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# ‘The Great Equalizer’: What the Bronx education of the past can teach us about the Bronx education of today

# ‘El gran igualador’: Lo que la educación del Bronx del pasado puede enseñarnos sobre la educación del Bronx de hoy

# ‘O Grande Equalizador’: O que a educação do passado no Bronx nos pode ensinar sobre a educação no Bronx de hoje

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**Abstract**

Education is an important tool in the pursuit of the American Dream, namely upward social and economic mobility in the United States. For over 100 years, immigrants and their families have moved to the Bronx to pursue this dream and take advantage of the free education provided by the public school system, from the influx of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to immigrants today coming from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. This article seeks to use the Bronx Jewish History Project’s oral history interviews to establish the state of education in the Bronx in the mid-twentieth century in order to compare it with Bronx education today. In doing so, it draws the conclusion that public resources need to be reallocated to teacher education and enrichment education programs in order to overcome worsening segregation and provide the newest generation of immigrants with the opportunities necessary to pursue the American Dream in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** Educational history, immigration, The Bronx, American Dream, access to education, bilingual education, school integration, teacher shortage, teacher education, government policy.

**Resumen**

La educación es un instrumento importante para la búsqueda del sueño americano, relacionado con la movilidad social y económica ascendente en los Estados Unidos; durante más de cien años, inmigrantes y sus familias se han mudado al Bronx para lograrlo, aprovechando la enseñanza gratuita que implica el sistema de escuelas públicas, desde la llegada de inmigrantes procedentes del sur europeo, y de Europa del Este, de finales del siglo XIX y principios del XX, hasta la actual presencia de inmigrantes

 

latinoamericanos, caribeños y africanos. Este artículo emplea entrevistas, historia oral, del Bronx Jewish History Project, para establecer el estado de la educación en el Bronx, desde mediados del siglo XX, hasta hoy. Al hacerlo, concluye que los recursos públicos necesitan reasignarse a la formación docente y a programas de mejora de la educación, con el objetivo de superar el aumento de la segregación, y otorgar a las nuevas generaciones de inmigrantes las oportunidades necesarias para perseguir el sueño americano en el siglo XXI.

**Palabras clave:** Historia de la educación, inmigración, Bronx, sueño americano, acceso a la educación, educación bilingüe, integración escolar, escasez de profesores, formación de docentes, política gubernamental.

**Resumo**

A educação é um instrumento importante na prossecução do sonho americano, relacionado com a mobilidade social e económica ascendente nos Estados Unidos; Durante mais de cem anos, os imigrantes e as suas famílias mudaram-se para o Bronx para o conseguir, aproveitando a educação gratuita que o sistema escolar público implica, desde a chegada de imigrantes do sul da Europa e da Europa de Leste na viragem do século XIX e início do século XX, até à presença atual de imigrantes latino-americanos, caribenhos e africanos. Este artigo utiliza entrevistas de história oral do Bronx Jewish History Project para estabelecer a situação da educação no Bronx, desde meados do século XX até aos dias de hoje. Ao fazê-lo, conclui que os recursos públicos precisam de ser realocados para programas de formação de professores e de melhoria da educação, com o objectivo de superar a crescente segregação e dar às novas gerações de imigrantes as oportunidades necessárias para perseguir o sonho americano no século XXI.

**Palavras-chave:** História da educação, imigração, Bronx, sonho americano, acesso à educação, educação bilingue, integração escolar, escassez de professores, formação de professores, política governamental.

## Introduction

In 1923, New York Governor Al Smith spoke at the opening banquet of the luxurious Grand Concourse Plaza Hotel, where he declared, “The Bronx is the most striking example of urban development in the United States” (Rosenblum, 2011, p. 107). If New York City was king, the Bronx was the shining jewel in its crown.

 

It represented modernism, progress, and optimism for the millions of immigrants arriving on the country's shores. Families moved to the Bronx to get better living conditions and a better education for their children (Hanson, 2004). Nonetheless, by 1977, President Jimmy Carter took a "sobering" visit to the Bronx to see the burnt out buildings of what was then the nation's most striking example of urban decay (Dembart, 1977). Today, things have greatly improved, and what were once empty lots and abandoned warehouses are now new homes and businesses. Yet, the Bronx still has the highest poverty rate of any county in New York State and the South Bronx remains the poorest congressional district in the country (New York State Community Action Association, 2018; Food Research and Action Center, 2017). The purpose of this article is not to explain how or why this shift took place, but to look to the mid-twentieth century Bronx, specifically at its public education system, to find valuable lessons for the Bronx of today.

It is an established fact that education is a key component of the American Dream. Educational advocates like Horace Mann have been advocating for free, universal education funded by the government since the 1830s, highlighting the importance of this educational system as the "great equalizer" in a democratic country where the masses run the nation (Sadovnik et al., 2017, p. 82). Mann stressed the responsibility of each generation to the next, writing in 1846,

> Certainly, in a republican government, the obligation of the predecessors, and the right of the successors, extend to and embrace the means of such an amount of education as will prepare each individual to perform all the duties which devolve upon him as a man and a citizen. (1891, p. 130).

