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THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOL SYSTEMS IN CUENCA, ECUADOR

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Cuenca, the third largest city in Ecuador, offers both public and private education to its citizens. The value that has been placed upon each system varies from person to person. Therefore, I set out to learn more about the benefits, disadvantages, and overall differences between the two systems. I traveled to Cuenca for a site visit to public and private schools and interviewed teachers in the two systems. The observations I made and the results of the interviews changed my opinions and preconceived notions about what I thought education would be like in Cuenca. The results of this study pointed to the advantages and disadvantages, perceptions concerning lack of funding, parental support, adequate facilities, student-instructor ratio and relationships, student success, and learning outcomes. My research focused on my site visit, observations, and interviews with people who are within the education system in Cuenca.

Introduction

Cuenca, the third largest city in Ecuador, offers both public and private education to its citizens. The value that has been placed upon each system varies from person to person. Therefore, I set out to learn more about the benefits, disadvantages, and overall differences between the two systems. I hope to better understand both education systems through this research. My paper outlines this information through my observations and interviews with people who are within the education system.

Hypothesis

Before I began my research, I hypothesized that the public education system would prove to be better than the private education system. This idea was probably affected by my own experience here, since I received a good public education.

Methodology

Since I was living in Cuenca, Ecuador at the time of my research, I decided that the best way to go about gathering information would be to actually go in the schools and interview teachers. I conducted five interviews: two with public school teachers, one with a teacher who had taught in both systems, and two with private school teachers. I also was able to observe the teachers, students, and the facilities when these interviews were conducted.

I realize that my study is limited to the time that I was in Cuenca, which was during the fall of 2004. This research is also limited to the number of schools and teachers involved, the opinions of these teachers, and my personal observations. I recognize that this research could be more complete with further investigation in more of the schools along with additional interviews.

The questions appended at the end of this document are in English because I included only the English translations of the Spanish original for accessibility to non-Spanish speakers. All translations are mine. To protect the anonymity of the teachers I interviewed, I provide pseudonyms and indicate throughout the research paper only the type of employment (private or public) and their attitudes toward the work environment.

Results:

Interview with Lucia, public school teacher

The first interview that I completed was with Lucia* who worked in one of the poorest public schools of Cuenca. She has been teaching for nineteen years in the public school system within three different schools. Though she has not worked in both systems, she was able to tell me what she perceived to be the main differences between the two.

I asked Lucia to explain the differences between public and private education (see Appendix 1 for interview questions):

The main difference is economical. For example, in this school there are 800 students, and only 10 computers; in the private schools there are computers in the classrooms. We don't have the same kind of technology resources. Another difference is the number of interruptions in the school year that we have because the government doesn't pay the teachers. If they don't pay us, we don't teach. Family situations are very different, too.

80% of the parents of students in this school work in the United States. So the students live alone and without support; whereas students in the private school system have their parents there to help.

Lucia also explained the advantages of each system. The public school system has proven to be, in her opinion, better in terms of their teachers. She stated that they “have better qualifications, such as a college degree,” and “more experience, because public schools will not hire new teachers.”

Another advantage seen by Lucia was the freedom given in public schools: Teachers can control their classes better, because parents don’t have control over what the teachers do. Also, nobody needs to think like everybody else, because the schools aren’t controlled by the church. There is more respect between the teachers and students; this is to be expected.

During Lucia’s class, I observed that this seemed to be true. The students were very respectful of Lucia and listened quietly during the lecture. During discussion, many students volunteered to participate, while the others took notes and listened. They were free to speak their opinions, as well, without having a teacher tell them that their opinion was morally wrong.

After describing the advantages of the public school system, she told me the advantages of the private school system. According to Lucia, one of the main benefits has to do with the regulation of teachers. “There is more control over the teachers’ lesson plans, which means the teachers have a greater responsibility to use class time well. Teachers need to revise their lesson plans and use updated materials.”

