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The liberations and limitations of schooling: insights into the curriculum and environment of U.S. private and public schools

Allegra Pauline Neely-Wilson
Vassar College

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Vassar College

The Liberations and Limitations of Schooling:
Insights into the curriculum and environment of U.S. private and public schools

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

by

Allegra Pauline Neely-Wilson

Thesis Advisors:
Professor Marque Mirningoff
Professor Erendira Rueda

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The Liberations and Limitations of Schooling:

Insights into the curriculum and environment of U.S. private and public schools

Abstract

This thesis proposed the concepts of “liberating” and “controlling” education. I initially defined a “liberating” schooling environment as one that follows a progressive educational philosophy that focuses on curriculum that deepens critical thinking, a philosophy mostly found in private schools. I categorized a “controlling” environment as one that follows the essentialism educational philosophy that focuses a common core curriculum which forces learning based on certain standards, a philosophy mostly found in public schools. Using these definitions and my initial categorization, I explored whether these types of education have the potential to either “liberate” or “control” students. My research consisted of interviews using a convenient sample of five current college and recent graduate students who came from a mix of public and private high schools and colleges. I used open-ended interview questions that examined their experience in school, how that experience prepared them for college and the outside world. I ultimately came to a conclusion that veered from my original impression. I determined that although a high school can be categorized as “controlling” or “liberating” based on how the school helps develop their student’s intellectual curiosity, I found that public and private high school education can be both controlling and liberating in many different aspects.

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Introduction

For 13 years of my life, I attended the same K – 12 private school. Until I went to college, I never had the opportunity to explore or understand a type of school or schooling environment. I became interested in the topic of education, specifically the differences between private and public high schooling, when I began to realize my experience in high school was extremely different than many of my friends who went to public high school. I was incredibly interested in how their background differed from mine, and how their school prepared them, or did not prepare them, for college and the world beyond. I believed this was an important topic to analyze because a high school environment helps develop students academically and somewhat socially and for future endeavors, and my high school played such an important role in my development. Additionally, after reading about all the inequalities that come with public high schooling, I was interested to see how my friends personally felt about their experiences, and if those experiences were comparable to what I was reading.

When initially reflecting on my own academics and high schooling, I came to describe my setting as “liberating.” When reading about the inequalities that come with some public schooling and the curriculum that is based on teaching to the test¹, I came to describe that type of environment as “controlling.” These were my initial reflection of how to define schooling and how to describe the academic environment based on what I originally thought was expected from a high school environment. Educational systems are in place to prepare students to become literate for college and beyond. The common core curriculum of teaching in public schools was

¹ Teaching to the test, or *item-teaching* is when “teachers organize their instruction either around the actual items found on a test or around a set of look-alike items (Popham 2001).”

created to provide an equalizing potential, although I believed that public schools had the tendency to be more “controlling” as they teach towards a test through the common core. I found that because private schools created curriculum to deepen critical thinking, they were promoting a more “liberating” aspect.

These considerations led me to ask these questions: What is the impact that social institutions and individual actions have on the learning process and the students overall educational outcomes? How will race, gender and socioeconomic characteristics play a part in how well students focus and retain information and perform on tests in the educational environment? How are these differences represented and how do they alter the learning process? Is there a correlation between educational outcomes and economic success? And finally, how does education effect or shape a person’s sense of identity not only in their community but in the world in which they move on to after high school?

In order to come to some answers to these questions, I interviewed five of my friends who have a wide range of high school and college experiences. I went in to the interviews with the somewhat biased that private school would produce more liberated students, because of the progressive standpoints towards education and critical thinking. From stories, movies and scholarship, I initially had the idea that all public schooling was inherently controlling, and therefore a possibly inferior learning experience. But, as I continued with my interviews and research, I found that my biased approach to only labeling public and private schooling as either controlling and liberating respectively was incorrect. I discovered that public and private education can be both limiting and liberating.

Chapter outlines

I will begin the thesis with an outline of the context of the history of schooling and the foundations of sociology of education. In this section I will outline traditional education, that included the common core curriculum and the idea of teaching to the test, and progressive education, that focuses on the student rather than the teacher. I will introduce my methods, my interviewing process and define the terms I use. In Chapter one I discuss the issues with inequalities in schools and highlight how schooling can replicate social patterns, how cultural social and economic capital effect inequalities, and how high stakes testing and tracking in schooling, although formed with the intention of equalization, resulted in more negative effects. The school to prison pipeline additionally creates a push out of students, tracking them to jail through zero tolerance policies within schooling. In Chapter two I go on to discuss public schooling and frame public schools with scholarship discussing some controlling aspects that can be found in public schools. I reference my interviews with those who attended public high school and add their perspectives. Chapter three looks into private schooling. I open with an analysis of the New York City private school I attended, The Brearley School, and continue with an analysis of the interviews given by those who also attended private high schools. I conclude by discussing how I veered away from my original categorizations and discuss how each schooling systems tend to have aspects of both liberation and control. I end with a discussion in the ways in which we can change and challenge a constraining high school, particularly with ones that have restricting curriculum and the many ways we can define success.

Context: History of schooling, foundations of sociology of education

The sociology of education is the study of educational institutions and how those places affect the individual experiences of the student. It is believed that education is supposed to support social aims and progression. The two main types of education that I will be referring too are progressive education and traditional education.

Traditional Education

“Essentialists hope that when students leave school, they will possess not only basic skills and an extensive body of knowledge, but also disciplined practical minds, capable of applying schoolhouse lessons in the real world.” – William C. Bagley

Traditional education is an approach to education that is based off of lecture and instruction by a teacher, who expects students to receive and master the core subjects. Essentialism is based off of the idea that there should be a common core of knowledge that students must receive and master. Schools should base their educational principles on the standards of the core curriculums on essential knowledge.

Essentialism education was started by William C. Bagley and it was based off of the idea that in the classroom the teachers would have the authority. Bagley supported what is now commonly referred to as the common core curriculum. With this, essentialism is the educational philosophy that is the dominant approach to education in America. As noted in *Educational Psychology* by A. K. Nayak and V. K. Rao, an essentialist approach to education “strives to instill students with the ‘essentials’ of academic knowledge and character development” (Naykak and Rao 2008:6). They continue to say that essentialism “contends that schools should not try to radically reshape society... [rather] American schools should transmit the traditional moral values and intellectual knowledge that students need to become model citizens” (Naykak and

Rao 2008:6). Academic rigor is apparent in an essentialist view of education, where a common core requirement is key to success. The teacher is the core orientation of the classroom and serves as “an intellectual and moral role model for the students” (Naykak and Rao 2008:7). Those in the classroom are taught to be culturally literate, to “possess a working knowledge about the people, events, ideas, and institutions that have shaped American society” (Naykak and Rao 2008:8). The essentialist way of education results in many different inequalities with contemporary education, which will be further referenced in Chapter 1.

In *Educational Goals* by David Labaree, Labaree touches on the three goals for American Education that either focus on private goods or public goods: democratic equality (public), social efficiency (public) and social mobility (private). Labaree’s discussion on social mobility in schooling is the idea that schools should compare individuals to compete for social position. He mentions how schooling “argues that education is a commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions” (Labaree 1997:42). When teachers are teaching to the test, it undermines learning, reinforces social stratification and promotes a futile and wasteful race to attain devalued credentials. As Labaree says, “credentialism [is] triumphing over learning in schools, with a commodified form of education winning an edge over useful substance” (Labaree 1997:42).

Progressive education

Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself. – John Dewey

“Traditional education tended to ignore the importance of personal impulse and desire as moving springs. But this is no reason why progressive education should identify impulse and desire with purpose and thereby pass lightly over the need for careful observation, for wide range of information, and for judgment is students are to share in the formation of the purposes which activate them” – John Dewey

Progressive education is based on the idea that education has to focus on the student rather than the teacher. Students should be active participants in education, question what they learn, and experiment and experience the world. Emile Durkheim was one of the first sociologists to suggest that the study of education was in need of a sociological approach. He considered education “to be something essentially social in character, in its origins and its functions and that as a result of theory of education relates more clearly to sociology than any other science” (Dhiman 2014:104).

John Dewey had a prominent role in promoting progressive education within a democratic classroom. He believed in a hands-on approach of education that supports learning by doing. This view of education also falls under the educational philosophy of pragmatism, where humans must rely on reality through experience. Students should interact with their environment, and teachers and students should learn together. This view of education is child centered, giving students the ability to explore environments through an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum. The role of the teacher, according to Dewey is as a facilitator rather than an instructor, one who helps develop skills and observe. This idea goes against the traditional idea of schooling where a teacher only delivers information and students receive the information and present understandings through a test.