Mann and modern education scholars also recognize the role that education plays in economically uplifting both individuals and whole communities, with economists recognizing education as a key component of economic growth (Vinovskis, 1970). With the growth of cities and the influx of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe between the 1890s and 1920s, education became increasingly associated with Americanizing the new generation of immigrants and adapting them to the American societal milieu. The most influential education scholar of this time period, John Dewey, described the school as a "primarily social institution," stressing its importance in building community, instilling a sense of shared morality, and promoting progress and reform (1897, pp. 77-80). By the end of the Second World War, the expansion of education had shifted from K-12 to higher education, through efforts such as the GI Bill which opened up university level educational opportunities to those who could not previously afford them (Savodnik et al., 2018).

It was in this historical and educational context that first and second generation Jewish Americans were growing up in the Bronx. Jews had started to arrive in large numbers from Eastern Europe starting in the 1890s and, though the immigration wave was reduced to a trickle with the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924, the

 

Jewish Bronx experienced its peak population and golden age between the 1920s and 1950s (Dash-Moore et al., 2017). The Bronx in particular was seen as a place for those who were upwardly mobile, a place that was newer, greener, and cleaner as compared to the conditions of the Lower East Side or Williamsburg, Brooklyn (Maier-Garcia, 2023a; DuBose-Simons, 2014). As the postwar period progressed, there was upward mobility in the Bronx itself, with poorer and more recently immigrated Jews living in the South/ East Bronx and middle class and more established Jews moving North/West (Maier-Garcia, 2023a). Education was a well known value for these Jewish immigrants arriving in America, stereotyped to "Land on Saturday, Settle on Sunday, and School on Monday" (Jacknow-Markowitz, 1993, p. 5).

The primary sources examined for this article come from the Bronx Jewish History Project (BJHP)[1], an archive of oral histories and artifacts from Fordham University, about 40 of which are included in the archive today. As a foremost authority on the history of the Jewish Bronx and an educator who conducted a year of student teaching in a Bronx high school, I seek with this article to combine these two interrelated areas of interest. At the school, I bore witness to the experiences of the newest generation of immigrants and their families living in the Bronx today, and I saw the continuities and changes over time.

In the 1930s, Jews made up about half the Bronx, while the two largest minority groups of the mid-twentieth century Bronx, African Americans and Puerto Ricans, made up a combined 6.1% of the Bronx population in 1940 and rose to 21.6% by 1960 (Gonzalez, 2004, pp. 98, 113). As of 2022, the Bronx was 28.2% Black, 56.6% Hispanic, and 8.3% White. In the neighborhoods around where I lived and worked in the Bronx, Fordham/ University Heights and Belmont/ East Tremont, the white populations were 7.2% and 3.2%, respectively (Furman Center, 2024). The Bronx has undergone a massive demographic change in the last 100 years, but socioeconomically it is very much still the borough of poor and working class immigrants and new Americans. In recognizing this fact, I was struck by the similarities and differences in the educational experiences of Jewish Bronxites of the mid-twentieth century as compared with the predominantly Hispanic Bronxites of today. Particularly, I saw the stark disadvantages my own students faced in 2024 as opposed to those Bronx students of the past, and quickly came to realize that Bronx educational opportunities have gotten worse in the past century, not better.

I am far from the first person to suggest reforms in Bronx education, and there are many great educators, reformers, and scholars still fighting for change (Su, 2010; Fabricant, 2010; Zachary & Olatoye, 2001). The purpose of this paper is to utilize a unique historical perspective to examine what education once looked like in the Bronx and what it can look like in the future. In critically analyzing previous research, the Bronx Jewish History Project's interviews, and my own experience teaching in a Bronx high school, it becomes evident that public resources must be reallocated in order to overcome the impacts of lasting racial and

[1] https://research.library.fordham.edu/bjhp/

 

socioeconomic segregation and revitalize free and low cost teacher education and enrichment education programs in the Bronx.

## Methodology

The personal nature of oral histories make them specifically useful for a study such as this one, examining the lived experiences of those in the past and present. Taking inspiration from the groundbreaking works of Robert Darnton (1984) and Pierre Nora (1989), I intend to use the oral histories to move the historical narrative away from traditional accounts of institutions and powerful individuals and give a voice to those "regular" people who have been previously excluded from the official historical record. Oral histories have been an important tool in shifting historical research towards "ordinary" people or marginalized groups such as the poor and working classes, immigrants, and religious, racial, and ethnic minorities that make up places like the Bronx (Sharpless, 2008). In this case, I am analyzing the oral histories for personal memories, values, and aspirations to learn from those who attended the Bronx public school system in the past and apply those lessons to serve people in the Bronx public school system today.

The analysis in this paper is a bottom-up approach, learning from individuals to reflect on larger institutions, as opposed to a top-down approach, learning from the institutions what impact they have on individuals (Lynd, 2014). This perspective challenges mainstream understandings and stereotypes about the Bronx and the people that live there, pushing for new approaches that center *their* voices in the conversation.

## Bronx Education in the Mid-Twentieth Century

*The Public School Environment and Educational Experiences*

Unlike in other parts of the country where segregation was enforced by law, racial and socioeconomic segregation of neighborhoods and ability based tracking led to *de facto* segregation in Bronx schools. Some interviewees describe their neighborhoods as "99 percent Jewish," and those who describe "mixed" neighborhoods typically refer to an ethnic mixture of Jews, Italians, and Irish (Maier-Garcia, 2023b, p. 5). Those who describe their schools as non-segregated by race were often segregated by economic status (Maier-Garcia, 2024; Maier-Garcia, 2023b, Maier-Garcia, 2023c).[2] Harold Schultz, in an interview with his sister Eva Yelloz, echoed this sentiment about the Melrose neighborhood of the South Bronx, "We had an egalitarian neighborhood, and we were ingrained as little kids to believe, to just take it for granted. We're all poor, we're all equal. It had nothing to do with, 'You're Puerto Rican, you're Black, you're Cuban.' We're all

[2] These interviewees even share the fact that they never knew they were poor, because everyone around them was of the same economic status.

