

Manny Ramirez

Power Autobiography

From birth to my graduation from high school, I grew up in the house that my parents had bought in the late '80s in a relatively average suburb of Boston; for context, “relatively average” for Boston suburbs means about 90% white and quite affluent compared to the rest of the country. My mom likes to tell the story of how, when my older brothers were in high school, she bought them an atlas to use as a reference book for social studies homework. According to her, my brothers took little interest in the book, but 4-year-old me became obsessed with this picture book filled with glossy maps of various countries, and before long, I was teaching myself to read the book and developing a love for learning about places all over the world.

A number of factors combined to provide me with an education that fulfilled most of my needs as a student at the public schools in my town. For one, much of the funding for that public school system comes from my town’s property taxes, which are quite high for the area. My town’s taxes, in addition to providing funding for our town’s schools, were also designed to serve another purpose--to prevent the predominantly low-income, Black residents of the neighboring city from being able to move in and send their children to our well-funded public schools. The end result of these policies was that white students like me could attend my town’s public schools, staffed almost exclusively with white teachers, be taught a curriculum written by and for white people, enjoy a range of Advanced Placement classes and extracurricular activities (with financial support from our parents for the cost of tests and activities fees), and not be made uncomfortable by having to think about how poorly our schools served the needs of low-income and non-white kids, not to mention thinking about the educational environment in the predominantly-Black city right next to our town.

Living in this bubble, in which school came easy to me, just as it was designed to, I never had to think critically about the power and privilege inherent in my education. Suburbia was and is a very insular cultural environment, and opportunities to connect with kids in the majority-minority city right down the road were never offered to us. Much to the contrary, we were taught to have a general aversion to that “unsafe” city. Therefore, it wasn’t until I left my town after graduating high school that I would come to realize just what a uniquely privileged educational experience I had.

Of course, privilege in education tends to accumulate in those people who already have it in the first place; my privileged public school education got me into an Ivy League school, at which point the opportunities available to me exploded out in all directions. Among those opportunities was an international gap year program that sends groups of students to 5 countries for a year of volunteer service learning and cultural immersion before they enroll as a first-year student. Princeton, with its vast pool of resources, is able to offer this program at no cost to any student who participates. I participated in the program in Bolivia, where I lived with



a homestay family for 9 months as I volunteered at my service placement. That placement was at an arts-based education organization whose name translates to “To Educate is a Party”. I worked as a teacher’s aide to my boss; the two of us went into public elementary school classrooms on the outskirts of the city of Cochabamba, giving animated lessons on teamwork, creativity, children’s rights, etc. using games, music, and art. The organization’s mission is to provide an alternative pedagogy that’s centered around joy and self-expression to the city’s youngsters, who attend public schools in which the arts are severely underfunded and teachers often maintain control of the classroom through heavy-handed discipline.

Unfortunately, the arts are not all that is underfunded in the public schools where I worked during my time in Bolivia. There were no computers, smartboards, or other instructional technology in any of my students’ classrooms. I never remember hearing anything about the presence of a school nurse or mental health professionals in any of the schools we worked in. Regularly, my boss would pay out of pocket for the classroom materials we intended to use in our lessons. In Bolivia, as in DC and my hometown, the funding for public schools (or lack thereof) is the direct result of racial inequities. In Bolivia, the student body of the underfunded schools I worked in was almost entirely of indigenous ancestry.

Volunteering as a teacher’s aide in those schools showed me the astounding amount of energy required to manage a classroom and that I’m not cut out to teach elementary school kids. More importantly though, this was the first time I ever had a view onto an educational reality different from my own. In Bolivia, I lived in communities where, since resources are often scarce, a high value is placed on the traditional Andean concept of *ayni*, which translates roughly to reciprocity. In the Andean cosmovision, all blessings one receives individually should be shared with the community, and the community will give those blessings back to those in need. During my time in Bolivia, I lived and worked with people who had little choice but to align their actions with this value; in the United States on the other hand, many of us live with privileges and power that allow us to ignore the many ways our actions clash with our most important personal values. When I left Bolivia, I left with the conviction that I needed to use the limitless possibilities and connections I’m so privileged to have through my college education to lift up the voices of marginalized people and work to realize a society in which resources and opportunities are distributed equitably.

On my return, I was plunged into the educational environment of an Ivy League university as a low-income student. Never before was I more acutely aware of class distinctions than at Princeton. Membership in some of the social clubs on campus requires paying significant amounts of money every year, and it always rubbed me the wrong way that these clubs blatantly exclude so many low-income students. At Princeton, I also interacted with many people who went to private schools, and whose parents and families were full of alumni from highly selective private universities. As well, and this says way more about the extreme racial homogeneity of my town than about Princeton, Princeton was the most diverse place I had ever



lived before. I laugh at how bleak that statement will seem to my college friends that came from other places. Seeing such a wide range of educational experiences and socioeconomic positions at Princeton broadened my perspective, and considering the immense privilege that that degree confers upon alumni, I left college believing even more strongly that the important work of life is to use all of my privilege to redistribute power and resources to folks at the margins.

I'm grateful to have ended up at PAVE because connecting, informing, and empowering parent leaders is an investment in local leaders' advocacy, which makes a lasting change in marginalized communities' capacity to co-create a more just education system.