Dewey believed that students should explore and collaborate together in the classroom. Traditional education has a child remain passive throughout their educational experience but, Dewey believes children are naturally active and engaged learners and must have an outlet to express themselves. He believed that education and life should be intertwined; education is a part of life rather than just a preparation for life beyond. As Dewey says, “the child always has something in his mind to talk about, he has something to say; he has a thought to express, and a

thought is not a thought unless it's one's own" (Dewey 1907:66). Additionally, Dewey touches on the idea of the competitive nature of schooling and the negatives that come with traditional education. In his chapter "The School and Social Progress," Dewey states that rather than critical thinking, "school work consists in simply learning lessons" (Dewey 1907:4) where teachers look for which "child has succeeded in getting ahead of others in storing up" (Dewey 1907:4). Dewey emphasizes how the traditional view of education is not a social one, and how "thoroughly is this the prevalent atmosphere that for one child to help another in his task has become a school crime" (Dewey 1907:4). Further comparison between traditional and progressive Education can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparing Traditional and Progressive Education

Traditional	Progressive
School is a preparation for life.	School is a part of life.
Learners are passive absorbers of information and authority.	Learners are active participants, problem solvers, and planners.
Teachers are sources of information and authority.	Teachers are facilitators, guides who foster thinking.
Parents are outsiders and uninvolved.	Parents are the primary teachers, goal setters, and planners, and serve as resources.
Community is separate from school, except for funding.	Community is an extension of the classroom.
Decision-making is centrally based and administratively delivered.	Decision-making is shared by all constituent groups.
Program is determined by external criteria, particularly test results.	Program is determined by mission, philosophy, and goals for graduates.
Learning is linear, with factual accumulation and skill mastery.	Learning is spiral, with depth and breadth as goals.
Knowledge is absorbed through lectures, worksheets, and texts.	Knowledge is constructed through play, direct experience, and social interaction.

Instruction is linear and largely based on correct answers.	Instruction is related to central questions and inquiry, often generated by the children.
Disciplines, particularly language and math, are separated.	Disciplines are integrated as children make connections.
Skills are taught discretely and are viewed as goals.	Skills are related to content and are viewed as tools.
Assessment is norm-referenced, external, and graded.	Assessment is benchmarked, has many forms, and is progress-oriented.
Success is competitively based, derived from recall and memory, and specific to a time/place.	Success is determined through application over time, through collaboration.
Products are the end point.	Products are subsumed by process considerations.
Intelligence is a measure of linguistic and logical/mathematical abilities.	Intelligence is recognized as varied, includes the arts, and is measured in real-life problem-solving.
School is a task to be endured.	School is a challenging and fun part of life.

Source: Robert G. Peters, with thanks to the books *Schools of Quality*, by John Jay Bonstigl, and *In Search of Understanding*, by Martin C. Brooks and Jaqueline Grennon, *Independent Schools*.
<http://www.wingraschool.org/who/progressive.htm>

Methods

Interview process

My findings for this thesis were drawn mostly from interviews with five current college students and one college graduate who were directly affected by the curriculums of either public and private schooling. Additionally, I referenced a video that contained pre-recorded interviews from teachers at The Brearley School, a private school in New York City. Prior to conducting the interviews, I received IRB review exemption under the provisions outlined in section 46.101(b)(1)(ii) of the HHS regulations governing research with human subjects. And Each interviewee signed a consent form.

This thesis was based in qualitative research² which included semi-structured, open-ended interview questions that allowed for unplanned follow-up questions. The questions asked about their experience with their high school, how those experiences prepared them for college, for their lives in college and beyond. The full list of questions can be found in the appendix. Open ended qualitative research allowed for my interviewees to report their own worlds in their own words, creating a meaningful frame that presented their lived experience. I used a convenient sample³ consisting of my friends from high school and college. Each informant fell into a different category displayed in Table 2. I was able to complete five interviews over the course of two months. The interviews were conducted in New York City and Poughkeepsie, NY. Each interview lasted between 40 and 50 minutes and were recorded, transcribed and later coded to identify reoccurring themes. Each informant's name was changed to protect their identity.

² Research that observes and analyzes the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things

³ "Convenience sampling, as its name suggests, involves selecting sample units that are readily accessible to the researcher" (Convenience Sample - SAGE Research Methods 2018)

Charts

I wanted to cover these four different possible paths:

- Private high school → Private college
- Public high school → Private college
- Public high school → Public college
- Private high school → Public college

Table 2. Interview Paths

	Public High School	Private High School
Public College	Marie (New York) Ernest (Washington State)	[no available informants]
Private College	Margot (New York to Connecticut) Ernest (Washington to New York)	Tina (New York to Washington DC) Sara (New York to Minnesota)

Note: Ernest appears in two categories because he transferred schools

Coding themes

My interviews consisted of five sections of questions that related to high school experience.

After coding each interview, I found six common categories and each interview provided different reoccurring themes within these categories.

1. High school environment
2. Teacher access
3. Tracking
4. Classes and curriculum
5. Preparation for college
6. Life within college

Limitations

There were inherently setbacks that I faced with the selection of interviewees. Those I interviewed were mostly from New York and went to east coast high schools (besides one from Washington State). Most interviewees came from middle class backgrounds, had support from family and had the opportunities and the means to go to colleges after high school. All were high achievers in high school and participated in honors or AP classes, so the experience of lower tracked and lower-class students was lacking. I did not have a long list of people who I interviewed and would have liked to go beyond a convenient sample that allowed for diversity among participants and experiences. Additionally, there was nobody I was able to interview that were part of the private high school to public college track.

Definitions

Controlling: When I initially thought of the word “controlling” to describe schooling it was based on my idea of what the academic environment was at a common public school. These controlling aspects that would make a student feel constraint in their learning were based off my understanding of the constant surveillance and curriculum that focused on teaching to the test found in some public schools. Additionally, I was interested in whether those who came from what I defined as a controlling environment would find that they were unprepared for the experience of being at a college, or if they were overwhelmed and shocked with the openness and the expectation to think critically outside of their high school experience. Although all schools and teachers hopefully want their students to feel liberated in all senses of the word in and out of the classroom, I found that through the history of schooling and the interviews that I conducted, the wish was not always the result. This is why I considered “controlling” as a word

that I thought juxtaposed well with “liberating.” A controlling environment provided the idea that students would not feel liberated in a sense of individual movement, but rather would feel as though the school was forcing knowledge that they would not necessarily connect with. This would not allow room for intellectual development beyond what was being taught.

Liberating: When I first defined these terms for myself I stuck to my own, possibly biased, idea of what typical school would aim to produce in their students learning. I believed that a liberating environment in school referred to the academic standard that a student achieved by the end of high school. Specifically, at a standard acceptable for elite colleges. When I started this study, I believed that private high schools were in a sense more “liberating” with student because they focused on a curriculum that deepens critical thinking rather than forces learning based on certain standards where a student’s intellectual curiosity and promise would naturally extend beyond the classroom and the school would liberates them in a way that could expand their knowledge due to the rigor and the climate of their high school environment. Soon, I learned that there are many more ways a student can feel “liberated” during and after high school, that does not have to do with academics or academic standard that usually came with a private school. How the student feels motivated in school and in life is what is most critical.

Through these questions I wonder what is really liberating about schooling. Is it to have the students reach a common good, civic virtue or engagement, to promote a concept of care, to lead to social justice or participatory democratic practice, or to focus on the individual student and their contribution to society? How does the school individually “liberate” their students? The historical outline of school reform helps improve understanding on the history behind how others considered what would be to help students become liberated.

The analysis in *Becoming Good American Schools* by Jeannie Oakes, Karen Hunter Quartz, Steve Ryan and Martin Lipton can help further support my definitions of “liberating” and “controlling.” They discuss how Thomas Jefferson set public education in motion and argued that public schools “bore the responsibility for ensuring that Americans acquire the cultural knowledge and skills of deliberation that could make possible a public process of determining the common good” (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan and Lipton 2000: 30). Jefferson’s response to public education is one that supports the common good. In their book they argue “schools must . . . impart to young Americans the academic knowledge and skills necessary for democratic citizenship and the public good” (Oakes et al. 2000:30). The authors also suggested that students develop into “an intellectually reflective person” with a ‘disciplined mind’” (Oakes et al. 2000:31). As they reflect, Jefferson “believed that education could serve both” individual liberty and the common good” (Oakes et al. 2000:31).