 

the same" (Maier-Garcia, 2023d, p. 7). Because the public schools (elementary schools) drew from the immediate neighborhood, this meant the schools reflected the socioeconomic makeup of that small radius.[3] Particularly because many Italian and Irish children would go to parochial schools, the result was almost exclusively Jewish schools with the few minority students, mainly African Americans in the 1940s and 1950s, who lived there (Maier-Garcia, 2023e). Gloria Katz recalls her kindergarten class picture, where her teacher has her arm around the sole Black student in the class (Maier-Garcia, 2023f).

For those schools that were more racially diverse, *de facto* segregation was enforced by a tracking system that ranked students "intellectually" and put them in classes based on their perceived academic level. Beth Braunstein describes her own experience as a "homogeneous" one, always being placed in the special progress (SP) or highest level accelerated class:

> My class ethnically had maybe two African American kids, one Hispanic kid, the rest were Caucasian… That's just what it was, for better or worse. Was it racism? Was it that those kids passed the test to get in? There were IQ tests and there were reading scores, that's how I think they did it. So, I don't really think it was racist. I think it was kind of how it worked out, because of the opportunities that those ethnic groups had for education. (Maier-Garcia, 2023g, p. 9).

Regardless of what is now known about the racist nature of IQ tests and the intentions of the teachers or administrators, the practical result of this tracking was to segregate students within their school.

Two other factors that interviewees discuss, that are still relevant today, are overcrowding and teacher representation. Overcrowding in the public schools (elementary schools) was especially a problem for those growing up in the South Bronx, which even before the arson and devastation of the 1970s and 1980s was poorer and more overpopulated, with older tenement style housing. This resulted in half days or split sessions (where, for example, half the kindergarten class would come in the morning and the other half would come in the afternoon) or classrooms filled to the brim with students sharing desks.

Jack Jacobs recalls his experience in PS 79 where, because there were not enough teachers to handle all the students, the second and third grades were combined leaving one teacher for upwards of 50 to 60 students (Maier-Garcia, 2023h). In regard to teacher representation, Jacobs describes the dichotomy between the teachers and the students, the teachers being of predominantly Irish Catholic backgrounds and the students being overwhelmingly Jewish and the children of immigrants (Maier-Garcia, 2023h). This was not an unusual experience, particularly in the interviewees' public school (elementary school) years (Maier-Garcia, 2023f; Maier-Garcia, 2023i; Maier-Garcia, 2023j). As Ruthie Cohen explained, "There wasn't any

[3] In the context of the interviews, "public school" is used to refer to both elementary/ primary schools and the larger government funded educational system. For clarity, public school generally refers to the larger system, unless clarified with "(elementary school)."

 

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animosity, that's just the way it was" (Maier-Garcia, 2023j, p. 2). As the postwar period progressed, it would be Jewish teachers who made up the majority of teachers in New York City's public schools (Jacknow-Markowitz, 1993).

Despite those factors discussed above, many interviewees report having received a high quality education in the Bronx public schools of the mid-twentieth century, particularly at the Bronx High School of Science (colloquially known as "Bronx Science" or just "Science"). Bronx Science was then, as it is today, a selective public high school in the North Bronx that specializes in the sciences. In those days, students had to test in. This meant local Jewish Bronxites could receive an education as good as, if not better than, any private school. Particularly because many people with PhDs could not find university jobs during the Great Depression, the school recruited the best teachers, and it is still known today for the high number of Nobel Prize winners that graduated from there (Maier-Garcia, 2022a). Even for those who did not attend Bronx Science for high school, they recall "excellent" educational experiences in the Bronx public school system.[4] Of course, this is not a monolithic statement, as personal circumstances, interactions with particular teachers, and age led others to have more mixed or lower quality educational experiences (Maier-Garcia, 2022b; Maier-Garcia, 2022c; Maier-Garcia, 2023k).

Overall, education was an important part of the Jewish culture of the mid-twentieth century Bronx, some even describing it as the most important value of a Jewish family at that time (Maier-Garcia, 2023l; Maier-Garcia, 2023m). Despite the majority of interviewees' parents not graduating from college, it was made known that this generation would pursue a college education, without them having much choice in the matter (Maier-Garcia, 2023b; Maier-Garcia, 2023e; Maier-Garcia, 2023h; Maier-Garcia, 2023j; Maier-Garcia, 2023n; Maier-Garcia, 2023o).

Interviewees like Mark Willner and Vivian Gruder point to the implicit nature of their experience, sharing respectively, "It was just assumed I would go to college, and my cousins would go. Where you went didn't matter so much… It was just assumed. No questions asked," and, "I don't think we talked about it… I mean, it was just something we did. I guess it was in the cultural air of Jewish families about the importance of learning, of study" (Maier-Garcia, 2023p, p. 4; Maier-Garcia, 2023k, p. 4). Even for women growing up during this time period, they were expected to be well educated, though their career opportunities were limited to teacher, nurse, and secretary (Maier-Garcia, 2023j; Maier-Garcia, 2023n; Maier-Garcia, 2023q). Susanne Seperson described the "two commandments" for women of the era as getting a college education and getting married (Maier-Garcia, 2023r, p. 7). Even with the clear misogynistic outlook on women's education, they were expected to be well educated and thoughtful as the educators of the next generation, be it their own children or someone else's.

