



The Power of Personal Stories in Education

BY: JOY E. HAUGABOOK

A look into the KIPP Nashville Collegiate High School (KNCHS) community of teachers and faculty who have taken a wide range of paths which convene here.

Introduction

I am always fascinated by storytelling. Whenever I go into a job interview, I always ask my interviewers how they ended up in their particular role at their organization. The range of answers that I get from people never ceases to amaze me. In the field of education however, there seems to be quite a bit of debate about the paths that people take to the classroom and draw a wide range of conclusions about what it might mean for students – for better or worse.

Throughout the duration of this semester, I was fortunate to work as a school operations intern for KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) Nashville Collegiate High School (KNCHS) in East Nashville. Like any school, KNCHS My goal for this article is to simply tell a story. Oftentimes, we have the tendency to attribute a sort of absolute truth to data and numbers. While they can add value to a story, it is important to consider the context in which these things are situated. However, the purpose of this learning endeavor was to explore the social and cultural underpinnings of my site and gain first-hand insight about how people navigate this space. Throughout this assignment, I have found that this means different things to different people which is where personal narratives come into play.

In this article, I will utilize KIPP Nashville Collegiate High School (KNCHS) as an interesting case of where educators from a number of varying backgrounds meet in one place with the common goal of educating the students in the East Nashville neighborhood and surrounding areas. By conducting informational interviews with three teachers at KNCHS, I was able to get a glimpse into the journeys of three educators at KNCHS. These interviews addressed the following integral themes:

- (1) Teacher educational journeys
- (2) Perceived strengths and areas for growth of the workforce at KNCHS
- (3) Their view on KNCHS culture and its implications for the organization

KIPP Collegiate at a Glance

KNCHS is a charter school in East Nashville that serves students in grades 9-12. It was founded in 2014. Upon opening, KNCHS added on a new class (or cohort) of students each year. The 2017-2018 was the first year in which the school had students in each of the four grades. As a relatively new and continuously growing school, one focus is the cultivation and sustainment of a school culture.

Since its inception, academic rigor has served as the crux of the school's mission as a high school with a college preparatory focus. The school population primarily consists of students of color from the surrounding East and North Nashville areas.

KNCHS holds four core values that are showcased as central to the school's mission and culture. The first is excellence. KNCHS holds high expectations for its students and also encourage accountability in this pursuit of excellence. The second is resilience. In any academic journey, students are faced with obstacles. KNCHS poses that students and staff be solutions oriented to overcome these obstacles. The third is heart which simply means that they encourage and work to build a supportive environment among students, faculty, and staff. The final tenet is growth which means looking for ways to improve and acting on them (KIPP Nashville, 2018).

Charter schools tend to be associated with KIPP has seen success with its goal of academic achievement. For example, last year, KNCHS was recognized as a Tennessee Reward School. They experienced student growth that placed them in the top 5% of public schools in Tennessee. This ranking means that KNCHS is helping students attain more knowledge, attain knowledge faster, or both according to the state measure of academic improvement known as the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System or TVAAS (Tennessee Charter School Center, 2018). Additionally, last year's graduating class averaged ACT scores that ranked four points higher than the average in Davidson County and the highest of any KIPP high school in the country. Finally, this class is also "expected to graduate college at more than triple the rate of their peers" (KIPP Nashville, 2018).

Defining School Culture

According to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), school culture can be defined as “the way teachers and other staff members work together and the set of beliefs, values, and assumptions they share” (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2018). They argue that a positive school culture and climate – which can be defined as “the school's effects on students, including teaching practices; diversity; and the relationships among administrators, teachers, parents, and students” (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2018). – can positively impact student learning.

The ASCD (2018) promotes a “Whole Child Approach” as a way to create and sustain school improvement and student achievement via five “Communities of Excellence”: (1) Transformational Leadership, (2) Global Engagement, (3) Poverty and Equity, (4) Redefining Student Success, (5) Teaching and Learning.