They discuss the idea of “the dual commitment to civic virtue and freedom” (32) and reflect how schools struggle between “simultaneously foster[ing] individual development and promot[ing] the common good” (25). They continue to define the two positions that American culture considers “the good society” and “the good life.” “Alongside viewing a ‘good society’ as one that presses individuals to fulfill their responsibilities to the community and that seeks common good with policies and structures that engage and benefit *all* Americans, Americans also see ‘the good life’ as one unfettered by constraints on individual liberty. We define our well-being in large part as free pursuit of our self-interest” (Oakes et al. 2000:25). “The good life” is an individualistic approach to living in society, that could fall under my liberating idea of education where individuality is developed and considered in schooling. While “the good

society” falls more under my controlling category, where one works to develop to be party of society rather than develop individuality.

Later, the authors outline how an important part of education is one that “shifted from departmentalized, impersonalized, content-driven classrooms to child centered, interdisciplinary learning communities, rich with opportunities for students to learn collectively and experientially through deep engagement in thematic problem-based criteria” (Oakes et al. 2000:27). This shift they discuss is in conversation with the “liberating” and “controlling” aspects of teaching that I was considering. “Schools were to become more caring by responding to students as whole persons who have academic, social, emotionally, and physical needs, rather than seeing them, at the extreme, simply as recipients (or resisters) of instruction and knowledge” (Oakes et al. 2000:28). The way they describe how schools were becoming is how I imagined schools that take a more “liberating” aspect.

In some ways my definitions are outlined this concept: that liberation in a schooling environment is one that focuses on individual development while control is one that focuses on developing students in a way that will reflect on the common good of the greater society, rather than on the good of the student.

Although my interviewees “liberated thinking” of course can be caused by many things, particularly their social situation and mobility, here I will be focusing on how their liberated or controlled experience were reflected by their subsequent high school experiences. Throughout my interviews I kept these concepts I defined in mind, while also realizing that the definitions I initially established would have some deviations.

Summary

The current American public school system has the potential to be considered a “controlling” environment, which can be seen through the essentialist educational philosophy for curriculum. Progressive education, the idea mainly associated with private schooling, has the potential to provide a more “liberating” environment for students. My thesis will explore these concepts, these definitions of controlling and liberating, and study whether these different types of schooling indeed mimic these definitions.

Chapter 1: Issues with Inequality in Schools

Inequalities in schools come in many different forms. In one way, schools can replicate social patterns where a lower-class student can stay in the same path as their parents, while upper class students can continue to succeed and excel in the environment of schooling. This does not allow for student's social mobility. Cultural, social and economic capital can increase these inequalities, as in most cases students can only be successful in schools when their school replicates their own cultural capital. Although high-stakes testing had the intention to equalize schooling and what students learn, it instead increased inequalities among students and produced more negative effects on students (Giersch 2016: 6). Tracking systems had the aim of providing peers similar education based on their observed abilities, but it limited the opportunity for students to grow. The school to prison pipeline reflects the harsh policies within schooling that leads to students, majority minority students, to be pushed out of schooling and become incarcerated.

Replication of Social Patterns

In Annette Lareau's book *Unequal Childhoods*, she uses the histories of real families to highlight reproductions of social patterns. She shows the important differences among social groups in raising children in middle class and working-class backgrounds. She found that working-class children experience "the accomplishment of natural growth" (Lareau 2014:3) where their development unfolds more spontaneously and naturally. They spend more time together as a family, have fewer organized activities and develop an emerging sense of constraint. In contrast, students with a middle-class background develop an emerging sense of entitlement.

Lareau's thesis that "social structural location of the family systematically shapes children's life experiences and life outcomes" (Lareau 2014:30) ultimately argues that your social class predisposes what type of person you will become. The social class outcomes of children that are outlined in Lareau's book are also discussed in a Washington Post article entitled, "How your first four years of life affect the rest of it." This article is an interview by Roberto Fredman with Jane Waldfogel the author of the book *Too Many Children Left Behind*. She discusses how not only does the United States stand out for having more inequality at school, but also for "having more inequality even in early childhood" (Fredman 2015). She mentions how "the gap at school entry is responsible for 60 or even 70 percent of the gap seen at the end of the school years" (Fredman 2015). Children enter school unequal due to their social class, and end with an even more visible gap. As Lareau says, "America may be the land of opportunity, but it is also a land of inequality. [Her book] identifies the largely invisible but powerful ways that parents' social class impacts children's life experiences" (Lareau 2014:3).

Children grow up learning the skills to succeed in their own socioeconomic stratum, but not necessarily others. Children seem to be divided by the education level of their parents. While working-class children are expected to grow naturally, it makes it difficult for them to escape the lives that their parents live, causing class boundaries to be preserved. Working-class parents give their children more independence, but this can cause working-class children to fall behind because they do not receive the same amount of pressure, push and guidance that is needed to stay in the fast pace environment of schooling. As Lareau says, entering school with this dynamic, and going through school without the same type of educational parental support that middle class children get, is the reason for this gap. In their article "Education and Inequality" from *Seeing Ourselves*, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis argue that schooling has more to do

with maintaining existing social hierarchy. They write how “children whose parents were themselves highly educated outperform the children of parents with less education by a wide margin” (Macionis and Benokraitis 2009:360). In fact, “U.S. education is highly unequal, the chances of attaining much or little schooling being substantially dependent on one’s race and parent’s economic level” (Macionis and Benokraitis 2009:363). This is reflected in Lareau’s follow up study with the families in *Unequal Childhoods*. For the most part, the children followed the paths that were expected, almost replicating their parent’s lives. If a child had an unequal childhood, they most have an unequal adult hood. According to Cecilia Elena Rouse and Lisa Barrow in their article “U.S. Elementary And Secondary Schools: Equalizing Opportunity Or Replicating The Status Quo?” “children from low-income families attain less education than children from more advantaged families” (Rouse and Barrow 2006:99). Specifically, they cite U.S. public schools as “tending to reinforce the transmission of low socioeconomic status from parents to children” (Rouse and Barrow 2006:116).

Although there is nothing wrong with the community that some students come from, it can be a disadvantage to students whose communities do not correlate with the setting of schooling. For example, in a speech by David Berliner he states how “neighborhoods communicate norms for behavior, such as in the case of drugs and alcohol, breast-feeding or pacifier use, and achievement” (Berliner 2005:38). Depending on the neighborhood and community one grows up in and lives in some things that are considered normal behavior may not be normal in a school environment. In the case of lower class students, “family background continues to play an important role in determining a child’s educational attainment” (Rouse and Barrow 2006:116). Poverty is directly associated with academic performance: scores of poor students are considerably below the scores achieved by white middle class American students.

Cultural, Social and Economic Capital

It is important to consider economic, social and culture capital in this analysis and determine how each type of capital enhances or undermines how education can be a “great equalizer.” Some believe that schools fall under the “meritocracy myth” where one only needs to work hard to succeed and although the inequalities in school are acknowledged by some, support is rarely given as it is believed that students in poverty should lift themselves up by using schools as a vehicle. All three capitals play different roles in academic achievement.

Cultural capital can be defined as one’s “general culture background, knowledge disposition and skills that are passed from one generation to the next” (MacLeod 1995:12). This measure is what gives one the ability to reach a higher social status in society. Children inherit different cultural capitals based on their social class but unfortunately “schools [only] reward the cultural capital of the dominant classes and systematically devalue that of lower classes” (MacLeod 1995:12). In most schools, students learn based on a certain culture, and for some that culture is similar in and out of schools and for others it is not. It seems that schools reward culturally related advantages, mainly for rich white backgrounds. This idea of a certain cultural capital being evident in schools relates to Jay MacLeod’s references to the Social Reproduction Theory in his book *Ain’t No Making It*. The Social Reproduction Theory explains how most students stay in the same position of class structure as their parents. He cites Pierre Bourdieu in his essay explaining how Bourdieu believes that “schools are seen as part of a larger social universe of symbolic institutions that ... reproduce existing power relations” (MacLeod 1995:14). This leads to tracking at a young age, where the focus is put on improving hire tracked students to ensure that they continue in their social legacy rather than helping others gain those same successes.

Economic capital refers to one's resources in terms of money and assets. The amount of economic capital held by one person or family helps facilitate their access to other types of capital. Economic capital is directly correlated with cultural and social capital, as more money leads to more resources. Within education, a family with high economic capital can afford private tutors and extra help with their current education, which increases their cultural capital. They can also afford trips or other activities that gives them access to more people with high social status, increasing their social capital.

