

An Education Where Differences are Respected and Valued, not Neutralized

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Education is an everlasting issue in the United States. Much like healthcare, education in the United States is one of the most controversial topics on any political agenda. However, while everyone seems to acknowledge that there is a problem, no strong action has been taken to remedy it. In the mid-time, the outdated methods of standard education and political decisions are discouraging young children, ripping them of their creativity and uniqueness to fit into their established role in society. Besides, students not only have to go through every academic obstacle to success, but they also face the most extreme situations due to many ways of discrimination based on their ethnicity, race, and whether they have any disability. This project aims to introduce an innovative demonstration project called Global Field Academy (GFA) which implements an educational methodology called Relational Learning Framework. GFA aims to eliminate education disparities and discriminations, to create access opportunities for every student, to engage and support the whole family, and to help students reach their maximum potential. This project is supported by individual interviews with current parents of the program, current educators of the program, and the Director of Implementation of the Relational Learning Framework methodology.

Many Americans believe that discrimination has disappeared from the educational system, but they forget that it was not long ago when minorities were attending wholly segregated schools. Even when the courts deemed school segregation unconstitutional 60 years ago, there are still many students across the country who attend school primarily with students who look like them (Monarrez, 2018). There is a positive correlation between schooling and housing segregation patterns, where neighborhoods with higher residential segregation suffer

from higher schooling segregation. The reason why this happens is that most of the low-income families do not have the opportunity of choosing a school far away from their homes, and the schools nearby are under-resourced because K-12 funding comes largely from property taxes collected by local governments, meaning that schools from neighborhoods with a lower tax base receive less money than schools in wealthier neighborhoods (The Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2019). As a result, minority students tend to attend poorer schools that are more likely to have inexperienced teachers and fewer resources.

Inclusion, accessibility, and opportunity are important values of Global Field Academy. Quality education should be available and affordable for everyone, regardless of their income level or residential situations. Families of this innovative program pay tuition based on their income level, providing scholarships for those families whose incomes do not reach the federal poverty line. This economic system based on democratic education will create a strong cycle where wealthy families will support those in need. This process will allow every child to receive quality within the faculty, high resources, and an environment of support and empathy. As a result of GFA's efforts to reach as many communities as possible, there is an 85% diversity among their students (C. Palavecino, personal communication, May 1, 2021). Relational Learning Framework adapts easily to any context because the method always tries to adjust to each community. Currently, in Colombia, there is a high percentage of low-resourced schools that are reaching positive impacts and results while implementing this methodology. As Lisette Cifuentes, the Director of Implementation of Relational Learning Framework declares, these results are due to the fact that, even if you lack the physical resources, the development and personalization of strategies to reach self-sufficient environments, results in a system that,

through creativity, flexibility and adaptation, makes knowledge reachable for every student. (personal communication, May 5, 2021).

Minority groups tend to be underrepresented in the academic field. Minorities represent about 20% of the educational workforce. In 2017–18, about 79 percent of public school teachers were White, 9 percent were Hispanic, 7 percent were Black, 2 percent were Asian, 2 percent were of Two or more races, and 1 percent were American Indian/Alaska Native (NCES, 2020). This lack of diversity contributes to the lack of understanding and empathy for what minorities go through every day. Black students who had black teachers are more likely to graduate high school and consider college (Hines & Hines, 2020). Besides, they experience less exclusionary discipline and fewer office visits, which is correlated with the probability of ending up in the criminal justice system (Hines & Hines, 2020).

The mission of this educational program is for every student to feel comprehended, valued, and equally represented. Lecturer Sarah Leibel, a master teacher, mentions how students need “mirrors and windows,” meaning that they can see them themselves in stories and also experience unfamiliar worlds (Moss, 2016). The program aims to provide a mirror for every student by increasing diversity within the faculty based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and language, while always having a higher focus on the values and principles of each person to provide students with the right windows. In order to accomplish this, the faculty of the program is selected with precaution, and requirements that go beyond the professional experience and academic knowledge. They are evaluated based on who they are, what are their values, and how they interact with children and families. This program is based on a democratic education, where every voice is equally heard. For this reason, children and families are also part of the hiring

process. Upcoming teachers are required to explore real-life experiences with the children of the program to see the way they can bond with the students. This is crucial to determine whether or not a teacher is compatible with this learning methodology. Once the new members are selected, they have to go through Relational Learning training where the instructor's role is reimagined as a trusted guide for students to become active participants in the creation and discovery of their own unique selves (Oliverian School, 2019).

