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Unequal Educations

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An Autoethnographical Perspective of Education Regulation in America

Education was a complicated sector of my life when I started elementary school almost 20 years ago. I grew up in Los Angeles, California, in the heart of the second largest school district in the nation, Los Angeles Unified (LAUSD). With over 680,000 K-12 students divided between 885 schools and centers in the fall of 2007, one of the first impressions I remember receiving from elementary school was that it was crowded. There have been countless events and people that have shaped my journey through the American Education System. In this essay I will discuss a few of these factors, and how they fit into the complex landscape of education regulation in the United States.

During the 2010-2011 school year, my elementary school, like several others in LAUSD, experienced a staffing shortage. This led to the school assigning one teacher, Mr. Pablo, a 3rd and 4th split-grade class with a total of 39 students. My grades had been on a slight downward trend and my parents couldn't figure out why. Over the years, I had slowly started to realize that I couldn't read as well or as fast as the other kids in my classes. Instead of telling my teachers that I was struggling, however, I grew ashamed of my reading ability, and decided that the best course of action was to hide the deficiency. When I reached third grade, vocabulary practice and quizzes became two of our most frequent weekly activities. Suddenly, my work was timed, and I could no longer hide the fact that it took me significantly longer to parse through passages and spelling than my peers. I had started to fall behind significantly in reading and writing, and with such a full roster, my teacher didn't have the resources to spend large quantities of time helping

students individually. When our classroom was assigned a teaching assistant, separating groups of students that needed more one-on-one help became more common in the classroom. When it became clear that my reading and writing were a persistent concern, my teacher called my parents and I in for a meeting after school. He pulled out some of my work, where he had circled Bs that should have been Ds and Ps that should have been Qs. Following my teacher's discovery of my dyslexia, my parents were able to start helping me more with my reading skills and they tasked my older siblings with afterschool tutoring. The fight to keep up with my peers slowly shifted from a sprint to a jog, and as my grades improved, I started to feel more confident in my learning abilities.

The transition to middle school was hard on me with shifting learning and social expectations. I began experiencing mental health struggles in seventh grade and, for the majority of that school year, I lived predominantly in hospitals and residential treatment programs. Because children must be removed from school in order to stay in inpatient settings, many of these institutions have some form of an independent education program. At first, I stayed in contact with my teachers for assignments and simply did my best to stay on course with the material by reading and studying independently. Once I was moved to a program across the country, however, time differences and technical difficulties made staying on track with my classmates impossible. At that point, I was completely removed from the California school system. The treatment program placed me in the secondary education group, and I spent the rest of seventh grade trying to keep up with my high school-aged classmates. By the time I returned to California for public school, I had been gone for three and a half years, and lived in six different programs between four different states. I couldn't wait to return to the normalcy of school, but when I got there, I slowly started to realize how much I had missed. When my cohort

in California was learning things like MLA formatting, I was living in North Carolina attending a single three hour general secondary education class four days a week. This resulted in countless incidents of confusion, such as turning in a paper with two space bars between each word when instructed to double space an essay. I scored well on tests and my teachers were vocal about their appreciation for my skills, but I often ran into basic, and even foundational concepts, that I simply didn't understand because they were never taught to me. I was incredibly lucky to receive the support that I did when returning to school in California. A group of incredible teachers and tutors helped me bridge the gaps as much as possible, and I successfully graduated high school with several academic accomplishments under my belt.

These experiences do not exist in a vacuum. Both of them are part of a much bigger story that has impacted thousands of students across the nation. LAUSD entered the 2009-2010 school year with one of the largest student populations in the nation. At the same time, the district was hit with unprecedented recession-based budget cuts. News outlets reported that nearly 1000 schools received layoff notices for certified staff, leaving numerous schools scrambling to fill the gaps in vital staffing (LA Daily News, 2011; Llanos, 2011). I remember hearing teachers speaking amongst themselves in hushed voices about the threat of receiving pink slips, and the demeanor change we witnessed as students as teachers began to fear not only for their ability to manage growing classrooms, but also their own personal livelihoods and futures in education. By mid-2011, the district had already issued 3,000 layoffs in an attempt to close budget deficits (LA Daily News, 2011). These cuts collided with already-crowded classrooms, pushing some class sizes into the high 20s and 30s. With such a large student body and a shrinking presence of qualified adults, teachers were forced to prioritize basic classroom management over

individualized instruction, leaving students with less personal feedback, fewer interventions, and a lack of access to academic support that was previously available in surplus.

