Super Thought Paper

Indiana University Bloomington

**My Mind Doesn’t Work Like That**

It is somewhat hard to believe that I have been in the United States for 8 years already. The last 8 years took my life to the places that I would have never imagined. Somewhere along the way, I earned an English name Brian. I learned Swahili. I met my first love. Now I am privileged enough to follow my dreams that I am passionate about. While coming to the United States opened up so many unexpected doors for me to explore, it also gave me and my family so much anxiety because there were no “formulas” to turn to. No formulas to follow meant potential failures, and my family’s American dream could not afford a single failure. It was not until later I realized that a failure can easily turn into a hope.

I was born and raised in Korea for 16 years. For 16 years, my life was carefully crafted by formulas my parents, neighbors, community, and the society agreed on. I learned how to play piano and swim when I was in elementary school. Although I enjoyed playing piano and swimming, my parents had me quit them in middle school because it was “time for me to focus and study.” I remember the first time when I saw my mom cry because of me in middle school. She was crying at the corner of her room because my average grade of the first semester exams (about 13-15 subjects) was 83.7 out of 100. I assume she was worried about me not following the formula for good life. After seeing her cry, I studied six to seven hours every night after school reading and highlighting textbooks, making notes, and solving problems on various prep books. By my third year in middle school, my average semester exam grade went up to 95.4. Then my parents pushed me to consider prestigious foreign language high schools because going to these high schools meant guaranteed admissions to top universities in Korea and around the world. This is how my parents signed me up for a cram school that my parents paid thousands of dollars for. My parents, just like many others in Korea, did everything they could do for my education because they wanted me to live an “easy life.”

Attending cram schools – which usually lasted from 6:00pm to midnight or 2:00am – in addition to regular school was not easy. What challenged me the most were these questions required creative thinking which a big portion of the entrance exams was. *I struggled because creative thinking was not what I learned at home or school*. I never had to find my own answers because people always told me what I was supposed to know and do. Non-creative environment was so pervasive, even in these cram schools, we learned formulaic ways to figure out these creative thinking questions; I still remember a mother who asked the cram school teacher, “so… as long as he gets less than three questions wrong, he will get into the school?” Did they really care about creative thinking? I think not.

I ultimately was not accepted to the schools that I applied and moved to the United States for my dad’s new job. Although they had limited resources and access, my parents continued to do their best to find *the* formula for me to get into a prestigious college. It was not until few years in college I felt like I started developing my own formulas for my identities, life goals, and dreams. Today, I find myself getting frustrated (but mostly inspired) at times when I see my colleagues making innovative and creative moves in their lives and in education. At times, I cannot stop thinking, “I wish my mind work like that…” Now I wonder, if my mind would have “worked like that” if my parents and teachers taught me early on to think on my own and think creatively. I wonder if I would have become more creative if I was taught that there are multiple formulas instead of a dichotomy of the picture-perfect formula and the failure.

**The Educators We Need**

Last week, two of the Resident Assistants I supervise came to me all excited about Teach for America. Apparently, they responded to the recruiters and had conversations with them about what it means to be a part of Teach for America. Although I was happy to see them thinking about their future and the next steps they want to take after they graduate, I was little hesitant when they mentioned Teach for America.

While I recognize the good work that Teach for America does in the most isolated and underprivileged areas, I do not believe it is the future of American education. This class taught me that a high level of complexity and introspection is needed for good teaching. Teaching that maximizes students’ creative and critical thinking obviously needs a large amount of time, experience, and effort. With that being said, I am not confident in Teach for America program and their prep work for recent college graduates. I also find it problematic that the program is sending newly prepped teachers to the areas that need help the most. In these situations, underrepresented students are especially marginalized. I understand that these schools are suffering from a small number of teachers. I also understand that not many educators are willing to go into these areas. Frankly, if somebody asks me if I have a better idea to handle these educational issues in America, I do not. I am still not convinced that Teach for America is the solution for our broken education system. But, perhaps, if we cannot fix the system, what we can do is to engage the members of Teach for America in continuing conversations about creativity, critical thinking, and impactful teaching imperatives like cooperative learning. The students in low income areas need great teachers. What I can do, with my career working with college students, is to help them become creative and innovative as much as they can be so that when the opportunities like Teach for America approach them, they are susceptible to the ideas of creativity and critical thinking.

**Creativity and “Reality”**

Those who are in higher education and student affairs field often remind one another how the field is not all “rainbows and butterflies.” Last year, I was naïve and I definitely did not expect to hear “no, we cannot do that,” so many times. I guess I should have been more realistic about things because higher education environment IS a form of institution. Institutionalized systems are less likely to be open for ideas that are out of their structured paths. Then I found myself few days ago repeating what I was told by my supervisors and colleagues to the students that I work with. “No, we cannot do that.”

In the next few months, I will be job searching. The more I think about my career, the more I question my conviction as an educator. I do not want to be swept away by the institutionalized thinking, yet how do I survive in the environment to make a difference? I do not want to put my career at risk, yet how do I protect my students from outside forces when all they are trying to do is figure out their lives or try something that is “not realistic”?

I want to be a game changer. I may not be the most creative person but I would be content if I could foster an environment where we raise a generation of students who feel empowered to transform innovative and creative ideas into their realities. I foresee that I will have to face many walls of “the reality.” If there is one thing I learned in my advisorship, however, that would be patience. Hopefully, my passion will stay with me as I continue to be patient and work my way through “the reality.” And yes, I will think more in the future before I say “no, we cannot do that.”