Racism and police arrests are other big problems that many minority students have to face at least once during their school years. The United States is one of the few countries where it is legal to arrest a child under the age of 16. In fact, 34 states have no minimum age for delinquency (Hutchinson, 2019). According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) at least 30,467 children under the age of 10 were arrested in the United States between 2013 and 2018 (Hutchinson, 2019). These numbers increase dramatically for those children between 11-12 years old with 266,321 arrested (Hutchinson, 2019). Black students are, in particular, the group that is targeted by these outdated laws, making them suffer the most extreme consequences while the academic institutions stand idly by. According to the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights (2014), black students are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than white students. Research in Texas has also found that students who have been suspended are more likely to be held back a grade and drop out of school entirely (Kohn, 2021).

Global Field Academy believes that every "misbehavior" comes from external factors that are affecting the child indirectly or directly, such as financial struggles in the family, parents divorce, lack of education at home, and other issues that could affect the structure and environment of the child's family. In addition to these factors that affect every single child, it is

crucial to understand that minority students suffer from systematic oppression that constantly affects their emotional state. For this reason, the approach that this program follows to address these circumstances is based on communication and comprehension, not punishment. The workforce of the program needs to be prepared to manage these situations for the benefit of the child. The Relational Learning methodology is composed of two main figures: the educator and the coach. The figure of the Coach is an essential tool in the academic life of a student. Learning Coaches are always psychologists, well prepared to intervene, orientate, prevent, advise, and support the student to improve the learning process and promote educational success. In addition to the coaches, the educators are trained under Relational Learning Framework, where teachers learn how to provide the right tools to each child considering, at all time, the ecological levels of the student. The police force will never be called unless the situation compromises the safety of any of the individuals. Instead, behavior management will be addressed through the lenses of psychology.

Another community that suffers from impactful discriminations are children with disabilities. While school policies or practices are applied in the same way to everyone, students with disabilities are put at a disadvantage (The Head Teacher, 2019). In addition to institutional barriers, the prevalence rates of bully victimization and risk for repeated victimization among students with disabilities is from 24.5% in elementary school to 34.1% in middle school (Blake et al., 2012). Usually, these students have more difficulties to learn because their access to classes is limited, they are provided with substandard instructional materials, the facilities are unsafe or structurally deficient for them, and they are denied with scholarships, grants or enrollment opportunities (Calig Law Firm, 2018). Maggie Espinosa, a current member of the

Global Field Academy family and mother of a 12 years old student diagnosed with ADHD claimed that she decided to pull up her daughter from the Charter School because the teachers were not prepared to deal with the learning disorder (personal communication, May 3, 2021). In addition, Gabriela Medici, a mother of a student with the mildest level of autism, decided to take her son from the public school because the medicine she was forced to administer paralyzed every emotion he had, to the point that he could barely speak or move. She then expressed that her son was not accepted in any traditional school, because she did not want to give him the required medication, leaving her with the only option of an alternative school for children with autism (personal communication, May 6, 2021).

Relational Learning Framework is based on the respect and recognition of each student. No difference or particularity cannot be developed and guided providing the right tools and support. The methodology deploys individualized learning plans according to each student's strengths, weakness, abilities, emotional state, and external factors that could interfere with the learning process. Global Field Academy is a safe space for many students with disabilities that were not fairly treated and supported in traditional schools. Relational Learning Framework allowed Ms. Espinosa's daughter rebuilt her self-esteem, by providing an environment where her strengths were empowered, and her disability was never a barrier to learn with the rest of the students. As she mentioned in the interview, "My daughter is extremely happy with GFA. She could be herself and be accepted as she is" (M. Espinosa, personal communication, May 3, 2021). Also, after 2 years experiencing this innovative methodology at Global Field Academy, Gabriela's son has experienced a 180 degrees turn. He became able to communicate with other children and make friends, while also becoming more independent and self-sufficient. Gabriela

even got to the verge of crying when she saw her son seamlessly interacting with other children in the park for the first time (personal communication, May 6, 2021).

