



## My Journey Through Injustice

Kaitlyn Justice

*Respite Care Provider*

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Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These are three aspirations that everyone in this country—regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, legal status, or religion—has a right to. Unfortunately for many, these three promises remain a dream. Public services are often lacking or are not widely accessible, especially those that aim to meet the academic, emotional and material needs of disadvantaged students. When it comes to the role that the public schools play in this problem, UCLA Professor of Education Tyrone Howard puts it plainly. In an article entitled “We Are Failing Our Most Vulnerable Children,” he wrote:

Although many courageous and dedicated teachers, staff, and leaders work tirelessly in these schools, the reality is painfully clear: Most schools are ill-equipped and under-prepared to understand, let alone address, the depth, breadth, complexity, and seriousness of the challenges that many students face daily. It is difficult to inspire children when they are hungry. (2018, para. 3-4)

I have experienced first-hand the dark, depressing reality of being an underprivileged student in modern day America. Even though life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness ought to apply to everyone, I know differently. This is my story.

When you look at me, you see what seems like a normal 25-year-old woman. However, if you could see inside my heart and mind, you would see a scared little girl affected by traumatic experiences and a lifetime of extreme poverty for whom every day is a struggle. All my life I have been a recipient of government aid such as Women, Infants, and Children’s food service (WIC), Medi-Cal, food stamps, welfare, HUD housing, financial aid and state grants. My father abandoned my mother, sister, and me when I was seven years old. After he left, our lives spiraled into such chaos and anxiety that, to this day, I have no memory of ages seven to nine. Due to the traumas of abandonment, homelessness, and watching my mother fall into a deep depression, I had a miserable experience with education. My psyche was so badly damaged that I was experiencing extreme panic attacks and emotional breakdowns daily. Every night brought horrifying dreams that would keep me on edge for days. Once I was diagnosed by a psychiatrist, and I was told I had severe Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, severe anxiety, and depression. Although the diagnoses provided an explanation as to why I could not function in school, the pain and fear I experienced didn’t change, and they left me feeling separated from everyone around me.

Fast forward to high school. At this time, I continued to experience psychological disorders while living far below the poverty line. It was in high school that I began to notice the differential, unethical treatment of disadvantaged students, especially those who were poor, who came from immigrant

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families and who had parents who only spoke Spanish. For example, the high school I attended is the only public high school in a small city. The area closely surrounding the high school is quite wealthy which means that wealthier families have better access to the school, eliminating the need for these students to commute to school on buses. The farther you travel from the high school, the more disadvantaged people and lower income households there are. My neighborhood stands in the oldest part of town and consists primarily of lower income households, old apartment complexes, and an affordable housing complex. This means that school buses to my neighborhood provided a vital public service. Unfortunately, by my sophomore year, the school bus service I relied so heavily on was taken away. The two city buses that were available to ride were often so overcrowded with kids from my neighborhood that many would be turned away and had to wait another hour for the next bus. There were days I had to beg my friends for rides or for bus money. I was so embarrassed and felt increasingly unmotivated to go to school. I wondered who could justify taking this service from disadvantaged children. Then I remembered that more privileged families lived closer to the school and that no parents from my area would speak up. Most of them did not speak English; in fact, my mother, sister and I are the only white, English-speaking family in our neighborhood. This is only one example of the many social injustices that made attending school more difficult than necessary.

Throughout my schooling I received free school lunches. I had no other option and was grateful, but how the free lunch program was handled at my high school was utterly shocking. When it was time to get in line for lunch they made students like myself stand in a separate line from everyone else. The food we received was of poor quality, as well. Meals were often soggy, microwaved, and very obviously put back out from the days before. It was not until my senior year that I would sometimes have the choice of a day-old salad. Little effort seemed to be made by anyone in power to value and treat all students with respect.

I always had an interest in school sports and dance teams. However, since I was forced to grow up more quickly than my peers, I never felt that I fit in with the teenagers around me. I dreamed of being part of something bigger, but I knew it would not be possible because the school did not offer extracurricular programs in which disadvantaged, poor students could easily participate. While many of my peers enjoyed playing sports and making friends, students like myself worried daily about finding loose change for a ride home on the city bus. The one extracurricular activity I could take that was “free” was choir and musical theater. What was supposed to be a good experience became quite stressful. We often had to buy special clothes or bring baked goods to sell at concerts, neither of which was a possibility for me. I had to explain to the teacher that I did not have any money, a fact that seemed to be met with annoyance and confused stares from my peers. It was humiliating. I began to note what I saw as blatant favoritism in my choir and musical theater classes toward those who had more and weren’t “problem students.”

I loved to sing, and it was the one thing I honestly thought I had a talent for. I decided I wanted to expand my ability. I figured maybe this could be the class which offered that “something extra” I had been hoping for. Unfortunately, the teacher—who may have thought he was being helpful by telling me he understood my situation and that he had lived through similar circumstances—ended up making me feel invaded and embarrassed. He knew about my mom being a single parent and once told me he was giving me advice from a “father’s position,” which came across to me at the time as his using intimate knowledge about my life to make me feel guilty.

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Additionally, some teachers at my school would make degrading remarks about going to community college and related it to being dumb and lazy. I was quite hurt when I heard these remarks because I knew that community college was my only option for higher education. It was upsetting to see my friends get acceptance letters to universities in exciting new places, seemingly without a worry in the world. I could not allow myself dreams of going to a big university after high school. I was too worried about budgeting my family's food costs for the month and about whether my mother would have enough gas to take me to school the next day. Many students from poor and marginalized families face similar concerns but few of us have access to the care and services that could help get us to college and university. It is important that our voices be heard.