These losses were detrimental across the board, but their distributions were skewed by the socioeconomic landscape of LAUSD schools. The *Reed v. State of California* lawsuit (ACLU SoCal, 2010) documented how some campuses lost such a large percentage of their teaching staff that students faced a constant turnover along with long-term substitutes and frequent position vacancies. The result was an unequal educational landscape in which students from affluent areas retained access to stable staffing while others experienced a revolving door of educators. Budget cuts also stripped away many of the supplemental programs designed to help students stay on track. In early 2009, LAUSD prepared for \$130 million in additional cuts, threatening arts programs, libraries, and vital intervention services (Llanos, 2009). By 2011, even summer schools (once a key tool for academic intervention and cognitive exercise) had been drastically reduced, with district leaders openly acknowledging that budget limitations made it difficult to combat the “summer brain drain” (NPR staff, 2011). Reports from the time describe schools eliminating tutoring, reducing instructional days, and cutting enrichment programs that had previously supported struggling learners (NPR staff, 2011; Llanos, 2011). For students already dealing with overcrowded classrooms and unstable staffing, the disappearance of these supports compounded academic setbacks.

Budget cuts are one of the most common crises in the American education system, but they are not the only issue that compounds unequal educations across the nation. Within the grand timeline of education in the US, the troubled teen industry (TTI) is a very new addition to the system. Since its invention about 60 years ago, millions of children have filtered through the TTI. It is estimated that at any given moment, there are 120,000-200,000 children in the TTI

(Mater, 2022; Krebs, 2021). While many of the institutions within the TTI have their own education programs, they are often not associated with any formal state curriculum. Many operate with no federal oversight from education or child welfare authorities, meaning their academic programs often fall far below public-school standards (Krebs, 2021; Fabish, 2024). This regulatory gap allows facilities to prioritize behavioral control over learning, resulting in inadequate curricula, limited coursework, and few opportunities for credit-bearing academic progress. The lack of strong federal or state curriculum requirements within the TTI means that what counts as “school” inside these programs varies dramatically. This means that a child who was pulled from public school during, for example, the periodic table unit, could be placed in a treatment program where that unit has already been completed or even replaced entirely with a therapy-centered curriculum. This lack of collaboration between the TTI and the Department of Education has built an internal education system that does not work to prepare children for the schooling they will be required to attend post-treatment.

A second layer of inequality surfaces from the geographic separation that is built into the TTI. Because children are often sent across state lines to remote facilities (Jackson & Eldeib, 2020; Miller et al., 2023), they are removed from their home state’s curriculum and graduation requirements, creating a mismatch between what they are taught and what their home school districts expect. This disconnect becomes especially harmful when students attempt to transfer back into regular schooling, as many discover that credits earned in RTCs are not recognized or do not accurately align with their home state’s curriculum ([VeryCoolSpursy], 2025) . Survivors frequently report that returning to public school involves repeating courses, undergoing remedial placement, or struggling to adjust to a normal academic pace. These are the tangible

consequences of an educational regulation standard that is not designed for continuity or long-term academic success.

Through this reflection and analysis, I have learned more about two very different areas of the American education system. These two areas: the second largest district in the nation, and the most discrete sector of the system, exemplify the nation's highest and lowest volumes of top-down oversight in curriculum and staffing. I have a new appreciation for the grit and resilience of my elementary and middle school teachers. While I remembered their talk of pink slips and lost colleagues in the early 2010s, I was never aware of the full impact the 2008 recession had on my district, and the immense stress my educators must have been grappling with. Mentally superimposing this reflection onto my own experiences as a preschool teaching assistant, I now understand even more how the value of an extra pair of hands in the classroom cannot be understated. I also developed a new feeling of kinship with the TTI survivors who shared their stories of struggling to reintegrate themselves into non-treatment related school settings. I am very curious about the percentage of survivors who experienced this kind of difficulty returning to school, and how this difficulty impacted their pursuits of higher education. I believe that an empirical study on the long term academic success of survivors could generate valuable information on the efficacy of education practices within the TTI. A study of this nature could also be utilized in efforts to enforce more structured educational regulations within the TTI, in hopes of improving children's academic success outside of treatment and strengthening opportunities for participation in higher education.

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