Social capital is the idea that one gains support based on personal social networks. As Ricardo Stanton-Salzar sites Bourdieu and Colman in his article "a social capital framework for understanding the socialization of racial minority children and youths," it is the concept of "social support inherent in a young person's interpersonal network" (Stanton-Salzar 1997:5). Students can use social capital to navigate through schools. Social capital is something acquired and can be enhanced by creating a network of relations and establishing or reproducing relationships that are used for the future. Although it is easier for families with more economic capital to increase their children's social capital through their connections, it is possible for most people to increase their social capital. In academics, social capital can be enhanced by institutional agents. Stanton-Salazar defines the concept of institutional agents as "individuals who have the capacity and commitment to transmit directly, or negotiate the transmission of, institutional resources and opportunities (Stanton-Salzar 1997:6). These connections can help guide students in a positive educational direction.

Social capital is most important to academic success. An increase in social capital gives one relationships and resources needed to expand cultural capital and in turn eventually increase economic capital. Unlike cultural and economic capital, social capital can be acquired by all.

Those who do not have familial connections to people with higher social status can increase their social capital through institutional agents. Social agents can be the mentoring support that provides information about school programs, academic tutoring, and assistance with college admission. Additionally, gaining social capital can help stop social reproduction where social inequalities are reproduced in schools by providing resources that parents or family could not offer.

Currently, academic achievement is attained when certain educational goals set by the school systems are reached. Academic achievement is often measured through an individual's tests and grades. Success is found when a student ultimately achieves these goals, whether it is based off of a GPA in high school or a Bachelor's Degree in college. For some this academic achievement is a smooth ride based on one's high capital. For others, their capital does not correlate with academic success, and their path to academic achievement is more difficult. If schools valued capital based on what one already possesses and focused their attention on improvement in society than schools would be on a much more equitable route.

High Stakes Testing

High stakes testing is a current central reason for a controlling environment in schooling; it creates important consequences not only for students but also for the schools and teachers. Schools risk a loss in funding if their test scores are poor, requiring them to develop a common core curriculum. Teachers are then forced to teach to the test rather than teach to open the minds of children through a robust curriculum. Heubert and Hauser (1999) argued that attaching high stakes to tests causes educators to narrow the curriculum, reduce instructional quality, dilute

learning, increase dropouts, reduce graduation rates, encourage or even engage in cheating, and favor some students over others (Giersch 2016:6).

High stakes testing developed more aggressively through the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act in 2001. The NCLB act required every state to develop standards and within these standards create standardized tests and an accountability system. With this, curriculum was developed based on how teachers can teach students to achieve these standards. This type of state regulation took power from the teachers, the students and their parents. Although school reforms are important because they are “necessary within an increasingly global economy, reduce educational inequality, and they will increase assessment objectively” (Hursh, 2005, p.606), the passage of the NCLB posed many negatives.

Teachers are required to teach to the test, in order to ensure their students are prepared for the test. This can cause teachers to “neglect other usually more complex aspects of the subject and some subjects altogether” (Hursh 2005:614). Teachers then experience a conflict between teaching students knowledge that will help them analyze the world or teaching them solely to prepare for the standardized test. The NCLB act require that all States conduct standardized test in reading and math. Subjects like the arts and sciences could be reduced because the curriculum budget would go to test-prep materials. Students only focus on mastering these competencies rather than others that “may be educationally important but untested (e.g., collaboration, research project design)” (Horn 2003:32). Subjects that are possibly more important to future endeavors are sacrificed. Although standardized testing is promoted as a means of ensuring valid assessments and a rigorous education, “every recent standardized examination in New York has been criticized for having poorly constructed, misleading, or erroneous questions ... [and] neither provided objective assessments nor reduced the differences in educational achievement

between advantaged and disadvantaged students” (Hursh 2005:611).

The inequalities that come with high stakes testing shows a correlation with income and promotes social inequalities. Middle and upper-class students can rely on their economic capital to get tutors and access practice tests, making the tests much more of an easy task. Lower-class students who do not have the economic capital to afford tutors and tests are automatically at a disadvantage. Studies of Massachusetts and North Carolina schools in Catherine Horn’s article “High-Stakes Testing and Students: Stopping or Perpetuating a Cycle of Failure?” give results that “suggest that non-White, non-Asian students are among the groups most affected by this type of high-stakes testing” (Horn 2003:37). Some may not graduate or will be retained in grades because of test scores. According to David Hursh, test scores of students correlate with a student’s family income; a school’s score is “more likely to reflect its students’ average family income rather than teaching or the curriculum” (Hursh 2005:613).

High-stakes testing is not only high-stakes for students but also for schools, as schools are evaluated based on the test scores of the students. Schools would face penalties if they fail to increase these test scores. Schools are judged by “whether their aggregated and disaggregated test scores exceed a minimum yearly threshold that gradually increases over the next decade” so even if schools improve their test scores, if the scores still remain below the threshold they are considered failing (Hursh 2005:613). Because schools are judged by how well students do on a test, in order to raise test scores schools can try to “force weak students out of school before they take the required examination” (Hursh 2005:614). This can be done by pushing-out students from schools, placing students in special education, or retraining students in a certain class. The standards created by the NCLB act also “made it acceptable to deny graduation to students who failed a test and to punish schools for low test scores” (Hursh 2005:609). Students are more

likely to drop out because of the stress and struggle.

High-stakes testing does not equate to increased learning, and test scores are not accurately measuring students learning. “Amrein and Berliner gathered comprehensive evidence from 18 states using high-stakes testing to suggest that in all but one analysis, student learning was indeterminate, remained at the same level as before the policy was implemented, or actually went down” (Horn 2003:33). Not only is high-stake testing ineffective in completing its intended purpose, it also creates unnecessary negative effects by having curriculum that caters towards test prep.

All of these inequalities that come with schooling drives me to wonder what is the purpose of schooling, what should we really be using to teach and assess students? Are schools there to put students on a standard level and to teach to the test with no variation or preparation to the world? The initial inequalities that students bring to schools are not dealt with, and some schools curriculum even cater against student’s backgrounds. Standardized tests are too narrow a measure for capturing the broad range of goals that schools should pursue. These inequalities are what has led some schooling to become a controlling, unequal environment. Empowering education is one that builds on a culture and creates a dialogue between teachers and students who engage in critical thought and dialogue with the wider community.

Tracking

Tracking in schools is a practice where students are put into a trajectory path of education based on their perceived intelligence. Tracking can increase inequalities, as low tracked students are primarily low-income students and minorities, while upper tracked students are predominantly white and upper socioeconomically class. Although the initial concept of tracking

was to place students with peers of similar observed abilities to progress together at the same pace, the disproportion of minority students to be tracked lower is believed to be due to racial biases. Once in the lower track, students tend to believe they are less intelligent and cannot measure up to their superiors, and therefore perform with less effort. Educational systems are supposed to prepare students to become literate for college and beyond, but the tracking system limits the opportunity for students to grow. Tracking is a main factor in the continuation of the achievement gap.

The School to Prison Pipeline

“In the last decade, the punitive and overzealous tools and approaches of the modern criminal justice system have seeped into our schools, serving to remove children from mainstream educational environments and funnel them onto a one-way path toward prison. . . The School-to-Prison Pipeline is one of the most urgent challenges in education today.” (NAACP 2005) (Heitzeg 2009:1)

The school to prison pipeline can be defined as a “growing pattern of tracking students out of educational institutions, primarily via ‘zero tolerance’ policies, and, directly and/or indirectly, into the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems” (Heitzeg 2009:1). In her article, “Criminalizing Education: Zero Tolerance Policies, Police in the Hallways and The School to Prison Pipeline” Nancy Heitzeg discusses how the school to prison pipeline is directly associated with zero tolerance policies in public schooling. Heitzeg lays out some zero-tolerance policy associations including “an increased police and security presence at school, metal detectors, security cameras, locker and person searches and all the accoutrements of formal legal control.” Violators then are suspended, expelled, and increasingly arrested and charged in juvenile court as a result (Heitzeg 2009: 13), therefor contributing to the school to prison pipeline. The control

that comes with the zero tolerance policies and the policing in the hallways is evident. Heitzeg cites how the current inequalities in public schooling has, “rather than creating an atmosphere of learning, engagement and opportunity, current educational practices have increasingly blurred the distinction between school and jail” (Heitzeg 2009:2). The many different zero tolerance policies reflect the continued control that most public schools have on their students. These policies increase the risk of being suspended, expelled or arrested, and are disproportionately affecting students of color. There are many factors that are correlated with the school to prison pipeline, including “under-representation of students of color in advanced placement courses and over-presentation in special education tracks, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), high stakes testing, and rising drop-out/push -out rates” (Heitzeg 2009:13).