Transformational Leadership refers to the effective utilization of talent to create effective leadership for schools. Global engagement refers to the incorporation of community perspectives and stories into classroom instruction. Poverty and equity refer to the support of students via the provision of opportunity to increase and foster achievement academically and beyond. Redefining student success means considering more holistic views of student achievement beyond data and test scores. Finally, teaching and learning refer to the development of innovative teaching strategies to encourage effective learning. This model highlights some important factors to consider in the creation of a school culture that is beneficial for all students (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2018).



Dia Liggons

Hometown: Glen Burnie, MD

Subject: 11th Grade College Readiness

Time at KNCHS: 1st year

If you had to listen to one album for the rest of your life what would it be?:

Whitney by

Whitney Houston

Dr. Liggons attended University of Maryland Eastern Shore, a small HBCU in Maryland, for her undergraduate years. She continued on to attend seminary at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Finally, she received her Doctorate from Regent University. Now she works at KNCHS as a College Readiness teacher for the 11th grade students.

I began by asking what in her path exactly led her to teaching high school after such an interesting educational path. "Well I coached students who dropped out of college at one point in my career". This work allowed her to see such a wide range of experiences but as she notes, she was exposed to many of the negative aspects of the college experience for her students.

She knew another team member from the KNCHS College Readiness team which was

how she discovered the open position on the team. "I was ready for a change. I've always had a heart for education".

After gaining more insight on her educational path, I asked where she saw how her background in ministry intersected with her current work in education. Dr. Liggons did quite a bit of work in youth ministry during her time as a student in the Howard University School of Divinity. "Giving back was a big part of seminary". Through this work, she had the opportunity to see children grow up and come back to speak about their experiences. "I wanted to empower kids to do what they wanted - especially the young girls". Ultimately, she found joy in the fact that while these students took a wide range of paths, they all discovered goals and ambitions that they created for themselves instead of ones created of feelings of necessity and obligation. This agency to discover and pursue their interests and passions was one of the most rewarding parts of that experience for Dr. Liggons.

From this topic, we moved to her experience at KNCHS. We are both new to the school, so I was particularly interested in hearing about her transition to a high school environment in general but furthermore, to a high school like KIPP Collegiate. "Well, first I had to figure out the culture". She pointed out the existing relationship between responsibility and growth. This is something that other teachers noted in their personal experiences. The rigor at KNCHS requires a great deal of personal responsibility from its students. However, the accountability systems set in place can at times stifle the growth of students because they can ironically create a lack of autonomy in some ways.

She notes that another shock came from the various backgrounds of her students. "These kids are incredibly smart and talented. They just make you remember how you are, and they

remind me of how I was at that age," she said with a smile. "But I'll also say, I've never dealt with kids with these kinds of stories". The school population is predominately students of color and a significant portion of its students come from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. So, they possess a wide range of their own personal stories especially related to various hardships which can of course pose different challenges as it relates to their academic experiences. Being so closely connected to stories such as the ones at KIPP Collegiate was a new and eye-opening experience for her.

We began the discussion of school culture by discussing the faculty and staff. "Everyone cares about the work that they do." However, she also notes that people oftentimes clash over competing priorities especially in areas such as discipline. "We all have a common goal, but we have different ways of doing things." She also discussed work-life balance as something that she has prioritized but of course is not sustained and practiced in the same ways across the staff. "Our staff works very hard. But I promised myself that I would work to find a balance between school and everything else". For Dr. Liggons, this means avoiding working over nights and weekends as such as possible. However, she also notes that the rising 11th grade cohort will be larger than the current class and therefore, this may impact her ability to continue that practice with ease.

We then talked about the existing perceptions of school culture among students based on her experience as someone in the classroom. She began with a chuckle, "well of course some kids call it a prison," which points back to the theme of a lack of autonomy for students. However, she also notes that as an 11th grade teacher, she also sees the kids that their time at KIPP

KIPP Collegiate as something that was necessary for their growth and success in terms of the curriculum and resources provided by the school.

To conclude, she reflected on the most rewarding parts of her experience at KNCHS. Hearing kids come back with their successes and breakthrough moments with students is always worthwhile. Similarly, seeing students find new ways to view and overcome obstacles (especially academic ones), is a fulfilling experience as well. Another impactful part of her time at KIPP has been working with the families of students as well. "We have amazing families who really care about their students!". Finally, the KIPP Through College team, a team dedicated to providing resources for KIPP graduates in the years after high school, has served as a great support system. "We just love on each other and care for each other". Again, referring back to the team.



