A Case Study in the Differences of Teaching Secondary English in Georgia Public and Private Schools

By

Lauren Niemeyer

Under the direction of Peter Smagorinsky

ABSTRACT

As students graduating from teacher education programs are beginning to graduate and enter the work force, it is important that the future teachers are able to know all of their options when deciding on where to teach. This case study is to look into the differences between public and private schools so individuals will be better informed to make the choice when they begin teaching. To do this I interviewed five teachers who have taught in both settings to record and compare their answers.

INDEX WORDS: Public school, private school, English education
A CASE STUDY IN THE DIFFERENCES OF TEACHING SECONDARY ENGLISH IN GEORGIA PUBLIC AND
PRIVATE SCHOOLS

By

Lauren Niemeyer

B.S., Florida State University, 2010

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

 Athens, Georgia

 2011
A CASE STUDY IN THE DIFFERENCES OF TEACHING SECONDARY ENGLISH IN GEORGIA PUBLIC AND
PRIVATE SCHOOLS

By

Lauren Niemeyer

Major Professor:  Peter Smagorinsky
Committee:       Jim Marshall

Mark Faust

Electronic Version Approved:
Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2011
# Table of Contents

Public versus Private .............................................................................................................................. 1

Background ................................................................................................................................................ 1

Education .................................................................................................................................................. 2

Home Life .................................................................................................................................................. 4

Money ...................................................................................................................................................... 6

Students .................................................................................................................................................. 7

Parents .................................................................................................................................................... 8

Faculty .................................................................................................................................................. 10

Curriculum and Instruction ..................................................................................................................... 11

Public or Private ....................................................................................................................................... 13

Works Cited ............................................................................................................................................. 15

Appendix A ............................................................................................................................................. 16
Public versus Private

In any degree you earn from a university, the goal is to ultimately find a job in that field. Earning a degree in education is no different. All students in a teacher education program eventually want to become a teacher, administrator, or even professor; however, it is difficult to narrow down the decision because there are many different options at each level of the school system. I will be focusing on options for entering the teaching field in either a public or private school setting. Although each has its advantages and disadvantages, it is important to know all of the information about each setting to help make the decision to teach in a place that fits an individual teaching style.

I had the privilege of interviewing five teachers who have taught in both public and private schools for various reasons. Through this, I want to find the best fit for my teaching style, especially since the teacher education programs I have been in have mainly focused on the public sector and I have only had the experience in a public school setting. These teachers: Anne, Betty, Cathy, Denise and Edward, were able to show me how each school runs and which incorporate teaching styles conducive to an individual teacher’s preferences. Although all of the teachers have taught in both sectors, Anne and Denise currently teach in a public school, while Betty, Cathy, and Edward are currently teaching in private schools.

Background

One of the first questions I asked each teacher was if they attended public or private schools growing up and if that affected their choice of where to teach. Each teacher I interviewed had attended public schools and only two of them had also attended a private school. Most of the teachers originally thought that they would be more comfortable teaching in the setting they grew up in. However, Edward brought an appealing point to his reasoning:

“I hated school when I went to public schools, so my parents put me in a private school instead. But then when I graduated college, the only job I could find was in a public school. It was a
completely different experience and I did end up loving it before I switched to a private school. The best advice I can give you is that there is a difference between being a teacher and being a student at these schools, so don’t make up your mind just because you loved or hated your high school. Things change.”

Betty made a similar argument, but she did find it easier to teach in a private school setting since that was her schooling experience; although, she did enjoy teaching in public schools as well. She said, “It wasn’t about easier or harder, it was about being comfortable. I already knew how private schools worked so I didn’t need to learn the school system as much.”

Anne, Cathy and Denise hadn’t given it much thought when they first started out teaching. Anne said, “I didn’t care where I worked as long as it was a job.” Even though this is a common thought for all first year teachers, where you decide to work does matter if you want to end up staying in that career field for a long time. Too many teachers get burned out after two years of teaching because they aren’t somewhere they chose to be. It’s a delicate balance of doing what you have to and also what you choose to do.

Education

Like all teachers, these five teachers have earned a four-year degree from an accredited college. Anne earned her bachelor’s degree from Wright State University in English. She did not need her certification because she started teaching in a private school. However, after four years she decided to switch to a public school. Not only did she get her certification, but she went back to school at Troy State to get her master’s degree in English Education. Since then, she has gone back and forth to teaching private school and also has applied to start her doctoral degree at the University of Georgia in the fall with a focus more on administration.

