



The Elephant in the Classroom

The gentrification of many of our big cities is providing a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create a large number of racially

and socioeconomically integrated schools. “White flight in reverse” means that, for the first time in 40 years, school integration is logistically feasible in urban America, and without the mandatory busing that derailed earlier efforts. But to capitalize on this opportunity, urban schools that currently serve a predominantly poor and minority population must find a way to attract and retain the gentrifiers—mostly white, upper-middle-class, highly educated parents. That’s easier said than done, because the schools these newcomers find in their gentrifying neighborhoods often embrace practices that they find off-putting and difficult to accept.

Many upper-middle-class parents are willing to have their children be “the first” white kids in a school and are comfortable with the *idea* of their child being a superminority. When the idea takes on an actual shape, however, diversity’s nonsuperficial elements often batter their sense of right and wrong, and they leave. After interviewing more than 50 of these gentrifiers about their school-choice process, I concluded that it is the substantive differences in parenting styles between the white, upper-middle-class parents and the nonwhite, less-affluent parents that are hindering school integration, as these parenting styles directly

Why is diversity so hard to manage?

affect school culture and expectations. This article explores how the disparate cultures found in gentrifying neighborhoods clash in schools, and the pivotal role school leaders play in determining whether integration succeeds or fails, based on their ability and willingness to bridge the two worlds.

Culture Clash

The cultural differences between the newcomers and the old-timers in gentrifying neighborhoods can be easily, though inadequately, summarized: white, upper-middle-class families prefer a progressive and discursive style of interaction with their children, both at home and in school, and lower-income, nonwhite families prefer a traditional or authoritarian style of interaction with their children in these same venues. Annette Lareau’s book, *Unequal Childhoods*, delves deeply into these contrasting styles and how they play out over a lifetime. In my research on school choice, one cultural disparity came up repeatedly as a reason for why white parents leave the schools they are trying to integrate. They were put off by near-constant yelling—from principals, teachers, school aides, and nonwhite parents who come to drop off and pick up their kids. The white parents were surprised to discover that not only is the authoritarian end of the schooling

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spectrum alive, which would be tolerable if not ideal, but also that their gentrifying neighborhood schools exhibit what these parents perceive to be an extreme and outdated education environment, characterized by strict discipline with yelling adults.

Avery (pseudonyms are used for all of my interviewees), a white mom who was clearly resigned to the pervasiveness of this norm at her newly integrating school, explained that she was leaving “primarily because of the discipline issues. I figured the older, the higher up you got, the more effect there would be on him. I didn’t know enough about the upper-grade teachers to automatically be comfortable, because I know there were some yellers in the bunch. And I didn’t want him to get a yeller. It’s a crapshoot every year who you’re going to get.”

Amber was “appalled” by what she “saw in the hallways and in the cafeteria with the way some of the teachers would speak to students.” She remembers many teachers “screaming at the students,” and quickly concluded that “the pre-K was fine, but there was no way she was going to see the kindergarten year of that school.”

Erich used the word “insanity” to express his disdain for the yelling and strictness norm, which he attributed primarily to the administration: “There was just a lot of yelling in the halls,

Meredith was not just concerned about “the policing of kids” and the impact this was having on her own children, she was especially aggrieved by the way the yelling seemed to target the young black boys in the school. She described a scene in which the black boys were “being treated like prisoners, lined up against the wall, like they’re being incarcerated already!” She was clearly pained recalling this story: “It was so tragic, so, so tragic. You know I was so aware of my own privilege in the situation, knowing I could pull my kids out at any time. And there are some parents for whom this is their chance!”

Lisbeth was equally horrified by the way the school aides’ yelling always seemed to hone in on the black boys, and she told her principal, “They would never dare speak that way to my children. They speak that way to the black boys. So not only is it horrible for everybody, but they’re reinforcing a stereotype that black boys can be spoken to in a way that white boys and white girls are not spoken to.”

In *Other People’s Children*, Lisa Delpit explores the dissimilar styles of communication exhibited by people from different racial and class backgrounds, and how these differences might have a negative impact on learning. For example, Delpit sees a problem when a typical white, middle-class teacher uses



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a lot of screaming at the kids. If the kids were acting up they would be punished by not allowing them to go to recess. You need to give them more recess time if they are acting up! Punishing the whole class if one kid is acting up is insanity to me.”

Cindy’s son “hated” school, and she attributed it to a classroom that “was kind of disorganized. There was a lot of yelling and there was no standard of discipline in place.” Clearly trained in diplomatic speak, Cindy expanded on how the yelling drove her out of the school: “I do think it is a little strange when you’re walking down the halls of the school and you hear teachers shouting and screaming ‘shut up’ at the kids. That is not a good thing. Our kids get yelled at enough at home, but to have to go to school and get yelled at too, it is not a good thing. So, I just wanted out of the school at that point.”

a passive communication style with her low-income black students, such as *asking* them to take their seats instead of *telling* them to take their seats. She argues that this passive communication style is confusing because of low-income black children’s expectations of how authority figures should act, and this mismatch hinders their academic progress. She asserts that white, liberal educators who value student-centered pedagogy and soft, conversant, negotiated power end up alienating and confusing children who are used to explicit instructions and assertive, strong authority figures, a parenting style more common in the black community. My research suggests that this cultural mismatch also appears to work the other way. The teachers in predominantly poor, minority schools, who are reportedly mostly black and have adopted