The last advantage that Lucia saw relating to the private school system was that there are nearly no unanticipated interruptions during the school year. She explained that because teachers are paid well, they do not go on strike as they do in the public school system. Therefore, the students have scheduled breaks and, unless due to a rare emergency, classes are in session when they should be.

This brought us to one of the disadvantages of the public school system: the continuous interruptions throughout the school year. Since teachers are paid so poorly, and often irregularly, it is not uncommon for school to be cancelled. “There are constant interruptions due to economic reasons; when the teachers aren’t paid, the whole school is shut down from strikes.” Students not only end up with a lot of free time, but they also are forced to make the transition of being in school to having an unscheduled break and having to restart again.”

According to Lucia, a downfall within the private school system is the training that teachers typically have. “In general, teachers don’t have very much experience; most are just starting as teachers and don’t have a degree.” Another disadvantage that she sees within the private school systems is the lack of freedom. “The students and teachers do not have much freedom; they have to do what the schools ask. This usually means following a particular social group’s rules. Hence, the schools are not very democratic.”

Knowing the advantages and disadvantages of each system brought me to my next question: is there a difference in the success rate of students after graduating from each system? Lucia responded with, “After graduating, students from private schools have greater success due to social relationships. In the public school system, the students who work the most and are the best, may be successful; however, the majority work or go to the United States instead of going to college.”

I also wanted to know if society was in favor of either system. Lucia told me, “Money mandates.” She then explained that society is in favor of the private school system, because only those who have money can go to the private schools. “The social classes are very important.”

My last question for Lucia was open ended. I asked her if she had anything else that she would like to say about the education system. This is how she replied: “There isn’t support for education here. Government officials say that they will give 30% of their budget to the schools each year, but in reality they only give 10, 12, or 15%.”

Interview with Juan, public school teacher/former private school teacher

The next interview that I completed was with Juan*, a teacher at a “lower-middle class” public school (as he defined it). Juan has been teaching for eight years; he has taught in both systems. When asked what the main differences were that he noticed he said that one was within the infrastructure of the schools; private schools simply have more room. He then switched from the infrastructure to tell me about the students. He said that the students in private schools are from the upper-middle class and upper class. Those in public schools are from the lower-middle class and lower class.

As in my first interview with Lucia, Juan and I discussed the advantages and disadvantages of each system. The first advantage that Juan pointed out to me was that students within the public school system are better disciplined. I thought it was interesting that he said this, since in one of his classes several students had been sent home for misbehaving during class (talking while the teacher was talking, arguing with the teacher, etc.) Each classroom at Juan’s school has a chart that records the behavior of students throughout the day. Since teachers move from room to room, not students, this chart remains with the same group of students throughout the day. When Juan arrived to one of his classes, some of his students had already been sent home.

The second advantage that Juan listed in the public system was that students are more committed to their school work. He explained that his students complete their work and are involved in the classroom. I observed this during my observation of his classroom. Most students were on task for the majority of the time and actively participated in class discussions.

The last advantage that Juan saw within the public school system is that the government has more control over the operation of the school and what the students will be taught. Teachers have to follow certain guidelines mandated by the government. However, there is still democracy within the school. Teachers and students can speak freely, unlike in private schools.

Juan proceeded to tell me the advantages of the private school system next. One advantage of the private school system is the availability of resources. “Teachers can ask, and the school gives them the necessary resources quickly.” Books, technology, and other materials are easily obtained by private schools, because of the cost that parents pay for their students to enter school.

Another advantage of the private school system is the consistency in the school year. Juan reiterated much of what Lucia said. He explained that private school teachers do not go on strike; therefore, students do not lose several days of classes.

Juan followed this advantage up with a disadvantage of the public school system: teacher strikes. He explained, like Lucia, that the pay is very poor within the public

school system. Therefore, when teachers are not paid on time, they strike. He said that this is a problem that occurs throughout the year.

