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Defining and Seeking a "Good Education":
A Qualitative Study of Black Parents Who
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Ph.D. degree in Educational Psychology


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**Defining and Seeking a “Good Education”: A Qualitative Study of Black Parents Who
Select Charter Schools For Their Children**

By

Heather M. Pleasants

A DISSERTATION

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology and Special Education

2000

ABSTRACT

Defining and Seeking a “Good Education:” A Qualitative Study of Black Parents Who Select Charter Schools For Their Children

By

Heather M. Pleasants

Within the debate on charter and choice, researchers have well-represented specific factors that parents may consider when selecting a charter school for their children. However, within the body of literature that has accumulated, little research has explored the experiences and perspectives of Black parents who select charter schools for their children. Further, few researchers have attempted to understand the meanings that Black parents attach to their choices, and the process by which these meanings inform their selection of a charter school. In this study, two questions were considered: (a) among a group of Black parents who chose charter schools for their children, what issues and themes are represented in their choice? And (b) how do these parents describe their decision-making processes? However, both of these questions became subsidiaries of a larger research question—How is it that this group of parents define and seek a “good education” for their children? Interviews with ten parents whose children attended an African-centered charter school and eight parents whose children attended an “entrepreneurial” charter school were qualitatively analyzed for their thematic content. From this analysis, four themes representing parents' definitions of a “good education” were identified: (a) a good education is one in which ones’ children are academically successful, (b) a good education is one that involves one's parents, (c) a good education

connects family and school in a supportive relationship, and (d) a good education addresses the impact of race and culture on the education process. In order to provide a more detailed look at how parents undertook the search for a good education, five parents were selected from the group of eighteen for an in-depth analysis of their interviews. These interviews were analyzed and their narratives were presented in order to illustrate different accounts of the search for a good education. The parents interviewed for this study enrolled their children in charter schools with the purpose of obtaining for them a good education. However, their choices may obstruct consideration of enduring issues central to the improvement of the public education of Black children as a whole and may inadvertently prevent other children who are left in "traditional" public schools from gaining a "good education."

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2000**

Dedicated to Edward Lafayette Pleasants, III

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It seems that the journey to get to this point has been so long! But now that I have reached the end of this road (only to have started down another in the meantime!) I can truly see that a dissertation is far from a solitary undertaking. My sincere thanks and appreciation goes to P. David Pearson, my dissertation committee chair (the forward motion), and Patricia Edwards (the voice of reason) , Dick Prawat (the objectivity), Gary Sykes (the caringly-critical eye) and Lauren Young (the tireless editor and writing/thinking coach). Each of you played very important roles, and at various time “took the reins” in guiding me toward completion of my dissertation. I would also like to thank Penelope Peterson for the help that she provided me during the time I was at Michigan State and beyond.

Thanks also to my friends: the MSU crew—Gwen McMillon, Jennifer Danridge, Shalonda Kelly, Susan Wallace, Steve Sheldon and Brenda Neuman Sheldon; and to my best friend, Miko A. Jeffries. Your prayers, critiques and good thoughts got me through! Thank you to Sharon Ransom and Harley Mikkelson. Clichéd though it may be, you made it possible for me to get to this point, both by bringing me into the world and by giving me the tools to survive and persevere no matter what. I also would like to thank my grandparents, Mattie and Joseph Wright and Betty Mikkelson, as well as Gloria, John, Daria and Jocklen McMeans (for putting up with my semi-anti-social behavior in the beginning), and Lydia and Clifton Mattison for teaching me about the meaning of “family.”

Last, I want to thank my husband, Edward L. Pleasants, III, to whom I've dedicated this dissertation. Through everything, from beginning to end, you stuck by me, which

was no easy task. You kept it real with me, and always showed me love. I could not have done this without you (I think you know that). Hopefully I'll be able to return the favor. I love you, always.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Voices, Choices, and the Continuing Struggle for a "Good Education"

"...by birth we have to struggle." –LaTonya Richardson, mother of Darnell, Michael and Tera

"...my son is my heart. He's my heart...and of course I'm going to do everything I possibly can to make sure that he gets a good education..."—Camille Collins, mother of Andre, Adam, Shalonda, Shanice and Sharon

"But when it's like with your kids, you know, you just really want the best possible situation for them. And it seems like you're always getting, having to compromise on something as a Black parent. I just, I just hate the thought of settling...you know, if you're settling at like 90 percent, you know, that's cool. But if you're settling at like 50 and 40 percent, it's like damn, that's so frustrating." –Jeremy Wright, father of Kofi, Malik, and Jada

As I put pen to paper, I am surrounded by the voices of twenty-four Black¹ parents who chose to enroll their children in charter schools. Their voices form the essence of the story to be told through this dissertation. It is a story of these parents' definitions of a good education, and of their attempts to obtain this good education for their children. In this study, I argue that although the context (charter schools) has changed, these parents' ideas about a good education are consistent with the ideas of Black parents before them, and like the parents before them, their search for a good education is complicated by enduring issues of race, culture, and class. In my mind I see the parents' faces who I interviewed, and I have vivid remembrances of the way they invited me into their lives. These images tell me that the heart of my dissertation concerns Black parents and the continuing struggle for the minds, spirits, and futures of their children. This dissertation is framed within that struggle and within the narratives of

parents who have made decisions for their children in order to provide them with a "good education." The significance of laying this struggle bare and providing a space for the voices of Black parents who have selected charter schools for their children is two-fold. First, in exploring the educational decision-making of this group of parents, my research adds to the body of work that represents Black parents as responsive, concerned, and invested participants in the education of their children (Ogawa & Dutton, 1994; Shujaa, 1993). Madhubuti (1994) has written that " The fight to educate African-Americans is a little told history in this age of integration" (p. 3). Charter schools are the newest arena within which the battle to educate Black children is fought, but within the research on parents' selection of charter schools, Black parents' perspectives have not been closely examined.

Second, my research brings the narratives of Black parents into the broader debate about how Black children can and should be educated. What comes across clearly is that parents' ideas about which *schools* can provide their children with a good education are based on a variety of experiences that come from the past and present, and on their ideas about what should happen for their children in the future. Through this idea, the parents in my study make a connection between a particular kind of school (a charter school) and the desire for a particular standard of education for their children. Indeed, through their actions, the parents I interviewed seem to address a question first raised by Dubois (1935), "Does the Negro need separate schools?" Dubois later answered by saying that what the Negro needs is *better* schools and good educational experiences. By focusing on

¹ Throughout this dissertation, I use the word "Black" to describe the ethnic background of the parents I interviewed. I use this descriptor because this is the terminology most often used by the parents.

the experiences of Black parents who have chosen charter schools for their children, I provide research that further defines what it means to provide better schools and a good education for Black children.

The "Voice" of Brown

In the history of the education of Black children, the most visible parent voice has been the voice of Oliver Brown², father of Linda Brown, who with many other parents brought suit against the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954). The irony of his place in history is that when we think of Brown, we do not typically think of Oliver Brown, the parent, but of the critical mass of law suits that culminated in the Supreme Court's decision that separate is not equal. Kluger (1975) writes:

It is one of the idiosyncrasies of American constitutional law that cases of profound consequence are often named for plaintiffs whose involvement in the original suit is either remote or merely fortuitous. So it was with the Brown of Brown v. Board of Education. Nothing in his background seemed to suggest that he would stand against the tide of apathy and fear in the Black community of Topeka that had accepted segregated grade schools and oppressive economic racism since long before Oliver Brown's birth in 1919... (p. 407).

Yet, with his decision to file a law suit against the Topeka Board of Education, Brown did "stand against the tide of apathy and fear." Unfortunately, we have very little evidence about his life and the circumstances surrounding his—and others'—participation in the fight to desegregate schools. We know little more than that his involvement grew out of his dissatisfaction with the dangerous walk his daughter made to a colored school when there was a better quality "Whites only" school seven blocks away. We also know—through Kluger's meticulously researched and documented retelling of the events

leading up to and following this historic decision—that Oliver Brown was one among a cast of hundreds of people who raised their voices against the inequities of public schooling.

It is a sad fact of history that Oliver Brown died before he could tell his story; it is equally unfortunate that other parents involved in the desegregation of public schools were not able to tell theirs (Bell, 1993). The power of the present study emanates from the analysis of the ideas of multiple parents as they responded to the opportunity to tell their stories about defining and seeking a good education. Through presentation of this analysis, Black parents' voices will be included in the history of the education of Black children as it continues to unfold.

Choices and Charter Schools

Providing an opportunity for Black parents to be heard is especially important given that the history of their educational decision-making has been, in large part, a history of frustration. While some Black parents who have had either the money, the access, and/or the children with high grades had the option of sending their children to private, independent or magnet schools, most Black parents have had little choice in the type of school their children attended (Irvine & Foster, 1996; Kluger, 1975; Perry, 1988; Ratteray, 1992; Walker, 1993a). However, Charter schools have now provided choice for a greater number of Black parents, largely because charter schools are public schools which "operate independently of local school districts," (Medler & Nathan, 1995) and provide alternatives to neighborhood public schools (Jones-Wilson, Arnez, & Asbury, 1992).

² Oliver Brown's name has become synonymous with the group of cases bearing his name

For Black parents and others who have sought but not found in conventional public schools the characteristics they want for their children, charter schools may indeed present an array of options that may more clearly match parents' images of a good education. However, as Fuller & Elmore (1996) state:

If...we want to develop (school) choice systems that are sensitive to the cultural and social differences among groups of parents and students, then it seems clear that we have to understand a good deal more than we presently do about how individuals understand and construct their choices from their cultural backgrounds. (p. 200).

Elmore and Fuller are correct in their assertion—we do not yet understand the process experienced by different groups of parents who make the decision to enroll their children in charter schools. We are beginning to form understandings of why parents of different ethnic and socioeconomic groups do or do not get involved in school choice (Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1996; Martinez, Godwin, Kemerer, 1996; Wells, 1996), but much remains to be discovered about the thought processes and understandings that underlie parents' choices.

Because of the over-representation of Black children in Michigan's charter schools, I felt that there was a story to be told regarding why these children's parents found it necessary to place their children in these new, largely untested environments. I wanted to represent, as vividly and accurately as I could, the experiences of a group of parents involved in charter schools; more specifically, I wanted to explore how these parents' understandings of their own experiences informed their decisions about the form and character of their children's schooling.

for the simple fact that the law suits were presented in alphabetical order.

Pursuing Answers to the Research Questions

The initial research questions that guided this study were: (a) Among a group of Black parents who choose charter schools for their children, what issues and themes are represented in their talk about their choice? and (b) How do these parents describe their decision-making processes? As the study unfolded, I became aware of the fact that both of these questions were really part of a larger, more fundamental research question—How is it that this group of parents define and seek a “good education” for their children?

In order to pursue answers to my research questions, a wide array of qualitative data were collected: (a) parents' personal histories, (b) parents' ideas about and perceptions of education and particular schools, (c) parents' perceptions of their children's needs, and (d) parents' and children's experiences within traditional public schools, private schools and charter schools. In effect, I drew on participants' experiences of the past and present as well as their ideas about the future in order to understand how and why Black parents choose charter schools for their children.

Epistemological and Methodological Framework

I contend that Black parents' choice of charter schools can be understood by examining their definitions and searches for a good education, and that these definitions and searches are made meaningful through parents' knowledge of their pasts, their present, and their children's academic and social futures. By examining the decisions of the parents interviewed for this study from a constructivist perspective, the socially grounded and multi-dimensional nature of what a good education is and how one obtains a good education for one's children is more directly addressed.

From a constructivist perspective, the activity of making decisions can be described and analyzed by beginning with the situated activity of individuals, and by considering that a decision may have several meanings attached to it. MacIntyre (1981) writes that "...one and the same segment of behavior may be correctly characterized in a number of different ways" and elaborates through the following example:

To the question "what is he doing?" the answers may with equal truth and appropriateness be "Digging;" "Gardening;" "Taking exercise;" "Preparing for winter;" or "Pleasing his wife." What is important to notice immediately is that any answer to the questions of how we are to understand or to explain a given segment of behavior will presuppose some prior answer to the question of how these different correct answers to the question, "what is he doing?" are related to each other (p. 243).

It is only when activities are related to each other through narrative that we begin to understand the meaning of an individual's behavior. Thus, in order to understand the meanings that Black parents attached to their selection of a charter school for their children, I was compelled to examine, through their own words, how their actions were contextually situated. In examining the decision making of individuals, the way people talk about the decisions they make provides a perspective for understanding their behavior. Constructivist theories focus on how language use mediates our meaning-making processes and the activities that we perform in our social worlds.

Constructivist theories also suggest that, in making decisions, people are involved in actively interpreting themselves, their interactions, and the sociocultural contexts that surround their decisions. In conjunction with this interpretive focus, constructivist theories also emphasize the active nature of thinking and the inseparability of the individual, the particular social environment, and the larger sociocultural context (Rogoff, 1990).

In short, a constructivist perspective on decision-making emphasizes the centrality of “meaning making,” language as a mediator of experience, and the constructed nature of social reality. These three ideas have been developed by psychologists, philosophers, anthropologists and sociologists, who have utilized a “narrative stance” in interpreting psychological and social phenomena. It is this narrative that I have used in order to study the educational decision making of a group of Black parents.

The “Narrative Stance”

Jerome Bruner , Theodore Sarbin, Donald Polkinghorne, and others have pioneered the study of psychological phenomena through narrative. Hinchman & Hinchman (1997) give a fundamental definition of narrative as “discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience, and thus offer insights about the world and/or people’s experience of it” (p. xvi). Narrative has also been broadly defined as “talk organized around consequential events” (Riessman, 1993, p. 3). As a foundation for the study of narrative, Bruner (1986) proposed that there are two kinds of thought—logico-scientific and narrative. While logico-scientific, or paradigmatic thought makes use of “categories...and the operations by which categories are established” (p. 12) and is action-oriented; narrative thought “deals in human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course” (p. 13) and is organized around the construction of meaning. Narrative thought, in contrast to paradigmatic thought, seeks to make experience vivid, and located “in time and place” (Bruner, 1986).

Emphasis on Temporal Meanings. A central concept in the narrative construction of meaning is the temporal organization of our experiences. In processing

the significance of our daily activities and in our constructions of life events, the use of words which demarcate what happened and when are ever present. Polkinghorne (1988) writes that “the experience and interpretation of time is a basic and dominant theme of human reality. Narrative is able to structure and organize time according to hermeneutic principles and to present time through multiple levels of interpretation” (p. 127). In bringing together chronological events, and the meaning attached to them, people construct “meaningful stories” which come to present and represent who we are and why we do the things we do. Indeed, Cohler (1982) describes personal narratives as “the most internally consistent interpretation of presently understood past, experienced present, and anticipated future” (p. 207, as cited in Mishler, 1986).

