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Vitallis Chikoko
University of KwaZulu-Natal

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EDUCATION: THE EQUALIZER AND ENERGIZER

Vitallis Chikoko, Professor of Educational Leadership, Department of Educational Leadership, Management and Policy, University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Education, South Africa

This is a commentary on Siobhan Walker's essay entitled "Education Creates Confidence and Empowerment; Confidence and Empowerment Create Opportunities; Opportunities Breed Success." In sociology, we learn of two types of status: ascribed and achieved. One enjoys the former by virtue of being a member, for example, of a wealthy family. Because the family is wealthy already, a member thereof enjoys high status, even if they have not been party to the generation of such fortunes. In contrast, the latter comes about as a result of one's own hard work. In the modern world, achieved status tends to be far more prestigious. This may explain why many people endowed with ascribed status still seek to achieve something of their own, even if in economic, and perhaps social and political terms, they may not need to do so.

Siobhan Walker writes about the power of education—something unachievable through the ascribed route. Education is something achievable even by those from very poor socio-economic backgrounds, like Walker. What education has developed in her—confidence, empowerment, opportunities, and success—summarizes my own journey in life. This is the reason why I selected this essay. Having been born in a poor socio-economic family background as part of the oppressed in a colonial state, my attaining education was the only way out of that quagmire. However, in the beginning, such a dream seemed practically unachievable because my parents were unable to pay for my education, let alone provide for a decent life. As the saying goes, the rest is history.

In life we sometimes need a trigger in order for things to turn around for the better. The arrival of her baby, which on its own is no mean feat in life, born in a single-parent context, was the trigger in Walker's life. Out of that emerged a strong drive to seek to achieve more, and a passion for education was born. While the two may sound unrelated, they indeed are, and in multiple ways. My sense is that Walker began to ask herself not only about what next project she would tackle, but also what legacy she would like her beloved daughter to emulate. This is not to imply that important triggers in our lives come on their own. In the unequal and often unjust world in which we live, inclusivity is called for. In education, where minds and attitudes to life are shaped, the need for such inclusive approaches to teaching students cannot be over-emphasized.

Having fallen in love with education as she says, Walker's hard work saw her score high marks. But this was not simply because of her hard work; it also entailed institutional support. This is what built more confidence and a sense of empowerment in her. Institutional support can be an equalizer among students, particularly for those like Walker, who hail from poor backgrounds. Had there been no institutional support that addressed issues of equity and diversity, Walker would not have discovered her dyslexic condition. Knowing and understanding the self is a pre-requisite to the development of the necessary emotional intelligence to be able to seek solutions to problems one faces and cope with living together with others. The opportunities provided to Walker enabled her to persevere with studies despite the dyslexic condition, and this bred more success. Who would have ever thought that from such a poor socio-economic background, Walker is now planning to pursue a PhD?

Education is a major instrument for both personal and societal transformation. From Walker's essay, we see that such transformation does not come on a silver platter. Partnership is required to achieve equity, inclusion, and decolonization.

Walker's essay teaches me that life is not without struggles. The impact of one's background does not go away just because of one or two achievements. Walker had to balance between work and study. As she lived that life, she felt that because of her poor socio-economic background, her academic achievements, though remarkable, were still behind time in relation to her aspiration to become a registered psychologist. Thus, the more support institutions of higher education provide to students, the more likely it is that students can succeed in their programs in minimum time.

Overall, the essay shows that institutions of higher education have a huge responsibility to build in their students a sense of belonging. With that sense of belonging as a foundation, many students will not simply wait for opportunities to be provided. Instead, they are likely to be part of the creation thereof. I thus subscribe to Walker's thesis that education is a confidence builder. It empowers. It opens space for opportunities. Success lies in exploiting such opportunities.

References

Walker, S. (2023). Education Creates Confidence and Empowerment; Confidence and Empowerment Create Opportunities; Opportunities Breed Success. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 40. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss40/10>