Betty has her bachelor’s degree from the University of Georgia in middle grades education. She did the program so she could earn her certification at one time and hasn’t gone back to school yet to get
her master’s degree. Since she is still young, she would eventually like to get her master’s, but “life gets in the way sometimes.”

Cathy and Denise both went to Georgia College and have degrees in middle grades education. As of now, neither of them plan on going back to school for a master’s degree. Denise currently teaches in a public school but will re-evaluate going back to school if she plans to switch jobs since the teaching market is becoming more demanding.

Edward went a different route in college and never planned on becoming a teacher. He went to Princeton for his undergraduate work and majored in English and Philosophy. After his bachelor’s he wasn’t sure what we wanted to do, so he went to the University of Virginia for his MFA in English. While there, a friend referred him to a job posting for a part-time teaching position at a local high school. Once he was in the school for a year, he decided to continue on that course and became certified when that school he had been working part-time in offered him a full-time position. He says,

“Everyone kept asking me what I was going to do with an English degree and I didn’t know for sure, but I knew at the time I didn’t want to teach. If that friend hadn’t shown me the job, and if I hadn’t been so desperate for money at the time, I never would have ended up in a career I have loved for 27 years.”

Most public schools do not require a master’s degree yet, but it is starting to become more common. The school systems even offer alternate routes to certification, other than a degree specifically in education, to encourage more people to enter the education field and compete with some of the qualified applicants who are entering the private sector. Private schools are a lot more relaxed when it comes to education requirements and only require a four year degree in any field. Similar to public schools, private schools are starting to become more interested in having teachers with advanced degrees; although, there is still no certification requirement.
Home Life

As with any job someone has, home-life affects the decisions to take or to keep certain jobs. I found a common pattern with the teachers I interviewed about the effect teaching has had on their home-life and vice-versa.

Betty, Denise and Edward have no children and they say that was a huge factor in their decision of where to teach. Denise is recently divorced and talked with me about how teaching had a small part in that. She says,

“Even after fifteen years of teaching, it still takes up most of my time. It also affects the mood I’m in when I get home. If I had a rough day, it was hard to leave it at the classroom door. Also, since I don’t have any children of my own, my students became my kids. I would worry about them even when I wasn’t in the classroom. It led to many discussions about having a family of our own, but my husband and I had decided before we got married that we didn’t want any kids. I was young then and hadn’t taught yet, so I feel like maybe I rushed into it. My teaching career was obviously not our main problem, but now that I’m divorced I spend a lot more time devoted to my classroom, and I know it’s what I have always wanted to do because I’m much happier now with my life.”

Denise had an extreme case on how teaching affected her home life, but others had similar points. Betty just recently got divorced and remarried. She had been teaching at a public school for a few years and she found it was stressing her out. She finally decided to make the switch to a private school and has found that it is a better setting for her home-life. Even though there were drastic changes outside of school in her life, she attributes a lot of her happiness to being back in a private school setting where she feels more comfortable.

Edward has never been married and has no children. This was one of the major reasons he decided to switch to a private school when the opportunity arose. He had taught in public schools for 26 years and was starting to develop some issues with his administration, so he decided to apply for new jobs in both private and public sectors. Since he didn’t have any family to uproot, he was able to go anywhere in the country to take a job he wanted. He received offers from public schools near him, but after visiting a private school in Georgia, he decided to make the move. I asked him if he would have
thought about moving that far if he had his family, especially because this job has turned out to be his favorite yet. He said, “There’s no way. Part of why I’m not married is because I want to do what makes me happy. It may be a little selfish, but I’m happy where I’m at now and I made sure I could have this opportunity if I wanted it.” He also talked about still maintaining a life outside of school and found it much easier to do that working in a private school setting. He said there is less of a need to spend time at school because, for the most part, parents are doing their jobs outside of school.

Anne has three children and she says that is the greatest factor in her teaching decisions. When she first started teaching in a private school, she had no children and was a newlywed. When she had her first two children, she still taught at a private school and was able to put her kids in that school because of the tuition discount. Once she had her third child, they made a family decision that she would switch to teaching in a public school because of money and being closer to her kids, who would also be switching to public schools. While all of her kids were in school she switched back and forth every two or three years from teaching in a public or private school. If she had a choice, she would have stayed in a private school for the flexibility and so that her kids could attend the private school. She admits it’s one of the sacrifices she has had to make throughout the years and would rather teach at a private school, but she had to do whatever was best for her family and each sector offered different advantages that were right for her family at the time.