The Centrality of Language. In Polkinghorne’s view, “according to narrative theory...a study needs to focus its attention on existence as it is lived, experienced, and interpreted by the human person. This interpretation finally involves the process of language...” (p. 125). In taking the use of language as central to the process of meaning construction, narrative perspectives are able to transcend original ideas about the place of language in cognitive theories. In considering the significance of language in the study of narrative, there are two critical issues. The first has to do with the way that language is used to structure the representation of experience (Vygotsky, 1978). The second issue of language relates to the consideration of speech acts within situations where narratives are shared. This is important because of the ways that meaning (especially in the context of interview situations) is co-constructed through the “linguistic and social rules” that structure talk between individuals (Mishler, 1986).

Human Beings as Active Meaning Constructors. Lastly, returning to a central tenet of constructivist thought, narrative theoretical perspectives support the idea that human beings are active meaning constructors. Of particular interest in the current research is the use and development of narratives as a means to develop and clarify one's choices and identity. Hinchman & Hinchman (1997) write that:

Who one is, from the perspective of narrative theory, is inseparable from the way one's personal history unfolds, the telos (if any) toward which it builds, and the way that its overall course is emplotted and interpreted by oneself and others. This process of interpretation, which is continuous though not always fully conscious, necessarily utilizes narrative (p. 119).

Within my research, I have used the concept of narrative to analyze the ideas of the parents whom I interviewed, both in terms of content and as holistic narratives. In particular, the use of narrative is effective for the study of my research questions because through narrative it is possible to (a) look at the meanings that human beings create as being temporally ordered; (b) examine meaning construction from the perspective that participants are active constructors of meaning through language and (c) provide a way to discuss psychological phenomena through the perspective of the emerging identities of those who are the focus of the research.

Conclusion

Although charter schools have existed in Michigan since 1994, the process by which parents choose charter schools remains relatively under-defined. In lieu of a standardized process, parents are on their own in determining what school fits their child's needs. In order to gain a more detailed understanding of how the parents I interviewed were thinking about securing a "good education" for their children, I have framed the study within a constructivist perspective, and I have drawn on the idea of

narrative. Within narrative research, temporality, the multi-dimensionality of meanings, and the active construction of meaning through language are taken as central to the investigation of human experience.

This dissertation is a story of the varying ideas and resources that Black parents bring to bear on the decision of what school is best for their children. It also addresses the historical, social, political and cultural contexts which surrounds the decisions Black parents make on behalf of their children. In the history of the education of Black children in this country, it has been the Brown v. Board of Education case that has most identifiably shaped our notions of how Black parents define what a "good education" looks like. With the emergence of charter schools, there is a new opportunity to understand the voices of Black parents concerning what it means to provide Black children with a "good education."

In describing how a group of Black parents construct meanings about their decisions to enroll their children in charter schools, I hope to achieve two interrelated goals. The first is to insert the narratives of Black parents into the debate about what constitutes a good education for Black children, particularly as this debate relates to charter schools. The second is to make a significant contribution to our understanding of how we can provide schools that give Black children (and all children) what they need and deserve. This type of knowledge is necessary if public education is to embody the equity and quality that parents search for, and if we are to truly understand how parents define a "good education."

In order to tell this story, I begin with this chapter, which introduces the main ideas and conceptual framework of the study. In the second chapter, I present a review of

the literature pertinent to the research questions that were considered. In particular, I focus on the historical storylines involved in Black parents' search for a good education and on the place of charter schools and increased parental choice within this search. In the third chapter, I present an explication of the methodological approach and the research process that occurred during the span of the project. In the fourth and fifth chapters, I present an analysis of data that was obtained through interviews with parents and observations within the two charter schools. The sixth chapter focuses on the implications for the study and discusses future directions for continued research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

My research questions focus on an explanation of the decision making of a group of Black parents who selected charter schools for the education of their children:

(a) Among Black parents who choose charter schools for their children, what issues and themes are represented in their talk about their choice?

(b) How do they describe their decision-making processes?

Both of these questions are part of a larger research question:

(c) How is it that parents define and seek a “good education” for their children?

It is within the literature on school choice and charter schools that I first grounded the present study. In thinking further about the significance of charter schools to Black parents, I could not ignore how the parents I interviewed were connected to Black parents of the past who had struggled to provide their children with a good education. As their predecessors did, the parents of this study dealt with public schools that did not meet their standards. Thus, the story to be told had to address these historical connections and make them explicit. The concept of “story,” or narrative, was central to addressing my questions because of the existence of earlier personal and historical narratives centering on Black people's search for a good education and because throughout my study, the parents I talked with told stories about themselves and their children, about the schools in their communities, and about the importance of education. Through their stories, I gained insight into the meanings surrounding their decisions. It is through these stories that one can begin to reconstruct these parents' processes of deciding the most appropriate options for their children.

This review therefore integrates literature from two sources. The first section of the review is focused more specifically on how charter schools have come to represent legitimate and available options for Black parents. Since 1991, the choices available to many Black parents have been expanded to include the charter school. Presently, as an alternative to the traditional neighborhood public school, charter schools have provided Black parents with a new route to what they believe to be a "good" education for their children. As backdrop for my research, I describe the general characteristics of charter schools, the national charter school landscape, and the composition of Michigan charter schools. Additionally, I discuss the empirical research that has focused on the delineation of factors involved in parents' choices, the types of information available to parents, and on the impact that choice of charter schools has on issues of policy. However, this research has not focused on crafting an understanding of what the process and experience of selecting a school means to parents, and Black parents in particular. In order to fill this gap, my study provides an analysis of the narratives of parents regarding their choice.

In the second section, I explore literature relevant to the past and present struggle of Black parents to provide their children with a good education. In particular, I focus on the "storylines" which seem to run through this struggle. In tracing these storylines, my intent is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of the education of Black people in this country, but to highlight one theme of that history—the ways in which Black parents have been active advocates for their children, and active constructors of the idea of a "good education."

Charter Schools: A National Snapshot

Definitions of charter schools vary somewhat, but contain roughly the same key words and ideas: public, choice, accountability, and performance (Medler & Nathan, 1995; Corwin & Flaherty, 1999). These key words are found within the definition of charter schools given below, which is excerpted from the US Charter Schools web site:

Charter schools are nonsectarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. The “charter” establishing such a school is a performance contract detailing the school’s mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success. The length of time for which charters are granted varies, but most are granted for 3-5 years. At the end of the term, the entity granting the charter may renew the school’s contract. Charter schools are accountable to their sponsor—usually a state or local school board—to produce positive academic results and adhere to the charter contract. The basic concept of charter schools is that they exercise increased autonomy in return for the accountability. They are accountable for both academic results and fiscal practices to several groups: the sponsor that grants them, the parents who choose them and the public that funds them (www.uscharterschools.org/).

In general, several characteristics separate charter schools from “traditional” public schools. First, unlike other public schools, charter schools have an agreement with a sponsor (e.g., a school district, state board, university) that specifies “how the schools will be run, what will be taught, how success will be measured, and what students will achieve” (AFT, 1996, p. 4). Secondly, charter schools are held accountable for meeting the terms of the charter and for producing positive educational results in its students. Third, as a “reward” for meeting these standards, charter schools are often provided exemption from “restrictions and bureaucratic rules” (Nathan, 1996) that traditional public schools are bound by³.

³ As research on charter schools continues to grow, it is clear that charter schools may be *more* encumbered by rules and regulations than traditional public schools—in many states, waivers of rules are not automatically given, and many charter schools are

Charter schools are also different from schools of choice in key ways. Unlike charter schools, schools of choice do not have a performance-based contract with a governing body. And, while charter schools must admit all students up to their enrollment limit, schools of choice such as magnet schools are often able to control enrollment through entrance requirements (Dall, 1999; Viadero, 1999). On a state-by-state basis, charter schools can also differ from schools of choice in their relationship to school districts. In Michigan, for example, schools of choice are managed by individual school districts (Vretis, 2000), while charter schools are considered their own school district and are managed as such.

Charter schools vary significantly across states and even within states. Differences among charter schools, and the way they are operated is in part due to the state laws enacting them. These laws specify:

- (a) who is allowed to operate a charter school (e.g., groups of teachers and/or parents, private or non-profit organizations, higher education institutions);
- (b) who is allowed to grant (sponsor) a charter (e.g., district, state board, higher education institution);
- (c) whether charter schools are granted legal, independent status;
- (c) how they are funded and what percentage of state funds they receive and have control over;
- (d) type of regulation waivers (automatic exemption or waiver-by-waiver);
- (e) employee requirements and restrictions;

therefore under pressure to be accountable for meeting state guidelines, as well as the objectives listed in the charter. Additionally, since some charter schools act as

(f) student performance requirements; and

(g) limits on the number of charters per state and the duration of the charter (WestEd, 1999).

Depending on the state, a charter school could take one of several forms. Some charter schools are owned and operated by “educational corporations” such as Edison Schools (www.edisonschools.com), a private company that manages charter schools under an umbrella curriculum used in conjunction with state curricula. Currently, Edison schools operates 79 public schools in sixteen states, has a combined student enrollment of 38,000, and is continuing to expand. Another form a charter school can take is a conglomeration of home schools that are “lumped” together under the direction of a principal.

Other charter schools are created when private schools become public through obtaining a charter. These schools are likely to be either former independent secular or religious schools, and can exist as charter schools, provided that they do not include religion in their curriculum and teaching practices. Traditional public schools can also become charter schools as a way to gain more local control or enact a specialized mission.

Finally, charter schools can also be entirely new schools, founded through the efforts of community leaders, parents, teachers, and/or educational corporations. This type of charter school is the most common (WestEd, 1999). In the State of Charter Schools 3rd year Report, the authors state that “as of the 1997-98 school year, most

autonomous school districts, they are also responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of the school that would normally be handled by the district (Neuman, 2000).

charter schools—70%--were newly created, while 19 percent were pre-existing public schools, and 11 percent were pre-existing private schools.⁴”

Now that charter schools have been in existence for almost a decade, there is a substantial database, at both the national and state levels, detailing the demographic characteristics of charter schools (Bierlein, 1996; Medler & Nathan, 1995, Tracy, 1992). Since 1991, thirty-four of fifty states have passed charter school legislation and of these, twenty-eight have operating charter schools (see Appendix A). Since the 1992-93 school year, the number of charter schools has grown from two to 1,050 (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). National data on charter schools state that there is an average of 38 charter schools in states with charter school legislation (as of September 1998). The most recent statistics regarding the number of students in charter and public schools state that among states with both charter and public schools, less than 1% of the student population (160,000 students) attend charter schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

Michigan Charter Schools

Michigan charter schools, or public school academies (PSA's) are defined as follows:

Public school academies, (PSA's), (charter schools) in Michigan operate under the leadership and supervision of the state board. Sponsorship and approval of Michigan PSA's come from local boards, universities, and community colleges. There currently exists no absolute cap on the number of total schools allowed in the state, but by 1999 university sponsored schools will be up to a 150 maximum. PSA's are not automatically waived of state education laws and regulations. Schools operate under limited-term performance-based contract with funding that is capped at the statewide average.

(www.charterschools.org)

⁴ It should be noted that in providing this statistic, the authors do not differentiate between “grass-roots” charter schools and those schools which are run and managed by

In Michigan, charter schools generally fall into one of three categories—the public school owned and operated by a corporate entity (such as Edison Schools), the private school which has been converted to a charter school, and the relatively small “grass roots” or “visionary inspired” charter school.

Michigan is one of several states that have a much higher percentage of Black students in charter schools compared to other public schools; in Michigan charter schools Blacks made up 42.8% of the student population in 1998. Evidently, for Black parents, particularly those living in urban areas, (where many charter schools have a student enrollment that is 96-100% Black), charter schools are an attractive option to traditional neighborhood public schools. In the next section, I turn more specifically to an examination of the empirical research that provides both a foundation and a rationale for the current study.

Who is Choosing: Charter Schools and the Issue of Race

Despite the relatively small number of charter school students, charter schools have been embroiled in controversy since they were first conceptualized and established. Charter schools have been criticized as a first step toward policies supporting vouchers, they have been hypothesized as encouraging “White flight,” and they have been thought to “cream” the best minority students from urban public schools. In fact, research reports that have looked at charter schools nation wide show that on average, there are higher percentages of minority students in charter schools than in traditional public schools (Finn, Manno, Bierlein, 1996; (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). More specifically, nationally, the percentage of students in charter schools who are Black is slightly higher

educational corporations.

than in public schools (19% versus 11%) and several states (North Carolina, Arizona, Connecticut for example) have higher percentages of Black students than Whites enrolled in charter schools. Further, when the enrollment of Black students in charter schools and public schools is compared, several states have significantly higher percentages of Black students enrolled in charter schools (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Comparison Of Blacks In Charter Schools Vs. Public Schools

State	Black Students (%) In Charter School	Black students (%) in Public School	# of Charter Schools
Pennsylvania	67.7	14.2	31
Louisiana	64.8	46.4	10
Illinois	60.5	21.1	14
North Carolina	53.1	30.8	59
Connecticut	49.7	13.5	16
Michigan	42.8	11.1	132
Florida	41.3	25.4	70
New Jersey	30.1	18.5	30
Massachusetts	27.1	27.1	34
Minnesota	23.6	5.2	38
Wisconsin	19.4	9.6	30
Arizona	9.8	4.3	180

Data are sorted by percentage of Black students in charter schools, in descending order. Number of charter schools is the number operational as of September 1998.

This data and initial research (Vanourek, Manno, Finn, & Bierlein, 1997) suggests that Black parents see charter schools as a viable option to the “public schools’ disastrous record of teaching Black children” (Shokraii, 1996, p. 20). In the next section, I focus more specifically on research about why parents choose charter schools.

Why Do Parents Choose? Studies of Parental Choice of Charter Schools

Very little research has been conducted on the reasons why parents choose charter schools. Prior to charter schools, the parental choice literature consisted mainly of studies

focused on private schools. For example, parents in a study conducted by Edwards and Richardson (1981) self-reported the most important reasons for enrolling their children in a private school were lack of discipline in public schools, their desire to have their children taught values/religion, smaller class sizes in private schools and more individualized attention (cited in Arnez and Jones-Wilson, 1988). In a follow-up study conducted by Fretchling and Frankel (1983) it was found that smaller classes, individualized instruction, and higher academic standards were the main reasons parents cited for choosing private schools for their children. In similar studies done by Gibson (1994) and Griffeth (1991), parents cited religion/values, warmth of school climate, small class size, committed teachers, quality instruction and curriculum, responsiveness to parental expectations, personal attention and discipline as the most important reasons for enrolling their children in private independent or religious schools. As mentioned above, it has been only recently, and with the development of reform efforts focused on choice, that research attention has turned to parental choice of public schools.

