

Money-Driven Choices: A Disruptor of Learning

Jacquelynnne Anne Boivin

Abstract: Public education in the United States is often run like a business—driven by money. A school’s decisions, like which textbooks to use, how many paraprofessionals to hire to support teachers, and the technology offered throughout the school, are all contingent upon a budget. In the field of education, while administrators encourage life-long learning, this message neglects to acknowledge a sad reality reflected by the practices of public school districts. The more education a teacher receives, the more expensive they are to the district. While such continuing education benefits instruction, and thus student learning, the increased pay commonly outlined in school districts’ collective bargaining agreements shows that at the highest ranking of doctorate, teachers are too expensive. This narrative depicts my journey of pursuing a doctorate while teaching but hiding it out of this fear.

Keywords: budget, doctorate, education, life-long learning, public education, teaching

Introduction

Careers based on compassion for others often pose particular challenges for their practitioners. Whether it be social work and the mental health toll of supporting children in non-nurturing homes, or nursing and the dauntingly long shifts with limited breaks, occupations focused on caring for others have their obstacles. Teaching, an occupation I chose out of my love for children, posed a challenge for me that I did not anticipate. Low pay, spending my own money on classroom supplies, unfair labeling as a “glorified babysitter,” and large class sizes without in-class support were all obstacles I knew were part of the profession. However, I did not expect school funding concerns to be a hindrance to my students’ and my own learning.

“Become a life-long learner!” Ever hear or give that advice? It’s a mantra that our culture has been perpetuating for decades. As a teacher, I preached this long-term goal to my students routinely with the hopes that later in life they would go to college, graduate with a bachelor’s or master’s, and even go on to get their doctorates. But what if I told you that getting a doctorate was looked down upon—that it is something that should be kept private, a secret? Would you think I’m crazy? Quite possibly, but my story is one that reflects these exact sentiments. Public education’s prioritization of finances has disrupted my own learning and my students’ learning as I served as a fifth-grade teacher for three years. From students concerned I’d lose my job due to budget cuts, to me fearing my continuing education was too evident to administrators, concerns about money had overtaken much of the time meant to be dedicated to learning. A paradox became evident: In a place where learning should be encouraged and nurtured in countless ways, the focus on educational funding may be the largest hindrance.

One Teacher’s Story of a Secret Doctorate

Growing up in a small town in western Massachusetts, my mother, a high school special education teacher, dreamt of getting her doctorate. That title of “Dr. Chase” was something she

desired deeply. However, before she could celebrate getting accepted into a program, she had to turn them down. She had just found out she was pregnant with my older brother and had decided to make motherhood her focus. I respect her for that choice, but she later admitted to me that her greatest career aspiration was to get her doctorate in special education—and that was why she constantly reminded me that a doctoral degree was within my reach. In high school and college, I would scoff at her and insist that once I had my BA, I was going to be done with school. Then, when I started my education major in college, I found I needed to get a master's anyway. I decided that another year of school would not be so bad and, so, I pursued an MEd in elementary education. But in graduate school, I grew to truly love the process of learning.

Once I graduated, I took a year off from being a student to focus on my first year of teaching, which was overwhelming in itself. With a class of 26 students, a high proportion of them receiving special education services, my plate was full. But I was missing the structure of coursework, reading empirical articles, and pushing myself academically. What could possibly fill this void? When I explained to my mother how I was feeling, she was quick to respond with one single word: “Doctorate.” I laughed at first, for she had been harping on that idea since I was a mere five years old (or earlier, because knowing her, she probably said it to me in utero). I then realized she was right.

I wanted to reach a higher level, and as much as I was enjoying teaching, I wanted something more. I wanted to teach prospective teachers in an educator preparation program. I saw myself as a college professor, climbing the ladder of academia, getting published, researching in the field, and through this work having an even greater impact on the field of education. I felt like I understood excellence in teaching practice, and reviews from parents and students ensured me that I understood what it took to be a life-changing teacher. With my PhD in education leadership, research showed me that I could help inspire other teachers.

As you could imagine, my mother was thrilled with this news that I wanted a PhD for the betterment of the field of education. When I was accepted to Lesley University, she started absolutely bawling with excitement, joy, and pride. Unfortunately, three weeks before I would leave for my first residency to officially start my PhD program, my mother passed away from cancer, only three weeks after being diagnosed.

Heartbroken, confused, and deflated, I held onto the dream of my PhD to pick myself back up. I needed a focus, an outlet, and some meaning to my life, and I hoped that re-entering academia would provide the structure I needed to function. I went out to Cambridge, MA, to begin a journey that has brought me close to some of the most amazing, inspirational people I have ever met, and I have been pushed intellectually to a level I would have never thought possible. While it has been a challenging program, the supports that have surrounded me have made it all possible.

Upon beginning this program, however, I learned something quite interesting from my fellow cohort members. Not all schools support teachers getting their doctoral degrees. I was very surprised at this news. Not supportive of furthering one's education? Isn't that what we advocate to our students daily by preaching a love of learning for life? But why?