Another form of discrimination that broke my heart was to observe some teachers' reactions when I, or any other student, asked for the accommodations granted in 504 Plans.<sup>1</sup> I had been in such emotional and psychological pain that I begged for relief in any way possible. When my mother and I attempted to receive a 504 Plan, we were met with resistance from the people who were supposed to help us. They tried to convince us that such a plan would not benefit me, and that I did not need it. My mother continued to fight, and eventually convinced the school to set up a 504 Plan which allowed me to take tests in a private place. For a brief moment I was relieved until I asked my teachers for the accommodations. In response to the shrug of their shoulders and a sigh, I would quickly say I could try taking my tests in class, since my abandonment issues turned me into a people pleaser who was terrified of disappointing adults.

I grew up in a household without access to the Internet, cable television or even a cell phone. The only way I could complete much of my schoolwork was by going to the public library to use the computers there. The public library in my town happens to be close enough to walk to from my home. However, since every other student in my immediate neighborhood was in the same situation, I often had to wait for a computer to become available. I would arrive home from school at four o'clock in the afternoon due to inadequate public transportation, and the library closed at five o'clock. There was a slim window of opportunity for me to have the opportunity to do my homework, not to mention the impact my disabilities had on my ability to do the schoolwork to begin with. Little did I know, I had undiagnosed Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) which I now realize hindered my ability to complete assignments in general. I was not aware of any teacher during those years who recognized my struggling grades as a sign that I needed extra help and compassion. I felt that I was completely on my own. I had given up. I just wanted it to be over. High school is supposed to be the best time of your life. My high school years were the worst. I desperately wanted to be away from the place that made me feel unimportant and unwanted.

Fortunately, after high school I finally felt free. I went to community college and took advantage of the financial, psychological, and educational aid available to me. It was also in community college that I was diagnosed with ADD. The services I received adequately leveled the playing field for me. I felt a new and

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<sup>1</sup> 504 Plans and Individualized Educational Plans (IEP) are both created to make sure that students with disabilities get the services they need to be successful in school. However, an IEP is legislated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); it is for those who require specialized instruction, and requires documentation of measurable growth. A 504 Plan is legislated by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and simply ensures that the student will get the accommodations they need to access the curriculum and be able to succeed (DO-IT, 2017).

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unfamiliar sense of empowerment. I had control of my surroundings. If I did not feel comfortable in one class, I switched to a new one. I had better access to the Internet, so I used it. I used the free tutoring and counseling which made me feel strong enough to stop taking the handfuls of anti-depressants I had been taking for eleven mind-numbing years. I graduated with an associate's degree in Sociology with straight A's and as a member of the Phi Beta Kappa Honors Society.

The day I walked on stage to receive my degree was beautiful, yet I was filled with mixed emotions. I felt angry that my academic, emotional, and material needs as a high school student were not met. I could not stop thinking that if I'd had access to the services in high school that I received in college my future might have been very different. I might have attended university on scholarships. I might not have felt so trapped. I might still be singing. I had the sickening realization that my potential to be a great student in an honor society would probably have been recognized in high school if I was not also disadvantaged. As Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) found in their classic research project 50 years ago, published with the title *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectations and Pupils' Intellectual Development*, my teachers might have invested more time with me if I had been seen as a promising student, not a poor one. They might have gladly given accommodations and been more compassionate. I might not have been overlooked and secluded.

My story shows the depressing reality of the social injustices that profoundly affected my educational experiences. My right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness was not guaranteed because I was poor. I felt perceived as the kid you did not want to waste time on because "I probably wasn't going anywhere in life." I lived with tremendous psychological pain, but I thought, "I'm going to show this school and the rest of the world that your weaknesses are what makes you strong." So, I looked to the future, took a deep breath, made a leap of faith, and tasted the sweet freedom I had been longing for.

Children are the future. How they are treated in school is paramount not only to their mental, physical, and emotional growth, but also to community health and to our collective well-being as a nation. Professor Howard, in recognizing that "a society will only be as prosperous as its young" (2018, para. 16), names three specific things that educators, policymakers, and communities need to do, together, in order to better address the needs of our society's most vulnerable children: (1) acknowledge the complicated challenges faced by increasing numbers of young people today and reject simplistic responses to the deep levels of inequality, poverty, racism, and sexism in our society that they are trying to navigate; (2) build partnerships across many fields, not just within education, to create solutions for complex educational problems (e.g., public policy, law, medicine, social welfare, and mental health); and last, but certainly not least, (3) "develop the moral conviction to support our vulnerable youth" (para. 15).

With moral conviction, we can make the changes we want to see. We can choose to make a difference. We have a responsibility to do so.

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## About the Author

Kaitlyn Justice holds an Associate of Arts and Transfer Degree from Moorpark College. She currently serves as a respite care provider for families with children who have autism. Her background in working with children who have experienced trauma—for example, youths who crossed the Mexico-U.S. border on their own, foster children, and children with disabilities—demonstrates her commitment as a social justice worker for children. Kaitlyn is a member of the Phi Beta Kappa Honors Society. She credits the Accessibility Coordination Center & Educational Support Services (ACCESS) program at Moorpark College for her academic success and for her passion to be of service to children in need. She plans to earn a bachelor's degree in sociology or family counseling, with longer-term aspirations for graduate school.

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