Cathy discussed with me how fortunate she felt that she was able to work in whichever setting she chose. She started off in a public school and was married shortly after. She then had three children, like Anne, and took some time off to raise them. When she went back to teaching, she decided to go into the private sector to be closer to her children who already attended the private school. She said she has been much happier being so involved with her kids’ lives and knowing their teachers through working with them. She did enjoy working in public schools, but her decision to make the switch was strictly because of her life outside of school and wanting to be with her children.
Money

Money wasn’t the major factor in switching sectors for most of the teachers I interviewed; however, it certainly cannot be discarded.

The recent pay scale for teachers in the state of Georgia has become more level, but private schools, on average, pay less than public schools.

In 2010, the average pay for first year teachers in Georgia public schools was $33,424 for those with a bachelor’s degree. For a master’s degree, the salary goes up to $38,438 (GA Department of Education). Although salaries can differ between private schools, the average pay range for private school teachers is $28,000 to $34,000 (National Center for Education Statistics). Some private schools even offer a higher starting salary than the public sector, depending on the county.

Of the teachers I interviewed, each one had a salary cut by switching to the private sector. Edward said that the only reason he was able to make the switch to a private school was because he didn’t have a family to support. He did not talk specifics, but he did say it was a pretty significant pay cut, but that the cost of living in the area is also a factor to consider.

Contrary to Edward, Anne did have a family to support and it was a major reason for switching sectors. She originally started teaching in a private school, but when she started having children she switched to a public school to earn a little more money. Over the years she was able to switch back and forth between the private and public sectors depending on what her family needed of her. Recently, and newly single, she started teaching in a public school again for the extra pay and benefits. This is the first time any of the teachers I interviewed had mentioned the benefits. While private schools do offer some benefits, Anne explained, “People may complain about how much teachers are paid, and it is true, but people often forget to mention that working for the government offers pretty good benefits as well, so I know my family is covered.” If she had her choice, she would still be working in a private school and hopes to be able to switch back once her youngest is off to college.
Denise also admitted that the salary had an influence on her decision at one time, but now the pay scales are a lot more similar so it’s not necessarily a deciding factor anymore.

Betty and Cathy said that money was not part of their decision at all and that part of that is because they didn’t go into teaching for the money. Betty says, “It wasn’t what I started for, so it’s not something worth switching for.”

Money is not just a debate between the different sectors, but is now also an issue within the public sector alone. With new laws trying to be passed, and debate about student performance levels, teacher salaries may be changing in the public sector, so it is not guaranteed that these pay differences will remain in effect. Since the government is not a deciding factor in private schools, teacher pay is more secure at the moment.

Students

All of the preceding factors play an important role in decision making for where to teach; however, none of these would matter without the students. The teachers unanimously agreed that the major difference between the settings is the students themselves. A few of the teachers attributed this to simply the amount of students in the classroom at once.

“It is a lot easier to deal with a behavior problem because classes are so small that it is possible to address an individual student every time they misbehave since you don’t have thirty other students to worry about,” remarked Denise. Also, many of the students in a private school have been there for most of their lives, so behavior problems get fixed pretty quickly by previous teachers if you are teaching secondary grades.

Some private schools can be on the larger side, but generally there is still a community among the students. Since they have been together for years, it allows the students to keep each other in line and creates less classroom management difficulties for the teacher. Edward is in his first year at a
private school and admitted that at least fifty percent of his time in a public school classroom was devoted to classroom management; but at the private school, he estimated it at five to ten percent.

Another difference teachers noticed at private schools is the amount of students who are planning to attend college. Although there are more factors that contribute to this than just the students themselves, it is one of the peer pressures in this setting since the majority of the students are planning to attend college. Just like with any other peer pressure, if your friends are doing it, you are more likely to do it as well.

“Public schools provide more diversity so it is not uncommon for a large group of students to not attend college after school. There’s nothing wrong with that, it is just a difference.” Edward acknowledged, “The other side of the situation is that public schools open the door to different possibilities as well as college.” Students don’t feel as forced to follow in the footsteps of the rest of their class and instead associate with a group that is choosing a similar path. He commented that sometimes it might be better to let the students make the choice themselves rather than pushing them into something they are not ready for.

It is not just the students who impact the environment of the school. There are several different groups of people that influence the way a school is run; even though the students are the ones attending the school, they are often driven by another factor.

Parents

A large discussion among the education world is the role of the parent in the classroom. While it is commonly agreed upon that having parent involvement is essential in facilitating learning, each setting provides a different forum for parent contribution.
In a public school setting parental participation is not a requirement; in fact, sometimes it is extremely difficult to obtain. Betty remembered only communicating with one or two parents regularly, and maybe a handful sporadically in each class.