The answer was quite simple: More education means a higher salary. A higher salary means more money out of the school district's pocket. I learned that school districts that were struggling to make ends meet financially, like my school district, were known to cut teachers who decided to go for higher degrees if those teachers did not have professional status. A teacher achieves professional status after three years of teaching at a single school and it becomes much harder for that teacher to lose their job, similar to tenure.

Since I had just entered my second year of teaching and needed three years to qualify for professional status, I became incredibly scared of my school district discovering that I was pursuing this endeavor. What if they found out? Would I be fired? Would any school district want me? How come some places celebrated teachers learning more, but others condemned it? I felt lost and frightened. When paying for a pricey degree out of pocket, I could have used the funds more than ever and technically could have reported course credits to climb the salary scale, but it was too much of a risk to ask. Were a few thousand dollars in pay raise worth potentially getting laid off? I decided to keep my continuing education to myself.

In a world where I originally thought earning more education was a positive, I saw an ugly underbelly—one that revolved around money and budgets. I decided to keep my PhD a secret so that my school would not have a reason to fire me; I really enjoyed the small, rural school where I was teaching. A year after making that choice, something convinced me further that I made the right decision.

In May of 2017, I was preparing for my students like any other day. I was putting up the morning message and schedule after photocopying some exit tickets for the day's reading lesson. Everything was normal, until the principal opened my door and asked me to come see him when I got a chance. His tone was less upbeat than usual, so I had the sense that something was awry. Once I walked into his office, he asked me to take a seat. He then proceeded to tell me something that seemed unreal at the time—I was being laid off.

To save money, the school was combining fifth and sixth grade. I was the most recent hire out of the two grades, so I was the one being laid off. This did not go over well with the community. Yes, they did not like the idea of students of different ages forced into the same class, but it had also turned personal. They were more upset about me being let go than the act of merging. Students showed up to school committee meetings with protest signs and news crews even waited outside my car for commentary. As humbling of an experience as this was to have so many fight to have me stay, it was also quite nerve-racking. "Teachers get cut all the time," people would say to me, to try and normalize the scenario. My students did not see it that way. As one student told me, "It's just not fair. You're the best teacher we have ever had and you do so much for us. Why should you be cut?" I was shocked with her rationale and all I could respond with was, "It's just how life goes sometimes."

In the end, due to this large disruption from the community, the superintendent rescinded his decision to reduce faculty numbers and did not merge the two grades. Many of my students' parents had threatened to remove their children from the district if faculty numbers were cut. My students felt validated for their undying efforts to keep me at their school, even though I would

not be their teacher anymore as they had moved up to sixth grade. While they gained a great deal of satisfaction and skills of perseverance and optimism, they lost time learning academics and felt a huge amount of pressure that they put on themselves to answer the call of saving my job. While there were pros to this experience, it was a huge disruptor to their education and to my teaching, as it was all that was on their minds.

The whole experience highlighted to me what money means for a public school district whose funds are already tight. They were willing to cut me in a heartbeat, without a second look. Suddenly, it became clear to me that I was lucky to have a job at all. For me to suddenly report my PhD course credits to the district to increase my salary could potentially inspire the administrators to look for any reason to cut me.

It was an emotionally taxing process. I usually got into school one to one-and-a-half hours prior to students' arrival, and not even other staff were there yet. I did this because once I had materials prepared for my students for the day, I would use any extra time to work on PhD homework—I needed any spare time I had. Every time another teacher or an administrator walked into my classroom, I felt paranoid that maybe something from my coursework got left out. What if they saw a book on qualitative research methods or my course program outline? It was as if I feared that they could smell the academia emitting through my pores. I could not even talk to my principal without thinking about him finding out about my PhD. I even had nightmares of the district finding out and firing me. The focus on my fear kept me from fully seeing the extent to which my doctoral studies were actually improving my teaching, since so much of my coursework revolved around trying out new strategies and material with my students.

I *was* able to see, however, that student engagement was vastly improved, student test scores were on the rise, and the new quality of conversations that were taking place was inspiring, all thanks to my PhD work. The results I was seeing in my students due to my improved practice made me satisfied with my choice to pursue my PhD, and I deeply wished I could share it with those above me administratively. However, to the school district, a better, more expensive teacher was simply not worth the cost.

Flash forward two years later, and I had defended my dissertation after teaching in a temporary position in an educator preparation program. I had become a tenure-track assistant professor of education at a state university. The clouds had parted in my professional world and the largest weight had been lifted from my shoulders. The fear that once made me second-guess every action I made from the moment I stepped on school grounds had suddenly vanished faster than candy in front of a fifth grader. This meant that upon leaving to work in higher education, I told my principal what I had been up to for the past two years in secrecy. His reply was that I should not have worried about it and should have let them know so that I could get more pay—but when I told our union representatives and colleagues of my choice, they affirmed that I made the correct decision. Everyone else I spoke with agreed that it was likely that the district would have cut me had they discovered my continuing education. I think that my principal denied that is what would have happened because it is not something that he would have openly admitted, or because it would not have been his choice; rather, it was the superintendent's choice who was in

charge of the decision to almost cut me previously. Either way, keeping my education a secret was the smartest choice for me. Taking a pay cut of about \$4,000 was worth not risking losing my job.