In 1994, Ogawa and Dutton wrote that:

Research on parental choice is sparse. Very few studies of choice programs have been reported. In addition, the research base is very fragmented... Thus the little research on educational choice that has been reported is spread over a wide array of program types. This may be due to the scarcity of choice programs... Whatever the reasons, it leaves a body of literature that is not only thin, but also contains many important gaps (p. 275).

This “thin” body of literature on parental choice was soon augmented by several dissertations written in the area of parental choice of public school (Lobdell, 1995; Joyce, 1992; Moran, 1994; Richmond, 1999; Roden, 1992). Each of these studies focused primarily on exploring the question of what factors were seen as most important by parents who selected a public school other than their child’s neighborhood school. Within

the various studies, convenience, safety, high academic standards, teacher quality, school order and discipline, specialized curricula, teacher morale and accessibility, teaching approaches, responsiveness of school, family values, class/school size, and individualized attention were the factors important to parents. These findings echo those of the Hudson Institute, whose researchers found that the top reasons parents selected charter schools were small class size, higher standards, educational philosophy, greater opportunities for parent involvement and better teachers. (Vanourek, Manno, Finn, & Bierlein, 1997). Interestingly, the authors of the aforementioned research have relied almost exclusively on surveys and telephone interviews as a means for addressing their research questions. As a consequence, we have learned about the factors parents consider important in a school, but we have not gained any insight about how parents may “fit” the factors together in their decisions and in their understanding of what constitutes a good education. Across the history of the education of Black children in this country, there are recurring ideas concerning a “good education” which can ground the present exploration of Black parents' choice of charter schools, and it is this literature to which I now turn.

The Search for a Good Education: Shared Storylines, Different Struggles

The search for a good education for one’s children seems deeply entrenched in the collective consciousness of Black people. Through first and second person accounts of the education of slaves and ex-slaves (Jones, 1862; Stowe, 1879), in historical documents which provide evidence of the establishment of schools and colleges for Blacks in the North (Tyack, 1974), and in depictions of the fight for desegregation (Kluger, 1975), Black parents have sought a good education for themselves and their children. In examining the historical literature, a shared “storyline” emerges among many Blacks.

This storyline has been preserved and adapted over time and it draws on two ideas: (a) that education for many Blacks has never met the quality of many predominantly White schools and (b) that the pursuit of better schools and better education is a goal of the utmost importance.

The storyline begins in the South (where most free Blacks and slaves lived) during the 1800's. Anderson (1988), in describing the education of Blacks in the South from 1860 to 1935 writes that:

There developed in the slave community a fundamental belief in learning and self-improvement and a shared belief in universal education as a necessary basis for freedom and citizenship...education was fundamentally linked to freedom and dignity. This distinctive orientation toward learning was transmitted over time... (p. 281-282).

This orientation developed in the harshest of circumstances; educating slaves (or seeking to obtain an education if you were a slave) was illegal in most Southern states, and those who violated this law received harsh punishment. Even so, Anderson and others (Jones, 1862; Stowe, 1879) have documented how slaves struggled and sacrificed so that they might become literate.

In the post-slavery South, some Black parents made the decision to send their children to school even under threats of eviction by White property owners (Anderson, 1988). For these parents, enduring economic hardship was a risk they were willing to take so that their children might receive a formal education and through doing so, escape the cycle of poverty in which they were trapped. Even given their choice, the quality of schools for Blacks in the South was low. Although there were a few Black parents who could afford to send their children to private schools in order to get a good education, the majority of parents could not. Consequently, in the last half of the nineteenth century in

the South⁵, many parents were often involved in efforts to gain state-supported public education (Anderson, 1988, p. 16). State-supported education meant that it might become possible to improve the chances Black children had to become educated, and the overall condition in which they were educated. During the early 1900's Blacks in the states of Louisiana, Georgia, North and South Carolina all lobbied heavily for state-supported schools. In her examination of the efforts of Black parents in Augusta, Georgia to open and maintain Ware High School, Patton (1978) explored the agency of Black parents in their pursuit of a good education, and cited Black newspaper editor John T. Shuften in his admonition to Black parents to:

“toil a little harder and a little longer so as to allow your sons and daughters the inestimable privilege of learning....Remember they will have to take your place in the great drama of life...they will have to take care of themselves...and nothing...can aid them to do this better than a good education” (p. 48-49).

Parents in Georgia were not the only ones encouraged to make sacrifices for the sake of their children's education. This concern and commitment has been described in other historical research; a notable example is the work of E.V. Siddle Walker on the Caswell County Training School (1996). In her book, she chronicles the successes of Black parents in supporting CCTS and providing their children with an exemplary education, even while they lived in a social context of “discrimination and expectations of self-help” (p.25). Walker cites a former student as contending that “...the priority was on White people. Black was secondary” (p. 25). Through Walker's work, it is further evident that an emerging struggle for Blacks in the South revolved around attaining schools for their children that were of equal quality to schools of Whites.

⁵ Ninety percent of Blacks lived in the South at the turn of the century, thus the focus on the South in this review (Anderson, 1988).

The push to improve Black schools in the face of racism and discrimination can be seen in historical texts about the experiences of Blacks in the North and West as well. Even though discriminatory practices and racist attitudes among Whites in the 1800's and 1900's stood in the way of the improvement of education of Black children, Northern and Western Blacks also fought to gain access to better schools (Tyack, 1974). Two examples of this fight stand above the rest. The first is the Sumner v. Board of Education of Boston case. More than a century before Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954), in Boston, Charles Sumner directed a lawsuit in which he contended that Sarah Roberts, "had every right, legal and moral, to attend the White school she passed on her way to the Black school." (Tyack, 1974, p. 114). In cases similar to the Roberts case, Black parents and community leaders in California also fought to open segregated schools to Black children between 1860 and 1870 (Hendrick, 1981). Although these efforts were also unsuccessful, they point to a common theme in the Black community—Blacks wanted better schooling opportunities for their children, and one index of "better" was what was available to White children; thus the push for "equal" schools.

The theme of inequitable schooling is most recognizable in the group of lawsuits initiated by Oliver Brown and other litigants; these lawsuits eventually led to the Supreme Court's decision that separate is not equal. Through Richard Kluger's account of the legal history leading to desegregation decisions, again it is possible to see that the Roberts and the Brown case were not isolated occurrences. Instead, Roberts, several California cases, and the group of cases assembled under the name of Oliver Brown demonstrated that many Black people in this country reacted to the unequal treatment of their children in school not with deference or apathy, but instead challenged the political

and legal system to institute practices that would lead to the improvement of their children's schools.

Since Brown, the struggle for a good education in the last forty years has continued to be defined as a struggle for equality. Within this struggle, desegregation achieved through forced integration or through magnet schools and schools of choice have garnered the most attention in research and public literature (Joyce, 1992; Lomotey, 1996; Shujaa, 1996; Viadero, 1999). Additionally, Black parents seeking a good education for their children have also selected private religious or secular schools (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Cibulka, O'Brien & Zewe, 1982; Coleman, Defoe & Johnson, 1988; Irvine & Foster, 1996)⁶. Still other Black parents in the past and present have seen the route to providing a better education for Black children as necessarily involving the control of schools and education by Blacks (Akoyo, 1994; Asante, 1991; Lee, 1994; Shujaa, 1994). For over twenty years, Blacks have been sending their children to independent (often private) schools that are owned, operated, and controlled by Blacks. Many of these schools have focused on nurturing both the academic and social development of Black children from an Afrocentric perspective, which is something that often cannot be said of public schools or private secular and religious schools. In particular, many independent schools focus on nurturing the ethnic identity of their students. Regardless of the position of Black parents, the common quest throughout the history of this country is Black parents choosing, to the extent of their options and resources, to provide a better education for their children.

⁶ Historically, Black children have had entry into Catholic schools for over one hundred years (Irvine & Foster, 1996).

Conclusion

As a Black child, adolescent, and adult, I heard told and retold narratives that rose above the status of accounts of “everyday life” (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997) to become meaning-laden, larger than life stories. In my life and the lives of other Black children, the stories of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King, Jr. were much more than accounts of people and events—they were representations of cultural and historical identity. The story of Oliver Brown and his choice stands among these. As an iconic narrative, Brown’s story represents not only a watershed moment in American history, but also the cultural importance the Black community places on education and the historical predisposition of Black parents to seek out the best education possible for their children.

In fact, Brown’s narrative lives on through the choices of countless Black parents who have selected alternatives to traditional public schools for their children. This phenomenon is evident in past research on Black parents who select private schools for their children (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Slaughter & Johnson, 1988) and in the more recent research focused on how choice in education impacts Black families and communities (Fuller & Elmore, 1996). Indeed, echoes of Brown’s narrative were often present in the stories I was told about the struggles that members of my family had undertaken in order to become educated and provide their children with a good education.

Although research on Black parents’ choices has focused on the outcomes of charter and private schooling for Black children (Barnds, 1988), on parental goals (Slaughter, Johnson, & Schneider, 1988), and on policy issues (Yeakey, 1988), little attention has been paid to the narratives which contextualize the decisions of Black

parents. In this literature review, I have argued that parents may hold powerful narratives through which the past is connected to the present. These narratives draw on parents' experiences and values, reveal how parents utilize information to make choices, and address how parents define a "good education" and their role in providing it for their children. In the next chapter, I focus on the methodology which has been used to address my research questions and which has been used to analyze the interviews of the participants in this study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Research reported here about Black parents' selection of charter schools for their children has mainly been conducted from a depersonalized, or paradigmatic perspective (Bruner, 1986) and very few studies have approached this issue from a narrative approach. In keeping with the idea that understanding how Black parents define and obtain a good education for their children is gained through parents' own words, I have chosen a methodological perspective consistent with narrative inquiry that (1) privileges participants' knowledge and (2) uses a research strategy and analytical framework that emphasizes an understanding and interpretation of individuals' "life world" (Kvale, 1996) and an understanding of the contexts in which individuals interact.

Based on these ideas that the meanings we attach to our behavior and the social contexts in which we live are mutual influences on each other, I consider my research to be within a socio-cultural, interpretivist framework. In listening to the participants of my study and analyzing their words, in observing the interactions of parents and others and making sense of these interactions, I am engaged in acts of interpretation. Meaning-making (which is the result of interpretation) and the "elucidation of the process of meaning construction" (Schwandt, 1994) are essential to the analysis of the data I have collected.

Through observing and listening carefully to the participants of my study, I have directed my attention to the ways in which a group of Black parents has developed an understanding of which schools are (or are not) the best educational environments for their children, given their available choices. Additionally, I have sought to explore the

differences and commonalities in participants' understandings of charter schools. In other words, I have placed an emphasis on the socially constructed realities, local generalizations, "interpretive resources, stocks of knowledge, and intersubjectivity" (as defined through commonalities in meaning and perception) (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994, p. 263) of the participants in my study. In analyzing the data I collected, I have attempted to "...organize the interviews to present a narrative that explains what happened or provide a description of the norms and values that underlie cultural behavior" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

My Role As Researcher

An important part of the methodology of this research involves an explication of the way I have conceptualized my role within the research project. In his work on interviewing, Steiner Kvale (1996) alternately describes the role of the researcher as "miner" and "traveler," with each representing a different way of approaching interview research:

In the miner metaphor, knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal...The interviewer digs nuggets of data or meanings out of a subject's interior to be uncovered, uncontaminated by the miner...precious facts and meanings are purified by transcribing them from the oral to the written mode. The knowledge nuggets remain constant through the transformation of appearances on the conveyor belt from the oral stage to written storage. By analysis...the essential facts are drawn out by various techniques and molded into their definitive form.

The alternative traveler metaphor understands the interviewer as a traveler on a journey that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home...the traveler may also deliberately seek specific sites or topics by following a method...What the traveling reporter hears and sees is described qualitatively and is reconstructed as stories to be told to the people of the interviewer's own country, and possibly to those with whom the interviewer wandered. The journey may not only lead to new knowledge; the traveler might change as well.

As seen in these descriptions, the miner metaphor treats “knowledge as a given,” while the traveler metaphor is guided by a constructive, postmodern perspective (Kvale, p. 4). These metaphors are useful ways of explaining how I have come to conceptualize my role within the present study.

In constructing an account of the research findings, I began with very clear-cut ideas about the form and structure that my investigation would take. I would obtain the data, it would be transcribed, and I would look for recurrent themes, ideas, and patterns which would allow me to come to certain conclusions. I began as a miner, panning for gold. However, I very quickly began to realize several things. First, my role as “the researcher” could not be ignored. Although I initially intended to “fade into the background” as participants talked about their lives, experiences, and choices, I began to understand that who I was as a person was an important influence on the conversations that I had with participants, and that by simply choosing to interview parents in their homes, the form and content of our conversations was affected.

Through listening to the interviews and visiting the schools that were the subject of parents’ conversations, I became increasingly aware that their discussions about schools were guided by their own and by their children’s past and present experiences, and by the parents’ expectations for their children’s futures. At the same time that I realized I was affecting parents’ talk, I also began to realize that what I had heard and experienced was also influencing my own thinking about the research project and process, and about the decisions I envisioned I would one day make concerning my own children’s education. In short, through the research process, I came to accept that the more accurate metaphor for my approach was that of traveler. Although I still believed

that I was forming meaning through observations and analyses of participants' words, I could not ignore the importance of my presence within the research and the ways in which understandings of my interviews and observations were co-constructed.

Negotiating Entry and Participation

In studying the decision-making and involvement of Black parents in charter schools, I was initially interested in exploring how parents' own experiences, their socio-economic status (SES) and the type of charter school might all play a part in the decisions parents make to choose a charter school and then become involved in it. My first interest was in interviewing parents who had selected charter schools with different curricular foci. Therefore, two schools were sought as sites through which to gain parent participation. Specifically, I was interested in selecting schools that were located in urban environments, had predominantly Black student populations, and whose philosophy/focus differed significantly from each other. Through selecting for schools with these characteristics, I hoped to tap into the phenomenon surrounding Black parents selection of charter schools, while still be able to explore the possible importance of the *type* of charter school in their decision making process.