A study by Christine A. Christle, Kristine Jolivette, C. Michael Nelson, entitled “Breaking the School to Prison Pipeline: Identifying School Risk and Protective Factors for Youth Delinquency” discusses how school factors may contribute to risks for youth delinquency. They found that in schools that promoted negative perceptions of school environment “including negative beliefs regarding expectations for student success, negative perceptions of the school climate, and negative perceptions of family involvement” (Christle, Jolivette and Nelson 2019:83) there was a higher correlation with youth delinquency. Additionally, in these schools were “undesirable physical condition of the schools, infrequent adult–student interactions, and few instructional strategies used by teachers” (Christle et al. 2019:83). Correspondently, they found less youth delinquency when schools “can provide protective factors by providing a positive and safe learning environment, setting high yet achievable academic and social expectations, and facilitating academic and social success (Christle et al. 2010:83). Christle et al. reference how the zero tolerance policies and violations in schools lead to academic failure and

dropping out. The control of “zero tolerance policies have only negative effects on student behavior and school climate” (Christle et al. 2010:84). We can see here that the school to prison pipeline is created through the constant control of the school, through zero tolerance policies that include surveillance and policing.

Summary

As we have seen, replication of social patterns and the positives outcomes that come from ones social, economic and cultural capital can be seen as successful for students in private schooling and can cause more inequalities for those in public schooling. Tracking within school can be seen in some aspects of private schooling and public schooling, while tracking out of school through the school to prison pipeline and the inequalities that come with high stakes testing is mainly seen with public school education. In the following chapters using scholarship and my interviews, I will discover how these inequalities within schooling effect students directly.

Chapter 2: Public Schooling

The control of a student can come in many different ways. My initial belief was that public school had more controlling aspects through its architecture, curriculum and environment. Before I discuss my interviews, I will frame the public school environment in scholarship. I wanted to see how public schools could control students into a certain path, while also considering control in the way of how a student gains or expands their critical thinking and their world view.

A Controlling Environment based on scholarship

Herbert Foucault expanded on the idea of the panopticon⁴ to characterize social institutions like schools. He discusses how the architecture of schools is built to be seen, and to “permit an internal, articulated and detailed control – to render visible those who are inside it” (Foucault 1979:190). Herbert Kohl also expands how schools have a similar structure to a panopticon in his article “The Educational Panopticon.” He mentions how “the notion of control and surveillance is pervasive these days” (Kohl 2009:1) in schools. Kohl first understands the consequences of the inequalities mentioned in chapter one.

“The consequences of scripted curriculum, teacher accountability, continuous monitoring of student performance, high stakes testing, and punishment for not reaching external standards is that schools become educational panopticon, that is, total control and surveillance communities dedicated to undermine the imagination, creativity, intelligence, and autonomy of students and teachers.” (Kohl 2009:1)

⁴ The panopticon is a way to describe a system of control. Originally used to define the surveillance of prison inmates, it refers to the design where inmates can be observed by one person, typically in the center surrounded by cells, this causes them to believe they are constantly being watched and there for are motivated to constantly act in accepted way.

The structure and architecture of the school and the classroom adds to the controlling environment. Students sit in rows and teacher stands in the front. Observation and surveillance is always apparent. The idea of the panopticon as Kohl discusses, is based on the prison design, where cells were built around a surveillance core. This would create an environment where “prisoners would internalize and accept the idea of total and continuous surveillance” (Kohl 2009:1). Kohl expands on Foucault’s idea of the educational panopticon as “a system in which teachers and students are under constant scrutiny, allowed no choice over what is learned or taught, evaluated continuously, and punished for what is considered inadequate performance” (Kohl 2009:2). This causes anxiety among students and teachers.

It is clear how the idea of a public school panopticon makes the idea of prison an easy transition, as referenced in as the school to prison pipeline. A quote by the organization State of Incarceration references the ultimate control that comes with the idea of the school-to-prison pipeline.

“In the quest to create ‘safe schools,’ students have become demoralized and criminalized. The presence of metal detectors, surveillance cameras, drug sniffing dogs, harsh ticketing policies, and prison-inspired architecture has created a generation of students, usually poor and of color, who are always under surveillance and always under suspicion. these modes of controlling spaces and the youth within them normalize expectations of criminality, often fulfilled when everyday violations of school rules lead to ticketing, suspension or worse court summons and eventual incarceration – a direct path to the criminal justice system.” (Caro, Friedman, Mehrmand 2015)

The control of the school is not only focused on the students, as Kohl states, “scripted curriculum turns teachers into mechanical delivery systems” (Kohl 2009:2). Teachers are under constant scrutiny to stay on the set curriculum, asking set questions rather than further discussing ideas or texts. Accountability of teachers, discussed in chapter 1 can be seen here. Curriculum can become “teacher-proof” where teachers “are evaluated on the effectiveness of their student’s performance on tests relating to material they have no control over” (Kohl 2009:2). This also

references how a classroom becomes a humanely impoverished environment where learning has no space for conversation, exploration or personalization. This contributes to depriving the youth of opportunities for the development of their minds (Kohl 2009:2).

Normalization is another issue that Foucault discusses in his paper. Rather than being a place where students can argue against the right answer in class, there was only one idea of what was right in the classroom.

“The school became a sort of apparatus of uninterrupted examination that duplicated along its entire length the operation of teaching. It became less and less a question of jousts in which pupils pitched their forces against one another and increasingly a perpetual comparison of each and all that made it possible both to measure and to judge” (Foucault 1979:198).

Normalizing of judgment in schooling creates an environment of perfection to a standard, rather than expansion of what you already have. Public school environment normalizes judgement and looks at micro actions and disciplines. Punishment is given to a failing exams, rather than providing help for improvement.

Interviews

Although my interviews provided a positive correlation with public schooling as a controlling environment, there were times where I saw liberating aspects. I interviewed three people who started in public high school and went to various colleges. Margot went to high school in New York and went on to a private college in Connecticut. Ernest went to school in Washington State and first went to public college in Washington State, and later transferred to a private college in New York. Marie went to public high school and public college in New York.

High school environment

One issue I initially noticed from interviewing those who came from typical public school environments in the U.S. was the structure of their schedule. One interviewee named Ernest who went to a public school in Washington State, described his schedule as strict, with short breaks between classes where running to class was sometimes a necessity. There was no structured free time in the schedules, classes were back to back and lunch was short. As Ernest says, “you'd have a four-minute break between classes, half hour lunch, and then you'd go home” (Ernest). Margot’s experience mirrors Ernest’s; “we had scheduled classes every hour. I think some people could choose to leave for the day a little earlier, but usually it was pretty restricted because you couldn’t even go off campus for lunch and we didn’t have any sort of study lounge or anything so really there was nowhere to go so they didn’t want people just wandering around. So basically, you were required to take eight classes. Or, eight classes-periods including lunch and gym” (Margot). The infrequent breaks between classes and the strict lunch schedules gave students little time to be anywhere else but where they were supposed to be. As Ernest says, “I think that was a big security measure, was just not to give kids time to get in trouble. That's why the lunch was so short, a half hour” (Ernest). Margot’s interview also brought that idea, as she says the school “didn’t want people getting into trouble, since my school had a lot of fights and people selling drugs and stuff” (Margot). They both reflected on bells determining the start and end times of classes, and requests to go to the bathroom were required.

Security within the school was another theme of the high school environment. There would be security in the halls ensuring everyone was where they were supposed to be. Those who I interviewed described their high school as similar to the panopticon design of schools explained by Kohl and Foucault. Margot remembers “yeah, I would definitely say that the whole

concept of security guards wandering around and keeping track of people and asking for hall passes would be near that concept I guess...it was pretty impossible to wander around and not run into somebody, so it was very controlled” (Margot). Ernest also felt that way. “I definitely feel that there was nowhere on campus where you could do something not allowed, and not be seen, except maybe the bathrooms were the easiest place to do that...teachers would keep their doors open during passing periods, so they could monitor what was going on in the hallway” (Ernest). The security was there as more of a way to control on the students inside the school rather than controlling something from the outside, as Margot recalls “alumni would visit a lot. And they would just kind of stroll in, and nobody would care. But if you tried to leave somewhere they would just jump on you and be like, where are you going? Do you have permission? Where’s your passes?” (Margot) There was strict attendance in school and in classes. If kids were in places they were not supposed to be, there would be firm consequences and disciplinary actions like detention or expulsion. Control through punishment was a reoccurring concept in my interviews that included in school suspension, suspension, detention and expulsion. Some were based off a strike system with hall passes, or at the discretion of the teacher.

Teacher access

Because public schools have a naturally larger student body, access to teachers is very difficult both within the classroom and outside. At Margot’s school, she described how even in the one period after school that was designated to help from teachers, the help was catered towards re-teaching the lesson, rather than helping on personal questions or expanding on the material. As she says, they would “teach things, there wouldn’t really be questions, they would

just teach about what's going to be on the test" (Margot). It was difficult to gain constant access or individual attention.