[4] Among those who didn't attend Bronx Science: Susanne Seperson, Herbert Hochberg, Richard Rothstein, Howard Rifkin, Michael Rosen, Diana Rotman, Ellen Newman. Among those who attended Bronx Science: George Acs, Stuart Rudnick, Marc Hochberg, Charles Fogelman.

*Enrichment Educational Opportunities*

When asked about memories that stand out to them about their time in school, many BJHP interviewees fondly remember music and art programs. Students were provided with instruments and free music lessons starting in public school (elementary school), with some schools having their own bands and orchestras (Maier-Garcia, 2023e). Susan Schwalb, who is today a professional artist, aspired to be an artist since she was a small child and was able to take art classes through school, eventually attending the School of Music and Art, a selective New York City public school that focuses on the arts (Maier-Garcia, 2023s). Joan Brock and Hilde Klein both recall taking part in school choirs and shows, particularly in junior high school, which created communities for them in an otherwise difficult time of adolescent transition (Maier-Garcia, 2023c; Maier-Garcia, 2023l).

Like Schwalb, these activities in their youth fostered a lifelong love of singing, music, and shows that included Brock becoming a drama teacher and directing student plays herself and Klein participating in religious and non-religious choirs to this day. Given the working class background of the interviewees and their families during this time, the resources to foster their love of the arts would not have been available to many of them if the public school system had not provided them with these free and accessible opportunities.

The education that Jewish Bronxites received was not limited to the classroom; they also took advantage of free resources around the city. Then, as today, they could visit world-class museums such as the Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art free of cost (Maier-Garcia, 2023i). Susan Schwalb would take the subway down to Manhattan on the weekends to visit these museums, attend free talks on art, and study in nearby libraries. For her, the accessibility of these cultural centers allowed her to find the "something else" that she was looking for, that she was lacking in the Bronx:

> I don't look back at [my childhood] in a negative way. I was glad to move closer to culture in Manhattan, there was no art in the Bronx. They have the Bronx Museum, I've been there. It's nice. But that wasn't there when I was a child, there wasn't anything like that. I was always coming, wanting to come to Manhattan. (Maier-Garcia, 2023s, p. 18).

While the Bronx lacked museums then, even more so than it does now, the New York Botanical Gardens and the Bronx Zoo were free and accessible. This meant that young people growing up in the urban environment of the Bronx were able to experience a diversity of natural life. Eva Yelloz recalls the role her mother, an amateur botanist from Poland, played in supplementing her education, bringing her and her brother to the Botanical Gardens and teaching them plant names in Latin and Polish (Maier-Garcia, 2023d).

 

Additionally, the interviewees identify the public library as a vital resource. This “wonderful gift New York gave to her children” (Maier-Garcia, 2022a, p. 11) allowed young Bronxites to widen their educational purview beyond what was being taught in school. Interviewees like Gloria Katz describe taking out as many books as was allowed and reading vehemently (Maier-Garcia, 2023f; Maier-Garcia, 2023l).

Andrea Brecker, who graduated from high school in 1968, describes the low quality of education she was receiving as she got older and Puerto Rican and Black gangs began fighting in turf wars, including in school. While some students in her English class could hardly read aloud, she supplemented her knowledge by going to the library, a place she called a “sanctuary” where she was comfortable surrounded by the books (Maier-Garcia, 2023t, p. 5). Especially for those with difficult home lives, it was a place of refuge (Maier-Garcia, 2023u). The library was a place to be frequented, to fuel a love of reading (Maier-Garcia, 2023k; Maier-Garcia, 2023l; Maier-Garcia, 2023n; Stovall, 2023).

*Education and the American Dream*

Education is recognized by the interviewees as an essential part of the pursuit of the American Dream and upward mobility for Jewish immigrants and children of immigrants in the mid-twentieth century. Among the BJHP interviewees, most of their parents did not graduate from college, and many did not graduate from high school.[5] This meant the majority of them were the first to graduate from college in their family, and some went on to pursue graduate degrees as well, becoming teachers, professors, and doctors. The interviewees are cognizant of the fact that their location in the United States and the Bronx enabled them to pursue a free and accessible quality education. Herbert Hochberg reflected:

> I was very lucky. I had very good parents. And I think the city did a very good job for people like my family, immigrants, immigrant children… The contrast between the standard of living of my grandparents, my parents, and me early on, and today is… almost unbelievable… The US has been very good for not only my family, but most families. People talk about opportunity having disappeared. But there's still tremendous opportunity in the country. And the New York City school system, with all the handicaps it had, with all these immigrants coming here, they did a wonderful job. And they deserve a lot of credit for it, which I don't think they get. (Maier-Garcia, 2023b, p. 7).

[5] Parent(s) did not graduate high school: Helen Siegel, Vivian Gruder, Gloria Katz, Diana Rotman, Alexandra Vozick Hans, Stuart Rudnick. Parent(s) did not graduate college: George Acs, Alfred Brandon, Joan Brock, Ina Gordon, Jeffrey Gurock, Herbert Hochberg, Marc Hochberg, Jack Jacobs, Hilde Klein, “Len”, Howard Rifkin, “Robin”, Michael Rosen, Susanne Seperson, Mark Stern, Helen “Lyn” Silverstein, Harry Sweet.