My selection of the first school was the result of a three-year-long process of research and volunteer work at an African-centered charter school near the university where I was enrolled as a student. In 1994, I was teaching "Reflections on Learning," a beginning teacher education course at the same university, and I was invited by one of my students to visit a preschool in Sheldonville at which a charismatic teacher was organizing plans for an African-centered charter school. In 1995, I eventually did visit the preschool, and did some volunteer work for Wanda Howard, the charismatic teacher my

student had described to me. As I volunteered at the school, I became increasingly interested in understanding Wanda's ideas and vision. Even though it was unclear whether her vision would become a reality (charter schools in Michigan were originally declared unconstitutional, a decision that was later reversed) she was intent on making the idea of the school come to fruition. A couple months later, I attended an organizational meeting, at which more than thirty parents were briefed by Wanda about the plans for the school. During the summer of 1995, I again spent a period of time volunteering for Wanda—at this point her school was in the works, and she was operating a preschool program out of a community church. In the fall of 1995, Umoja Academy opened and it was at this point when I began a research project centered around case studies of two parents' and two teachers' past educational experiences. During the next two years, I completed this project, but still continued to volunteer occasionally at the school. In order to maintain an understanding of the development of the school, I attended Harambe meetings (monthly whole school meetings for parents, teachers, and students) and helped Wanda with school-related projects. As I developed my dissertation proposal, Umoja Academy remained an important influence on my thinking and I decided that it would be an appropriate site through which to gain parent participant in my study.

At Umoja Academy, the first step towards obtaining the participation of parents was accomplished through working with an informant, Carolyn, a parent who was temporarily employed as an administrative assistant for the school. Through the course of my research and volunteer work at Umoja, Carolyn and I established a friendship, and she became an important resource for my data collection. Initially, Carolyn identified a

list of parents “who would probably agree to be interviewed.” As Carolyn wrote names on the list, I asked her to indicate whether she thought each parent was low, middle, or high SES, with the idea that I could cross check her assessments through a demographic questionnaire and my eventual conversations with parents. Additionally, Carolyn volunteered information related to the parents that she thought might be “good to know.” I used this list to write letters to parents and begin calling them (see Appendix B). In this first attempt at obtaining participants, the majority of parents declined participation. I then asked to meet with Wanda Parks, the principal of the school. At this meeting, I discussed my plans with her, and supplied her with a memo that described these plans. After the conversation, Wanda agreed to provide me with a list of all the school’s parents. Using this list, I again asked Carolyn’s opinion on who might be willing to speak with me (and what SES group they might belong to) and using this information, I sent letters to 25 parents. From this group, I selected and interviewed ten parents (six single, separated, divorced mothers and two couples).

In order to select a second school, I searched the internet for a listing of all charter schools in Michigan, and I identified five schools which fit the characteristics I had established for my work (urban, predominantly Black student body, different curricular foci). I then sent letters to the principals of these schools introducing myself and asking for an opportunity to talk with them further about the possibility of including their school in my study. After little response and several unsuccessful attempts to meet with principals of four of the schools, I made an appointment with the principal of Orange City Academy (OCA). At this meeting, the principal of the school agreed to allow me to use the school as the second site for my research. In ten visits to the school, I observed in

classrooms, I attended a school-wide assembly and after school meetings, and I interviewed the principal and parent involvement coordinators of the school.

After interviewing the principal, I spoke with him about obtaining parent participation, and he agreed to allow me to send a letter home with students, on the condition that the students' teachers would agree to collect these letters (see Appendix B). In the letter I briefly introduced myself, discussed my research project and my interest in speaking with them, and told them that of the parents who returned the letter, one parent would be randomly selected to receive \$50.00. I gave four teachers a total of seventy letters; twenty-three were returned and I used these to contact parents to be involved in the study.

Description of Schools and Participants

Parents

Data from twenty-three parents were used in the analyses—of this group, eighteen parent interviews provided information for the bulk of the data analysis⁷ (see Table 2 and 3 below).

⁷ Four of the five parents were excluded from the analyses because only one interview was completed; the other parent was not included because she did not gain custody of her niece, who she was planning to enroll in Umoja Shule.

Table 2: Sheldonville Parent Demographic Information

Parent	Occupation	Income	Education	Age	Children	Other Ed. Info. About Parent
Daphne Richmond	Admin. Assistant	25,000	Undergrad.	28	Amber: 5 Mitchell: 1	Not educated in same city, some Catholic school
Jeremy Wright	Asst. professor	58,000	Doctorate	39	Jade: 12 Malik: 4 Kofi: 5	Not educated in same city
Tonya Harper-Wright	Asst. professor	58,000	Doctorate	38	Same as above	Not educated in same city
Koretta Taylor	Unemployed at time of study	20,000	Some undergrad.	28	Ron: 4	Educated in same city, some Catholic school
Camille Collins	Unemployed at time of study		High School	41	Adam: 4 Andre: 18 Sharmin: 16 Shalonda: 14 Shanice: 11	Not educated in same city
Valinda Young	Legal Secretary	22,000	Associate Degree	36	Marcus: 9 Mya: 4	Same city, some Catholic School
Pamela Richardson	Data management	30,000	Masters	35	Douglas: 4	Ed. primarily in same city
Ron Harper	Refuse Management	64,000	Some community college	39	Carl: 7 Jasmine: 4	Same city for Secondary Ed.
Jenay Harper	Admin. Assistant	64,000	Some undergrad.	37	Same as above	Ed. in same city
Carolyn Williston	Clinical Social Worker	16,000	Masters	48	Justice: 10 Sam: 7	Not educated in same city

Table 3: Orange City Parent Demographic Information

Parent	Occupation	Income	Highest Ed. Attained	Age	Children	Other Ed. Info.
Pamela Sutton	Singer	28,000	Undergraduate Degree	42	Amara: 8	Ed. in same city
LaTrice Morgan	Residential Care Worker	9,000	High School	26	Marcus: 6 Carl: 3	Ed. in same city
Sharmaine Jackson	Factory Worker	25,000	High School	25	Tamara: 5	Ed. in same city
Tracy Ross	Packaging Clerk	15,000	High School	25	Shawn: 5	Ed. in same city, some Catholic school
Tricia Parker	Computers/Car Industry	42,000	Undergraduate Degree	34	Eric: 7	Ed. in same city, some Catholic school
Arlene Montcalm	Residential Care Worker	26,000	High School	52	Gena: 8	Ed. in same city
Rochelle Allen	Unemployed at time of study		High School	26	Charles: 8	Ed. in same city
LaTonya Richardson	Factory Worker	28,000	High School	25	Darnell: 5 Tera: 3 David: 1	Ed. in same city

Of the eighteen parents interviewed, ten parents had children attending Umoja Shule, and eight parents had children enrolled at Orange City Academy. Within both schools, parents were selected from both low and mid/high SES groups. I also selected parents according to the length of time their children had been at the school—half had children enrolled for two years or less (I designated these as “old” parents), half had just enrolled their children for the school year beginning at the time when the data was collected (I designated these as “new” parents). Through interviewing both “old” and

“new” parents, I hoped to determine if the length of time since parents made their initial selection had any effect on the detail with which they talked about their decision.

All of the parents who participated in my research were high school graduates. In addition, four held advanced degrees (Masters and Ph.D.) and several were working on obtaining college degrees as the time of the interviews. During their primary education, half of the parents at Umoja Shule were educated in Sheldonville, while most of the parents who had children enrolled at Orange City Academy were educated in neighborhood schools close to the one their children now attended. Six of the twenty-three parents were educated in Catholic schools. About half of the parents were in their mid-twenties, with the other half being in their early thirties to early forties. Most parents had more than one child, and most were single, unmarried parents.

Schools

Umoja Academy. Umoja Academy, the first school selected for the study, is a K-6 African-centered charter school that received charter school status in 1994. Housed in a former vocational school, the building is gray and modern with large windows on the south side entrance. Before attaining this leased building, the school operated in a community church, and before that, at a nearby preschool. Presently, the principal continues to encourage school parents to financially support a plan to build a school which can more adequately support the type of learning environment originally envisioned. Since the building is leased, the school has not been able to build any playground equipment in the adjoining grassy lot it shares with a large church.

Although the building is relatively large, space usage continues to be an unresolved issue; on one side of the building four classrooms have been built. On the

other side is a large open space with a high ceiling (known as the “big room”) which has been divided into several classrooms, although no walls have been erected. In the four classrooms and in the big room area, children rotate teachers every fifty minutes. This results in a lot of noise and activity, and the principal and the teachers at the school admit that for children in the big room, the level of noise and activity “takes a little getting used to.”

As stated in the school’s brochure, the focus of the school is “African-centered curriculum, with multi-sensory, multi-modal, multi-dimensional, and multi-cultural strategies for an experiential school-based model of empowerment.” The mission of the school is “to center, educate, and nurture all students to achieve their maximum potential while developing future world leaders.” In accordance with the focus of the school, the principal’s vision of the school is firmly grounded in an African-centered perspective which reflects the philosophies of Maulana Karenga, Haki Madhubuti, Asa Hilliard, Jawanza Kunjufu and other Afrocentric theorists. The school day begins with a Zulu Affirmation:

I
I am
I am alive
I am conscious and aware
I am unique
I am the face of humanity
The face of humanity is my face...
The infinity is a unity; it cannot be destroyed;
I am a constituent of the unity
I cannot be destroyed;
The infinity and I are inseparable...
I am eternal; I am the secret that drives out all fear.
Perpetual evolution is my destiny.
I evolve forever, in response to the challenge of being human...

(Excerpt from The Zulu Declaration)

The empowerment of the Black community is a central theme for the school—through the education and socialization of the students at the school, it is the principal’s vision that the students of Umoja Academy will be able to “reach back” and help to make positive change for other Blacks. The curriculum at Umoja Academy is African-centered with “a strong emphasis on individualized reading, reasoning and critical thinking.” In addition to studying Japanese, Spanish, and French, the children go on many field trips during the year, and participate in a variety of after school clubs, including African drumming, drama, and science. All of the 156 students at Umoja Academy are Black, and range from preschool age to eighth grade. All students are required to wear a uniform consisting of jeans or slacks, tennis shoes and a shirt over which a “buba” (a smock, preferably in a Kente cloth or other African-inspired print) is worn.

There are ten regular teachers at the school, in addition to several part-time teachers. With the exception of the Japanese language teacher, all are Black. Since the school opened, staff turnover has been a recurrent challenge. Wanda's strategy of attracting many of “the best and the brightest” comes with a hidden cost; several teachers who originally formed the ideological backbone of the school have left to pursue “bigger and better” opportunities in private business and educational administration.

Despite teacher turnover and problems with space, in the years since Umoja Academy as been open, it has consistently maintained a waiting list. Umoja's students have a reputation in the Black community for excelling academically, and they often give plays and other performances at the local university and at city functions during Black Heritage month. The school has also been profiled in the Wall Street Journal and U.S. News and World Report. Local newspapers have done stories on the school and of the

charter schools in the city, it has had the most success, as measured by the academic achievement of its students and the lack of bad publicity and controversy it has experienced (as compared to other charter schools in the area).

Orange City Academy. Orange City Academy (OCA), a K-5 school is located in a south suburb of the large, metropolitan city of Monroe. Although the suburb is predominantly White and middle to lower-middle income, it borders another suburb which is predominantly Black and lower middle income to lower income community. Unmistakable racial lines divide the two communities—as one parent says “you can be in this neighborhood, which is all Black, and cross Hillsdale Road and be in an all White neighborhood. It’s like fish in a lake—if we (Black people) put one toe in, they (White people) all scatter.” The school itself serves as a geographical marker between the two communities, and it has a student body that is ninety-eight percent Black.

The school sits across the street from an apartment complex, and appears to have been built in the late sixties to mid-seventies. Like many charter schools located in renovated older public schools, it experiences problems with its ventilation system. In the summer months, classroom doors must be propped open so that air circulates from the outside and through the building. The interior of the school complements the style of the outside. Long, tiled hallways lead to classrooms, students’ work is displayed on painted cement walls, there are waist-high drinking fountains at several places, and a small gym/auditorium serves as the meeting place for school-wide assemblies.

As stated in the student-parent handbook, OCA’s mission is to:

...offer the finest academic program possible; to improve pupil learning by creating a school with high and rigorous standards for pupil performance; to teach self-discipline, honor and high moral standards; to teach students to understand the American “free enterprise system” and encourage them to fully participate; to

encourage and allow the most effective teaching methods in an environment where each student is well known, to provide teachers with the opportunity, responsibility, and accountability for the management and control of the total school curriculum and environment; and to foster student, parent, and community involvement through the use of community resources and partnerships.

The principal of OCA, Walter Neuman, is a former Orange City public school principal. On weekends, he teaches at the Jewish Saturday school, and it is clear that being involved in education has been a lifelong endeavor for him. As principal, Mr. Neuman see himself as “the captain of the ship,” which he must keep running smoothly, while at the same time trying to maneuver improvements for the students and the staff. Despite being the “captain,” Mr. Neuman is also very conscious of the fact that OCA is part of a city-wide organization of Orange City Academy charter schools, and it is his responsibility to make sure that his school follows the ideals upon which all of the City Charter Corporation (CCC) schools were founded.

The operation of OCA is based on four “operational goals:” (1) creating an environment where all students learn (curriculum), (2) continued improvement of professional skill and development (professional development), (3) create a collaborative partnership with district, parents, and community (parent-community involvement and (4) maximize our management system (school climate).

There are eighteen teachers at the school (two teachers per grade), in addition, the school employs a “parent coordinator,” a part-time music teacher, and local college students volunteer to staff the computer lab. Many of the students at OCA come from families that are low income and ninety-eight percent of the students are Black. Although most of the students live within a few miles of the school, students also come from within the city of Monroe.

Data Collection

Interviews and observations were the tools used to collect the data for this study. Because I wanted to explore parents' choices and involvement in charter schools, from their perspective, using interviews as a method of data collection was a necessity. Rubin & Rubin (1995) state that "qualitative interviewing is a way of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds. Through qualitative interviews you can understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate" (p. 1). Further, because I believe that parents' choices and involvement in charter schools cannot be fully explained without paying attention to the contextual influence of the charter school, it was also necessary for me to observe parents, teachers, and students interacting within Umoja Academy and Orange City Academy (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

Interview Structure

Of the twenty-three parents who participated in the study, eighteen were interviewed twice. The remaining five parents were interviewed once⁸. Through two interviews, I was able to ask participants questions related to (1) their past educational and life experiences, and (2) their decision-making processes. The first interview was to be semi-structured; I had a list of questions (see Appendix C) related to their past educational experiences and based on previous research using the questions, I felt confident that this would supply me with data necessary to discuss the impact of parents' own educational experiences on the choices they made for their children. Using this protocol, I completed five of the first interviews with parents at Umoja Academy. After

⁸ Of the five parents who were interviewed once, two moved during the time of the study, two were unable to be contacted for a second interview, and one individual was not included because she did not become a guardian of her niece during the time of the study.

taking notes on these interviews, I realized that although I was obtaining a good amount of information about parents' past school experiences, I needed to know more about them as parents and their lives in general in order to better understand their choices and thinking process—I see this as a conceptual turning point in my thinking about the data collection process. With this in mind, I altered the protocol to first include questions about their family, work, religion/spirituality, ethnicity, and community. Using this revised protocol, I interviewed three parents at OCA. I continued using this protocol for the remainder of the first interviews with parents at both schools.