What do all of these experiences say about the mantra “life-long learning”? Is it a lie that we tell students? My situation is more common than I originally thought. By attending academic conferences, I have met several other practicing teachers who were also keeping their continuing education “undercover.” Less than two percent of the population holds a doctorate, and less than one percent hold a doctorate and are women (Scientific American, 2014). Something that should evoke pride and support has, greatly, brought me fear and reluctance. So, I pose a question to the those in the field of education: Are school administrators passing along a double standard that their students should get as much education as possible, but their employees should not? In a country where teachers are touted as role models for their students, are we putting a cap on their potential and then, by extension, a cap on their students’ potential?

Call me a rebel, call me a flight risk, or call me an over-achiever, but one thing no one could ever call me is impassionate and lazy. Working on my PhD has pushed me to work harder and think deeper, and it has made me a more reflective and effective teacher. In the midst of writing lessons, grading papers, applying for grants, and scheduling fundraisers and fieldtrips, I had been hiding in the shadows writing essays, reading countless academic journals, and completing course after course.

A Macro Perspective

In the end, I guess that it is not worth the cost to some administrators to have teachers continue their education. This is not the case everywhere, but the scenario I described does occur widespread in our nation, according to Leachman et al. (2017). Increased school funding, Leachman et al. argue, could help schools hire and retain high-quality teachers and reduce class sizes, yet 29 states provided less state funding per student in 2015 than in 2008. On average, 47 percent of public school funding comes from the state, 45 percent comes from local revenue, and only about 8 percent comes from the federal government. Such large discrepancies in state funding were not matched by federal aid, leaving school districts losing funding over time (Leachman et al., 2017). The less money in a school district, the higher the discouragement for teachers to climb in the salary scale, thus less continued learning.

The lack of money in public education means less money for teacher salaries. The national Report Card stated that the U.S. only has six states that offer wages deemed “competitive” when compared to other career options; the rest fall below, thus making it more difficult for schools in those states to retain high-quality teachers (Baker et al., 2014). Teachers, as a result, are paid less and asked to teach more children at a single time. The profession of teaching has become even more challenging, but not more rewarding—at least monetarily. To make matters worse, there has been a decrease in education jobs across the nation. Between 2008 and 2015, there have been about 135,000 education jobs cut, whereas the student enrollment has increased by over 1.4 million (Leachman et al., 2017). This leaves students with lower-quality instruction due to less individualized attention. Communities suffer because they then become populated with

graduates who did not receive a high-quality education and lack skills to contribute toward the economy as effectively as they could had they received a better education.

Communities that are deemed “rougher” for teachers to teach do not supply increased resources for those teachers, where they need it most (Levy, 2018). The struggling communities then suffer further because the students are not receiving the support they need in their schools. Lack of funding and prioritization has hindered schools from helping students transfer taught skills to their future careers. In a nation that prides itself on its status as an economic superpower, the concern about education is lacking. Without a focus on improving the supports in the U.S. public education system, it is inevitable that the U.S. economic status will decline, similar to how its place in education has already dropped internationally (Levy, 2018).

Could life-long learning be the answer to concerns of our nation’s future? If teachers continue to learn and improve their practice, while concurrently increasing their salaries, students will develop twenty-first century skills to be economically competitive in the future (Levy, 2018). This would result in economic benefits for the nation for years to come. If students have all the resources needed to ensure they are learning the necessary skills, and decisions of school offerings are not based on money, the nation benefits. In all, money should never be the deciding factor as to whether teachers or students are learning.

There is a long-standing controversy between whether *more* money or *better-used* money is the answer to the woes that public schools face. If money did not matter, then it wouldn’t be challenging to teach a child who didn’t eat breakfast or come to school with a snack. Turner et al. (2016) of National Public Radio (NPR) report that when increased funding is specifically allocated to recruiting adept teachers and decreasing class sizes, the quality of the education is vastly improved. The main take-aways from the studies presented in Turner et al.’s article were that a) the money must be directed toward the students who need it the most, b) the monetary increases must come at a steady rate over multiple years, c) the money should remain in the classroom by supporting teachers’ salaries, training, and continuing education, and d) the money should be applied to the public schools with a distinct definition of the desired result—i.e., how do they define success? Money for schools alone, Turner et al. conclude, isn’t the simplest answer for better experiences for both teachers and students: Instead, thoughtful use of funds (still increased) could more reliably boost student achievement.

Conclusion

As I left my job as a public school teacher, my secret came out—and I’m now using it as a lesson to all around me to bring to light a hidden conundrum that deserves attention. No teachers should ever have to hide achieving more for themselves. Consider this a request for all school administrators: Encourage your teachers to receive more education past their requirements, even if it costs the district more money. The benefits are too bountiful to pass up. More educated teachers mean more educated students.

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About the Author: Jacquelynn Anne Boivin, PhD is Assistant Professor, Department of Elementary & Early Childhood Education, Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, MA (508-531-1224, jboivin@bridgew.edu).