“Sometimes it’s helpful because it gives you more control over what you can do in the classroom and you don’t have to defend yourself to parents. But then when you need to talk to a parent about the student’s behavior, they aren’t there to help with that either. It’s hard to enforce rules in the classroom if the student doesn’t follow them at home or doesn’t receive consequences outside of your classroom. Then there’s the opposite end of the spectrum and those one or two parents who call your class every day and want a note home. They don’t let the student take any responsibility for themselves so it creates problems for you, too. Parent involvement wouldn’t be such an issue if every parent was the in-between parent, who was on your side for everything, but unfortunately that’s not the way the world really works.”

In public school settings it is more common to get a mix of parents. In contrast, private schools are much more likely to have the overbearing to middle-range parents, and very rarely are the parents not involved at all.

The parents of students attending private schools have one major difference from the parents of students in public schools: they are paying for their children to be there. These parents have financed their child’s education so they have more incentive to monitor their investment. In addition, most private schools actually require parent involvement rather than just encouraging it.

At the private school in which Anne taught, parents, by grade level, were expected to attend monthly or bi-monthly meetings to discuss fund-raisers and school functions. Edward is currently in a similar situation where parents are on campus at least once a month and he says that very few parents miss these meetings, and if they do miss, they have a good reason.

The positive side of parents being so invested in the private schools is that if there is a problem it is often rectified immediately. Since teachers are often in constant contact with parents, problems that could become more serious are solved right when they start. This could be a student’s grade, behavior problems, or even a concern about the health or well-being of the student.
There is also the aspect of support at home. If a student is struggling in school, frequently the parent will be able to help their student or provide another resource for the student. This results in less weight being put on the teacher.

There is a fine line between parents being over-involved or not involved enough; although, you are going to run into these problems in both sectors. It is a decision each teacher has to make, because in either situation parents play an imperative role.

Faculty

There is one way that private and public schools are extremely similar: the faculty. In each setting, all of the teachers interviewed described the support from other teachers and being able to have collaboration among others with similar interests and sets of skills. It is a lot like being in a teacher education program in which everyone is there for the same reason; everyone wants to be a teacher. At least for the most part, this is the case in the schools as well.

One difference between the faculties that has seemed to have an impact on the teachers is the size. The private school faculty is significantly smaller than a public school’s faculty. Edward said the faculty size dropped down from over one hundred teachers at his public school to only thirty teachers in the entire high school section of the private school. He said, “With a bigger faculty you don’t get to know the teachers in the other departments as well, especially if they aren’t teaching your grade. But with only thirty teachers, I know each one of them and every teacher at the school seems to have had every student at one time or another.” This aspect is helpful to the school community because it means every student knows of every teacher as well, so it’s easier to maintain consistency as far as rules being followed or the same consequences for breaking the rules.

Anne, Betty, and Cathy also preferred the smaller faculty sizes because more progress gets achieved. Anne discussed the length of the faculty meetings and the amount accomplished in that time.
At the public school, it was more input from administration and less from the teachers; however, the role was reversed in private schools. She says,

“It’s easier to discuss problems and address solutions when you’re only bouncing ideas off thirty or forty people. Also, it is easier to come up with school goals and have every teacher on board. With more people, it’s more likely someone doesn’t agree or wants to do something their own way.”

The other teachers all had similar statements but still regarded the public high school faculty as being supportive. “No matter where you are, you will find someone who has your back. Everyone has similar situations within a classroom, so you never feel like you’re the only one,” Cathy remarked.

**Curriculum and Instruction**

Curriculum in the schools differs mainly by who creates it. In public schools, the curriculum is created by the department of education and has standards that each teacher must meet throughout each school year. Most of the curriculum in a public school is geared towards standardized testing. In Georgia, students take end of course exams each year, CRCT, and a graduation test. Teachers spend significant time during the year preparing their students for these tests. The end of course examinations are based on the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards. Throughout the year, teachers must demonstrate that their students meet the standards given for each grade level. However, most of the test is not focused on literature or writing, but on grammar and reading comprehension (Curriculum and Instruction).

The biggest problem Betty was faced with was teaching what she wanted to teach and staying on the surface of books, such as main idea and inference, which is what the end of course examinations assess. “I didn’t mind following the standards, I just wished the tests would cover everything or we could know what was on them so I could cover what I wanted to teach and also what I needed to teach,” she said. All of the other teachers seemed to have the same general opinion. Even though standardized
testing is a controversial issue in education in every state right now, the testing definitely seems to make a teacher’s job more difficult.