 

He concluded by highlighting the free education that was available at public universities in New York City in the 1940s, which, though it is no longer free today, still costs significantly less than a private institution (Maier-Garcia, 2023b). In the mid-twentieth century, high quality free public education in New York City did not stop in high school, but instead extended to city universities such as City College, Hunter College, and Queens College. Susanne Seperson expanded on this idea:

> My mother went to high school in Poland. They moved from a little town to a bigger city, and she was very, very academically gifted. So she went to a commercial high school and gained a business background. This is why there was a reverence in my home for education… Her mother always said to her, "You don't need a dowry, your education is your dowry." And she (my mother) said if she had had a dowry she would have lost everything, but the education stayed with her. But she spoke multiple languages and she said it helped her during the [Second World War] when she could translate… I was literally in kindergarten, I knew I was going to college. My parents said, "You are so lucky because someday you will go… to Hunter College and it is free." Because in Europe my mother went to high school, but you had to be able to afford it. (Maier-Garcia, 2023r, p. 4).

The Bronx High School of Science was particularly associated with the pursuit of the American Dream. Like the New York City public university system at the time, Bronx Science offered the highest quality education free of charge to anyone who could test in. It was described as "academically elite," despite many students being "below the poverty line" (Maier-Garcia, 2022d, pp. 5-6). Bruce Jakubovitz connects this directly with what he calls "the Bronx mentality," saying, "What's impressive to me about Bronx Science… was very often these are first generation Americans. Parents were immigrants. And this was the first rung on the ladder that represented the American dream. It was all about education" (Maier-Garcia, 2022d, pp. 5-6). In retrospect many years later, the interviewees see the Bronx High School of Science as the first step in their economic and social upward mobility. In explaining why people would leave the Bronx, fellow Bronx Science alumna Alexandra Vozick Hans blames their education:

> People born in the 40s and 50s began to aspire to more. They now had college educations. My father hadn't even gone to high school. My mother had one year of high school… The education took us out… The idea of home ownership was like America with the golden streets. I mean, it was a dream but not necessarily a good dream; it was just something that people might have reached for" (Maier-Garcia, 2023i, pp. 4-6).[6]

[6] Vozick Hans refers here to "golden streets," as it was a common understanding among immigrants coming to the United States that the streets would be paved with gold, highlighting the wealth of the nation.

 

Charles Fogelman tries to live his life from a “stance of gratitude,” realizing the luck he has to be an American and a New Yorker, and to have gone to Bronx Science and receive a “stunning” public school education (Maier-Garcia, 2022a, pp. 10-11). Even after half a century and much educational and professional growth, Fogelman says he and others he went to school with are still searching for, and failing to find, an environment like the one they were in at Bronx Science (Maier-Garcia, 2022a). His and others’ comments reinforce the importance of free and accessible public education, not only to those with special education needs but also to those who need to be pushed and held to higher academic standards to meet their true potential.

Michael Malasky’s comments on his own educational experience and its connection to the American Dream shed light on the changes that began taking place in the Bronx in the late 1960s and 1970s. Born in 1959, making him younger than most other BJHP interviewees, and growing up in between the Marble Hill public housing project and Co-op City, Malasky describes his educational experience in the Bronx as a transitional period, as white ethnics such as Jews, Italians, and Irish were moving North and out of the Bronx and Black and Hispanic, particularly Puerto Rican, people were moving in. Based on his 40 years of experience as an educator and school administrator, he attributes his own poor educational experience to the city’s inability to deal with said transition. He continues:

> Going from a subclass that was very much into education, very much into the American Dream, versus the new generation of people that was still sort of transitioning from the South, and trying to get their roots in the city and having a very, very, very difficult time. And looking at it from a socioeconomic perspective it was a very challenging time for New York City, in the public schools. When I finally made it to high school, where it was very diverse and very dangerous, and the gangs really started to sprout, and myself not wanting to be involved in that — that's when it became very challenging… The standards at that time were pretty low… The schools became places where, you know, gangs of kids could come together to wreak havoc. And a generation prior to that, that wasn't the case. Kids went to school to become professionals. And I got caught in the transition of that. (Maier-Garcia, 2022e, pp. 4-5).

Here, Malasky points not merely to a perceived change in mindset, but the reality of socioeconomic difference between those Jews that were in Bronx public schools just ten or fifteen years before, who had been in the United States for a generation or two by that point, versus the newer internal migrants, African Americans and Puerto Ricans, who were not only economically disadvantaged as Jewish immigrants were when they arrived in the United States, but subject to larger societal factors such as institutionalized racism. African Americans coming up from the Jim Crow South, where they had been denied an education or

 

general sense of pride and personhood, and Puerto Ricans coming from the island where they had been colonized and oppressed, faced distinct challenges because of their racial status that previous generations of Bronx immigrants had not needed to overcome.[7] Coupled with the impending financial crisis in New York City that stripped the borough of public funds, the 1970s and 1980s marked a distinct decline for the Bronx and its public education system, one that has only begun to improve in the last 20 years.

**Bronx Education Today**

During the 2023-2024 school year, I completed my student teaching in a Bronx high school as part of my master's degree in Adolescent Social Studies Education at Fordham University. It was a small public high school in the Belmont/ Fordham neighborhood of the Bronx, focused on college readiness. It is an "intensely segregated" school, made up of 99-100% minority students, mostly first and second generation Americans coming from Latin America, the Caribbean, and West Africa. I worked with students of every grade level, 9-12, including in Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) classrooms with English Language Learners and students with special education needs. The reflections in this section build off the oral history interviews of the BJHP with other scholarly research and my personal experiences in this Bronx high school.