Tracking

The tracking system allowed for some of the control of regular classes to be altered to apply to honors and AP classes. Marie mentioned how she found that lower tracked classes focused more on passing a test while in honors the focus was on getting a higher grade, or the highest grade achievable. For Margot, each track was "a different world" (Margot) where some classes had students who were not paying attention, to others where work was constantly being accomplished. For Margot, the tracking also kept the better teachers for the higher honors and AP classes, while the less passionate teachers were those in the regular's class.

Classes and curriculum

Teaching to the test is a prominent idea in a public high school environment. High stakes testing and accountability, discussed earlier in chapter one, was a very big part of the public-school environment among those that I interviewed. As Margot recalls, "they were definitely teaching us to take tests. Even if it wasn't just a multiple-choice test it was a DBQ [Document Based Question] or Regents⁵ I remember part of it being multiple choice, and part of it being open-ended questions. But they definitely had a very set curriculum they gave us, and we didn't

⁵ The Regent Exams are New York statewide standardized tests in specific high school subjects. According to the New York City department of education website on yearly testing, Elementary and middle school students in New York State take these yearly State tests in core academic subjects to assess their mastery of the common core learning standards. Ultimately, the Students' test results are one of the factors that schools use to decide whether to promote a student to the next grade. In high school, students must pass five Regents Exams in order to graduate and may earn an Advanced Diploma if they pass more exams. (Yearly Testing - Student Achievement Resources - New York City Department Of Education)

do much that deviated from that” (Margot). Margot can recall the few times they veered away from this structure, where they were able to do a creative project, something that felt like a strange difference and escape from the normal homework and test taking. Public school students sometimes feel as though they are not in charge of their own learning through lecture-based classes. As Margot says “it was mostly just the teacher talking. Some teachers incorporated more discussion, especially in English classes, but it would mostly be just lectures” and if questions were asked by teachers “it was just more like, ‘What is this?’ than ‘What do you think about this?’” (Margot)

Even in Washington State they were preparing for the WASL (Washington Assessment of Student Learning), and as Ernest recalls “we took that sophomore year and I remember my English classes, specifically, were the whole year, geared towards doing well on the test, basically...It was definitely a recurring theme of the teachers preparing us for it, and telling us exactly what we need to do to pass and depending on the class, focusing the curriculum around it” (Ernest). Ernest also recalled how although some of the classes were structured and required, electives were an option. Some electives were occupationally focused, which allowed students to get more of an idea for a certain trade after high school.

Preparation for college

One of the most interesting things that I found when interviewing those from public school, is how the controlling environment changed when it came to prepare and applying for college. While we will see in the private school analysis, it was somewhat controlling with students applying to only four-year elite colleges, but with public schooling other options besides a four-year college were upheld after high school. There were more options advocated, like two-

year colleges, community colleges, or occupational work. In the way that classes were controlling environments with how they were taught, preparation for life after high school was much less.

It was apparent that the public school's preparation for college was a lot less intensive and individually focused than the private schools. The access to college counselors was not easy or excessive for the students in public school system. Marie reflected that for her it would have been most beneficial to receive help from the beginning of high school for options on what life could have been like, but that was lacking. In the public schools that my interviewees were from it seemed there was a push to college, but not a specific type. A community college or state university was a more common option. As Ernest remembers, they wanted you "to have a plan, that could be trade school or community college or public college. If you wanted to go to a private school, that was a big deal usually. That was rare. They didn't have expectations of elite universities, or anything, like I imagine private school did. They want there to be a list of all these universities and their graduating class. It wasn't anything like that. They were super psyched if you got into the state school. That was their golden standard" (Ernest). The options that were known for life after high school were more diverse in the public-school experience.

Life within college

The people that I interviewed all went to a mix of public and private colleges after their public school. Those who went to public college after high school found it pretty similar in the sense of a controlling environment. Marie referred to her time in community college as the "13th year" where there were larger classes with limited discussion. Ernest found his experience at the state school much more pressure than his experience at Vassar College. At The University of

Washington, he found there was “a lot more of that pressure to have a plan...[and] there's an attitude among the students where if you weren't studying STEM or business, you were wasting your time, wasted your money” (Ernest). Students were learning to get the grade that they needed rather than one they wanted. His comparison of that experience to Vassar was interesting. He reflected that people at Vassar used “education where they want to become more well-rounded people. I feel like liberal arts schools have a reputation for that, so people who come to these places are seeking that out, for learning for learning's sake...people really want to just understand the subject, even if they know they're already getting an A, they still want to master the subject as much as they can before the semester ends” (Ernest). It is interesting to hear this perspective. I agree with this statement as I find students at Vassar passionate and engaged, but because I came from a school environment that had a similar vibe of students, I found this to be the norm.

Margot, who went to a private school after high school, mentioned how initially she was worried that the environment of a private institution would be foreign to her coming from her high school. “I definitely wasn't prepared for small discussion-based classes from high school, because that was never a part of my high school curriculum at all... [it] was definitely a culture shock where I was not prepared to share my ideas and I guess I didn't have a lot of confidence in them. So, it took a while to adapt to them, but they definitely made me feel obligated to participate and talk more” (Margot). But as time went on, she found that her AP classes in high school tended to be harder than her college classes, and she adapted to the differences in small class sizes and discussion-based classes.

Concluding remarks

One of the most prevalent thing that distinguishes between public and private schools is their sizes. Public schools are just that, public and open for everyone. The student body of a public schools is unlike the student body of a private school private school, as the private school student body is a controlled environment that is determined by many different criteria including an entry exam. This lack of control of the student body is what leads to implications of some of the controlling aspects that we have seen in public school environments. The tone of each class must be catered towards the different types of students that are attending. Despite the control within the public-school environment, we can see some liberating aspects through the wide range of supported options for students after high school. In a private school, as I will discuss in the next chapter, the environment is catered towards a controlled student body that of most privileged and eager students. All students are of similar caliber, one that is mostly eager to learn in a higher level of educations. This allows the school to have the freedom to establish their own curriculums that is expanded and experimental. We will see how in the same way that the naturally controlling environment of public school veered away from control in their preparation for after high school, private schooling veered more towards a controlling system when it came to college after high school.

Chapter 3: Private Schooling

Within the classroom at private school's students could be more liberated in the way they think, learn and are taught. Classes do not rely on a common core curriculum and promote critical thinking. It is clear that the private school agenda expects a common structured path of education. This is a structure of lower school, middle school, high school, possible honors or AP class, college, graduate school, job.

The Brearley School

The Brearley School, the school I attended for 13 years and a few of my interviewees also attended, is a prime example of a progressive education. In a video entitled *Challenging Adventurous Intellects*, teachers from The Brearley School discuss what it means to be a "Brearley girl" and how they support the students learning. Some quotes from these teachers mimicked those of a progressive education outlook. Within the classrooms, teachers find that students "come already excited about learning, and [teachers] stoke the fire" (James Mulkin). The students are already naturally so curious, and they come to the classroom questioning how and what is being taught. Rather than an environment where teachers teach necessary information, "students and teachers lean forward into conversation" (Tim Brownell). One teacher's comments mimicked those of John Dewey, where she said that they teach "whole students, not teaching to a program or to a test, trying to get to know them as human beings and work with all sorts of learning styles" (Ju Yeon Kim). Instead of an environment of competition where students feel like they cannot collaborate because of high stakes testing and accountability, at Brearley "every young lady supports their colleague" (Pat Neely). Mistakes at Brearley are celebrated rather than penalized, and students are "excited about sharing a mistake

that they made because they learn something from it” (Julian Altschul). All ways of processing information are good ways. Students value their own ideas, and that allows for “flow that happens when everyone is thinking and contributing” (Gail Marcus).

This being said, not all private institutions follow this same path of a critically thinking and supportive environment. One student who I interviewed from Brearley agreed with these sentiments, while another student I interviewed who left Brearley for another private school shed more light into the understanding of other private school institutions.

Interviews

The two people that I interviewed from private schools had pretty different experiences. My first interview, Sarah, went to Brearley with me for 13 years and then went to a private college in Minnesota. Tina went to Brearley for nine years, then transferred to another New York City private high school and went on to a private college in Washington, D.C. Their experiences had similarities, but also some differences. One difference about the experience Tina had at her private school was tracking, similar to the environment described in public school. What Tina described in her private school seemed similar to Margot’s “different worlds” perspective.