Unlike the abundance of resources in private schools, public schools always lack resources according to Juan. He pointed out that this is particularly a problem in rural areas, where even the simplest materials, such as desks, are lacking. Public schools within Cuenca lack technological resources and current materials for teaching. The problem is not just within the school, either. Due to the economic level of students in public schools, many cannot even afford to buy basic materials for school. Unfortunately, the school cannot provide materials, such as pencils, notebooks, and folders, because they have their own resources to try to obtain.

Within private schools, one problem or disadvantage that Juan found to be common is the education level of most teachers. As Lucia mentioned, private school teachers are usually beginners. Though Juan has a degree for teaching and previously taught in private schools, most teachers do not have degrees. On the other hand, public schools require teachers to have degrees.

Perhaps the lack of training contributes to Juan's next point: students are not well disciplined. He very clearly expressed this opinion by saying, "Students in private schools are less disciplined and are babied by their mothers."

Another disadvantage that Juan saw was the lack of respect for the law that some private schools have. There are certain standards that all schools are to follow by law; however, according to Juan, these standards are not necessarily met. Juan said that schools can get by with this because there is not effective regulation by the government.

The last disadvantage that Juan told me had to do with the food served at private schools. School is usually in session from about 7 a.m. to 12 p.m. or from about 1 until 6 p.m. During this time a snack is provided for the students, which is not very healthy. Juan said that the food served is typically sweet or fatty. I decided to check this for myself. Since my host brother attended a private school, I looked at his snack schedule. It included chocolate treats a couple days a week, cheese sandwiches, and pastries. I then could see why Juan said that the food was unhealthy; that is, if all private schools serve similar snacks.

Juan's response to my question about the success rate of students echoed that of Lucia. "Generally, yes, there is a difference in the success rate of students; but it's a question of the family name. There isn't a difference in the quality of education between the private and public schools. The public school students that do very well can continue in their education."

In reference to society's opinion about the education systems, Juan said that opinions vary and some only want one system or the other. "Those with money want the private school system. They say this because of the strikes within the public school system. Those without money need the public school system." Juan's final remarks about education were: "Cuenca is a city that has many education institutions. Within Cuenca the education system is good. In the rural areas, there are more problems."

Interview with Cecilia, public school teacher

The last interview that I had with a public school teacher was with Cecilia*. Cecilia has been teaching in the public school system for 20 years. In fact, she has only taught in the all-girls public school that I visited. Though she has not taught in the private

school system, she told me the main differences that she saw between the two systems. “The difference is basically in the economic and cultural levels. Also, the number of students is much higher in the public system and this makes education less personalized.”

Cecilia found that an advantage of the public school system is the higher amount of freedom in the classrooms and schools. “There is more freedom in all areas of life, especially religiously speaking.” She explained that teachers are free to believe and teach what they would like and students can freely express their opinions on life, such as religion, without the worry of being penalized by the school.

The second advantage that Cecilia told me about was the lower cost of public schools. Though parents still have to pay some basic fees for uniforms and other costs, the pension is much lower than the pension fees at private schools. “The students’ parents don’t have to pay pensions because the government takes care of most of the costs.”

Though Cecilia has not taught in the private school system, she still was able to list some advantages to the private school system. One advantage to the private school system was the availability of resources, which Juan mentioned, as well. Unlike public schools, she explained, private schools have access to computers and the internet.

Another advantage to the private school system was the evaluation of teachers. Cecilia explained that within each private school, the teachers are regularly evaluated by school administrators. “On the contrary,” she said while looking over her classroom full of girls, “I can do whatever I want in this class and no one would take action.”

The last advantage that Cecilia emphasized, as did Juan and Lucia, was the consistency in the school year schedule. Whereas in the public schools the schedule is frequently interrupted, “classes are never cancelled in private schools.” She told me, in reference to a disadvantage of her school system, “Teachers are often on strike due to political reasons, which stops schools.” She explained that the issue may be economical, a disagreement with the government’s decisions, or a statement against a particular political group.