Schools have become more and more “industrialized” with time. The standardization of school programs and tests has turned education into a sort of production chain where every product has to come out the right way to pass certain premade standards, or otherwise, it is discarded. Sadly, the same happens with children. As somebody who uses certain specifications and materials for products, we give every child the same subjects, textbooks, lectures, and environments, erasing creativity and uniqueness along the process. According to an experiment made by George Land and Beth Jarman, and published by Forbes, students become significantly less creative as they go along their education levels (Shulman, 2020). At the beginning of the study, the students were between the ages of three through five years old. Then, the same children were tested at 10-years-old, and again at the age of 15. The proportion of children that reached the higher level of creativity among the different age brackets were 98% among five-year-olds, 30% among ten-year-olds, and 12% among fifteen-year-olds (Shulman, 2020). This demonstrates an inverse correlation between creativity and education, where higher educated individuals become less creative. Creativity is associated with critical thinking and idea development, allowing us to solve problems with innovation. It also helps children to have an open mind to different possibilities and being more autonomous. A society that has lost touch with its creative side is an imprisoned society, in that generations of people may be closed-minded (Carson, 2019).

We have been under the same educational system since the 19th century (Kindsey, 2007), while we and our environment have evolved and developed. For this reason, it is time to realize

that learning should be focused on the process, rather than on the result, and differences should be respected and valued, not neutralized. Equality does not mean the same, "everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." (Albert Einstein). Each student is different and education has the right to provide the tools and resources to every student to discover their infinite potential. Relational Learning Framework is built on eight stepping stones that are crucial for children's development. Intellect, to help students develop intellectual autonomy; Emotions, to encourage self-recognition and acceptance; Social, for children to build social skills, tolerance, and empathy; Creativity, to build knowledge through critical thinking, and unique thought process; Time Management, to plan ahead and be self-sufficient; Responsibility, to add value to our society in the best way possible; Innovation, to have a direct impact in the community; Constant Quality - Variable Time, to become the main actors of their learning experience.

The role of the educator needs to be shifted in order to achieve all the aspects mentioned above. As Paulo Freire critiques, the relationship between teachers and students, in which teachers have power and knowledge, but the students do not allow students to develop excogitate thinking to view the world critically. Instead, In this "banking model" of education, a teacher "deposits" facts into the mind of the students, who have to memorize and recall them (Freire, 1972). Educators who are part of Relational Learning abandon their role of authority and become guides to develop the autonomy of every student. As Ms. Cifuentes mentioned, students should be the center of the academic process, which is why developing the system around them individually will lead to success. This requires a professional staff capable of recognizing and

adapting every step of the process to each student's interests and abilities (personal communication, May 5, 2021).

Global Field Academy is a righteous educational demonstration project that proves to eradicate the discriminations that minority students suffer in school every day through an innovative methodology based on personalized learning. However, not only students from minority groups could benefit from this system. This program sees everyone as a world in themselves, unique and complex, despite how society categorizes them. Relational Learning challenges students to the best of their abilities, which will enable them to be successful academically and in their lives. This program is living proof that our educational system can change for the better, but it has to come from the people to demand it. Society's children are the best hope for a better tomorrow, and we owe it to them to provide the best opportunities for their success. Education shouldn't be a transaction. It should be an invitation to personal growth through love, empathy, and comprehension, where the happiness of every student is above all.

“There's no such thing as neutral education. Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom”

Paulo Freire.

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Appendix

Personal communication - Interviews

Cecilia Palavecino

Program manager and teacher - Global Field Academy

Saturday, May 1, 2021

1. As an Educator, why do you think the public school system does not provide the right resources and support to every student?

As a mom who has a child with a learning delay diagnosis, in a public magnet school, I have seen the public school system have the right resources and support. Now personally I feel there is a lack of communication to support those parents who need help understanding how to access these resources. They are not trained to provide those resources.

2. How has your role as an educator changed since starting in Global Field Academy?

Being an educator in GFA allows me to see each student holistically, not only emphasizing the academic aspect but this in part connected with his unique psychosocial emotional cognitive communicative development.

3. What do you value the most about this program?

Children will never hear a "because I say so" when they ask why. In this program communication is key. Every student has the right to ask questions and we need to provide them with the best answers. If students understand why they have to do something, they are having a purpose, and they will feel better following the order.

4. Why a personalized learning plan could be beneficial for the students?

Because children develop at their own pace. In public schools, children have a lot of pressure from the teachers to get everything done at a specific time. They do not consider external factors that could be affecting the child's emotional state. In this program, we want to make sure everyone is the owner of their learning plans with guidance from teachers and learning coaches.

5. Would you consider that every student in this program is equally represented?

Yes, within the staff, there is a lot of diversity. There are no two people from the same country and culture in the team. Regarding the students, there is an 85% diversity. Many of our students had experienced discrimination and bullying in the public system. Here, every student will be valued no matter what.

