For the first problem, with an implementation of this program, the extreme lack of communication would start to gradually fade away since students from private schools would be in regular contact with students from public schools. Both groups of students will benefit from this exchange. First of all, both will develop a healthy awareness of the existence of 'the other'.

This awareness will provide the form of communication between the different social classes in Egypt that is necessary in order to create a cohesive Egyptian community.

Let us then examine the benefits that the students of private schools in Egypt will obtain. They will learn through practical experience the importance of helping those less fortunate not just by donating money to the poor, but through developing relationships with them whose effects will indubitably last a lifetime. After all, the essence of humanity lies in strangers coming into contact and helping each other. John Bunyan once said: "you have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you."

Through the private school's students' interactions with others in public schools, they will inevitably see what a less advantageous life looks like and will learn a valuable lesson about humility and modesty. More importantly though, they will recognize firsthand the hidden potential that Egypt has in its people. The private school students will also realize through the work they do what they have to offer to their country. They will have a direct outlet through which they can play their role in the improvement of an Egypt that is in dire need of such effort.

The public school students will also benefit simply by virtue of their interaction with the private school students. This interaction will show them in a very direct way what their children's lives may be like if they are successful in life and consequently give them ambition. Through my experience working in the slums of Cairo, children look up to people's lives in the upper class and aspire to climb the social ladder one day. That is exactly the kind of attitude that Egypt needs to be common amongst the majority of its population.

Moreover, the element of jealousy and resentment that often exists among the lower class towards the upper class due to the perceived apathy of the latter will decrease. The students in

the public school will understand that even though the students of the private school may be more privileged and may come from a somewhat different background, they are still similar in many ways and that they can celebrate their shared humanity by showing care.

The Second Problem

For the second problem, private school students will share what they have learned and benefited from within the private school system with the students in the public school. They can implement activities that their schools apply at these public schools such as art galleries, sports days, talent shows, science fairs, school choirs, and school plays. Through these extracurricular activities, the students in the public schools will develop their artistic, musical, and sports abilities to their utmost potential. Engaging in activities such as these unleashes the students' creativity and critical thinking skills. This lies in sharp contrast with the usual environment that public schools provide which does not stimulate its students' minds while paradoxically, Egypt currently needs a stimulated and creative generation.

The private school students will enjoy themselves because they will be teaching others what they love. After all, the essence of education lies in imparting wisdom that one has on to one who does not. The process of teaching someone a new skill or helping someone else find their passion is satisfying and fulfilling in itself. Viktor Frankl (1992) argues that people can find meaning to their lives by helping others find theirs. Moreover, through their implementation of these projects, they will learn time management skills, how to deal with different people, and many other valuable life lessons. An understanding, compassionate, and active youth will be the result of a project such as this.

It is important to recognize that it is not just the students in public schools that become engaged in new extracurricular activities through this project. However, the students in private schools as well will be engaging in a completely new kind of extracurricular activity which is community based learning. By engaging in this type of activity, there is actually a two way relationship between the students and the members of the community that they are engaging with and both ends come out of the project knowing and learning new things (Dallimore, Rochefort, & Simonelli, 2010). The students of the private schools will be stimulated by being pushed out of their comfort zone and into a new situation that naturally requires new skills.

The Third Problem

The third problem which was a lack of awareness of children's psychology can be resolved through three different ways. The common view among the slums of Egypt, from personal experience, is that beating children gives the best results which may not necessarily be true. The first way through which this problem can be resolved is simply the regular contact between the private school students and the public school students. This will give the families of the students in public schools the opportunity to see an alternative way by which they can raise their children. This of course, goes both ways. The families of students in the private schools will realize the virtues of being raised in a more simple setting. However, what is important here is that the lower class will become aware that their daily occurrences of beating, abuse, and neglect are not the only solution.

Second, the private school students can themselves conduct research and hold awareness campaigns about a variety of issues such as female genital mutilation, early marriage, sexual abuse, etc... Third, with the resources that students in private schools have, they can contact

professionals to come in to the schools they are responsible of and hold talks about these issues. For example, a sheikh and a doctor can be contacted to talk about female genital mutilation; a psychologist can be contacted to discuss learning disabilities and what parents can do. Softer issues such as parent-child relationships can be discussed as well for the betterment of the community. These sessions strongly have the potential to make the lives of students in public schools better slowly creating a community that is more aware and therefore more intelligent in its actions.

In conclusion, students in public schools will gain from their interaction with the students in private schools, the new activities they will be exposed to, and the knowledge they will acquire. And essentially, while students from private schools work with the community on this project, they will become actively engaged in and responsible for the projects and thus not only learn new skills but also become civically engaged individuals. The interaction between the students of Egypt will be spreading awareness about psychology, improving the education system, creating a cohesive community, while simultaneously building a generation that is talented in musical, artistic, and sports abilities. This project will thus result in raising a generation that is healthy, aware, well rounded, and active.

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