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Wednesday, 05 September 2012 01:03

Back-to School Part II

In Swahili, the word for “common sense” is Busara. Busara refers to the need to make knowledge usable, practical and applicable to the everyday lives of the learner. Good teachers really know how to make learning fun and meaningful to their students. I think it is because excellent educators believe that all children have the capacity to excel and have the right to dream.

People often ask me what it was like growing up with a mother who was a school teacher. I think about it and I laugh because when you are a “teacher’s kid” you never have a regular back-to-school experience. While some experiences of getting ready for school were similar to our peers, some aspects were not. For example, for my younger sister, Elisa and I, back-to-school meant not only getting our hair pressed, buying school supplies, and even new clothes, it meant accompanying our mother on home visits to meet with the parents of the children who would be in her classroom.

While sometimes the homes would smell like freshly baked cookies, and the owners would have maids, crystal door knobs and beautiful decorations, other homes would have ‘out-houses’ smell like out-houses and be run-over by critters. In either place, my mother would bring her freshly baked cornbread muffins, and sit down as if she were in the presence of royalty. She would ask every parent the same question regardless of their social or economic situation: *“Wh at is your dream for your child, and how can I help you achieve it?”*

Many years later, when my mother died, we found her little black grade book. Inside it were the names of her many students and next to their names were scribbled notes that labeled their dreams. She would list things like Mary Walker- Beauty shop owner; Kim Johnson- Librarian; Bobby Jacobs- Mechanic Shop owner; Raul Gutierrez- Architect…..

Why was this so important? It was important because I remember one of those home visits when my mother asked Mrs. Gutierrez what her dream for Raul was. His mother replied that she just wanted him to graduate from high school because no one in their entire family had ever made it that far. She went on to complain to my mother that she was afraid that Raul would never graduate because he spent most of his time in class drawing! My mother quickly informed Mrs. Gutierrez that folks could make a living drawing by being cartoonists for newspapers, or even drawing homes as architects. Then, my mom set out to help the young man visualize his dream. Because we were young, school would let out early. Consequently, my sister and I would be allowed to wait in the back of our mother’s classroom (doing our homework) while she finished out her day. I remember vividly how she called children to perform activities that identified their strengths. For example, if the class was getting ready for a play, Mary Walker would check everybody’s hair. If my mother was organizing books or spelling words, she would quickly call on Kim by saying you’re our Librarian, please make sure we have this properly alphabetized. If a chair would break, promptly Bobby Jacobs would be relied upon to help out, and when she needed a straight line drawn or a picture sure enough she would request the aid of Raul Gutierrez! At her funeral, many of my mother’s former students as well as members of the community came to express their condolences; however, none was so powerful as the well-dressed man named Raul Gutierrez, who had indeed become an architect.

Teachers have power to speak to us in life-affirming ways. Those who are paid to care for our children are critically important to their development. Yet, no teacher can ever be as important to a child as her first teacher, a parent. It was only because Mrs. Gutierrez had a dream for her son that my mom was empowered to help her and her son realize that dream and even more possibilities.

As school approaches, parents need to become mentally prepared to provide support for their children's dreams and here are some tips to doing just that:

1. Make education number one on your agenda. Arrange your work and social schedule to support your child's academic success.

2. Create a teacher-parent alliance that allows regular, open communication between you and the school.

3. Go visit your student at school. Make unscheduled visits-especially when he/she is NOT in trouble.

4. Join a parent education and support group like Project Murua within your community or within your child's school.

5. Consider becoming a parent leader or volunteer in your child's school.

6. Attend as many of your school conferences and Parent Night events as possible. If you can not go, solicit the help of a close family member or friend to go in your place.

7. If problems arise at school, respond to disagreements quickly and reasonably. Do not encourage your children to take matters into their own hands if bullying occurs or teachers are not responsive. You should be the first line of defense and no child should be told by their parent: *"Don't get punked."*
Instead, you should inform your child that
school is supposed to be a civilized, safe place
and let your child know that you will handle it. When you approach school personnel, you should also avoid "acting a fool" by putting your claims in writing and even sending your comments through certified mail. In your letter, let the school know that you are concerned about your child's safety and that you are holding them accountable.

8. Become familiar with the school's policies and procedures.

9. Make sure that you are aware of your child's homework assignments and check them routinely.

10. When it comes to learning, use culturally-specific supplemental materials to make learning more relevant to your child and get second opinions around issues such as special needs.

Most importantly, remind your child that you are proud of their efforts and let them know that you are their greatest cheerleader. Make sure you help them celebrate successes everyday and do not wait until they are failing or skipping or hurting before you give them your undivided attention.

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