I began my work on the second interviews by drafting a semi-structured protocol (see Appendix C) and piloting it with my informant, Carolyn. After the interview, I asked Carolyn to give me information about the structure of the questionnaire, and based on her suggestions I eliminated some repetitive questions. After four interviews with parents from Umoja Academy, I decided that the structure of the protocol was not conducive to eliciting the in-depth information I originally sought—this was another conceptual turning point in the data collection—and I moved toward an open-ended protocol that began by asking parents to “tell the story” of their decision-making process:

The first thing that I want you to do today is to tell me the story of all that went into your decision to put _____ into Umoja Academy. I'd like you to take a moment, and think of the first time you had thoughts about _____ going into kindergarten, and begin your story at that point.

This interview procedure was used with the remaining second interviews (see Tables 4 and 5 below for a timeline describing the interview process).

Table 4: First Interview Structure and Timeline

Parent	Date
Patricia Reynolds	4/18/98
Valinda Young	4/28/98
Daphne Richmond	5/2/98
Ron and Jenay Harper	6/1/98
Koretta Taylor	6/26/98
Conceptual Turning Point: First Interview Protocol Revised	
Tracy Ross	7/9/98
Tricia Parker	7/10/98
Carolyn Williston	8/20/98
Jeremy and Tonika Wright	10/9/98
Camille Collins	10/14/98
Pamela Sutton	10/20/98
LaTrice Morgan	11/10/98
Sharmaine Jackson	11/9/98
LaTonya Richardson	11/14/98
Arlene Montcalm	11/30/98
Rochelle Allen	11/20/98

Table 5: Second Interview Structure and Timeline

Parent	Date
Daphne Richmond	5/2/98
Valinda Young	5/11/98
Patricia Reynolds	5/28/98
Ron and Jenay Harper	6/6/98
Conceptual Turning Point: Second Interview Protocol Revised	
Koretta Taylor	7/20/98
Tracy Ross	7/30/98
Tricia Parker	8/1/98
Paamela Sutton	10/26/98
Arlene Montcalm	12/7/98
Carolyn Williston	9/17/98
Jeremy and Tonika Wright	12/16/98
Camille Collins	11/1/98
LaTonya Richardson	11/22/98
LaTrice Morgan	11/17/98
Rochelle Allen	11/21/98
Sharmaine Jackson	11/11/ 98

In addition to interviews with parents, I also conducted interviews with the principals and teachers⁹ at both schools. In particular, I focused on obtaining information about the person being interviewed, how they came to the school, and on the nature of the school environment itself, as they perceived it (see Appendix E). A table below describes the sequence of interviews that I completed during the data collection for this study.

In writing their chapter on interviews in the Handbook of Qualitative Research, Fontana and Frey (1994) have said that “asking questions and getting answers is a much harder task than it may seem at first”(p. 361). This indeed proved to be the case with the interviewing that was completed through this research project. Though I understood that there was a process involved in understanding what kinds of data are necessary to describe a particular phenomenon. The more difficult recognition was that I, too, was undergoing a process of learning what it took to become a good researcher and a good interviewer. I often tried to hold myself to the standards Kvale outlines in his “Quality Criteria for an Interview” (p. 45):

- (a) The extent of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers from the interviewee.
- (b) The shorter the interviewer’s questions and the longer the subject’s answers, the better.
- (c) The degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of the answers.
- (d) The interviewer attempts to verify his or her interpretations of the subject’s answers in the course of the interview.

⁹ The teachers interviewed were kindergarten and first grade teachers, since they were those most likely to be teaching students who were new, or who had been at the charter school for two years or less.

(e) The interview is “self-communicating”—it is a story contained in itself that hardly requires much extra descriptions and explanations.

However, with each interview I completed, I more fully realized that Kvale’s criteria (and my own criteria) were ideals to strive for, and that the interview situations were an unpredictable combination of my own developing expertise, my expectations of the interview, my interviewee’s expectations of the interview and the reality formed when these things came together through our conversations.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process for this study was completed in two interconnected phases. In the first phase, the interviews of the group of parents were analyzed by thematic content (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). In this phase of the analysis, each transcript was coded according to the identification of four primary themes which had been uncovered through prior research (Pleasants, 1996): (1) Good/Bad School Characteristics, (2) Parent Roles, (3) Child’s School Experiences, and (4) Parent’s Past Experiences with Education. The data was then recoded through a process of completing chronological summaries of each parents’ transcripts, through examining the summaries for themes and coding the summaries, then the summaries were given to two other people and they were asked to code the summaries. This approach to thematic analysis was data-driven, and based on this second analytical pass through the data, four themes were identified as salient to a “good education”—academic progress/achievement, parent involvement, connection between home and school, and the importance of race and culture in the schooling process. After identifying these themes, the themes were

discussed with parents, in order to determine their perceptions of the relevancy of the themes to their decision making process.

In the second phase of data analysis, I examined the transcripts and identified instances in which parents gave narratives about their experiences and/or their child's experiences. Within this phase of data analysis, I concentrated on analyzing parents' narratives holistically, in order to ground my interpretations and understanding of their narratives within the larger context of the complete text of their interviews. The result of these two phases of analysis was an understanding of the data that combined specific attention to content with a contextualized perspective on the lives of individual parents who were interviewed. In the next chapter, I discuss my analysis in light of the research questions of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF PARENTS' DEFINITIONS OF A GOOD EDUCATION

Introduction

...you are always trying to improve every generation. That's how we were raised. To improve every generation... You want the best. You want them to go further than you did.—Patricia

We kind of made the decision of trying it out because Tina was always a brilliant child, even in public schools, but, you know, we desired something more for her. —Koretta

And, uhm, so I am always believing in giving my kids the best of what ever, but I don't always mean that, material wise. I just mean the best, I want to give them the best education they can get.—LaTonya

If defined solely by the statements above, a "good education" would be embodied by several characteristics; it would be better than the education that one had as a parent. It would be something more than what is available through "traditional" public schooling. In short, it would be the "best education that they (one's children) can get." These ideas are a general representation of what a good education meant to the group of Black parents interviewed. However, through their reflections on their own school experiences and their evaluations of the learning environments in which their children were a part, this group of parents also conveyed deeper and more detailed ideas about their definitions of a good education. These themes were important because they bind the stories of the parents together and they also connect the parents I interviewed to the literature concerning how Black children can and should receive a good education. In order to illuminate the definitions of a good education, in this chapter I explore the themes evident in interviews done with a group of Black parents who selected charter schools for their children.

Through data-based thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), four main themes relating to a good education were identified:

Theme One: A Good Education Is One in Which One's Children Are Academically

Theme Two: A Good Education Involves One's Parents

Theme Three: A Good Education Connects Families and Schools Together in Support of Children

Theme Four: A Good Education Addresses the Impact of Culture and Race on the Schooling of Black Children

In the following sections, I describe how each of these themes was represented across parent interviews and I link these themes to research relevant to providing a good education for Black children. Although the parents interviewed did not cite research literature and rarely specific terminology related to the education of Black children, their thoughts about what was necessary for the attainment of a good education clearly resonated with research on policies and practices (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Mehan, 1993) associated with the education of Black students.

A Good Education is One in Which One's Children Are Academically Successful

The parents interviewed for this study enrolled their children in charter schools in order to promote the academic success of their children. In their interviews, parents conceptualized academic success as involving several components and they showed concern about obtaining these components for their children. Most immediately, they were concerned about their children's academic progress, their children's classroom and school environments, and their children's teachers. In the following section, I discuss how these concerns comprise one piece of parents' definitions of a good education.

Concern About Progress

Academic progress was first construed by the parents as academic work that was challenging and that helped their children go "a step further" than their current academic level. As Mehan (1997) writes, when Black children, particularly low-income Black children, are provided with structured academic challenges, they often do as well or better than their more well-to-do peers. And, as Sizemore (1990) points out, one important correlate of effective schools is "high expectations for student performance" (p. 41). The idea that high expectations promote academic progress is also represented in the literature on the Catholic school experiences of Black people, highlighted in the last chapter. Importantly, the parents interviewed for this study indicated that they did not believe that the environments their children were in would promote the academic progress of their children, and they were invested in finding schools which were more academically rigorous than what was offered in their children's preschool or public school environments. This idea is represented in Daphne's reaction to her daughter's report of what she did at her preschool:

...when she would come home I'd say "well... what did you do in daycare today?" And she's like "we played." And I was like "did you count?" "No." "Did you write?" "No." I was like "what are you doing there all day?" "Playing." I was like Oh Lord. You know I gotta get her out of this place. (Laughs) I was like man I'm gonna call Umoja again and sure enough they had an opening. And they said she can start on Monday and I said thank you Lord!
-Daphne Richmond

Daphne, a young single parent of two living in Sheldonville worried about whether her daughter Amber's preschool was an environment in which she could attain that success. In voicing these worries, Daphne referenced both knowledge about her

daughter and her own beliefs about what schools should do to support the academic achievement of students:

...she was speaking in complete sentences by the time she was like a year and a half. I mean she could communicate very well with people and so I knew that she was.... she was going to be very intelligent and uhm, so that was all the more reason for me to get her into a good school. I mean that's very important to me to keep that up and get her to the point where she's not bored with school. Because that's when you lose a lot of kids. Where they're bored with what they're doing.

Daphne went on to describe Amber as “a bundle of energy...headstrong and strong-willed.” Because of this, finding a school in which “they were challenging her and not saying ‘oh well, you know, those little kids can’t do that’” was very important to Daphne. As a student working toward her master’s degree, and as an administrative assistant for a prominent businesswoman in the community, Daphne also expressed concerns that Amber should be able to “compete with everyone else” for a good job when she got older, and an early academic start was a part of what Daphne saw as a necessary foundation for Amber. Thus, a preschool environment in which her daughter just “played” was not consistent with Daphne’s definitions of a good education.

Although Daphne’s perspective is in opposition to how some early childhood educators would define “developmentally appropriate” classroom practice (Bodrova, Leong, & Paynter, 1999), her worries about her the progression of her daughter's preschool learning were also shared by parents like Sharmaine, an Orange City parent. After a new teacher at her daughter's Head Start Center was prevented from teaching children how to write their names using a “dot-to-dot format,” Sharmaine went to the Head Start Center director to ask her why it wasn’t allowed:

She said, uhm, she said “well, I feel that you’re pushing Tamara too much.” But how do I know if she can do things unless I help her do it? I said “my child could be two years old and know every state.” ...to me, it’s just the parent introducing it

to their child. You know, I said “my child is four years old and she...can learn how to spell her name through a song.” You know, and she was like, “well, we don’t do that here in Head Start. In Head Start they like to do play only” ... You know, and I am like, I asked, “how can you say that when so many kids that was in the program last year or even six months ago before Ms. Murphy became a teacher, I said, they couldn’t recognize their name and now they can?” They knew the beginning, the letter their name started with, but they couldn’t recognize their whole name. I was like, “how can you say that,” and me and her argued for like an hour and she was like, “girl”¹⁰, that is how I feel because what I say the program guidelines, they are the program guidelines.”

After this conversation, Sharmaine resolved to find her daughter an elementary school environment in which she was doing work that was “more advanced” than the Center and “regular public schools.” In a similar way, Jenay and Ron Jones, Sheldonville parents, also talked about their son’s needs relative to the educational experiences that he had already had in preschool:

...he went to Sharon’s preschool for two years and we just felt like he had really outgrown them. You know, they start them off with the basic shapes and colors and all that...And he had mastered those skills pretty, very well, you know, so there was like no need in putting him through that again...So, then we looked for something that was maybe a little more structured. Uhm, where they had gone a step further past the preschool. He was in preschool, but basically he was doing kindergarten work when we put him in Umoja. --Jenay

In addition to verbalizing specific ideas about appropriate early childhood practices and drawing on their knowledge of their children’s individual needs in order to determine if their children were experiencing academic progress, parents discussed the importance of high academic standards in their children's schools. Arletta, one of the older parents in the study and an Orange City resident, talked about how “advanced” her granddaughter’s charter school seemed compared to the schools her sons had attended.

¹⁰ In this instance the use of the word “girl” was used as a term of familiarity; both Sharmaine and the Head Start Director were Black, and “girl” signified a change from what had been a more formal meeting to an informal and candid conversation.

Because only one of her sons had “made it” she felt that it was very important for schools to go beyond a traditional curriculum:

You just can't go to school and say, and learn reading, and writing and arithmetic. ...You've got to beyond that. ... and if you want anything in life, if you want to strive to be the best that you could be, you have to go beyond and above. And that's what they teaching them...And I love that.

Among several of the parents interviewed, there was the conception that some preschools and public schools just weren't aggressively promoting high academic standards for their students. This was made known to some parents directly through their children's experiences, as in Koretta's experience in observing of her niece's lack of interest in school after transferring from a Catholic school to the neighborhood public school:

...It's, it's all due to the fact that she just totally lost interest because you know, she is frustrated. She is like “it's stupid, I already know what they're teaching”....I seen a difference in her attitude, she started getting to the point that oh I don't want to go to school, I don't want to go to school...and before, she just loved to go to school.

As product of Catholic schools, Koretta often characterized the academic environment of public schools as below her standards. For other parents, variation in the academic pace of preschools and public schools was made even more apparent when their children were enrolled in charter schools:

...I think, that they (Head Start teachers) would be like, like here is the ABC's. We had the ABC's on our refrigerator, that doesn't interest him. You know, it's like that babyfied stuff, now he is doing things with more maturity (at the charter school)...But it's it's more of a faster pace and it is more interesting to him and I can see that he is learning. If you say Adam, write your name or spell book, book, he can write that without saying this is how a b goes, you know, that is good for a five year old. So, I'm I'm really really impressed. –Camille

Daphne, Koretta, Ron, Jenay, Sharmaine and Camille talked often of the ways in which preschool or Head Start programs did not meet the learning needs of their children. For parents like Koretta this was a “terrible situation” to be in, because as she put it,

“Our kids are our future so to me that is my future...I am looking at my whole entire future just being, you know, torn apart. You know, I just seen it breaking down and deteriorating right before my eyes. I’m like, oh, no, we gotta get her out of this public school thing.”

Perhaps because of the pressure exerted upon them to be successful in promoting the academic and social achievement of students, charter schools were perceived by most parents as being more dedicated to the learning and understanding of their students.