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the more teacher-centered, authoritarian style of instruction that they view as appropriate for their students, are turning off white, upper-middle-class parents who want school climates similar to their own progressive homes, where problems are discussed. The “yelling” described by my interviewees *could* simply be a misperception of Delpit’s described assertiveness. What they think of as “yelling” might just be a firmness and directness that these parents are not used to, that is not part of their culture. Regardless, it hampers integration, because the white, upper-middle-class parents who send their children to schools in their gentrifying neighborhood do not want them spoken to in *that* way, whatever its label, and they often reconsider their schooling decision.

Different Sensibilities

The parents I interviewed who were taking their children out of their gentrifying neighborhood’s school shared stories of cultural dissonance that were minor affairs, but that crystallized for them the discomfort they felt as newcomers, and their inability to find a niche. In one example, the newcomers were trying to organize volunteers to come in to the cafeteria at lunchtime to help manage what they called “the chaos,” only to be kept out by fear of child molestation. As Meredith recounts with both humor and horror, some of the nonwhite families in the school responded to the lunchroom volunteer proposal with, “How do we know who is coming into the school? We need to protect our children! How do we know these people aren’t going to molest our children?” To which Meredith sarcastically replied (in her mind only, of course), “Yeah, right, *that* is something we really need to be afraid of!”

Avery explained to me how the lower-income parents in the school wanted these lunchroom parent volunteers to go through a Learning Leaders program before they could come in and open milk cartons. She was baffled by the resistance to something that seemed so innocent and helpful: “You know, it was basically bringing hands and ideas. It was not trying to change curriculum, nothing dramatic. It was simply, ‘Let’s ease the hardest

part of the day, when you have no teachers and few adult hands in the lunchroom.’ We were literally going in and opening up milk cartons and handing out sewing cards. And yet somewhere along the line, there was an ego that got trip-wired. I don’t know what it was. But all of a sudden, ‘Oh, you have to go through the Learning Leaders program before you can even volunteer in the lunchroom! No, you cannot touch the students at all!’ I heard yelling at a meeting, from another parent, ‘I don’t want you in the lunchroom opening my kid’s milk unless you’ve gone through Learning Leaders! I don’t want you touching my kid!’ Like heaven forbid you put your arm around a kid’s shoulder!”

Since my study focused on the perceptions of the white, upper-middle-class families, I don’t know why there was such great concern about child molestation at this school. The parents I interviewed who were at the school at the time didn’t know either, and in the course of debating this parent lunchroom volunteer proposal, they never found out. It was as though they couldn’t have a conversation about it. Each side was so taken aback by the other’s sensibilities that there was no room for discussion.

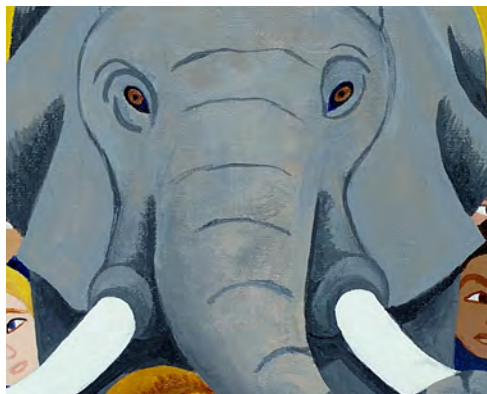
Principals Matter

The reaction of the principal in a gentrifying neighborhood’s school to the arrival of more-demanding parents largely determined whether the white, upper-middle-class families stayed at the school in spite of the yelling and other incidents, or left. Those school leaders skilled at bridging gentrification’s cultural divide were able to retain the newcomers. They assured the white parents that they were welcomed and valued members of the school community, even as they continued to hold the respect of the families who had long been part of the school. This took political savvy, and perhaps a special talent for code switching. It was easier to do in schools with a diverse nonwhite population, and in neighborhoods that were further along in the gentrification process, where the battle over who it belongs to isn’t as raw. Interviewees described those school leaders who were

unable to meet the needs and expectations of both groups of parents quite negatively and identified the principals as the ultimate reason for their departure.

At Timothy's school, for example, all of the white families I interviewed rated the teachers "very good," "great," or "excellent," so the principal, Dr. Fox, had a solid starting point for retaining the new families. But the parents described Dr.

modating. Cindy explained how her son got in trouble in his kindergarten class for raising his hand during a lesson, "because apparently you can't do that." He now lived in fear of getting in trouble and having to sit under the big T for Time Out. Cindy found this disciplining for hand raising so "bizarre" that she took her concerns to the principal. Dr. Caraway didn't think it was strange at all and did nothing to



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Fox as exacerbating the cultural tensions, tensions stemming mostly from different expectations about lunch and recess, with his "race baiting" and by "bad-mouthing some parents in the neighborhood to other parents." He reportedly said things like, "Oh these nouveau riche parents want to come in and take over, remember how our neighborhood used to be before all these nouveau riche people showed up?" One parent described him as "acting like Al Sharpton." Another said he fostered an "us-against-them environment," and he allegedly sent "horrible, stupid, hostile, mean, petty, threatening" e-mails to two of the white parents at the school, accusing them of "trying to bring down a strong black man."