*School Segregation*

Schools in the United States are more segregated today than in the mid-twentieth century, both racially and socioeconomically (Martin & Brooks, 2020). In particular, the New York City public school system is considered one of the most segregated in the country (Mordechay & Ayscue, 2024). As of 2010, the Bronx was the worst segregated among all of the boroughs, with 93% of their schools qualifying as intensely segregated (Kuscera & Orfield, 2014).[8] Among those community school districts (CSD) considered intensely segregated, CSD 9 in the South West Bronx that includes the neighborhoods of Claremont, Concourse, Highbridge, Morrisania, Morris Heights and University tied CSD 23 in Brooklyn for the most schools that were 99-100% minority (Kuscera & Orfield, 2014). The interviews highlight the fact that school segregation is an issue that has worsened over time, not improved. While the schools described by BJHP interviewees were segregated in the opposite way racially, being majority white with few minorities, the segregation was significantly less intense during the mid-twentieth century, especially in high schools that drew from different, more diverse neighborhoods.

[7] The status of whiteness in the United States overtime is fluid, but it is inarguably true that *de jure* whiteness enabled Jews, Italian, Irish to pursue housing and other opportunities that African Americans and Puerto Ricans could not. See Rosenbaum & Friedman, 2007.
[8] As compared to 71% of schools in Brooklyn, 69% in Manhattan, 59% in Queens, and 8% in Staten Island.

 

Now, even more than in the mid-twentieth century, class lines and racial lines are aligned, with lower class being associated with People of Color and middle or upper class associated with white people. Particularly in the South Bronx, which today has the most extreme school segregation, the schools reflected racially and ethnically diverse neighborhoods of Jews, Italians, Irish, African Americans, and Puerto Ricans in the 1940s and 1950s, bound together in a working class environment. *De facto* segregation by economic status overcame racial boundaries, and income inequality and economic-based segregation has only worsened between 1980 and 2009, continuing to contribute to widening educational gaps today (Duncan & Murnane, 2016). The city has made little to no effort to address economic segregation, and racial desegregation efforts in New York City peaked in the 1980s, with school segregation only intensifying since then and schools still tracking and "academically" segregating their students to this day (Mordechay & Ayscue, 2024).

Today's segregated conditions have a laundry list of negative impacts on students, including, but not limited to, less experienced and qualified teachers, less extracurricular opportunities, worse facilities and resources, and overall lower academic achievement and lower graduation rates (Mordechay & Ayscue, 2024). Academic tracking within these segregated schools only worsens these problems, "widening achievement gaps by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status" (Cohen, 2021, p. 32). Some of my own students in the Bronx expressed fears related to white teachers and white people in general, having had little or no white teachers before high school and only having interacted with white people negatively on public transportation or outside of the Bronx. These negative associations with segregated Bronx education stand in direct contrast with the experiences of the interviewees. Yet, both populations of students represent lower and working class families, where the parents have limited educational backgrounds and who are recent immigrants to the United States. Just because today's students and their families come from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Ghana, does not mean that they should have any lower quality education than those who came from Russian, Poland, and Italy.

As the racial background of the Bronx's students has shifted over time, so too has the city's prioritization of its resources in a way that has lowered the quality of education over the years and perpetuated stereotypes in a self-fulfilling cycle: Bronx minority students are seen as uneducated, illiterate, and unmotivated because the opportunities of their predecessors were taken away before they ever had access to them, and because Bronx students lack opportunities, they are poorly educated by the system and become unmotivated by what is seen as a hopeless situation. The path forward for these students is to look into the past, to see what a well funded school system that prioritizes hiring the best teachers and providing students with a myriad of diverse learning opportunities can do for each new generation of Bronx immigrants.

*Resources Inside and Outside the Classroom*

 

The 1970s marked a period of austerity in New York City that the city has never fully recovered from, particularly in the Bronx. Prior to the slashing of public funds, the interviewees took advantage of a variety of free accessible resources through libraries, museums, and the NYC Parks and Recreation Department. In the 1970s, as the city faced bankruptcy, the NYC government began to dramatically cut these and a number of other public services. In schools, this meant getting rid of music and arts programs that were a highlight of Bronx education in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s (Naison, 2019).[9] This was, also, the same era when they began to charge tuition for the city's public universities, such as City College.

While the city is no longer in such a financial crisis, New York City continues to cut its public programming, closing libraries and limiting their hours to put more money towards policing that discriminates against and harms Bronx students (Cole, 2024). At the same time, instead of putting educational funding towards improving the public schools, the money is being given to private contracts with less regulation and oversight, like charter schools (Gomez-Velez, 2013). The Bronx school I worked in had no music programs and art classes were only available for seniors. The Bronx Zoo and the Botanical Gardens are now only free on Wednesdays, when students are in school. The Bronx still lacks, as it did in the mid-twentieth century, cultural opportunities such as museums and concerts (a major exception being the Bronx Museum of the Arts, which is free and puts on events for the community). While many interviewees enjoyed the museums available in Manhattan, most of my students in the Bronx had not gone to any major museums in the city, except those who had gone on school trips, and hardly traveled south of 125th Street at all.