High school environment

Tina and Sarah had similar sentiments on their high school environments and the structure. Both buildings in the city did not replicate the panopticon, where students felt like they were safe with security but not controlled by the security. Sarah reflected on how much freedom she had during school. For Sarah, there were no bells ringing, no hall monitors or teachers requesting that students ask to go to the bathroom. Between class periods there were free times

and students could be anywhere in the building or leave the building. Class schedules were similar to that of college, where there were random blocks of free time during the day, and classes were not always back to back. When Sarah was in school she felt that “when [she] walked into the classroom, I was in my classroom. In a good way, not in an oppressive or stifling way” (Sarah). This reflects the community aspect of the classrooms, and environment. Tina’s school was different, with bell ringing, and teachers asking students to ask to go to the bathroom. They had the freedom to go out for lunch, mainly because the school did not have a cafeteria.

Detention was not heard of at Brearley. As I recall we had some myth that there was something similar called early work, where you had to come to school early to do work, but in my 13 years at Brearley I never heard of that happening. We also had a student conduct board similar to those at colleges where a student from each grade would be a representative and if anything against student conduct happened, they would go before the board of students. But throughout my four years in high school I also never heard of someone going to the student conduct board. When talking to Margot about this she mentioned how in her school they “definitely didn’t have any kind of democracy like that” (Margot).

Teacher access

Sarah reflected how she had “literal constant access” to teachers. Teachers were always there to give help for anything, and even reached out if they felt that you needed more help. “I felt pretty comfortable with most of my teachers, like going to them if I had an issue or I didn’t understand something or needed extra help or anything like that” (Sarah). We had free time during the day where we were able to schedule meetings with our teachers to go over material. It

was clear that teachers wanted you do to do well, to understand material, and to be sure your ideas were on the right track. Their goal was for you to understand and succeed.

Tracking

Tracking was not something that happened at Brearley, except in math. This gave all the students the ability to be on the same “level” where all classes were accessible to students and expected the same amount of commitment. Tracking at Tina’s private school, on the other hand, seemed to be there to help students meet their perceived academic level; “they give you work that will meet you where you’re most likely to achieve” (Tina). Rather than having students at the same level like at Brearley, which pushes students who would be a little below the academic achievement level and forces them to work hard to get to the “higher” level of academic success, tracking at Tina’s school made the students stay at the same level that was believed by others to be their most attainable academic achievement level.

In reflecting on control in her school, Tina mentioned how they had “an unfair way of controlling kids” (Tina) through tracking. The higher you were on the track, the less control the school put on you. Tina mentioned how she was in the honors track, and she could see how less control was put onto them. She reflected how sometimes she would skip class to hang out with the Dean. She thought that because it was her, she would be allowed to, but if it was someone “in the lower section, they’d be disciplined” (Tina). They would give the benefit of the doubt to those they believed were “good student[s]... [who were] always very on top of it” (Tina). Tina reflected how she believed honors classes would get better teachers. An honors teacher would not teach a threes class.⁶ Entrance into the higher-level classes were based on ones perceived

⁶ The four placement options at Tina’s school were Honors 1, 2, 3, with Honors being the highest placement and 3 being the lowest placement.

academic achievements, centered on past work and success in middle school. Mobility throughout tracks was a little difficult.

Classes and curriculum

The curriculum of the honors classes for Tina somewhat mimicked the type of curriculum that Sarah found at Brearley. For Tina, “There was more homework, it was harder homework, and I think maybe in like English classes and stuff, we would read more books as opposed to the lower classes might spend more time on a book” (Tina). Also, Tina said how it was a faster pace of learning with more content. They “would analyze the book much more in depth and we'd be expected to analyze on our own at home, compared to like track three” (Tina). Tina found that in her honors classes teaching was not structured. There was no uniformed school system, and teaching depended on the teacher. Adaptation was a big thing in Tina’s honors classes. Even with multiple choice, if something was false you would have to correct them to be true. Sarah reflects a similar sentiment, where she felt “especially in English classes and arts classes, [teachers were] teaching you how to think critically and work through your ideas and how to analyze text. But it never felt like they were teaching me, so I could do well on a test, it felt like they were teaching me, so I could learn” (Sarah).

Both Tina and Sarah reflected that their high school curriculum somewhat mirrored my initial definitions of a liberating education, one that allowed students to critically think and analyze, rather than learn just for a test. Sarah reflected how “we were always encouraged to ask questions... We were always encouraged to speak and participate. We were never told that our questions were dumb, or that we shouldn’t talk, or we shouldn’t ask a question if we have one. We were always encouraged to say what we were thinking” (Sarah). Elective classes were also

important parts of the curriculum “because you got to choose, so like, I really started choosing my classes based on what I was interested in. Which, like, was good for me because I’m the kind of person who will try really hard and work really hard in the classes that I like. And if I’m not interested, I won’t try as hard and I won’t care. So, getting to choose classes that I cared about was good” (Sarah). This is an important part of the curriculum because it allowed students to engage with classes that they were interested in, which would lead to even deeper engagement and critical thinking. In the lower classes at Tina’s school, teachers would lecture more. Tina believed this was the case because the teachers did not expect much discussion from the students. They were not expected to analyze, and Tina alleged there was some sort of mutual understanding between lower tracked students that they did not need to do their homework.

Preparation for college

The support from Brearley for college was evident. But, with that support did come with some control. As Sarah reflected, Brearley’s college counselors for the most part were “pretty set on you going to college and it being a four-year college. A two-year college was never really presented as an option” (Sarah). Although not frowned upon, other options besides an elite four-year institution were not common. There was a lot of support throughout the college process from teachers, college counselors, and seminars. Tina did not share the same sentiment of sympathetic support from college counselors: “It was more just like, ‘I need you to get into college.’ Especially for the kids, who weren't in honors. It was like, ‘I just need you to get into any school.’ Literally anything” (Tina). At Brearley we had college admissions counselors come to the school, but the meetings were open to all students. At Tina’s school it was clear though that the college counselors had an idea of who they thought would get into certain schools. When

college admissions officers would come to visit Tina's school to talk to the students, their college counselors would put lists outside of the room of what students they thought would be best at certain schools. The controlled aspect by college counselors was evident. Tina's school took control placing students in the school they believed was the best fit, depending on their track. Both schools promoted college as the main option and neither Sarah or Tina strongly considered an option other than a four-year college as other options rarely discussed or considered.

Life within college

Both Tina and Sarah remarked times in their high school experience that prepared them for college life. There were times in Tina's English class where she had to present and teach to the class. She felt after that experience "when [in college] they would ask us to lead chapters or to talk about something, I felt like I knew what questions were good, or what got people interested" (Tina). For Sarah, she continued her constant participation in college, which was the norm at Brearley. At college Sarah knew that she was in college to engage with what she was learning, and critically think. And she reflected how "if I'm not asking questions, then what am I doing?" So, I always ask questions in class, and... I feel like that really did come from Brearley" (Sarah). Brearley gave her the impression that there is no idea too out there. She "learned how to work out ideas and come up with stuff in a group of people at Brearley. Because we were doing that all the time" (Sarah) which helped her to easily transition to college classes.

Concluding remarks

Although we saw that the curriculum and environments of the specific private schools of Tina and Sarah promoted much more critical thinking and independence, Tina's interview

proved that not all private schools carry out the same ideals and intentions. The tracking system in her high school was an aspect that veered away from what I considered the typical private school. The tracks did create some distinguishes where the honors class closely represented the private school agenda and the lower track catered more towards the public school agenda. The constant engagement with the text prepared both students greatly for the kind of expected academic work at college. For others, that type of engagement had to be learned while in college. Additionally, the common life track of going to an elite private college after high school is a controlling aspect. Although within private school we see liberation with the curriculum and the critical analysis in the classroom, there is the overarching controlling “bubble” that is created among private school students. We have seen that in public schooling, although the control of classroom is evident, there is much more of a freedom supported after graduation. In the conclusion, I will dive deeper into this finding that both public and private schoolings have aspects of control and liberation, and additionally I will discuss ways that we can continue to liberate beyond the constraining educational environments we find in public schooling.

Conclusion: A Final Look

Veering away from what is expected

After interviewing and learning more about the personal experiences of those in different high schools, I began to see that some facets of my original definitions of a liberating and controlling high school experience lined up with my informant's experiences, but they also deviated away from my original definitions. Some who had what I defined as a "liberating" experience had some controlling aspects as well that came beyond my definitions. And conversely, those in my originally categorized "controlling" environment, experienced liberation in other ways that I had not initially considered.

I found more and more evidence that could suggest that in fact what I thought was liberating, was fostering an overarching sense of control. I found that those in public school environment had more freedom to choose their paths outside of college, with less expectations of a certain elite path and more expectations of a path suitable for their person.