After explaining this contrast between the private schools’ advantage of consistency and the public’s issue of strikes, Cecilia pointed out another disadvantage of particular concern to her school and other recognized public schools. “Public high schools with prestige, such as this one, have an exaggerated number of students, and, on the contrary, those without prestige lack students.” In Cecilia’s classroom where I visited, there were fifty students.

Cecilia listed the lack of freedom as the first disadvantage to private schools. “Private schools are very strict in the aspect of religion.” Students and teachers alike have to follow religious regulations set by the school and are not allowed to disagree with them.

Cecilia saw favoritism as another disadvantage to the private school system. From the school administrators’ perspective, “the student is valued for that which he or she has materially and for the economic help that he/she gives to the high school.” Within the classroom, “teachers give preference to certain students and they are unjust to the others.”

Cecilia told me that her students are successful after graduation, but this isn’t true for all public schools. “In this high school, the students are called to work in various institutions. They are also called by particular colleges; the majority shine as the best students in their college classes.”

When asked whether or not society promotes one education over the other,

Cecilia said yes. “Because the majority of the population is poor, society favors the public school system.” Cecilia’s final remarks were, “The education systems are trying to improve and, currently, one may take notice of a great interest in better capacitating the teachers.”

Interview with Anita, private school teacher

My first interview with a current private school teacher was with Anita. Anita has taught in the same all-girls private school for four years. Her school is a highly accredited private school. I asked her what the main differences she saw to be between the education systems. Her response was, “In the private school system, the service is better because you have to pay for it.”

Since Anita told me that “there aren’t any benefits to the public school system,” we moved on to the benefits of the private school system. The first benefit that she told me was that the private school offers better service to their students. “For example, private schools have more resources, better teachers, better facilities, and a good busing service. Therefore, they serve families and students very well.”

Another advantage to private schools, according to Anita, was that students are better disciplined. I observed her classroom and found that to be true, at least during the day that I was there. Students followed her directions well and were on task for most of the time. She did not have to discipline any of her students while I observed.

As for disadvantages of the public school system, Anita mentioned many of the same that the public school teachers had mentioned. First, she told me that there are many strikes throughout the school year in public schools. “These interruptions limit students’ learning in the classroom.”

Anita also mentioned the lack of resources within public schools. She believed that the resources lacking include technology, current text books, and other basic school materials.

In reference to the teachers themselves, Anita said that their ability to teach is not as good. However, she did not explain why. On the other hand, she admitted that it would be harder to teach public school students. “It’s more difficult to teach these students because they haven’t had breakfast and they aren’t receiving the support needed at home.”

I asked Anita what she felt were the disadvantages of the private school system. Her response was short: “There aren’t disadvantages to the private school system. The level is extremely good.” In Anita’s opinion, society favors the private school system because of this and the lack thereof in the public system. “Society promotes the private system because of its high level of excellence and the instability of the public school system.”

Anita felt that there was a difference in the success rate of students after graduation. “A person who has graduated from a private high school shows that he or she has the money necessary to continue their education.” As a closing remark on education, Anita said, “There is an equal quantity of private and public schools here. Everyone can choose if they have the money to do so.”

Interview with Paula, private school teacher

The last interview that I had with a private school teacher was with Paula*. Paula

has been teaching in the private school system for sixteen years. Paula does not see a big difference between the private and public school systems:

The differences between the private and public school systems no longer are as great as they have been in the past. There are differences in the number of students in each system (there tends to still be more students in the public school system). It used to be that private was only for upper class, but now there are a lot of families working in the States and in Spain, so now lower class students can go to private schools.

The only advantage that Paula found within the public school system was the lower cost. Within the private school system, there are more resources but for a higher cost. "These resources may include internet access, videos, televisions, musical equipment, current text books, educational computer games, etc. However, these are what cause the cost of school to increase."

