



Making it in Education: A Personal Comparison of Public and Private Education

By Melissa Ortiz

Public education in the United States is in need of aid even after the ‘Brown v. Board of Education’ ruling of 1954, which outlawed racial segregation in public education. More than half a decade later, schools in the US have still not truly provided African Americans, Latinos, and students from other minority groups with the same facilities and standards available to white Americans. Today, these same institutions continue to suffer through federal budget cuts, after-school program shortages, and a lack of extra-curricular activities such as music and sports outside of traditional school life. This leaves little hope for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Racially segregated schools, institutionalized racism, poor and unhealthy school conditions, under-qualified teachers, insufficient course materials, and inadequate support services all demonstrate the need to improve public education. There is a deep need for more public discourse as we continue to face the challenges that jeopardize the public school system.

My experience and educational training as a prospective “teacher of color” described here is meant to highlight the disparities that exist between private and public schools. These disparities are not limited to the physical facilities and the amount of access to resources provided by these schools to students themselves, but they extend to the meanings

we have given to public versus private school educated students. Many private schools aim at diversifying their schools through the integration of teachers of color. This teaching experience challenged me to think about the usual obstacles such as credibility and equal pay faced by people of color, who are sought out for different reasons such as, bringing a “multicultural” perspective to the school community and overall an affirmation of people of color as citizens of this country able to hold leadership positions. It helped me reflect on the challenge of either playing the race game in order to become the “model minority” or being okay with just fitting in to another quota of a social institution so it can proclaim itself to be “diverse” and “multicultural.” Over time such terms have adopted a “dirty word” nuance because of their exclusivity. Public feelings on this can easily be observed through the vote against Proposition 209 by Californian voters, in 1996, which banned Affirmative Action programs in public institutions throughout the state.

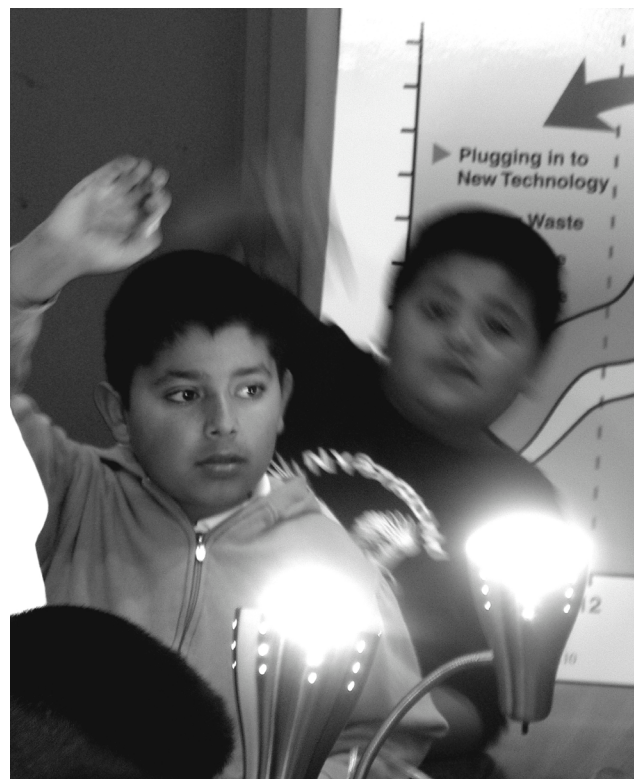
With statewide actions like these that speak on public sentiment, the difference that sets public schools apart from private schools is the projected monetary investment of its students as future leaders. Public schools carry a lead stereotype in the media. The stereotypical picture of inner-city schools filled with disrespectful kids who cut class, damage

school property, and generally misbehave serves as a distraction for those who hold negative attitudes against these schools. It helps explain why schools are being shutdown, why there is a lack of funding for public education, and why these problems still persist. Usual indicators for why this is happening are the disenfranchisement from local taxpayers, under-enrollment in schools, as well as war and prison industries receiving more federal money than the education system. A race issue is clearly at hand and if we continue investing only in educating the “future white CEOs and white Presidents” of this country. What else is left for the rest of us, who are the minority, public educated citizens?

This summer I participated in a teaching fellowship at an all-boys prep school in Manhattan’s wealthy Upper West Side. What was presented on paper as an intensive two-week training for teachers of color turned out to be a mechanism to diversify “independent” schools: the elite segment of private education.

The program took us from the basics of teaching (i.e. lesson planning and classroom management) to the hiring process of how to sell oneself to an elite school. Although independent schools recruit teachers of color, the ratio of faculty of color to white faculty proved that they have had little success.

One of the first activities was a trip to P.S. 07, one of Manhattan’s best-noted public elementary schools, located a few blocks from the all-boys prep school. Upon entering the school I signed in showing my ID to a police officer at the front-desk. The school is famous for recruiting students from all over the city, making the student body fairly-well integrated, while



Source: Alexandra Iselin Waldhorn

the majority of teachers are white. The school was in good condition and the students outspoken. I sat in on a first-grade class where the teacher asked the students for their feedback on the substitute teacher from the week before. One student eagerly responded, without raising his hand, that substitute teacher had taken time out of their play time, which was unfair. Other students empathized with him, either by nodding their heads or by raising their hands to add

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on to what he had just said. The teacher seemed perplexed by his

feedback and assured him that they must have misbehaved for the substitute to have come to that decision. This was an interesting moment inside the classroom, where the teacher was cautious of how she acted in front of us, the visitors. This was also towards the end of the school year and most teachers appeared overworked.

