

Alternative Schools:  
Not So Safe Schools

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I am currently interning at Out Now a queer youth based organization that focuses on social justice for all, but mainly LGBTQ youth of color. Towards the start of my internship I attended a lecture about alternative schools in Springfield and the treatment of the students within these schools. Any member of the community could come and share personal stories about their experiences or family members' experiences within these so called "safe" schools with a lawyer that was trying to change the laws and regulations around alternative schools.

A Grandmother, who is a guardian of a student that attends an alternative school within Springfield, came to this meeting to share her feelings about her daughter's experiences at one of these "safe" schools. It is important to note that her granddaughter had multiple mental disorders and had aggressive tendencies due to past trauma. Whenever she would act out in class, she would be put in the hall where the guards would make her hand over her lunch as a punishment. This girl's grandmother also said that the guards broke her ribs from bear hugging her so tight in the hallways when she was acting out. I understand that the guards have to contain her in some fashion; however, you should never take a student's lunch and if a full grown man can not contain a little five foot tall female without breaking a rib perhaps this is not the job for him.

I learned a great amount of information at this meeting. I am from a predominantly white, middle to upper class town where there was one high school. All students from my town attend this high school unless they attend a private school, and there was no such thing as an alternative school. Before this meeting I was unaware that there were even alternative schools for children with behavioral issues. I found it interesting that Springfield, a very low income city, had alternative schools while my

hometown, a fairly wealthy town, did not have any alternative schools. I wondered why this was so. I thought that maybe this happens because many of the children in Springfield grow up in disadvantaged homes and parents do not always know how to fight for their children's rights and it is sometimes easier to place these children in alternative schools rather than get to the root of their problems and try to fix them. In the town I grew up in, a predominately white community, the parents would not allow such a thing to happen. They would have paid to get the support their children or they needed in order to allow their child to be successful in the public school or would have sent them to a private school. This has to do mainly with the idea of white privilege and how white people are given specific privileges due to the color of their skin. This idea came about because growing up, "as a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage" (McIntosh).

From what I heard discussed in this meeting, there is a great amount of oppression towards the children within these alternative schools, and especially towards female students or those with mental disorders because they are seen as weaker. The guards would usually target these weaker students because they knew they could not fight back and it would give the guards a sense of power. Students, "with disabilities are targets of negative and inaccurate ascriptions and have few guideposts to define their social treatment...." (Palombi 61). This is very disturbing to me, not only due to the fact that "responsible" role models within these schools are targeting the weakest students, but also because no student can be expected to learn while living with this fear.

Intersectionality was not brought up at all during this meeting, but it was apparent through the stories that were shared. Much of the discrimination was directed towards the disabled females, because they were weaker and easier targets for the abuse. There were stories of males getting tackled in the halls and females without disabilities being contained; however there was not one story about a male or nondisabled female being put into four point restraints.

There were multiple benefits of this meeting. First, it allowed any member of community to come and share their experience with a lawyer. It also benefitted the lawyer because now he has personal stories to use as arguments. If this lawyer and other lawyers in the Springfield area could get proof of the mistreatment within these alternative schools then many of the children within these schools would benefit. In the long run, the community of Springfield would also benefit as the alternative schools would help its students become educated, productive adults within society after they graduate.

## References

- McIntosh, P. (1990) White Privilege. Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack. *Independent School*, 49(2), 31.
- Palombi, Barbara J. "Disability: Multiple and Intersecting Identities— Developing Multicultural Competencies." *Handbook Of Multicultural Counseling Competencies*. Ed. Jennifer A. Erickson Cornish, Barry A. Schreier, Lavita I. Nadkarni, Lynett Henderson Metzger, Emil R. Rodolfa. New Jersey: Hoboken, 2010. 55-93. Print