Sharmaine, provided a specific example of this, saying:

The one thing that that really impressed me about the school was, like for science or environmental observation, that was one of my cousin’s classes, her homework was she had to sit in the window or sit outside and sit and wait for an animal to come. It could be a squirrel, dog, cat, or anything, wait for it to come along, see what it does, describe the animal, see what it does, where it goes, how it walks or runs or whatever, tell about it. Put it in essay form. She had to write that down. That was the homework for that class...a lot of schools won’ tell you. They just tell you okay, this is a squirrel and there is a nut and that’s it. You know, what goes in the trees, that’s it...Orange City (Academy) is kind of the Cadillac of the public schools, it’s like I like how they they start quicker than the regular schools do.

In all, most parents felt that after their children had been enrolled in charter schools, the pace at which they learned and their general engagement in school increased. In discussing what promoted these increases, parents often compared and contrasted their children’s previous and present schools. Within these comparisons, their comments fell into two main areas; the classroom/school environments of their children’s previous and present school, and the teachers that their children were instructed by in the past and present.

Concern About Attention in Schools and Classrooms

Almost all of the parents interviewed (sixteen of eighteen) expressed the concern that their children were not receiving enough “one-on-one” or “individualized attention” in their schools. In talking about attention issues, the importance of small class sizes was

mentioned frequently. Although the advantages of small class-size have been contested by different researchers (Finn & Petrilli, 1998; Hanushek, 1999), class-size reduction, particularly for low-income and minority students, has had beneficial results in various schools and school districts (Bracey, 1999) and small-class sizes and "individualized attention" were among the most specifically mentioned aspects of schools that parents interviewed for this study were concerned about. Tricia, a computer programmer and Orange City parent, expressed this idea:

That size thing is so important to me, the size of the classroom. As I said, I did the substitute teaching thing, and having more than twenty is just too much for one person to be able to get their points across when they are that little. And even when they get bigger too...

Particularly for the parents living in Orange City, the perception existed that Orange City Schools were overcrowded. When asked what "large classes" or "too many kids" meant, parents talked about classrooms that had thirty to forty students in them, often with no more than one teacher and one teacher's aide¹¹. Because of this perception, many parents talked about feeling as if their children were not "really known" as individuals. This idea was expressed by LaTonya, who described the private school that her son had been enrolled in previously:

Yeah. And so, this school was what I was looking for. It was small, uhm, it was personable. You know, you were actually a name and like they say, not a number. That is how it was at that school and I really liked it. I really liked it...they took it upon themselves. They would take Daniel out of class a half hour to like 15 minutes because Daniel had a problem reading....They took it upon themselves. They didn't send a letter home saying your son has a problem reading and you need to do something about it. They did something about it.

¹¹ In talking with the administrative assistant for the Superintendent of Orange City public schools, I was informed that the class sizes in Orange City schools range from one to thirty (Murray, 2000).

The idea that a school or classroom would be small enough so that a child would get needed attention if they were experiencing academic difficulties was critical to several parents, and was integral to their conceptions of the conditions under which their children could attain academic success. As Tricia said, it was important to her that the school/teachers:

...would actually care if something happened to your child. They would be able to see that he needs attention or see that he is doing great, like...if he has a problem with reading, you know, or spelling a word, that he would get the attention. That he wouldn't have 40 other kids or 39 other kids wanting the same thing. He would only have to fight with 15 other ones for attention if that would be the case.

The importance parents attached to small class sizes and individual attention came primarily from experiences of either having their children in schools which did not meet this criteria, or having their children in schools that *did* meet this criteria and then having to put them in schools that had much larger class sizes. For example, Koretta related a specific experience she had in realizing that her niece (whom she had assumed custody of) was struggling in school because of the lack of attention she was receiving in her classroom:

...she came home one day and she says "my teacher does not like me." I was like "your teacher doesn't like you?" "My teacher does not like me." "What does she do to you?" "Well, she doesn't talk to me, she doesn't, you know, she is always nice to everybody else" and so I had to go up here to the school and you know get the principal involved. I have never gone through no mess like that before. And I talked to her teacher and I was like "Tina is under the impression that you don't like her, that you don't talk to her." Well, Tina is used to that individual attention. She was like "well if I had time to stop and talk to every student in my class, that's all I would do"...I felt like a fool, you know, after I left there...Because you know, you're so, you get so used to one thing, you kind of block out the reality. In public schools there is just too many kids, they are not going to get individual treatment, there are going to be many kids that are going to be completely looked over as though they don't exist. And my niece, in my opinion, is too good for that. She is too smart and I saw a difference in her grades, I am like, oh no.

Whether through situations like this, through experience in substitute teaching, or simply through general perceptions of what children need in classrooms, the majority of parents interviewed for the study saw it as extremely important that their children were in classrooms that had “small class size” and “individualized attention” in order to ensure that their children would get the time and attention needed to be academically successful.

Concern About Teachers

In addition to academic progress and individual attention, parents discussed the importance of teachers who had a sincere and caring attitude about students as individuals and toward students' learning in particular. In her book, The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education (1992), Nel Noddings discusses the idea that “the desire to be cared for is almost certainly a universal human characteristic” (p. 17) and supports the notion that the school's first priority should be “to establish and maintain a climate of continuity and care” (p. 64). Within this study, parents often reflected on particular teachers with whom they had had this kind of caring relationship. Sharmaine, who talked often of being alienated from school and from teachers, reflected on one teacher she had who made a lasting impression on her:

Well, when I was in the second grade, I had this one teacher and I used to love her. She cared if you knew it or not. It was like if you don't know it, she wasn't the kind of teacher that say, okay, everybody knows this stuff except for Thomas so Thomas you got to talk to me later, it wasn't like that. If Thomas didn't understand, we stopped until Thomas got it. She didn't go on until everybody knew. You know, then if Thomas couldn't get it the way she was saying, she was like is there anybody to get Thomas to know it. You know, that's how she did it. I guess from that point I was always like that.

Unfortunately, Sharmaine was most able to talk about the teachers she had that did *not* fit the example given above. She described most of her teachers as having an attitude of “I

am saying this once and one time only and if you don't get it, oh well." For Sharmaine, and for other parents interviewed, teachers' attitudes toward their students' learning and understanding were very important, as well as their attitude toward students as young people in general. Specifically, it was important that teachers demonstrate a caring attitude in three ways. In parents' eyes, teachers should care about whether or not students learned, have a generally positive attitude toward the children they taught, and they should be able to tackle challenging situations by communicating quickly with parents and by taking the initiative in solving problems. This first form of caring, a general positive attitude toward students, was evident as Gena, Arletta's third-grade granddaughter, talked about one of her "favorite teachers," Miss Campbell, in comparison to another teacher:

Gena: ...Miss Campbell, she was nice every day. Miss Stone, she wasn't nice every day. It have to be a, it have to be a simple day that she had to be nice...Like when it was Thanksgiving, Christmas, uhm, it had to be a simple day.

Arletta: A certain type of day? A holiday?

Gena: A certain type of holiday or anything like if she was getting married. She would act nice or if she got some flowers, she'd act nice.

Heather: And Miss Campbell was nice every day?

Gena: Yep. And she, and it wasn't, it just didn't have to be on a type of day, Miss Campbell had to be nice. She'd be nice every day.

In addition to the general attitude of teachers toward their students, parents also talked about the importance of teachers' attitudes toward their students' learning. In fact, their thoughts often reflected the "all children can learn" philosophy that current education documents highlight (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1998). For Rochelle, a single parent of two in Orange City, it was important for children to have teachers

...who seemed very involved, they took things personal, you know, the child learning was everything to them. Uhm, they rewarded the children for their

efforts and successes and you know, all kinds of things to me that are important when you are trying to inspire little people and you can make them because, what you do, say, and how you treat them can have an effect on them for the rest of their life.

Camille was probably the most adamant and specific about her definition of caring teachers. It was important to her that her children have “motherly” teachers who “had a knack and a love for kids:”

I think teachers are just like mothers... You have to understand them (children). They are yours all day long. No, you didn't go to raise them, but you need to have a love for them. So, therefore, even when you see them in the street, you're not saying, I am so glad that he's not in my, my classroom you know what I am saying? You know, I've had teachers that said that...they would like to be a mentor for my kids, they are like little blessings to say, well, this is what she does good and I want you to watch out for her and just encourage her just to make sure she stays on the right track.

Lastly, it was important to parents that their children's teachers demonstrate caring for students by letting parents know quickly, and by being able to solve the day-to-day problems without involving parents. As Arletta says about the teachers at her granddaughter's (charter) school:

... I mean, the teachers, they're aware, very much aware of the students' needs, you know. And I like that, that uhm, they care, they've showed that they care. If there is a problem, they will call you before it gets out of hand, you know, and let you know that, you know, we gon' have to start working on this before it gets out of hand. I like that, I mean, don't wait til everything blow out of proportion and then, "Oh, this been goin' on for six months." Well, where were you six months ago? Why you didn't give me a call, maybe we could do something about it then? That type of things. Those type of things I like about it.

The emphasis placed on appropriate kinds of communication was evident as parents talked about what teacher qualities were involved in providing their children with a “good education.” In particular, while parents wanted very much to be notified if there was a potential reoccurring problem with their child, it seemed that they also wanted teachers and school personnel to be able to handle problems at school without

unnecessarily involving them in daily situations. In Camille's eyes, this approach was equivalent to teachers taking a "motherly/fatherly" approach with their students:

When we have kids that small, that is very important because if they're having a bad day or what ever, they need like a motherly/fatherly nourishment and when my son was in Wexton the teachers and the principals of all different colors--he was cutting up and he would run and hide under the tables--They didn't so much call me or call me to come--I didn't have that problem. They would...pick my son up, pat him, take him in the room, calm him down, you know, wasn't scared to wipe his little snotty nose and this is the thing that when you have young children...if Adam is being mistreated or he is having a bad day and they are acting like he is acting like he is having a bad day... and they are using that type of voice, that upset voice instead of a soft, gentle voice, then this child is going to pick this up.

LaTrice most aptly summed up the concerns parents had about the perceived lack of caring that some teachers expressed in her comments about her son's ex-public school teacher:

...The way that she talked for one. It was like she didn't teach the kids. As long as they were there and she was there...and they were getting paid...I just started noticing after he didn't know, you know, anything outside of what I was teaching him at home...I mean you sit down, you can tell, if you are into your kid's learning and you sit down with and you can tell, basically. You know, who you know how a teacher is supposed to teach, you went through school. And when your kid's not learning like that it's just not good. You can, you can, I can tell....By the way they talk to the kids for one, or handle like discipline. When they come to school like, my kids came home just last week telling me that our teacher said, "Sit down, you are acting like damn kindergartners." I am like, she is not supposed to use that kind of language. you know? It's a way that you talk to kids and then when you go to be a teacher, you have to take psychology and things like so you know how to deal with kids, you know...And that's not a way. You don't talk to kids like that...The one way is the talking and then the way that they teach them. I mean you can tell when your kid's learning...

In sum, the parents in this study made it their first priority to consider whether or not their child was learning and progressing academically. Generally speaking, they wanted their children to be in an environment that gave them access and opportunity to develop academically. More specifically, their conception of a good education included

environments in which children got the time and attention they needed in order to be academically successful, and it involved access to teachers who “truly cared” about whether students learned something or not.

A Good Education is One That Involves Ones’ Parents

The parents in this study also defined a good education as one that involves one’s parents. Commitment to this idea was clearly evident in the reflections of parents about their childhood experiences and their own parents’ philosophies regarding the education and social development of children. The majority of the parents had families in which their parents—particularly their mothers—were actively involved in their educational experiences. However, the involvement of their parents (mothers) took different forms. Their mothers were involved by enrolling them in private schools, by being present at school, by helping with homework, through providing support for their children’s education, and through encouraging their children to become involved in learning opportunities outside of school. The critical point is that the parents interviewed considered their parents to have been involved in their education, and they considered themselves to be involved in their children’s education. It is likely that not all Black parents who select charter schools for their children are as involved as the parents interviewed for this study; this idea was supported by several parents who differentiated themselves from other parents who they saw as noninvolved and who pointed to the lack of parent involvement as a aspect of their children’s schools that needed improvement.

Involvement Through Selection of a Private School.

Koretta, Valinda, Daphne, Tracy, and Tricia all attended private, Catholic schools during some point in their primary and/or secondary education. This choice, made by

their parents, can be considered a form of involvement, and it is a particular approach to ensuring that their child receives a “good education.” As discussed by Franklin (1996), Black parents have chosen Catholic schools for their children for over one hundred years. And, as documented by Bryk, Lee, & Holland (1993) and York (1996), Catholic schools have successfully educated the Black students who have been their patrons. There have been many reasons hypothesized for their success, but perhaps the most often cited is the rigorous and disciplined environment focused on academic achievement, combined with the fact that parents were invested (financially and emotionally) in making sure that their children did well. As Daphne says:

But I can say once I started going to Catholic school, everybody was there to learn...Because you know, your parents were paying for you to go there (laughs) and you better not get into any trouble!

Because of the cost associated with a private school education, there was a high priority placed on Daphne’s parents getting what they paid for. In parents’ descriptions of Catholic schools, the environment was strict, the teachers committed, and the expectation for success unyielding. As Koretta says:

Catholic school in, in junior high was hard. It was hard. I mean, we took home so much homework that we had two book bags...It was, they were very, very strict. I mean, you, you have no choice but to learn. Whether you want to or not. And if you want to get out of there, you had better learn quickly (laughs) and try to move up.

For some who attended Catholic schools, receiving a “good education” from a private school implied certain things about the schools that they were *not* attending. One of the implications of attending Catholic schools was the knowledge that it was an education that few Black children were able to receive:

Uhm, and it was indeed a privilege to say that you went to a Catholic School, you know, it was not like every little Black child that you know, was going to Catholic

Schools. And I know that my parents sacrificed in other areas so that I could get an education that they thought was comparable to what White people were getting.--Valinda

Tracy voiced similar thoughts about the differences in her public school and private school experiences. Tracy's public elementary school was predominantly Black, and her Catholic school was predominantly White. And, as she described the difference between the two schools, she stated that it was because of Catholic schools that she "turned out better:"

...I just went to a Catholic school, everything was on schedule, everything is done a certain way, you prepare for this, you did this that way... There was no control in the public schools. It was just "come to class please" type of thing. Whereas if you didn't go to class at that (Catholic) school, they called your house and your mother would see that it was followed up...as (compared to public school) where "oh, she didn't come to school for about two or three weeks and we were wondering if she was alive" you know, type of thing.