The lack of resources within the classroom and in other public programming is a major obstacle for Bronx students today. A 2024 graduate of the Bronx high school I worked at told me explicitly that he and his peers do not lack motivation, they lack opportunity. Research shows that arts education not only increases academic achievement, but encourages self-expression, creativity, and improved mental health, in an environment where all these things are otherwise lacking (Roege & Kim, 2013). As the interviewees described, libraries provide not only places to expand one's education, but to find refuge from the difficult outside world. Museums provide essential access to the dominant culture, which enables minority students to succeed in higher education and the job market (Delpit, 1988). All of these opportunities are kept from Bronx students today, and in some cases are getting worse, such as recent library closures on Sundays. We need to take a dramatic turn in where our resources are being allocated, recentering youth and education to create a better environment for their growth, within the Department of Education and beyond. Coupled with that, there needs to be a focus on telling students about these opportunities and making them easily accessible, such as clubs that organize local cultural excursions and social media outreach. In doing so, more opportunity will be apparent and attainable for Bronx youth.

[9] The lack of music education did lead, famously, to the creation of hip hop.

 

*The Role of the Teacher*

Teachers have the most direct impact on their students' education. As mentioned above, students in segregated schools such as those in the Bronx are much more likely to have less experienced teachers and higher rates of teacher turnover. These teachers are often less deeply connected with their community, underqualified and sometimes completely unqualified, particularly young teachers that stay only for a few years completing programs like Teach For America. This is in stark contrast with the descriptions of teachers from the mid-twentieth century Bronx who were seen as competent and experienced. Yet there remains a problem then as now that Bronx students are not seeing themselves represented in their teachers. For Jewish Bronxites, it was Irish Catholic teachers, and today minority Bronxites are being taught by white teachers. As always, there are exceptions to the rule, as the school I worked at had Black and Hispanic administrators and many minority members of the faculty, but research shows that Teachers of Color are severely underrepresented, particularly Black teachers, despite an increasing amount of minority students nationwide (Martin & Brooks, 2020).

It is important for students to have teachers who come from similar cultural backgrounds as them to see role models for their futures and deepen understanding and relationships through cultural competence. All teachers, whether white or minority, in the Bronx or elsewhere, ought to be employing culturally relevant pedagogy, acknowledging the disadvantages Students of Color face and providing them with the best chances for success with Gloria Ladson-Billings' recommended components of academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness (2011).

Most of all, what needs to be changed is the prevailing mindset about the Bronx and the people that live there. The Bronx of the mid-twentieth century was thought of as a place of opportunity for the up and coming new American. The Bronx is best known today worldwide for its period of arson and devastation in the 1970s and 1980s, crime, and poverty. These negative associations with the Bronx and the people that live there are coupled with harmful stereotypes in the dominant culture about the intellectual capabilities of minority students. The "stereotype threat" is very real, and research shows that it can significantly contribute to poor academic performance (Good et al., 2003). Yet, it also shows the opposite to be true, that minority students can overcome this threat when effective interventions are put in place (Good et al., 2003).

When students are taught a growth mindset -i.e. that intelligence is malleable, not inherent, and that poor performance is based on the context of the challenge and not a judgment of one's intellect- they come to recognize personal growth is always possible and failure is an inherent part of that growth. This is particularly important for minority students to overcome the stereotype of low intelligence they face in school and larger society. If held to higher standards, students will rise to meet your expectations. I personally saw what my students were capable of when they were provided with the proper supports to tackle a complicated text. I

 

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saw how they reacted to positive encouragement, to an acknowledgement that their ideas were valid and important and they were capable of more than they had ever imagined. It sounds simple, but when you are accustomed to a deficit perspective, to being constantly reminded of what you lack and that you are unlucky purely because of where you live and the color of your skin, it is revolutionary.

*Upward Mobility Through Education*

In connection with the section above, the interviews not only show us the significant role that a teacher plays in the classroom, but also the significance of the teaching profession to Bronx immigrants and their children. In order to create teachers and administrators that reflect the student population, we must create accessible teacher education programs. The BJHP interviewees were not only Bronx educated, but a remarkable number of them became educators themselves at the K-12 and higher education levels.[10] This is not solely because of the quality of the education they received in the Bronx or the importance of education in their families, but because they had access to free or low cost higher education. Among those 15 who became educators, all but 3 attended a free or low cost city university, such as City College, Hunter College, Queens College, or Lehman College.[11] The accessibility of this higher education meant that they would acquire bachelor's, master's, and even doctorate degrees, despite coming from working and lower-middle class, immigrant backgrounds. Ruth Jacknow Markowitz, who wrote about Jewish women teachers in New York City, explained:

> The main determinant for achieving [a teaching career] was the existence of free and accessible teacher training. It was one thing for immigrant parents to be able to afford to forgo their daughter's economic contribution while she attended teacher--training school or college, and quite another to be able to afford the cost of her education. (1993, p. 16).

The job, of public school teacher, and/or professor, provided the stability and income necessary to boost this generation into the middle or even upper-middle class within a generation or two of arriving in the United States.

As previously mentioned, Teachers of Color are still underrepresented in the United States. There are teacher shortages all around the country, including in the Bronx. Despite this being a well known problem

[10] Joan Brock, Irene Konig, Ellen Newman, Michael Malasky, Mark Willner, Vivian Gruder, Ruthie Cohen, Harry Sweet, Beth Braunstein, Gloria Katz, Mark Stern, Jeff Gurock, Diane Wolfthal, Jack Jacobs, Ann Joy Becker

[11] Brock and Malasky attended Hunter College, Willner and Braunstein attended Queens College, Konig, Cohen, Sweet, Katz, Gurock, and Wolfthal attended City College, Newman attended Lehman College, Gruder attended Barnard College and Harvard University, Stern attended Fordham University, Jacobs attended SUNY Binghamton, and Becker attended Queensborough Community College.