As we continued our visit, walking down the hallways, I was happy to find a music room devoted to the school's music program. We got to meet the music teacher, who told us that only the fourth and fifth graders are able to participate because they did not have enough instruments. Even though because of limited materials, I was happy to find a music program that had not yet been cut, especially in a city that is supposedly active in preserving the arts.

After leaving the school, we spent only fifteen minutes debriefing our observations. For the next nine days our focus was looking exclusively at private schools. It was clear that the purpose of the trip to P.S. 07 was to show us a public school before presenting the alternative they wanted us to choose—independent schools.

I quickly learned independent schools act as mini-corporations where wealthy parents attempt to solidify their status by enrolling their children in top schools like New York City's Spence, Dalton, and Calhoun. These schools begin as early as preschool (known as "Baby Ivies" by those who attend them) and cost as much as \$24,000 a year. They serve a minute fraction of the fifty million school-aged children in the US. Aside from limited scholarships, these schools are inaccessible to families unable to pay such demanding tuitions. According to the teachers I spoke with, some sixth-grade parents evaluated their child's performance as either being University of Pennsylvania or Harvard "worthy," explaining how these institutions signify different strata of intellectual superiority very early on in a child's life.

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To attract teachers of color, my fellowship cast these elite schools in

the brightest possible light. We visited Jamestown, a boarding school with an amazing campus in central New Jersey, designed to prepare students for the world of over-achievement. The school had eye-popping facilities: a full size ice-hockey rink inside the gym, a newly built music and arts complex with its own recording studio, and a science laboratory the size of an Olympic sized swimming pool. Walking down neat cement paths along grassy areas under the scorching summer sun, gave me the feeling of being on an Ivy-League campus.

At lunch we sat with the teachers of color from the Teachers Fellowship (a competitive summer fellowship for independent teachers from all over the country) and were given the superb rhetoric of why we should join these schools. School-financed Masters degrees, housing, free tuition for teacher's children and childcare, not to mention generous gifts from parents such as keys to their summer home here and abroad or front row tickets to baseball games. According to the Teachers fellows, all these perks came in the name of "professional development" and "personal well-being." They made working at independent schools look like winning a lottery ticket, a game of chance and pure luck where if you play the cards right you can get yourself inside a world of financial and personal security.

However, it was clear from the beginning that in order to work in an independent school, we had to learn how to behave inside of them. We were told that in putting on a new "hat," we had to speak properly, dress a certain way for the frequent cock-

tail parties, and deal with conflict indirectly in order to “fit in” to this independent world. It is obvious that there is no room for students to experience other people’s realities without an artificial coating if teachers have to behave a certain way.

These schools call themselves “independent” overlooking the fact that they replicate all the other institutions that cater to the white and wealthy. The word independent obscures their elitism and so do these recruitment programs aimed at teachers of color. Independent schools need teachers of color to avoid the embarrassment of graduating “the future CEO’s and leaders of this country,” as one faculty member put it, without having encountered people of color in leadership positions.

While walking around Jamestown, I thought about my own overworked teachers growing up, most of whom disciplined students as much as they taught. My family immigrated to California when I was three after my parents lost their jobs to a twelve-year civil war in El Salvador. I grew up in San Francisco’s Outer Mission District going to public schools with other kids of color and newly arrived immigrants; the majority of us qualifying for free lunch.

My teachers often took money out of their own pockets to provide supplies when they wanted to incorporate creative lessons into our learning. I thought about how different school would have been if they had been given these opportunities that were being flaunted to us now. By the time I was in high school, I felt lost and behind in my course material from the lack of leadership I experienced in middle school, which I now know resulted from a lack of resources. Math teachers came and left after just the first week of school leaving us with substitute teachers for the rest of the year. This is the type of resemblance I saw when I visited P.S. 07, when the student

found the substitute teacher to be unfair.

It is not news why public schools face a larger challenge than elite schools, aside from an obvious lack of resources, they need to first teach students the value of their education and then let them know that college is in fact an option and further prepare students towards that goal. Positive reinforcement from my teachers motivated me to pursue college because they saw things that I did not see in myself at the time.

The reality outside of these schools is that teachers of color comprise only 14 percent of all teachers nationwide. These perks I heard are not enough to convince me to pose for a photo for an elite school to add to its pamphlet. If my teachers did not choose to teach at public schools then who would have taught me? As a young prospective educator, I believe I will be more rewarded teaching at public schools even if I have to shell out the extra \$500 from my own pocket for classroom supplies or develop the mantra, “Little Johnny needs to start eating breakfast.” I see myself living up to a school’s mission by creating opportunities for children who might not have them otherwise. The art of teaching itself is a skill, one in constant mastering because as children grow, you can learn from them if you allow yourself to grow up with them. This opportunity definitely allowed me to value that work. §

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