Maggie Espinosa

Mother of a black 12 years old student with ADHD - Global Field Academy

May 3, 2021

1. Why did you decide to take out your son/daughter from the public system?

I decided to pull up my daughter from the charter school because the teachers cannot deal with her ADHD although she was on medication. The complaints and text messages were unbearable.

2. Did you notice that your daughter or other children were treated less favorably than others because of their disability/race?

I feel that that may have played an issue. My daughter once Mentioned that her teacher did not like black students.

3. Were you pressured or obliged to comply with certain school rules regarding your children that you were not comfortable with?

Yes, I was obliged to comply with school rules that I did not feel were correct and appropriate at the time. Some of them were detentions for wrong reasons.

4. What is the biggest difference you perceive now that your son is part of the Global Field Academy?

My daughter is extremely happy with GFA. She could be herself and be accepted as she is.

5. Why did you choose individualized learning over the standard methodology?

I chose individualized learning as an alternative way to my daughter's education as that the school she was in was a problem. Her self-esteem was very low when she was at that school and she did not want to go to the school.

6. Why do you think this innovative program is beneficial for your son? could you mention some positive aspects of this methodology?

In this type of education, my daughter has learned how to discipline herself to learn and learn in different ways. Also, there is no Right or wrong way of learning as well as tests to measure her learning.

7. Do you feel that minorities are underrepresented in traditional schools' workforce? Do you feel the same way about this program?

I strongly believe that minorities are treated differently in traditional schools. I have not experienced this underrepresentation under GFA.

8. Overall, do you agree that Global Field Academy is the right educational environment for minority students that are affected by the public system?

Not only do I think that GFA is the right educational environment for minority students but is also an excellent alternative way for any student to learn.

Thank you so much. I loved these questions.

Lisette Cifuentes

Director of Implementation - Learning One to One

Wednesday May 5, 2021

1. ¿Cuál es el principal motivo por el cual los colegios deciden abandonar el sistema de educación tradicional ?

Las instituciones reconocen que cambiar sus prácticas es necesario, y esto se da cuando se construye sentido y valor a los procesos que FRE entrega, y uno de los más importantes es el respeto hacia la persona. Reconocer a cada individuo desde su esencia y hacer de él lo mejor de sí mismo. El centro de la educación es el estudiante, por eso poner el sistema a su disposición permite el éxito, un equipo docente dispuesto a reconocer y adaptar los procesos acordes a sus intereses y habilidades

2. ¿Cuál es el mayor impacto para un estudiante que transita del sistema tradicional a la metodología de Educación Relacional?

Al inicio los estudiantes se enfrentan a varios desafíos, ya que el cambio necesita de tiempo. Sin embargo, FRE es tan pertinente que el estudiante por sí solo empieza a empoderarse y apropiarse de las nuevas dinámicas y procesos para seguir su aprendizaje. Nuestros estudiantes expresan

que lo más valioso de FRE es que ahora pueden aprender realmente, potenciar sus habilidades e ir a su propio ritmo. Esto desde la manera en que empiezan a tomar decisiones, organizar su tiempo, definir y proyectar sus metas. Por otro lado, algo válido es la relación que se construye con sus pares y educadores, convirtiéndose en un equipo de trabajo, donde todos participan y construyen.

3. ¿Podrías contar como la metodología es beneficiosa para los estudiantes con discapacidades de aprendizaje?

Educación Relacional desde su principio de Respeto reconoce a cada individuo, por ende no existe ninguna diferencia o particularidad que no pueda ser orientada y desarrollada. Desde la personalización como uno de los procesos que tiene FRE, se logra reconocer el perfil de cada estudiante, brindando los elementos necesarios acordes a sus necesidades e intereses.

4. Cómo afecta emocionalmente a los estudiantes el poder tener un sistema de aprendizaje personalizado?

Motivación, interés, reconocimiento, sentido a lo que se hace, apropiación sin algunas de las respuestas que los estudiantes dan al momento de describir que beneficios encuentran con FRE. Lograr ser ellos mismos y descubrir su potencial les brinda elementos para construir su proyecto de vida, llegar siempre a la excelencia.

5. ¿Cómo se aplica esta metodología a las zonas y colegios de bajos recursos económicos?