 

in educational circles, the price of higher education in the US, including teacher education programs, continues to skyrocket. The current remedies that are being offered do not offer long term solutions for minoritized communities in places like the Bronx. For example, New York State offers Teacher Loan Forgiveness for teachers who teach in a "low income school" for 5 years (New York State Education Department, 2024). While this is an admirable program, it incentivizes teachers to perpetuate the problems already existing in impoverished and minoritized communities, such as inexperienced teachers and high rates of teacher turnover. It is also still reliant on a predatory college loan system that makes higher education inaccessible to those from impoverished or minoritized backgrounds who lack financial literacy and are unable or unwilling to take on crushing debt.

If we want to enable members of the Bronx community to improve economically, socially, and educationally -to pursue the American Dream in the twenty-first century- allocating public resources to local teacher education programs is an essential starting place. Not only does it create classrooms where students can see themselves represented by their teachers, but it provides an opportunity for the upward mobility of the whole community. Markowitz explains the namesake phrase of her book, *My Daughter the Teacher*, as a common saying for a proud Jewish mother in the twentieth century: "My son the doctor, my daughter the teacher." These were seen as the highest levels of social status for each gender.

Today, we ought to be stressing to young men and women the importance and prestige of the teaching profession to encourage the best and brightest among them to educate the subsequent generations, with pay that reflects the importance of their profession (Maier-Garcia, 2023c, p. 9).[12] Programming should start at the high school level, allowing students to "shadow" a teacher throughout their day to see the work that is involved. This could also include mentorship programs for older students to help younger students academically and beyond, stressing that teaching is much more than imparting information onto others.

Teacher education programs, such as master's/ certification programs, are inaccessible for many because of the exorbitant cost and lack of post-undergraduate scholarship opportunities at many universities, in addition to required student teaching hours. There should be a stipend provided for students who cannot afford to student teach full time for no pay and then take classes at night, leaving them little to no time to support themselves financially. Additionally, there should be more free accessible certification programming offered by the state or prominent universities, particularly subsidizing or removing the cost of mandatory certification tests and trainings for those in need.

Particularly for the newest generation of Bronx immigrants, their multilingualism should be treated, from the very beginning of their education, as an asset and not a deficiency. It is, here, a different kind of self-fulfilling cycle: if we expand our bilingual education programming, English Language Learner students will have

[12] Joan Brock makes an interesting point in her interview that, in her day, the smartest women became teachers, because of their lack of alternative opportunities. Today, women can pursue whatever career they choose, and the best and brightest do not necessarily choose the teaching profession. Those that do are often looked down upon as not having fulfilled their highest potential.

 

greater success in school and be able to expand their first language proficiency, and, if English Language Learner students have access to educational opportunities at the K-12 and university levels, they will be able to become bilingual educators and expand already existing bilingual programming. Again, it is a matter of changing the mindset.

For students like my own in the Bronx who have just recently arrived in the United States, their knowledge of, for instance, Spanish is seen as just a stepping stone so that they can learn English. Whereas if we, as educators, assign value to *all* language knowledge, recognizing that it is a valuable skill being sought out by companies worldwide, students will not only have more self-confidence and motivation, but develop and grow all of their language skills simultaneously. Specific scholarships or grants should be created for bilingual programs, and also for master's/ certification programs with the commitment to pursue bilingual certification (as the cost of the initial master's/ certification may preclude any further certifications). This will not only benefit the students of the Bronx, to enable them to have more qualified teachers who address their specific needs, but it will also open up opportunities for aspiring teachers from marginalized socioeconomic backgrounds.

## Conclusion

The Bronx Jewish History Project's interviews emphasize the power of a quality public school education. Many decades later, it is still recognized by the interviewees as an experience that provided them with the tools they needed to succeed in life and move up in the world, socially and economically. Public education in the Bronx still possesses the potential to pass on these tools to the next generation, the question just remains if the public resources will be put forward in order to do so. Today's Bronx students have their own unique challenges that the Bronx students of 75 years ago did not face, most of all artificial barriers put up by society based on the color of their skin, in addition to the more recent plagues of gangs, social media, and gun violence. But there is no reason not to learn from the successes of the past and give today's students every opportunity to put their best foot forward. The answer is right in front of us: allocate public funding toward public and accessible programming for students and aspiring educators.

It is not merely the responsibility of the government to provide the educational resources to its citizens so that they may succeed in a social or economic sense, but it is the duty of the public education system to prepare the next generation of citizens in a democracy. As Horace Mann explained, in reference to the state of Massachusetts but applicable to the Bronx, New York City, and the rest of the United States,

> The successive generations of men, taken collectively, constitute one great commonwealth. The property of this commonwealth is pledged for the education of all youth, up to a point as will save

 

them from poverty and vice, and prepare them for the adequate performance of their social and civil duties" (1891, p. 131).

Each new generation of immigrants that comes to the Bronx, is educated in the Bronx, and seeks a new and better life in the Bronx are the next generation of Americans that will decide the path of the nation. To prolong the American Experiment and extend the promise of the American Dream to the new generation, the government of this generation (and the voters that put it into power) must take up the historical mantle and prioritize public education once again.

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