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Educational Perspectives: An Interview with Dr. Karen Norris

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Interviewer: Maria Labus

Interviewee: Dr. Karen Norris

Date of Interview: October 14th, 2017

Location: University of Dallas

Transcriber: Maria Labus

ML:

1 Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. Could you please tell me about your
2 educational background and how you came to be involved in education?

KN:

3 Ok. I grew up in Belize, went to school, in Belize elementary school and high school. A Belize
4 education in Belize is based on a British system of education. So we have standards instead of
5 grades, you know like first grade second grade we have standard one standard two and in high
6 school we, we don't have grades we have forms first form second form A form. Our junior
7 college is called six form. We take, although many students take the SATs so they can come to
8 American colleges, when I was going to school we also took or we always took the A levels
9 and O levels which are the British exams. Then I came to the US and I came to the University
10 of Dallas. I came here as an economics major and quickly transitioned to an Ed and psych
11 major. Since my undergraduate degree I've gotten two masters and a PhD.

ML:

12 So you already went into detail about how the school system works in Belize based off the
13 British educational system. What differences do you see in the American curriculum versus
14 curriculum in Belize?

KN:

15 I think, One of the differences I see is especially; more particularly in, in junior high and high
16 school students up here have more options for electives or things outside of the three R's I
17 think, I think in the Belizean system when you graduate from high school, one of the things
18 that you are, or the things that you are able to do is, you are able to read really well and
19 comprehend, you are able to do math, and you are able to write and I think because those
20 things are emphasized across schools in Belize that when students transition to schools here in
21 the US, it's a very easy transition for them because while they haven't had all of the extra
22 classes they've gotten the really strong foundation in the basics.

ML:

23 Ok, now that also touches base into the next question about priorities in Belize.

KN:

24 *Chuckles

ML:

25 So obviously, the main core of curriculum.

KN:

26 Absolutely!

ML:

27 How do you believe Belize teachers differ from American ones?

KN:

28 Only recently has there been a shift in Belize to have certified teachers or a national way of
29 certifying teachers. Until then, it was if you'd gone to the junior college, basically the first
30 two years of college or if you had come to the US and gotten a degree in whatever, you could
31 apply to teach and so we had in high schools, we had teachers that might have known content
32 but not necessarily how to deliver, how to instruct, how to teach. And I think that that's a
33 difference because here, there's you're certified you have to go through some sort of
34 certification process whether it's traditional teacher prep or now there seems to be a big
35 movement towards alternatively certified teachers so...

ML:

36 And moving away from teachers, do you see differences in students from Belize students to
37 American students?

KN:

38 That's a good question. I think children are, children I think they, they have similar struggles.
39 I think, I think American children although in Belize we are getting, we're getting a little, a
40 little away from this but American children have more things at their disposal. I think
41 American children get cellphones younger than Belizean children and so I think that there's
42 things like that that Belizean children don't get as rapidly. Again that sort of answers the
43 question, I think.

ML:

44 I know you mentioned that American students have more opportunities with extra curriculums
45 but are there opportunities for Belizean students to do things after school or extra programs?

KN:

46 Yeah, we there's, there's basketball, there's sports, there's service projects. I know Kate in
47 school was involved in a couple of service projects. When I was going to school down there,
48 it really was just sports and I was also in my High school we got track well you, you either
49 went into the academic or the sciences or you went into the business class and so I graduated
50 with a secretarial diploma and I could take short hand and do short hand notes which is again
51 a useful skill that I never used after high school. *laughs. I was being slightly sarcastic with
52 that one!

Both:

53 *Laughter

ML:

54 How do you view a liberal arts education as a student from UD?

KN:

55 I think what a liberal arts education does is it teaches or really works on building creative
56 critical thinkers and if I look back to my time here at UD and I envision the kinds of careers
57 that I would possibly be exposed to in my life, there is no way I would have envisioned some
58 of the careers that are currently very common and, and available for students and so I think
59 what a liberal arts education does is it helps students to, to be nimble in their thinking that
60 they can be able to grow and move from one career opportunity to the other more easily than
61 somebody that has just been tracked into their degree specific kind of work. So that, that
62 ability to be nimble makes them more, I think more marketable. It just gives them better
63 skills, better prepared for careers that even today we can't imagine.