Involvement Through Being Present at School

Most of the parents interviewed did not attend private schools. However, their parents were also involved in their educational process. Several parents talked about their mothers and/or fathers being "in education" as a career, and as a result, being very active in monitoring their children's progress and being a positive force in their children's lives:

...I mean, you know she was always pushing, pushing. That was one thing about us you know because she was in the schools, she was a school counselor, she was always pushing. And then she and my father were both involved in schools, you know, in our education, calling the teachers and wanting the teachers to contact them, you know, if there was ever anything. If we were doing things we shouldn't have been doing, or if we were lacking in this or not doing this, they always wanted to know.--Jenay

Through their parents' involvement in their education (particularly their mothers' involvement), parents conceptualized their own attitudes, understanding, and practices related to the importance and definition of parental involvement. The significance of this

involvement should not be underestimated; in their book on home and school influences on literacy, Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill (1991) found that parent involvement was related to academic achievement and could mediate the effects of classroom instruction that was not effective. The way that parent involvement functioned to support and uplift student achievement is clear in the talk of the parents of this study about the role their parents played in their educational process. As Patricia says,

...my mom has always been an involved parent in our education....Being involved in education, taking a, making sure, it is not just a teacher. The schools have your kids most of the day and their ethics are taught to the children and all kinds of things, but the real ground training, how your child acts in school is done at home...with my mom, she went up there and she went “how is she doing in this” or “what are they doing there.” She is always just that way...she has always been very involved in our education, so of course, I take that same aspect.

Rochelle, in particular, had vivid memories of her mother being in her school and being volunteering on a daily basis; these memories served as a very strong foundation on which she built her own ideas about parent involvement:

...my parents were always involved in the school too. No matter what, I mean, when my mom came in the school door I could tell the sound of her keys or the sound of her shoes, because that’s how much she was there. Just checking in on everybody or helping out, always, she was always a school mom. And if there was ever a problem, all my teachers knew my mom personally and they would get right on the case and the problem would be solved, automatically.

Involvement Through Help at Home.

Given the fact that many parents interviewed had one or both parents that worked full-time outside the home, parental involvement as defined through in- school volunteering and visits to school was not always possible. Even so, parents helped their children with homework when they came home from school in the afternoons and evenings:

Yeah, even though my mother wasn't able to volunteer in the class, it was like when we got home and did our homework, she would sit down and if we didn't understand it the way the book said to do it or the way our teacher showed us how to do it, she would try to help to find an easier way to do it. You know, to come up with the answer...It was that and before we ever started school, she would take us to a church right here on Franklin, that church used to have a math class, a uhm, a word pronunciation class, when we was little and she would take us to that. I still remember that. I remember going there to do additions and subtractions.—Sharmaine

Similarly, LaTrice talks about how her father made her “strive” and “think:

...like writing reports, he made sure they were like right. I don't care what grade I was in. They were right. I couldn't just sit there and write something, you know, he was teaching me punctuation and correct spelling and how to say stuff in the right way. You know, he was like, "You don't just write it like that..." "What do you mean when you say this?" "Tell me what you mean"... ..He made me think...

Perhaps as the result of being the wife of a person in the military, Patricia's mother was the most “militant” in her approach to helping her children with their school work:

Well, let's put it like this. We would have to take our stuff home to mom and mom would drill you. I remember even having a chalk board. She bought one of those huge chalk boards at home and you would go through this that and the other and of course there was always a corporal punishment afterwards if you didn't get it right, you know, that kind of thing. So, so, and ah, she didn't over do that, but you know, it was, it was, yeah, (laugh). You better not bring home any bad grades. I mean that was like (laugh) you had to try your hardest, in other words. She wanted to know, she wanted to know that you tried and that you were really consistent in doing it. Not just laying back and not doing anything. And...I train my son basically the same way I was trained and explain to him even a little bit more than I felt my parents kind of missed it on...

Involvement Through Encouraging Learning Opportunities.

In addition to being directly connected to what their children were doing academically in school and with homework, several parents discussed the ways in which their parents were supportive of their participation in activities outside of school.

...mostly she did volunteer in the PTA she was a girl scout mother and a den mother she did a lot of volunteering stuff when I was coming up. Church down the street, the neighborhood church and that was also where we went every

Sunday and Saturday and they had youth programs and I spent a lot of time also at the church.
--Tonika

For Tonika, who was already doing well in school academically, her mother's orientation toward supporting her sometimes-fleeting interests reinforced the orientation she had of providing her own children with multiple "choices:"

...a lot of the choices, I don't feel like my mother pushed us in any particular direction uhm, which was good I think but gave us a lot of choices and examining things, like I remember when I told her I was interested in computers you know this was something that she didn't know anything about nobody knew anything about she was like find out some stuff on it and you know and you should really pursue it if that's what you want to do you've been thinking about this for a couple of years so maybe you should really pursue it and that's the kind of advice she would give.

For Camille, her mother's support of her extracurricular activities was more than just an opportunity for choices, it was a chance to bolster her sense of self-esteem and self-worth in a time when her community was struggling with issues of racism and prejudice. In her interviews, Camille proudly recalled that her mother was "the first Black woman in our community to drive a city bus." Because she grew up in New York when "the race riots were going on," her mother wanted to impress upon her children the importance of doing similar things:

... I took violin lessons. It didn't matter with my mother about what we were going to do, it was about the education and foreseeing some type of dream. Because I remember at school, uhm, my mother was always there, like I said we did violin lessons at the school, we did football practice, basketball practice, and it wasn't even the sport that you played or liked to play, it was just for making you get into it so that you would be able to challenge things, you know, cause it wasn't a whole lot of us (Black people) doing all kinds of sorts of things like that.

Influences on Parental Involvement

Although not all the parents in this study came from homes that emphasized traditional parental involvement like volunteering or helping with homework, most parents explicitly talked of the value they placed on parental involvement, and they reflected on their childhood experiences in order to formulate their understanding of how they were involved in their children's lives in the present and how they wanted to be involved in the future.

One way in which parents provided "non-traditional" parental support for their children's education was through helping with childcare. Several women interviewed for the study became pregnant during their last years of high school and their parents were instrumental in helping them to achieve educational goals. LaTrice was one of these women, and she talked about her resolve to finish school and her mother's support of her goals:

... three months after I had him (her oldest son) I found out I was pregnant with my daughter and still I wouldn't quit. After I had her, I took both of them to school with me, walkers and everything to night school. And, uh, it just made me fight harder cuz I had to look at their faces and know that I had to take care of them. ...And my mother was really good by that time. She always, she helped me. She was like my backbone by then...And even now she's really a good person and she helps me a lot when I'd come home at night, my mother would take the kids, I'd do my homework. She always had dinner ready, you know...So that made it wonderful, too. Wonderful.

Even when the parents interviewed for the study had parents who were not role models for parent involvement, they recognized that their parents did the best job that they could do in raising them and their siblings. As LaTonya says:

But, what I have come to realize in my age and time, uhm, I don't she don't even realize it to this day just how strong she is because if you can overcome the things that she did, you can be nothing but strong. I mean you can beat yourself up and

feel sorry for yourself because you are still in a situation that you don't want to be in but yet look at what you come from.

While keeping their knowledge of their parents' involvement practices in mind, parents also strove to go beyond what their parents had done to stress the importance of education. For example, Ron described his daily life while he and his family lived in Los Angeles:

...I was under lock and key, let's put it that way. I was surrounded by gangs where I came from so we didn't do a whole lot when I was in L.A. because my mother basically kept us isolated in the back yard and I think we were allowed to go skating on Wednesday nights and be home before dark and I think we were allowed to go swimming Saturday mornings.

Because Ron's mother and father both worked two jobs in order to support their six children, they were not able to be very involved in the education of their children. As a result, Ron recalled that his mother

...wanted us to go to school, but she pretty much really didn't force you. But she questioned you, how come you didn't go to school. I would miss two or three days some times. (Laugh, Laugh). She'd say "Didn't you go to school," because she was working all of the time. She left before I went to school, you know.

Ron stressed "being different" than his parents were "as far as being involved" in his children's education, but he also expressed hesitancy about what this would look like. He eventually settled on the perspective that through seeing him go back to school, and through explicitly talking with his children (particularly his son) they would be able to understand the importance that he attaches to the educational process. In reflecting on her husband's childhood, Jenay said that:

...his parents weren't like that with him and I had my mother kind of pushing me and there is really nobody pushing him but me and I do, I think, he's opened up his eyes to a lot of things because of me harping...but he just, he didn't have the support and stuff growing up that I had so I kind of know what I am supposed to do where he kind of set out there, didn't have anybody really doing it for him, so

therefore, he doesn't really know how to do it with ours. But he is learning. He's learning.

Carolyn, another Sheldonville parent, also discussed how she attempted to transcend the messages that her parents gave her about "getting your education" and "doing good in school" by taking her children "dreaming:"

My parents talked very openly and emphatically about the fact that getting an education could be the key to how your life turns out, in what you are able to do in your life. They were real emphatic about it but they weren't real detailed. They were just kind of broad statements. So I do the same emphasis with my kids, but I try to break it down into operational pieces...I take them dreaming and then I relate what they get goo-ga about on the dream trip to real dollars and cents...For instance, I take them to Whitmore Lake and I say, these houses exist. Now, if you like that kind of house and that is the kind of house you might want one day, this is what it costs and this is what, of all the different professions they told me they think, they like, this is what they make. So, that job would or would not put that in reach for you...So, I get real concrete with them. They still don't understand the dollars, I mean they can't conceptualize a quarter of a million dollars, I don't think. But maybe they can, okay, but I give them the figures and I think over time, those kinds of dollars will have more like relevant meaning to them...So I just talk to them about the salaries of the professions that they think they want to do and just try to make it more real because my parents didn't do that...And then, I tried to talk about another thing as far as education and that's the fact that uhm, just how important leaning is and that you never should stop learning and you should never let your mind close down to one set of ways of thinking.

A Good Education is One That Connects Family and School in a Supportive Relationship

The third theme that parents discussed relative to the pursuit of a good education for their children was the importance of family being connected to what happens in their children's schools. This theme was related to parent involvement, in that parents explicitly placed importance on schools that welcomed the presence of parents and encouraged them to be involved in what went on in their children's school. In discussing what school characteristics are most successful in increasing the success of minority students, Ladson-Billings (1994) and Haberman (1995) emphasize that schools and

teachers should establish connections between themselves and the parents whose children they serve. In support of this, in their reflections on their school experiences, parents in the present study discussed ways in which the lines between family and school environments were often indistinct when they were “coming up:”

...I remember school being fun because when we had, uhm, conferences. Our conferences were like food rallies. The parents all brung food. You know, they always interact with them and sometimes I might got picked up by my cousin or sometimes I got picked up by Grandma, you know, but, uhm, school was a place not only, where we were taught and being educated, but our family came. You know what I am saying? I can look up and I can see my granddad or maybe my grandmother being there or my uncle, or one of my cousins and I can see them going on field trips. That is why I teach my, you know, I do that with my daughter.--Pamela

The idea that schools should be welcoming to parents and families was an idea shared by several parents. Rochelle, for example, cited the unwelcoming and distancing environment of her son’s previous school as a main reason for disenrolling him:

...and then my mom stopped in, like I said, you know, for a visit, for one they didn’t like any surprise visits at all. They wanted you to make an appointment or something like that, always ahead of time. How do you know what’s really going if you can’t, you can’t just stop by when you have a moment or if you are wondering how your child or your grandchild is doing. I didn’t like that to begin with. Uhm, another thing, when you, when you did come, you weren’t made to feel welcome. Like, you know, you’re here, it is more of a bother and, uhm, I never experienced that before. And my mom neither, like I said, she was in schools all of the time with us, so like now why is, why is there a problem if I just want to stop in and say hello and bring my child lunch or my grandchild lunch? I I don’t need an appointment for all of this. I don’t see the reasoning. So, we had quite a few disagreements and the teacher, the principal made a statement during this one meeting that uhm, no matter what happened, she would always take the teacher’s word for it. And that just automatically did it, okay?

Heather: Did what?

Rochelle: You know, just took the cake. We were like, okay, I know my son’s leaving here and he won’t be back.

In addition to showing a preference for schools that were “family-oriented,” parents also discussed their preference for teachers who took a parent-like approach to

interacting with children. For example, in her first interview, Sharmaine talked of adults who demonstrated that they cared about her. One of these was her high school principal:

I don't know why he took a liking to all of us, but he did. He knew that my mother was a single mother raising us, he knew. Plus, Mr. Walker, he is the kind of principal, like, say for instance, if you was in class and you left your homework at home or you left something at home and you needed a ride home, and you don't have a ride home and it is snowing outside and you don't have no boots, he'd take you home. He was that kind of a person, he'd take you home if you needed a ride. He'd come pick you up so you don't be sick and you don't miss school.

As a teacher's aide in her daughter's Head Start, Sharmaine did not separate her role as a parent from the activities she was involved in during her volunteer time. As a result, she described how children within the program (and one child in particular) came to see her as a parental figure:

Martin loved me. He did, because he saw me one time, Tamara was acting up, I couldn't take it, I whupped her at school. I took her in the bathroom and I whupped her and Martin, I took Tamara and Martin to the bathroom, Martin went into the boys bathroom and Tamara went into the girls bathroom, that's when I spanked her, you know, and he was like "woo," "Martin, Ms. Sharmaine is going to watch you okay," and he was like "okay." "Are you going to be good?" "yeah, I'll be good." And it is like, anybody else, nap time, Martin wouldn't lay down, his feet would be up in the air, he would be kicking the walls, hitting the wall, hitting the floor, anything to keep the other kids woke. I walked in the class and I said Martin "what are you doing," "nothing, nothing, nothing Ms. Sharmaine." He would lay down there and go to sleep.

Arletta, in describing Miss. Campbell, Gena's teacher, also conveyed the idea that it was important for teachers to have, and draw on their knowledge of interacting with children as parents:

Miss Campbell understands about children, you know, raising children. Miss Stone don't have any kids. So when you, you can't tell me, like they say...don't tell me til you walk in my shoes. When it come to raising kids, no, you can't read a book about it. ...You can't watch a movie about it, you got to have that first hand experience to know what it's like and what you have to do.

Although more than half of the parents interviewed considered it to be positive when teachers were able to relate to, and treat children as if they were “their own,” a few parents with children enrolled at Umoja Shule were not comfortable with the indefinite boundaries between teacher behavior and parental behavior. Their comments were often grounded in references to specific situations that involved discipline of children. Valinda, for example, mentioned that she “should have been asked” about her opinion before her son was penalized for misbehaving. Jenay also voiced opposition to “parental” approach that teachers at the school took, saying that:

Jenay...the way they talk to the kids is like my mother tells me she hears teachers “you sit your butt down, and blah, blah blah”. That’s how parents talk to kids and that is not to say what is right, but when you go to school, you need to know how to deal with, you know, children.

Heather: Do you think they consider themselves to be like parents to the kids?