This led to a disadvantage of the public school system: few resources. According to Paula, since it does not cost as much to go to public school, schools cannot invest in as many resources. The government does not provide enough funding for these resources, either.

Paula believed the main problem of public schools is a result from teacher strikes. "There are many interruptions in the public schools from teachers going on strike." She also saw the consistency of classes as the biggest difference today between public and private schools.

When I asked Paula about the success rate of students in each system, she told me that there was a difference in what students from each system do. "Most people in the public school system go directly to work after graduation, instead of going to college. The majority from private go on to college. This is a cultural difference in the classes, not a result of the quality of education." In relation to that, I asked her which system society preferred. Her response was that society promotes the private system for "name, status, and symbol."

Paula's closing remark on education related to the issue of strikes and the quality of teachers. "The government should pay the teachers regularly to avoid strikes within the public school systems. If they'd pay teachers more, they might get teachers who've been certified."

Summary and Conclusions:

Based on the interviews conducted and observations made, several advantages and disadvantages proved to be prominent in each system. Within the public school system, commonly noted advantages were: lower cost, certification of teachers, and freedom of religion. The disadvantages included a high rate of teacher strikes and lack of resources. The most commonly noted advantages within the private school system were the availability of resources, consistency in the school year, and teacher evaluation; disadvantages included: high cost and inexperienced teachers.

After completing these interviews, I concluded that the private school system is probably the best option. The main problem within the public school system was the inconsistency in the school year. Without consistency, students have a hard time following the curriculum. My hypothesis proved to be wrong, as I saw that this downfall outweighed, in my opinion, the smaller disadvantages of the private system. However, if

the government provided for schools as promised, each system could be evaluated on a more equitable level. It is difficult to know which system provides a better education and has more effective teachers when one system is not functioning much of the time due to strikes. More conclusive data needs to be collected based on actual follow-up with graduates of both systems. A broader sampling of schools, staff opinions, schedules and financial resources, might more clearly support these initial conclusions.

**Interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated by me. Names have been changed to protect interviewees.*

For Additional Information:

All information collected was done through observation and interviews. I have not cited names of schools or teachers in order to protect their identities.

However, the following sources provide useful information concerning education in Ecuador.

- www.eumed.net/libros/2005/gcc/3b.htm
- <http://www.oei.org.co/quipu/ecuador/>
- www.fronesis.org/ecuador.htm
- <http://www.mec.es/>

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Anita. Interview. Cuenca, Ecuador. 8 November 2004.

Cecilia. Interview. Cuenca, Ecuador. 9 November 2004.

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Paula. Interview. Cuenca, Ecuador. 9 November 2004.

Appendix 1

Interview Script:

1. How long have you been teaching in the private/public school system?
2. Have you taught in both systems?
 - a. If so, what are the main differences?
 - b. If not, what do you perceive the differences to be between the system you teach in and the other?
3. What have you seen to be the advantages of each system?
4. What have you seen to be the disadvantages of each system?
5. Do you have an idea of the success rate of students after graduating from each system?
6. In your opinion, does society promote one system over the other, and why?
7. Do you have any other comments to add about the education systems in Cuenca?

Author Biography

Rachel Goodloe is going into her senior year at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Rachel completed her first two years of college at North Hennepin Community College as a post-secondary student in high school, before attending MSU in the fall of 2003. She studied in France and Ecuador in 2004 through MSU study abroad programs. During her stay in Ecuador, Rachel became involved with the local school through the church that she attended. She conducted research in the schools throughout Cuenca and is interested in continuing this study in the future. Currently Rachel is involved in Intersity Christian Fellowship, Spanish Club, French Club, Alpha Mu Gamma, and is a presidential scholar. She will graduate from MSU in May, 2006 with a Bachelor of Science in Teaching degree and plans to pursue a teaching position in a secondary setting in the field of Spanish or French.