ML:

64 As a director of curriculum, what challenges do you come across?

KN:

65 *Laughs Well [clears throat] I think, because I work in a private situation our teachers, what
66 we do, our teachers have this really I think unique opportunity to design their own curriculum
67 and of course they work hand in hand with me, kind of directing that work, but one of the
68 challenges I see now with really having teachers design their own curriculum of course it's
69 standards based, we use the Texas essential knowledge and skills but what I, what I see is one
70 of the challenges is, are, new teachers or even veteran teachers of a few years you know five
71 or 10 years are not nimble in their thinking, they are not flexible to be able to design or to do
72 that kind of work, they would rather us tell them what to do and exactly how to do it than to
73 really dig in and makes sense of what they are going to be teaching for their students. So I
74 think that that's a huge challenge and I, I think that that's, I think teachers are being prepared
75 differently now than they were back when I went through teacher prep. Are you getting all of
76 that?

ML:

77 Yes. How has math and reading been prioritized over other subjects?

KN:

78 Well it, it here in the US, the mere fact that it is being tested at such a young, in Third grade
79 that that's your state test and that's across the nation. Math and reading are the, the subject
80 areas or content areas that get tested the earliest and I think by the very nature of high stakes
81 testing, that becomes prioritized in schools and sometimes to the extent that other curricular,
82 other content areas just totally disappear from the curriculum, which I think, limits the child's
83 development. I think reading and math are very important. I think we definitely need to
84 prioritize math. But I also think that it shouldn't be the only focus. Both reading and math are
85 skills to further learning and then so [...] very important, it should be prioritized but to not to
86 the extent of everything else.

ML:

87 What changes in academic performances have you seen from students?

KN:

88 I think students, like our, our teachers, no longer grapple with hard. If it doesn't come easy
89 they give up, but the persistence is not there and I sometimes although I am not a
90 technophobe, I mean I use technology all the time, I sometimes wonder with the rapid
91 rewards system of technology gaming is creating challenges in student persistence and the
92 ways students will dig into work and their ability to grapple.

ML:

93 How do you believe the school environment can be advanced?

KN:

94 So I have this, this theory. I think that classrooms and schools, when you think about
95 classrooms and schools, you're really thinking about three, I call them spaces: you're thinking
96 about the instructional space which involves what they teach[...], what the content, what the
97 teacher teaches, so the how and the, the what and the instructional strategies they use, all of
98 those kinds of things and it's really in the instructional space. The other space is the physical
99 space, how the teacher is designing the physical space to really support instruction. So it goes
100 from everything from how they're arranging their classroom tables and chairs, how they're
101 organizing classroom libraries, how they are organizing classroom materials for students to
102 use, but also in the, in the physical space is really thinking about the routines and procedures
103 and the expectations of the students of what, how, they are going to be in the classroom
104 space or even in the school space. But equally important I think, and I think that this is a
105 space that has been largely ignored based on high stakes testing, and just this really, just this
106 push to you know, I think education has been boiled down to another worksheet because of
107 high stakes testing, not that we don't need to have testing but the space that I think is largely
108 ignored is the emotional space. When we think about a human being, we are not just an
109 academic brain, we are also an emotional brain and I think we've, we've swung so far to the
110 academics that we are forgetting that we have little humans that have emotions that come to
111 us with feelings, that come to us with that, maybe some of them have been exposed to
112 trauma and we are just going straight at the academics and I think we're not really paying
113 attention to, the, this is kind of trite because I think this term is overused in education, but
114 the idea of the whole child and really who that child is, who they are emotionally so that
115 they're ready to learn and I think that that emotional spaces is, is largely ignored and when I
116 think about that emotional space, I think we need to help our students develop the social
117 skills that will help them to be successful in the academic space and I think you can't have
118 one without the other. If we just spend time in the instructional space and the academic
119 space we might have children that have amazing abilities to read and write and do complex
120 math, but they don't have any social skills to deal with people in the, in the workforce or just
121 even in in human interaction and on the same time, if we spend too much side, time, on the
122 emotional space then we have students that get along really well with others, but can't do a
123 thing. *chuckle. So I think really the balance of those three spaces I think, I think strong
124 academics and social emotional health are corner stones of what we need to be doing in, in
125 education within those three spaces emotional space, physical space, and the instructional
126 space.