The private sector does not have to deal with this problem as much. The school is able to create its own curriculum, usually following closely with the standards of public schools, but they are allowed to deviate from the controlled list. Of the teachers interviewed, only one preferred the standardized curriculum and assessments. Edward attributed this to being because it was what he was used to. This is his first year in a private school, and while he has been able to use a lot of his same lesson plans, he liked the reassurance in the public schools that he was doing his job correctly. He said, “I had job security at my public school. I like the freedom at the private school, but it is still comforting to have performance evaluations and know that I’m not messing up. I’m kind of on my own here and they have complete trust in me, which is a little nerve-racking.”

The other teachers enjoyed the freedom of the private school more, especially since they started their teaching careers in this setting. Administration occasionally sits in on classes, but they rarely give the teachers things they have to do. In public schools, a significant portion of the third and fourth nine-weeks are devoted to preparing for the standardized testing, but in the private schools it is unnecessary. The exception of standardized testing in private schools is nation-wide college entrance tests such as the SAT, ACT, or AP tests. Teachers still have the responsibility of preparing their students for these tests; however, it is their own responsibility and not dictated by the administration or funding from the government. Administration certainly expects high performance rates on these tests, but they leave it up to the teacher and rarely intervene with pre-made study guides like in public schools.

Cathy taught in a very relaxed public school setting; although, she still preferred the private school curriculum. She liked “being able to discuss the controversial aspects of the books without stepping on any toes.” She teaches advanced literature so this is extremely important to her. In the public school, she focused on the standards during every single book and wasn’t able to expose her
students to the analytical side of literature as much. Even though it is different in every school setting, and some public schools do offer the teacher that ability, she felt controlled all of the time and that she would be graded on doing things according to what the administration wanted and was not able to venture out on her own.

There are still some standards that have been taken from public schools and utilized the same in private schools. For the most part, the same novels are taught so that all students will still have a similar repertoire when entering college. Students are just as prepared to start college when they leave a public or private school; they just took different paths to get there. The standards put on the curriculum affects the teachers much more than it affects the students. In public schools, it is one of the ways a teacher does not have complete autonomy in the classroom.

Public or Private

While each sector of education has its pro’s and con’s, it is ultimately up to the teacher to decide which setting is right for them. The differences between the two could lead a teacher to not burn out after a few years, which has been a rising trend. Teacher education programs are generally state or federally funded so they tend to prepare students for teaching in a public school. While there are more jobs available in the public sector, it is not always the correct fit for the teacher candidate. From looking into the similarities and differences of public and private schools, a teacher can fit into both settings equally or be better suited for one or the other. It is important to get the information out there about private schools for the students who never attended them growing up and are not familiar with the teaching environment there.

The teachers interviewed have all taught in both settings and still have found a way to try and get back in private schools. Although it was not possible for some, the rewards of private schools, for them, outweighed the negatives. As Anne said, “You don’t go into teaching for the money; you do it
because it’s the right thing for you. Just like you don’t just take any job, because if you don’t find a place
where you fit in, you’re not going to end up there for very long. It’s just not that kind of a job.”
Works Cited

"Curriculum and Instruction: Georgia Department of Education - Office of Curriculum and Instruction."

<http://public.doe.k12.ga.us>.


Anne. Personal interview. 23 Feb. 2011.


Denise. Personal interview. 27 Feb. 2011.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Did you go to private or public school growing up?
2. Where did you go to college and what is your degree in?
3. Are you married and do you have children?
4. How many years did you work in each setting?
5. What grades have you taught in the past? What grades are you currently teaching?
6. How many different preps do you currently have?
7. Can you identify the main reason you switched from a public school to a private school?
8. Have you considered switching back?
9. Was money any part of your decision?
10. Did your home life have any influence on the switch?
11. What differences do you notice in the students?
12. What difference do you notice in the faculty?
13. What differences do you notice in the parents?
14. How is your time spent differently while you are in/outside of the classroom?
15. Did your lessons plans change drastically or were you able to use pretty much the same ones?
16. How is the curriculum handled differently? Who decides what it is?
17. How does the support from the administration differ?
18. What are faculty meetings like now and how do they differ from public school meetings?
19. What is the measure of accountability in private schools compared to standardized testing in public schools?
20. Was it easier or more difficult to find a job in a private school? Does experience matter equally in both settings?
21. What is the best way to get a job in a private school?
22. Which would you send your children to (or do you if you have children)?
23. Do you have any advice for a first year teacher in either setting?