Parents complained that Dr. Fox tried to turn any criticism about the school into a racial issue. Shawn described him as "thwarting every attack by saying, 'It's these white people, they're racist, they want private school, they want this, they want that, they want to make this school into a cooperative,' things that make no sense at all." But if his goal was to drive away the white families, his tactics were effective. As Shawn concludes, "If you say enough of it, and people want to believe you, they'll believe you. So, eventually, we all just sort of left, in fear and in shame. Having to take my daughter out of the school, it hugely undermines what I'm trying to teach her about race relations. It's really weird; it's a weird situation."

Power and Protocol

Weirdness is a common theme in parents' recollections of school leaders who were both unwelcoming and unaccom-

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help mediate the classroom culture disagreement between one of her teachers and one of her parents.

Kate was driven to tears within the first week of school by Dr. Caraway. She unknowingly violated protocol by inviting fellow pre-K families to a pizza party without first getting Dr. Caraway's approval to distribute the invitation. It was Dr. Caraway's peculiarity about the situation that Kate found so maddening, as she describes, "We were at a meeting with parents about procedures and things, and the principal was talking about how—I mean the way she was talking you would think that somebody had distributed some kind of communist propaganda—she is talking about how somebody had the audacity to distribute something without it going through her office! And I'm thinking, 'Oh my gosh, how horrible, what did this person do?' I had no idea that she was talking about my pizza party invitation. Then once it finally dawned on me, I don't know how I made the connection that she was talking about me inviting my child's classmates to pizza, on a Saturday in the park, but I went up to her and tried to talk to her calmly about it. She was just so defensive, trying to hold on so tight to whatever little power she had left. She just made me feel like I had done something awful. I invited the kids to pizza! I just don't get it!"

Paula described an even stranger interaction with this same principal. She and a few other families in the school organized getting Barnes & Noble to give \$4,000 worth of book cards so all the teachers would have a \$100 gift card for books. According to Paula, Dr. Caraway thought they were "trying to bribe the teachers and turn them against her," so she left a message

on Paula's answering machine telling her, "Oh you can't do this, the DOE, it's against the rules," and then, thinking she had hung up, continued to say on the machine, "Just wait til Ms. — and Ms. — (referring to Paula and her friend) hear that! Ha ha ha ha ha (cackling like a witch)." Paula concludes, "It was so bad, it was straight out of the movies."

Navigating Diversity

It isn't clear what drove these principals to reject the white, upper-middle-class parents and their attempts to bring resources to the schools. Some interviewees thought these school leaders felt threatened and were trying to hold onto their power base; some simply thought the various principals were "not the brightest bulb in the box," "insane," "crazy," "incompetent." A few parents blamed themselves and thought that perhaps their tactics were insensitive to the existing school culture and off-putting to the nonwhite, lower-income families in the school. Despite their having the best intentions, given the cultural divide, they simply couldn't find a way to enter the school and offer what they had without inciting tension.

Paula thought that *successful* integrators "showed the proper respect to teachers and parents," whereas those who were not successful "felt like they were a little better than everybody, they didn't mesh with the old parents, they didn't know how the dynamics of the school really worked." Among these dynamics were the "school is your job, home is my job" attitude common among lower-class parents. This was truly confusing to upper-middle-class parents, who had never really interacted with families with this attitude about school.

Avery offered a critique of herself and her peers for possibly failing to have the proper "cultural sensitivity" in their integration efforts. Her reflection on what happened is an attempt to take some of the blame off of the school leader: "There wasn't enough, honestly, ego stroking or catering, there was not enough acknowledgment. It came across as, 'You're broken and you need fixing,' rather than, 'We've got extra hands, we've got extra energy, let's build up what you already have.' The perception, for whatever reason, was, 'You're judging what we have as inadequate.' I think that there needed to be a bit more weaving of the parents together. Before saying, 'We're doing this,' there needed to be more weaving."

The weaving together of extremely different groups of people is not easy, especially when there is an undeniable hierarchy. Those at the economic top can exercise their privilege and exit a situation

when it proves untenable. Despite believing in equality, they discover in their gentrifying neighborhoods that this concept isn't pure, and diversity isn't always a pleasant and stimulating panoply of interesting experiences. Non-superficial diversity can be extremely difficult to manage, especially in a school setting, where relationships are intimate. Overcoming the attendant challenges requires an adroit school leader who understands the value of racial and socioeconomic integration, who can infuse optimism into the integration skeptics within the school community, and who can skillfully shepherd such a motley flock. Without that kind of leadership, parents are too likely to reach the same conclusion as Peter, an urban dad who was bused for integration as a child, and who now struggles to navigate the parental responsibility of educating his own children: "I have my doubts about integration. It's supposed to be about building understanding, but I find that it just makes people want to be even further apart."

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"I'm not late. Everyone learns at their own speed."