ML:

127 What extracurricular activities are available to students at your school?

KN:

128 We are a small school we have 248 boys and girls we start with three year olds and we go to
129 fifth grade. We still have art, music, and P.E., as part of their daily classroom activities. But
130 after school curriculum, curriculurs, we do not have, curricular, extra curriculurs, we don't
131 really have but our, our children do, we do have musicals and plays and things like that, that
132 they're involved in but no after school programs per say. We also work with this, kind of
133 related but, we have family nights at school and what we do with our family nights is we
134 work with between family engagement and within family engagement because we found out
135 within our research that when we talk about parental involvement, we also want parents to
136 be involved, but when they come to school, we, they come in you know. It's for math night
137 where we are trying to teach them something. Our research has shown us that to really see
138 academic impact of parental involvement you need to have these two types of engagement.
139 Where families are between, within family engagements where families are you know
140 brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles or moms and dads are interacting with the student
141 or the children academically about their content but we, also in schools, we also need to
142 have between family engagement where the families in that school community are coming
143 together and they're involved with each other. It's when these two components are working
144 together in a school that you see academic impact on, on children's performance or
145 children's achievement. So that's something that we do too. We call them S.T.E.M. nights
146 and we get our families together and they are all working on a big S.T.E.M project so
147 families together are making recycling bags or reusable bags out of t-shirts or creating
148 prosthetic hands that can pick up small items. So some, some engineering challenges and the
149 families really really enjoy that and they're all working together so it's quite fun evenings.
150 So kind of related to extra curriculurs, sorta.

ML:

151 What are your educational concerns regarding the future of American schools?

KN:

152 *Chuckles. I am actually a bit concerned about teacher prep, to be perfectly honest. This
153 might not be the case at UD because I've seen Kate's exam for her child growth and
154 development class but I think educational psychology and classes that really help new
155 teachers and pre teachers think about how children learn are disappearing from the, the
156 majors and, and I think that that's, I think that that's not really a good idea. I think what,
157 what we're finding out is instead of classes in educational psychology or child growth and
158 development or adolescent psychology are being replaced with classroom management types
159 of classes and while I do think that students need to have a sense of how to manage a
160 classroom, I think that pre-service teachers really need to have a sense of how to teach and
161 how students learn and if they are grounded in the how to teach and how students learn, then
162 what they're doing is they're providing a classroom instruction that's really engaging to the
163 students and they'll see less classroom management problems, therefore making classroom
164 management, really looking at it from a proactive side as opposed to a reactive side. I think
165 when you look at classroom management at, from a reactive position you've lost the battle.

ML:

166 Where do you see state and federal influence most impactful in education? I am not sure if
167 you would since you work with private.

KN:

168 Actually we take the state mandated tests, so

ML:

169 Right.

KN:

170 And I think that's where you see the most influence is the, you see the national curriculum,
171 the common core curriculum, although we don't use that in Texas. I, we do consider it at our
172 school and I think that that's where you see their impact on, on the, the what to teach and
173 then also how it's going to be assessed and I think that's where you get all the, the state and
174 the mandated tests, high stakes testing. So that's the, the hugest influence and I think that
175 because they, they've had that influence it also influenced the what, types of materials that
176 students are being exposed to. So I think we see more test prep kinds of materials than we
177 see engaging curriculum materials.

ML:

178 Is there anything else you would like to add?

KN:

179 One other thing, to go back to the question you know, I talked about the challenges in
180 American education and I talked about teacher prep?

ML:

181 Yes.

KN:

182 I think on the student level I think we need to move from to allowing our students to really
183 grapple more, to really, instead of us being the ones that say, more of a constructive view of
184 letting the students grapple and build their own understanding of, of content I think our high
185 stakes testing and our test prep curriculum basically has taken that away from our students.
186 Has taken the, the exploration and the really playing with ideas away from our students and
187 I, I think we need to move back towards that because if we are not, if we're not exposing our
190 children as teachers to creative critical thinking, they won't be creative critical thinkers and
191 then they won't be nimble in, in their thoughts and in what they are able to do and therefore
192 we are not best preparing them for the future we cannot really conceive of right now. That's
193 my last thought.

ML:

194 Alright! Thank you for meeting with me.