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Comparing Student Retention in a Public and a Private College: Implications for Tackling Inequality in Education

Abstract

I became interested in inequality in education and academic achievement from my youth, after I attended the first year of my secondary school in a rural college. However, I was also privileged to attend an elite college from year 2 of my secondary schooling, having changed from the rural college to a city college in the 70s. I realized, from these experiences, the potentially huge impact of inequality in the education system in relation to quality and standards. It was from this experience that I came to fully appreciate why some parents choose to send their children to particular types of school to achieve good qualifications; and why others send their children to a public college. I also made a promise to myself that I must be a teacher with the hope of supporting student retention and achievement.

The purpose of this paper was derived from my previous work on student retention, and to share my experience working in elite and public colleges in London; the inequality and difference observed in teaching on their higher education programmes. My main aim in carrying out this research was to compare the difference in retention strategies in relation to private and public colleges, for which I employed qualitative research methods, observing the difference in college practices. Interviews were also conducted with few parents to ascertain their reasons for choosing either public or private colleges for their children.

The findings show that both the private college and the public college used for the study have good practices in education and in their retention strategies. However, the private college had higher retention and achievement rates compared to the public college. Bringing together my experiences of teaching in these colleges for a short period, and my previous research work on key retention strategies, I carried out this mini study to explore this particular aspect of inequality in education; and how can institutions work together to eliminate inequality in education.

Keywords: student retention, public college, private college, inequality in education

Introduction: Context

The main aim for this work was to develop my previous work on student retention, an area that I have always had a passion for, and also as a result of my experience in attending a Rural college and an Elite college with clear differences in quality and standards. Following this, I was interested in comparing two subsequent experiences as a teacher, when I started teaching in 1995 at a City College of Further Education in London and a college in a deprived area of London. I became interested in the differences in retention of students in a city college compared to a deprived college, and in students' motivation to engage in serious studies and learning. Hence, I began to think of the best approaches to helping students engage in serious academic studies that will enhance their future career development. In this research, the focus is to compare retention strategies and quality of education in both

public and private colleges based in inner city London. It will also raise the question as to why some rich parents choose to send their children to a private school as opposed to public school. It explored strategies that the business and law departments, where I taught on their higher education programmes, used in motivating students to engage in effective academic studies in both the private and public school settings.

Literature

There has been a body of research and literature focusing on students' retention and achievement with the main factors leading to it being identified. Many factors have been identified in the literature to contribute to students being retained to achieve academic success. The work of Cottrell (2003) identified different skills of success which students should implement in their studies to achieve the best results and the best degree at the end of their course of study. Student motivation was one of the factors that were identified to encourage students to achieve academic success; success is associated with high levels of motivation. This is in line with the thesis work of Achinewhu-Nworgu (2007) with motivation being one of the strategies for students' retention in FE colleges. For this reason, it is useful to be clear about what is likely to motivate students to aspire to achieve academic success.

Hawley and Rollie (2007) also support the argument that motivation and personal goals are factors that promote learning and student success. They commented that: "Motivational or affective factors as intrinsic motivation, personal goals, attributions for learning, and self-efficacy, along with motivational characteristics of learning tasks, play a significant role in the learning process" (p. 20). Others have also highlighted the importance of motivation in supporting student retention and success (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2009; McGivney, 1996; Barwuah, Green & Lawson, 1997; Miller, 1990). Alongside motivation, it is also important to recognize the contribution of other factors such as students' prior educational experiences (Martinez, 1995); financial pressures on students (Swail, Reed & Perna, 2004); integration with other students within the college environment (Tinto, 1975; Swail, Reed & Perna, 2004); and demographic factors such as gender, age and ethnicity (Swail, Reed & Perna, 2004; Golden et al., 2002; McGivney, 1996).

Other factors identified in the literature to trigger off motivation to achieve a degree are aspirations for a career. Race (2007, p. 13) supports the idea that a good degree is essential for career and that studying a degree often puts students in a better chance of getting the best job and also graduates are likely to get paid at least a quarter more in terms of income as opposed to non-graduates.

The literature on poor academic success makes repeated reference to students' perceptions of teaching and learning as an important influence on their participation and decision to stay to complete a particular course (Morgan, 2001, p. 15), (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2009), and therefore is an area if not effectively improved can have an impact on academic achievement and completion regardless of whether that is in private or public institutions. Martinez in his research on strategies promoting student retention and achievement identified tutoring and financial support as means to support students and leading to their success in education (Martinez, 1997, p. 63).

Khan (2006) discusses the need for people to understand their learning style. Most people have different learning styles, some are audio learners, some are visual

learners, some enjoy learning through touching and feeling activities – it is essential that teachers recognise the need to address learning styles that can help students to be retained and hence achieve academic success. Having explored a brief literature on factors contributing to students' retention and achieving academic success; this small scale research study aims to compare and contrast the difference in students' motivation strategies in private and public colleges in inner city London and why parents decide to send their children to private colleges instead of public colleges. The research sought to address the following questions: Why is there inequality in the education system? Why do parents, chose to send their children to either a public or private college? What differences are there between public and private colleges in their approach to student retention? Are privately educated students more motivated to achieve academic success than the students in the public colleges? What are the implications for inequality in education?