Victoria Morrow

Hometown: Laurinburg, NC

Subject: 12th Grade Literature

Time at KNCHS: 4th year

If you had to listen to one album for the rest of your life what would it be?: Blue by Joni Mitchell.

Ms. Morrow began her college career at Arizona State University's school of journalism which was located in downtown Phoenix. Initially, she wanted to pursue a career in public relations but "it felt pretty empty" as she would put it. However, through an internship in this program, she was asked to help with profiles of local educators every week by conducting interviews. From there, she became involved with organizations centered around education reform. From this experience, she made the decision to pursue a major in Secondary English Education and received her teacher licensure through her program.

From there she began a career with Teach for America. "I was critical of TFA at the beginning. I thought that I would be able to infiltrate and write an exposé - which of course didn't happen!" she says as she laughs. "I think that TFA is an organization with well-intentioned people. It's easy to hold

stringent beliefs about education versus what the reality is at the moment." She also notes that she was quite critical of charter schools especially due to concern over their potential to contribute to the privatization of public education. Despite her concerns she was able to see that both KIPP and TFA are reflective organizations and share a sense of self awareness. One important part of her experience with TFA was their prioritization of "identity work" or the cultivation of cultural competence among corps members before placing them in schools.

We then discussed her educational background in North Carolina. She credits her experiences in learning about education inequity and reform during her undergraduate years as something that gave her the necessary language to describe her experiences. She attended a predominately (she estimates 75%) Black high school where she took classes that were typically around 90% white. Then during her time in Arizona, where she taught at a public high school, she saw discrimination against Latinx students. She noted a particular bill that was passed which essentially legalized racial profiling. "It was so blatant that it made me reevaluate. I had to think, are we challenging or perpetuating systems of inequity?"

From there we dove into her experience at KIPP. The transition from large (at capacity) public high school in Arizona to a small charter school in Nashville was a culture shock for her. In her first year of teaching she struggled with classroom management. "At the first school I taught at in Phoenix, if your classroom wasn't on fire then you were doing fine. But I knew that I could be doing more for my students than that". She notes that in her second year, she was able to focus on relationship building which is integral to the way that she navigates KNCHS. She desires to have a holistic impact

on her students, something more than just academic rigor. She also values opportunities for growth and development as an educator. She likes to be in an environment where she can “be pushed”.

One challenge for KIPP from her perspective is its ability to grow its teachers. There are a lot of opportunities for leadership among faculty and staff. However, she says that “once you reach a certain point, you’re expected to teach others,” which is something she does as an instructor of a new subject for KIPP Collegiate. Over KIPP Collegiate’s first five years, they have experienced high turnover which could be attributed to this expectation for teachers to transition into leadership roles right away. She views this as something that attracts ambitious and passionate people, but it brings up a question of sustainability for KIPP as an organization and for teachers on an individual basis.

One strength that she notes for the KIPP Collegiate staff is its growth in terms of diversity. This is seen quite noticeably in terms of race/ethnicity, but Ms. Morrow emphasizes the fact that there is a broader range of experiences in this current group of teachers which is of course informed by their identities. This diversity leads to more enriched conversations. She described the previous makeup of the staff as “super homogenous” with teachers that came from similar backgrounds in terms of race/ethnicity, teaching paths, socioeconomic status, etc.

With this shift, she argues that the school has a responsibility to make sure that it has the necessary resources to support a diverse staff. “We have to address the hidden curriculum”. She further explained that it was necessary to address any underlying assumptions that could be made about

She also notes that this could encourage KNCHS to shift to a mission that includes a social justice focus in addition to its focus on academic rigor.

This point led us to a discussion of school culture. “We still operate on a year-to-year culture. By that, I mean there isn’t a cohesive and consistent culture across the cohorts”. She notes several things that should actively be integrated into a consistent and cohesive culture for KIPP. The first of these tenets is the “value of communities and families”. The second is an “aspirational ownership of the school among students that should be connected to the mission and goals”. As a teacher of upperclassmen, she notes that some of her students possess a budding appreciation for what KIPP does. At this point in their high school career, they have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and they “seem grateful”.