Tina believed that the tracking system in school was unhelpful to students. She reflected on how some of her classmates who graduated in the lower tracks are now out in the world running their own companies, where the honors kids are "in college, doing what they're told to do, and doing the traditional school thing and ... I don't want to say brainwashed, but definitely ..." (Tina) In a way, students growth is particular to their own development, which could or could not be supported by the type of schooling they have had. The support from the school also provided either control or promoted liberation beyond a certain path.

Tina knew what it was like to be a "good student." She, and her other honors tracked students, did homework and participated in class because that's what they were told would make a successful student, but that was defined under the control of their educational system. "I think

what the tracks taught us to do was to obey authority figures. It wasn't that the kids in the three track I guess didn't or couldn't do the work, it was that they were just less willing to accept that they had homework. Like they'd be like, "I don't want to do it," and so they wouldn't. And it wasn't that they couldn't or that they weren't smart enough" (Tina). But honors students stayed strong to the concept of a "good student" and did their work.

Another interesting idea that Tina brought up about her transition to her private school from Brearley, was the idea that Brearley was not very liberating in making you feel great about your work. Students knew that their essays and ideas were intelligent, intellectual and scholarly, but the support and response they received from their teachers did not always replicate the work that they were doing. So, for Tina though, after leaving Brearley she felt a mentality switch, where, when placed in the honors track, she had this label of one of the smartest kid which allowed her to make jokes and engage in witty banter with the teacher, without feeling judged that she was not on a level of intelligence to afford slacking off. There was a common aphorism during the school that the honors kids were expected to perform higher quality work. Tina remembered how teachers would say "Guys, you guys are an honors class. And I would expect this from a three class, not you" (Tina). Students would joke as well and say things like "Oh you don't want to be my friend 'cause you're an honors and I'm a three [and] oh honors kids are too busy to hang out with us" (Tina). Tina related this idea of labeling from the tracking system at her school to the Stanford Prison Experiment (1971)⁷, where in Tina's case students who were given these labels started to act in the way that was expected. Their perceived label from the

⁷ The Stanford Prison Experiment was an experiment led by Philip Zimbardo in 1971 with an aim to investigate how readily people would conform to the roles of guard and prisoner in a role-playing exercise that simulated prison life. The study was conducted at Stanford University using college students. Zimbardo ultimately found that both the guards and the prisoners quickly settled into their new roles (McLeod 2018).

tracking system and the stereotypes that came with it were acted out by the students. Through her label she felt more liberated cause she was aware of her place in the school.

Public schooling has a worldlier component that prepares one to go out into the world. Private school at most has a very narrow pathway with very similar people. Public schooling inherently exposes students to a much more diversity in a way that private school could not.

After interviewing and working with scholarship I found that there were in fact aspects of control in my own education, something I never really considered. I came out of high school thinking that my environment did create liberation in my thinking and learning academically. But now considering my life outside of the classroom, I felt like my schooling created a lot of control in my aspirations. I never considered the overarching control on life that the private school agenda had put on me throughout the years. My life was determined by the path of education that was expected after high school.

[How can we liberate beyond a constraint?](#)

Undeniably there are still many issues within the public school system and curricula that still need to be considered. Some ways that these inequalities can continue to be address are through the promotion of other schooling options like Charter schools and Magnet schools, and after school tutoring programs. Charter and Magnet schools are schools that have the ideals of a private school under the public-school umbrella. Charter schools allow for deviation from the constructed curriculum and project missions that echo those of private schools. Charter schools can be categorized as public schools of choice, where families choose the schools for their children. They operate with freedom from some of the regulations that are imposed upon district schools. Charter schools must adhere to basic curricular requirements of the state but are free

from many of the regulations that apply to conventional schools (What is a Charter School 2018). Charter schools rely on a lottery system to admit their students. Magnet schools promote diversity in backgrounds of their students by being a school of choice. Magnet schools typically focus on specialized courses and individually themed curricula (What are Magnet Schools 2018). Some magnet schools require an intensive application process while others rely on a lottery system. Both Charter and Magnet schools can be additional options in the choice of a traditional public schools, as both schools are free and open to the public.

One problem that comes with the public schooling environment is the lack of educational support. This can be improved through institutional agents. Institutional agents can come in many different forms, one being as an educational tutor. I acted as an institutional agent when I worked as a tutor at the Harriet Tubman Academic Skill Center, an afterschool program in Poughkeepsie, NY. Institutional agents, especially in tutoring, can help lower-income students who can get stuck with the pace and nuisance of a common core curriculum, gain the advantages they need to break their social boundaries and increase their educational promise. Programs like the Harriet Tubman Academic Skills Center allow the gap between the rich and poor children to shrink— it gives them not only the boost to succeed but also the ability to see a future that they might not have seen prior. As a tutor I helped provide children with the skills, understanding, and self-assurance to succeed and remain hopeful about their academics and social futures. Through this work the Harriet Tubman Academic Skills Center is able to report a statistic that graduation rates for students in afterschool programs were 90% compared to the 60% for nonparticipating students.⁸

⁸ Found at: <https://www.htasc.org/about-h-t-a-s-c/>

What really is success?

I did not want my paper to exude the impressions that that the public-school agenda of teaching to the test and of control was the inferior way of learning, and that my impression of a liberating private school experience was the superior. I did not want to compare and contrast in a sense of pessimism, comparing one environment as the clear superior to the other that needed improvements. Although there is much scholarship that can support the inequalities that come with public schooling, there are clearly many aspects of public schooling that can be considered in a positive light.

This has led me to reflect on what really defines success. Is a more traditional liberating environment really more successful? Or can students thrive off of a controlling environment and end up with the same success? Is success defined by schooling and a degree?

Recently I was interested by the students from the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida of the student activists who have begun fighting for gun control in the United States after the school shooting.⁹ Some student activists are deciding to take a gap year from college to pursue activism on a greater level. Do some consider that failure just because they are not going down the expected path? Some of the greatest inventions came from minds that only had a high school education.

Control in the aspect of education is something that I believe is unhelpful in the growth and developments of a successful student. For some, success comes through a “controlled” path, where elite college is the answer. For others, success comes when there are multiple options for

⁹ On February 14, 2018, a mass shooting occurred at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Seventeen people were killed and seventeen more were wounded, making it one of the world's deadliest school massacres. After the shooting many student victims organized March for our Lives, a demonstration for more gun control held in Washington DC on March 24, 2018.

the future, and many different paths to take. Ultimately, success is something that is individual, something that cannot be determined and should not be controlled. Feeling liberated and free in your decisions, no matter what path it must be on, is a gift in many ways.

Appendix

Interview Questions

I. Background

1. How big was your high school?
2. Was your high school private or public?
3. During high school what was your family background? How would you define your family's economic status?

II. Environment

1. What was the environment of your school and how controlling did you feel it was?
(Bell ringing, asking to go to the bathroom, hall monitors)
2. How was your school structured? (Panopticon and surveillance)
3. What kind of discipline did you have? Was there detention or suspension?
4. How were the classes scheduled during the day? How much free time did you have?
5. Did you feel controlled by the teachers?
6. How close were you to your teachers?

III. Classes and curriculum

1. Did you have different teachers for different tracks?
2. What were the class sizes?
3. How did tracking work in your school?
4. Did you feel as if people in the advanced classes received more attention from administration and teachers?
5. In your classes did you mostly take standardized tests with multiple choice, or did you write a lot of essays?

6. How much did you have open discussion in classes?
7. Did you have access to your teachers for help?
8. Did you ever take elective courses?

IV. Path to college

1. How many college counselors did you have?
2. Did you ever have a private tutor to prepare you for classes or standardize tests?
3. How much did you think your high school supported your college experience?
4. How stressful was the college application process from your high school?
5. Did you ever seriously consider that you would not get into college?
6. Did you ever consider a different path than college?
7. Did you ever think you would not get into college, even a safety school?
8. Did your school suggest or support other options besides college?
9. Was a four-year college the only option?
10. Before applying did you already know what you wanted in a college?
11. How often did you meet with your advisor or college admissions and what type of plan did they have for you?
12. How many colleges did you apply to or visit?

II. During College

1. How big were your classes, did you feel prepared?
2. Did high school prepare you?
3. How was your transition to classes?
4. Do you participate in class regularly?

5. Do you feel pressured to participate or scared that your ideas are less valuable than others?
6. Do you feel like you can use your prior knowledge to enhance the class discussions?
7. Do you ever get offended when someone disagrees with your opinion in class?
8. Can you retrace a time in high school that helped prepare you for your classes?
9. Can you use what you got in high school to college?

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