FRE es un modelo que se adapta fácilmente a cualquier contexto, ya que los procesos siempre buscan adecuarse a las necesidades de la comunidad. En este orden ideas, actualmente contamos con un alto porcentaje de escuelas rurales y de bajos recursos económicos, que han logrado un alto impacto y resultado a la implementación, esto se debe que más allá de los recursos físicos, la

personalización y el desarrollo de la autonomía garantizan prácticas esenciales para la vida de las personas, con creatividad, adaptación, flexibilización, se pueden diseñar otros mecanismos para llegar al conocimiento

6. ¿Hay algo más que te gustaría destacar sobre el impacto de esta metodología en la vida de un estudiante?

FRE es la respuesta al sistema educativo, y lo menciono porque su estructura parte de buscar la felicidad en los estudiantes, en brindarles elementos sólidos para construir su vida y sobre estos sean protagonistas en las decisiones y metas a alcanzar. FRE promueve también en el docente una reflexión constante sobre cómo desde su rol se puede reconocer a cada estudiante y desarrollar su potencial, partiendo de los intereses, habilidades y necesidades, fomentar el desarrollo de habilidades sobre el contenido lleva a los estudiantes a ser críticos, analíticos y responsables de su aprendizaje. Desarrollar la autonomía es otro de los valiosos elementos que tiene FRE, dado que las condiciones actuales requiere que los estudiantes se apropien de sus descripciones, para ello, construyen metas, organizan sus tiempos y recursos y evalúan el proceso alcanzado.

Gabriela Medici

Mother of an 11 years old student with level 1 of autism and ADHD - Global Field Academy

Thursday, May 6, 2021

1. Why did you decide to take out your son/daughter from the public system?

My son even though he has autism and ADHD, the grade of it is not very high that he could not be in a school with other children under the same condition. So, he always went to regular public

schools. However, when he started 3 grade, they put a lot of pressure on him. They pressured him to finish everything at the same time as the other kids. For example, Massimo needed 3 days to finish a project instead of 1 day, but the teacher didn't respect it.

2. Did you notice that your daughter or other children were treated less favorably than others because of their disability?

Yes, when he was in public school, all the teachers had the diagnosis from the doctor where it stated that my son needed more time than other students in most of the academic activities.

However, as I mentioned before, teachers did not consider this. I feel that they were not prepared and know nothing about this condition.

3. Were you pressured or obliged to comply with certain school rules regarding your children that you were not comfortable with?

There is a lot of pressure from the teacher about medication because they want kids to sit down on chairs without moving. They tell you that if your child doesn't get the medication he will have to repeat the grade. There is a high discipline inside the classroom that is not realistic for any student, moreover a student like my son. So, I went to the doctor for the medicine, but after a while, my son barely moved or spoke under the medication.

So, when I decided to stop administering medicine to him, they didn't want to accept him in any school.

4. What is the biggest difference you perceive now that your son is part of the Global Field Academy?

It has been a huge change for my son. He is himself again. He has been a very happy and excited boy all the time. Before, when he was in public school, he cried all the time because his

classmates bullied him all the time. Even the teachers supported the bullying with comments like “Well, that’s normal”.

Also, his social and communication skills improved a lot. Before, my son was too shy to talk to other kids. Now, at GFA my child is the time communicating and playing with other students. One day, we were at the park, and he went to talk to a group of children that were playing there. It was the first time in years! (eyes on tears).

5. Why did you choose individualized learning over the standard methodology?

Because individualized learning plans adjust to my son’s condition and interests. Before, teachers forced him to finish everything at the same time as the rest of the students, and do it in the way. Here, the coaches listen to him, they get to know him, and they find the right tools for him to learn. He can now learn at his own pace without feeling any pressure.

6. Why do you think this innovative program is beneficial for your son? could you mention some positive aspects of this methodology?

This is a place where he can be himself, without medication. And this is more important for me than anything else. At the same, this methodology is so good because students learn more and better because they are all interested and motivated.

7. Do you feel that minorities are underrepresented in traditional schools’ workforce? Do you feel the same way about this program?

Yes, they are. As I said before, not only are physically underrepresented but teachers are not trained to teach every single student in their classrooms.

Not at all, I don't feel the same way about GFA. In this program, as a mom whose second language is English, I can perfectly communicate with the members of this program because of the cultural diversity that it has.

8. Overall, do you agree that Global Field Academy is the right educational environment for minority students that are affected by the public system?

Absolutely, GFA is a place where children are happy. The methodology gives them the opportunity to follow their own goals and dreams while learning in their own way. The most important thing for a child to learn is to be interested and motivated. This program provides an environment where children want to be there all the time.