The focus is to further explore these factors in details to ascertain how the students in private and public education institutions perceive the difference in their motivation to achieve academic success in either private or public colleges.

This work did not privilege one particular theoretical perspective, but drew upon a wide range of theories and research that has been applied in the area of issues around reasons why students are retained, achieve or do not achieve in certain institutions. As the mini research aimed to have a very practical focus on examining the difference students make in their studies being in a private college as opposed to a public college, it is important to link the practical issues to theoretical perspectives as the contributions made by the work of Cottrell (2003, 2005), Harrold (2006), Hawley and Rollie (2007), Swail, Reed and Perna (2004), Race (2007)), Yorke and Longden (2004). Achinewhu-Nworgu (2009), Tresman (2002), Martinez (1997, 2002), Johnston (2001), have all explored reasons why students are committed to their studies linked to institutional retention strategies. Attention also needs to be paid to the important connections between the different strategies which work together within a package of measures. Beatty-Guenter's (1994) work on different types of retention strategy – based around the four processes of '**sorting**', '**supporting**', '**connecting**' and '**transforming**'. This work offers a different way of looking at different factors contributing to students' academic achievement and I have applied this perspective in analysing my data gathering for this work.

My research therefore focused on comparing and contrasting the difference in students' retention strategies in private and public colleges in inner city London and why parents decide to send their children to private colleges instead of public colleges.

Methodology

The process of data collection for this research used a combined quantitative and qualitative approach that focused mainly on observation of the practice of education and comparing the difference between working in an elite college compared to a public college. This involved the planned use of two or more different kinds of data gathering and analysis of techniques, where 'what is importantly mixed… extends beyond the numerical/quantitative or narrative/qualitative character of the different methods used' (Greene et al., 2005, p. 274). In this approach, there is an attempt to integrate the different methods within a single framework and set of

priorities specified within the overall research design – although there are many different models for combining qualitative and quantitative methods and no 'right' way of doing this (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2007; Punch, 2005). The value of combining methods is that it allows for the triangulation of data (Punch, 2005), recognises the similarities between qualitative and quantitative approaches (Blaxter et al., 2001), is less constraining than relying upon a single method (Morse, 2003, p. 195) and, crucially, strengthens the findings that are produced.

The work as indicated above mainly focused on participant observation of good education practices and the difference experienced, teaching in a private college compared to a public college. In additions, some parents' opinions were captured at parents' evenings and through other contacts. The research explored the quality of teaching and learning, students' motivation, support, the college environment and the difference in students' retention and achievement in both colleges.

Unfortunately, I was not able to directly explore students' perceptions on their motivation to study in a private college or public college. However, the length of periods stayed and what I observed of the group and institutions enabled my conclusion on the difference it makes to be in a private college compared to public college.

Findings

The findings of this work clearly identified the difference and inequality in educating children in private colleges compared to public; and also, the reasons why some students drop out without achieving academic success. Another point noted was that the quality of teaching and learning was found to be more intensive and academic than vocational in the private college compared to the public. Teachers have good attendance and punctuality records as well as the students; all the teachers are highly paid compared to public hence their motivation to deliver effective teaching and learning was very high, with high standards set for students' retention and achievement. Both the teachers and students were given good incentives, such as free breakfast and lunch, which motivated them to be punctual to lessons in the private college compared to the public college where teachers and students bought their own food. In terms of working environment in the case of private college, rooms were smaller but very cozy compared to the public college.

In the area of motivation, there is a big difference between students in the private college compared to students in the public college. Students in the private college were more disciplined, hardworking and have respect for teachers. In the terms of support, private students are more independent and dedicated to achieving compared to the public college. The findings in my observation, indicates that the quality of mathematics, English, science, arts and design teaching and resources are generally higher at private colleges than at public colleges.

Talking to a parent on why she chooses to send her daughter to a private college, she said:

> *My daughter wants to study medicine; she needs good grades in science subjects to make it to medical school. We can afford her fees; she needs to come to a good school like this to achieve her grade. She is doing extremely well and we are very happy. You can't get what she is getting here in public school. We can tell the difference. However, she can be over worked here as the course demands.* (P1)

We also need to look at how factors promoting or inhibiting student retention contribute to '**sorting**', '**supporting**', '**connecting**' and '**transforming**' the student. Superior teaching and learning, educational resources, and support facilities, clearly give a strong advantage to students in private colleges. But this can be compensated for, or offset, by the influence of friends, parents and other role models. Despite the inequality in resources and funding, there may be much to be gained for both private and public colleges in sharing good practices and approaches to supporting student retention, particularly those that develop holistic approaches and solutions. Joint CPD and sharing or practice between teachers from different types of institutions in this area could be extremely beneficial to both private and public based teachers and managers of education.

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