

Sarah Blanke

Power Autobiography

I like to say I grew up in a narrow space between cultures. I still call Japan home to this day, yet both of my parents are white Americans. I speak Japanese with a near-perfect accent, but waitresses shot me confused looks when they saw a *gaijin* (foreigner) order food without skipping a beat. I navigated the labyrinth of subway lines in Tokyo with ease, but the seat next to me on the train was always the last to fill. For a very long time, I found this excruciating. Being “foreign” and not belonging became the norm for me outside the gates of the school I attended from fifth grade through twelfth, but inside those gates I thrived and felt like I knew who to be.

I have always been immensely comfortable inside school buildings. I lived on a university campus in some capacity for sixteen years straight: from the summer before first grade until the day I graduated from college. My summer jobs were all at school - either helping teachers organize their papers, or working at my school’s summer camp for local Japanese kids who wanted to improve their English. Both of my parents are dedicated educators, as are countless members of my extended family. My mom worked at the same school I attended for over five years. Everyone knew who I was. School came naturally to me and felt like home, and I credit that comfort level with much of my academic success. One of my close friends, we’ll call him Andrew, had a very different experience.

The school I attended from fifth grade through twelfth is a private K-12 school that houses the elementary, middle, and high schools together on one large campus. I loved this model. As a middle schooler I remember looking up to the high schoolers who would come into the cafeteria after we ate, and as a high schooler I remember passing the kids I babysat in the halls. Many of my teachers went to the same church my family attended and I would run into them in the grocery store.

I drew power from the situation and used everyone’s high expectations of me to drive my ambition, but Andrew felt consistent comparison. I felt true community, but he felt trapped and watched. He eventually became labeled as a “bad student” who “didn’t care.” Years later, we now know that he was suffering from an anxiety disorder, and likely the beginnings of bipolar disorder. To exacerbate all of this further, our school was the only international school nearby, and therefore the only English-speaking choice for him. Once you were labeled as either successful or a bad student, there was no simple way to shake off those labels by moving to a different school.



All of this came to a head during our senior year of high school. Andrew had a notoriously strict Biology teacher who was beloved by the administration for his tendency to push his students to achieve unusually high AP Biology test scores. This teacher would lock the door to the classroom the moment the bell rang and very rarely gave partial credit. His sarcasm was biting and word in the hallways was that he would semi-regularly humiliate his lower-performing students. My friend was failing his class.

When Andrew's parents met with this teacher to come up with a plan to get their son back on track, everything appeared to be moving forward smoothly: Andrew would stay after school to receive additional help and come in during his free period to repeat old lab reports. When my friend attempted to fulfill the requirements of this agreement, the teacher in question was unavailable and "too busy with other students." Andrew, already deeply anxious about this class, became discouraged and over a period of a couple months I saw him eventually give up. When his parents advocated on his behalf and brought proof of this teacher's lack of cooperation to the administration, they were told that the school values initiative and cultivates proactivity in its students. According to the school, if Andrew *really* wanted to get better, he would advocate on his own behalf and try harder to work with his teacher's schedule.

This was the first time I had seen anything unfold like this in such a blatant manner. Seeing that their son was struggling and clearly not comfortable with this teacher, Andrew's parents did the right thing - they advocated for one of their children - and still failed to get anywhere. This was the first time I had seen up close how power structures in education can tip the balance in favor of or against a child's success. My suspicion then, and my suspicion to this day, is that the administration regarded my friend as a "bad student" who "didn't care." The school's failure to step away from that assumption in order to see what was clear to me: that Andrew was being treated unfairly, is the ultimate failure. In my bubble, I had not witnessed this before. Upon reflection, this incident was one of the first times I truly understood in a concrete way that I was treated differently than others within my school - that I had power and privilege within my already very privileged school.

Though I wish I was able to say I used that power and privilege to make immediate change for others, I cannot say that. What I can say is that this experience pushed me to be critical. It pushed me to refuse to take situations at face value, and to dig into where people might be getting hurt within systems that appear to be fair from the outside. It pushed me to be a tutor and a mentor for local middle school students while I was in college, and to advocate for those students when the trust I built with them resulted in stories of similarly unfair treatment. It pushed me to participate in a week-long trip to DC Central Kitchen (DCCK) during my sophomore year of college, where I built relationships with folks who taught me about intersectionality in a more meaningful way than any book or professor ever could have.



Seeing my friend navigate the power structures of our school and receive vastly different treatment than I did initiated a mindset within me that opened the door for the experiences which ultimately brought me to PAVE. I do not do this work solely because I want to ensure other students have fairer access to support from their teachers - I do this work because watching my friend's experience with power sparked in me a drive to create bigger change that results in more equitable systems. I want to work to cure the underlying disease, not just the symptoms, and that is why I am at PAVE.