Contrarily, there are students who note that there are still missing pieces for them. She notes that the values of high academic achievement and the accountability systems in place can sometimes lead to students being told what they should want for themselves instead of taking ownership of that discovery process. Additionally, she notes that “many of the students come from middle schools that value compliance”. She views this combination of systems at KNCHS and from student backgrounds contribute to this lack of opportunities to fail and take autonomy over their educational journey.

In an effort to make holistic impacts and encourage autonomy among her students, she has found ways to incorporate conversations about their visions for change and improvements in the school environment. She sees personal investment as an integral part of the education experience. For Ms. Morrow, this is the most rewarding part of the job.



Leonard Rowan

Hometown: Nashville, TN

Subject: 9th grade Pre-AP World History

Time at KNCHS: 2nd year

If you had to listen to one album for the rest of your life

what would it be?: *I Used to Know* H.E.R.
by H.E.R.

Mr. Rowan grew up in Nashville and is a product of the Metro Nashville Public School system. He comes from a family of educators. During his undergraduate years at Middle Tennessee State University, he studied history and political science. "I was in school during the Obama era so that inspired me to pursue those majors." From 2014 to 2017, he worked for the Tennessee State government. He always considered going into education. He eventually decided to enroll in an education graduate program at Tennessee State University where he received his teaching license. This led to his career at KIPP Collegiate.

When asked about how he reconciles his background in government with this relatively new career in teaching, he responded, "everybody needs government. Everyone has opinions about the way things should run". He argues that an important part of

government is navigating existing points of view about people in different institutions which is something that he does in his work at KIPP.

As previously mentioned, some students claim that there is a lack of freedom because of high expectations and accompanying accountability measures found at KIPP. "I get the rationale for a lot of things, but I don't think it's always explained in the most effective way". He believes that the students don't see their role in society yet especially in terms of how they themselves are viewed. "I wish I had this kind of structure when I was in school". One of the biggest challenges for him as an educator is existing as a black man in the education field. "I feel like people question what I do. I have to make sure that I don't lower the bar for other black men who are coming after me. I have to make sure I stay on top of things". However, he also notes that as someone with a background in government, that it is important to "keep [his] own groove" and make sure that he forges connections with his students.

This led us to his point of view on the KNCHS culture. He views this as a #1 priority and a huge area for growth. "There is no culture." He notes low participation as a contributing factor. He also notes a lack in the implementation of sustainable and effective solutions. One missing piece that he notes is community engagement. "We don't have a name in East Nashville. We can't keep closed doors and expect to become a community staple." Some ideas that he proposed were community service projects or community bonding activities such as a neighborhood potluck.

Another place where he sees an area for growth is in the social interactions among students. These kinds of interactions are

generally limited to before/after school, three-minute transition time between classes, and the allotted 25 minutes for lunch. "25 minutes for lunch isn't enough time to build community or culture outside of academics". He suggests that outings or incentives might be a good way to increase student engagement with each other in order to begin building a more cohesive school culture. He sees this as an integral part to student success during their time at KIPP and even notes that there are students who have not found their place (socially) in the school. "How can we get kids through college if we can't even get them through

KIPP?"

Finally, Mr. Rowan sees student impact as the most important part of his experience. As a 9th grade teacher, he sees the difficulty for younger students to be reflective about their experiences such as the older students from Dr. Liggons and Ms. Morrow's classes. He thinks that the reflective piece can come into play via classroom instruction. "I want to make this more than just history class for them. Knowing that I impacted even just one student is rewarding."

Conclusion

In these interviews, I discovered lessons about the power of representation for students of color, the implications of various teaching paths on students and school culture, and what the intersection of all these factors means for this high school. The purpose of this was to simply tell stories from this growing East Nashville high school. In conducting this project, I found a tales of achievement and existing areas for growth but most importantly, I saw reflection and adaptability as an integral part of those leading this organization. With this continued mindset for growth and change, there lies great potential for incredible feats within the walls of KNCHS and beyond.