Jenay: Well, to a certain extent, because of what they call them. I guess in Africa or wherever they call mother or father’s baba or whatever, they do, but they are not. They are teachers and there is a difference, you know, in the way students relate to them and the way they relate to their parents. And to, the way they relate to the students. I don’t think they teach, they treat their students the way they would treat their children. I don’t know. I don’t know how they treat their kids, but, you don’t get paid to take care of your kids. That is something that you have to do. They are getting paid to do what they do. So.

For the most part, however, parents seemed to appreciate teachers who were responded to their students as a parent would, and they appreciated being a part of a school environment in which they felt comfortable “dropping in.”

A Good Education Addresses the Impact of Culture and Race on the Education Process

Race continues to be a defining factor in the lives of many African Americans.

Recent studies polling African Americans on the issue of race have found that most still believe that America has an unresolved race problem, and that their lives are directly affected by their membership in a minority group (Tuch, Sigelman, & MacDonald, 1999).

The parents in my study also agreed that race is still an “issue,” and they held very specific ideas about the meaning of race in their lives and the lives of their children. In their interviews, parents talked these meanings, both how they were developed and how these meanings related to their definitions of a good education for their children. In this section, I discuss, their reflections on the importance of race in their own past schooling experiences and their ideas about how a good education should address race in relation to the specific needs of Black children.

Race and Parents’ Past School Experiences

For the most part, parents’ reflections on their experiences with issues of race were discussed as a part of their schooling experiences. These memories related to how parents developed their understanding of being identified as “different” from their peers in some way. Jenay for example, discussed the ways in which she felt ostracized by her Black peers, as the result of growing up in a neighborhood that was predominantly White:

But in the fourth grade, I guess is ...when I really saw a difference. I was being treated different. You know I wasn’t included in these groups but I couldn’t be in this group, you know. We grew up in a, we were the only first Blacks on our street. So I grew up around Whites, so, even to this day, you know, I get the “you talk too proper. You talk White,” and all that and it started way back then and it has followed me all along.

Valinda and Tricia, on the other hand, talked of the impact of being one of few Blacks in their schools. Tricia recalled, with bittersweet humor, her first day of school at her predominantly White Catholic school:

They had these conversations like I wasn’t even there the first couple of weeks. I went in there, had a uniform, it was a brown and white. I had my books and I remember standing there. I had my hair in this pony tail, I looked just like Mickey Mouse and I happened to have my hair all pressed and everything. I was all clean and shiny and I just stood there with my arms, you know, full of folders

and stuff. They all knew each other coming back from vacation and they were all happy. Having a private conversation and it was just me. I didn't know anybody and they were like, "wow, who's that." You know, they weren't talking directly to me is why I didn't answer. "Oh, she doesn't saying anything. I think she's a mute." I remember some kid saying that. "I don't think she knows how to talk." They weren't talking to me, they were talking about me. I didn't say anything back to them...

For Valinda, the insensitivity of her classmates and experience of being in a predominantly White school environment left her with feelings of low self-esteem and questions about her identity:

...And I was always the only Black. If there was another Black, I was the only Black girl and there was a Black boy...I enjoyed the school but I was always made to feel very bad about who I was. Because I was Black I was called burnt toast and actually had a real bad complex—wanted to be a White girl...so that's what I remember most about elementary school...Just going to school with no one who was like me was sufficient enough. I mean, they were friendly enough when they wanted to be but when they chose to be very mean they could be very mean. And there were plenty of times that I was made to feel very bad about the fact that I was Black...I do recall feeling that having long hair was better. And that being light was better. I do remember those feelings.

Other parents, like Koretta and Patricia, talked about the difficulty of being perceived as not a member of either their Black peer group or their White one. As a light-skinned Black woman, Koretta relates how this was an aspect of her life in school:

And the White girls didn't like me because uhm, I guess I looked mixed and the Black girls didn't like me because I guess they thought I was mixed. And or vice versa. I was too Black for the Whites or too White for the Blacks, so, I just said forget it.

For other parents, who were members of more integrated school communities, the knowledge that others perceived them as different developed through situations that, although subtle, left lasting impressions. In reflecting on his elementary school experiences, Jeremy relayed a playground experience that he remembered "vividly" and thinks about "about once a week:"

when I started kindergarten uh, and this was like a racial thing, not that all my memories are racial but this White girl came up to me at the slide and said you are the cutest little colored boy I've ever seen (laughter) and uh I remember just thinking I was like wow why did she say that, that colored, that little colored thing, it sounds like a great way to open a movie or something. (laughter) Uhm, so that was you know again I think it's related again to my introduction of these kind of different worlds you know like Black kids like kids in situations like kinda where we grew in very subtly introduced to prejudice you know you know it's like no one telling you anything but you really get (Tonika: you can figure it out) you get indoctrinated in it pretty quickly.

In a similar fashion, Tonika recalls one of the first times she had the realization that an elementary school friend thought of her as "different:"

...her name was Tonya my name was Tonika...and we were best friends I mean we were just like this (crosses fingers) all the time at school and I remember one time her coming up to me and I don't know patting me on the head, something very patronizing and we were probably only in the second or third grade but I recognized it as patronizing you know I didn't know-I couldn't put a word on it or anything but it made me feel, she said some she made some off handed comment to me like uh a compliment like uh you know you know even though you're Black I really like you...and I remember thinking oh that's really nice and then I thought no that's not so nice (laughter) you know...and then it dawned on me that there was something weird about this...and I was ambivalent towards her after that...

Jeremy and Tonika's experiences resonated with other parents as well. For example, Carolyn talked of the subtle ways in which some members of her gifted classes were noninclusive and distant towards her, the only Black person in the class. Across parents, however, feelings of being different, or the identification of people who thought of one as different were most often discussed by parents who interacted with people from both predominantly Black and predominantly White social environments. In addition to racial situations affecting parents' perceptions of themselves as individuals, these situations also effected their evaluations of the overall quality of their educational experiences. Specifically, many parents held the perception that schools for Whites and schools for Blacks were not of equal quality. In fact, for the parents who attended Catholic schools,

this was given as a main reason for their parents' decision to enroll them in a Catholic school. In talking about the differences between her predominantly White Catholic school, and her predominantly Black public school experiences, Tracy also discussed the idea that schools for Whites and schools for Blacks were not of equal quality:

My other elementary school where it was more, ah, what can I say? If you go to, which is bad, but that is just the way it is. If you go to an elementary school where there is all White people or an elementary school where there is all Black people, you know what I mean, they didn't push you as much here in the Black school. I think my parents might have seen that so, therefore, when it was time to graduate from the school, I graduated from the school in the sixth grade, but they are like it is time for seventh grade, I went to a private school.

LaTonya referenced the idea that it wasn't necessarily just the fact that Catholic schools were private, but that Catholic schools had a majority of White students enrolled in them:

But, I had a girlfriend who was putting her son in a private school, but since she moved to the suburbs she went ahead and put him their public school because their public schools are better, you know. They have more things available to them. It's like their birth given right to have and it's like, our, I want to say right, by birth we have to struggle.

Like other parents, LaTonya expressed her conviction about doing whatever it took in order to provide her children with a quality education, despite the negative sanctions of other Blacks who perceived her decision to enroll her child in predominantly White schools as a negative thing:

A lot of people would say things like, you know, being Black is always like, if you mix with a lot of Whites, something is wrong with you. I only want what is offered and available to me. And what ever the best is. And in certain situations, Whites have it the best. That's just the way it is. So, that's what I want. I want the best. You know, I want the best education for my kids. I want my kids reading early. I want my kids on computers early, all those types of things.

Rochelle expressed similar sentiments in her discussion about why she chose Orange City Academy for her son, Charles:

I feel that a lot of our children, especially Black children, aren't exposed to that at such an early age especially, you know, you go to some of the other schools and they might be predominantly White and there are so many things that they offer. You are kind of in awe, at the same time, you are kind of disappointed because why don't our children have that same opportunity?

Race and Parent's Definitions of a Good Education

Through their own experiences and their observations of their children's school experiences, Camille, Jenay, Ron, Jeremy, Tonika, Rochelle, Arletta, Patricia, Pamela, Tracy, Daphne, Koretta, Valinda and Carolyn defined a good education as one that would take their child's culture and ethnicity into consideration, socially and/or academically. Socially, parents were concerned about the effect that being a part of predominantly White classrooms with White teachers would have on their children's development. Further, parents were concerned with the extent to which White teachers could effectively teach and understand Black children. As Camille eloquently stated, "Black children have to have a special kind of love." She went on to say that:

they gotta be, they gotta be with the kind that their momma and daddy's know how to talk and know how to deal with them and that was my main focus. I never really knew what Umoja, really what their foundation was going to be like, but I knew that if it had a majority of Black teachers, Black parents, and Black children that were going there, that that was one thing that was in my favor, because he was going to be where he was not going to be disciplined, but knew how to act...

Rochelle also conveyed the idea that having her son, Charles, exposed to having Black teachers was important, because, as she said, "I wanted my child to be exposed, to hey, maybe one day that could be me teaching the class and he never saw that at that school." Rochelle perceived Orange City Academy to be "Black-operated" and "focused on children of color," whereas her son's previous school had "no Black teachers, no Black subs, no Black principals, nothing."

Although Camille and Rochelle addressed issues of race by talking specifically of their desire for their children to be taught by Black teachers, other parents talked of more subtle cultural differences in the way that their children interacted with teachers who were White and teachers who were Black. Through their description of two teachers at Orange City Academy, Arletta and her granddaughter, Gena, discussed the almost imperceptible ways that cultural background can influence the interactions between students and a teacher. Miss Stone, who was White, was a “sometimes nice” teacher, while Miss Campbell, who was Black, was perceived as being nice “all the time”, but also a disciplinarian. The following exchange took place in an interview with Arletta in which Gena joined the conversation through describing her “best” and “worst teachers. When I asked Arletta and Gena to elaborate on what made Miss Campbell one of Gena’s “best teachers,” Arletta said:

I don't know. She just, I mean, there's some people you just click with and there's some you don't. You know, and Miss Campbell was just one. She has complained about every teacher she had but Miss Campbell. ...And I don't know, and all of them was White but Miss Campbell. I don't know...

At this point, Gena interjected with further explanation:

Gena: It's because I want all my teachers to be like Miss Campbell, it's because Miss Campbell, she was nice...Miss Campbell, she would, like if we was, uhm, singing like in the recess, Miss Campbell, she wouldn't say nothin'. She'd say, "You girls singin or whatever." But Miss Stone, Miss Howard, she would just say, "Ya'll need to stop singing right now because ya'll not outside." And we not even be singin real loud. ...And then everybody start laughing and me and my friends--cuz it's like just a group of us. ...It's like me, Nicole, Najah, Kris, Rashad and Lester and Rahmal. And we all close friends and stuff. And we'd be over there singing "You're my Little Secret" or something like that and then she'll just say, Miss Campbell if we was in her class and we was singing with her, she wouldn't say nothin', she'd say, "Ya'll good singers." But if we wan in Miss Campbell's class, my teacher she would say, "Well, you, ya'll need to stop singing cuz you're not outside." And then we'd just stop singing and then we'd just be mad at her for the rest of the day.

Contained in Arletta's observation that Gena had a connection with Miss Campbell that was not present in her relationships with her other White teachers, and in Gena's description of the differences in interactions between she, her friends, Miss Campbell and Miss Stone, is evidence of the ways in which cultural differences can erect barriers to understanding. It was these barriers to which Camille and other parents referred when they spoke of the importance of having their children taught by Black teachers.

In addition to the social and relational aspects of a good education for Black children, parents were also concerned about the impact of race on their children's academic development. Ron, in particular, wanted his son to have Black teachers. When asked why this was important to him, he stated that "We knew for sure that Black teachers are helping the kids learn and I think in the back of our minds we don't think our children in public schools get a fair shake." Himself a past high school athlete and a victim of social promotion, Ron voiced his concern that "they (White teachers) tend to help, I don't know the foundation on this, but they tend to help them (White children) before they help us... They might, you know, they kind of push us through grades and once you get out of the twelfth grade, you don't know nothing."

In relation to academics, other parents talked about the importance of providing their children with access to a curriculum that included knowledge of their cultural heritage. As Jenay, Ron's wife, said it was important to have access to "Black heritage" because "they will at least know that they are somebody too and they come from great people and have a lot of good things to offer just like the next person." Camille, one of the older parents in the study, talked of how it was important to her that her son's school

recapture some of the educational experiences that she had as a young child that related to Black culture:

... We weren't talking about Jack and Jill going up the hill. You know, we were taught Black stories. and you know, that is something why I like Umoja, because, uhm, they were Black teachers who were there and they taught us back when they were growing up and, you know, Ms. Mary Mack, you know, all dressed in Black. When Ms. Mary Mack was really Black and all dressed in Black, you know, they emphasized and they taught us stories like that. But it was no jack be nimble, jack be quick. You know, when we went to school, and we jumped jump rope, it was about Black, Black learning.

While Camille reminisced about the kinds of schooling experiences that she was exposed to as a child, Koretta's desire to have her son's curriculum include Black heritage came from her realization that although Catholic schools did not teach her anything about Black people, public schools were no different:

One example stands out more than any, I had a, uhm advanced comp teacher that read Huckleberry Finn and also made us watch a movie of the The Natural with Robert Redford. And, being an individual that had just come from Catholic school, had dealt with White folks all her life, it burned me to pieces to have to deal with two, you know, authors and actors in, in, in times where there were great Black baseball players and, and, and excellent crop growers, or whatever. You know, back in those times. They were Black. And you know, this man he just kept on the, the, the, you know, the White author. Shakespeare and everything, and I am like where is all the Black people at? I came to high school, the public school to learn about my folks. Because they didn't teach us nothing (in Catholic school). The only thing we learned about our Black people is what our parents taught us. And my parents are entrepreneurs. And, you know, they don't, on the Black level, deal with Black folks every day. Well, here I go from this Catholic White school to this public Black school and here goes the same Catholic teachers, you know, teachers teaching the "White thing."

In sum, parents wanted their children to have an education that was socially affirming and inclusive of Black heritage and history (and, if possible, inclusive of other cultures as well.) These ideas were important both because of parents' own experiences and their current observations of their children's learning. In other words, as Koretta said,

...my son will not live through what I have lived through. He will not be exposed to what I have been exposed to as far as education. His education is going to be, and that is why I chose Umoja, warm and enjoyable. And he is going to know about his people. Unlike mine, which was cold, unenjoyable, and I didn't know nothing about Black people.

Conclusion

Even though each of these parents has a unique experience and a different story, the commonalities emerging from this group of Black parents' definitions of a good education are important, not only in their own right but also in the way these definitions connect to what researchers have learned about the effective education of Black children. Overwhelmingly, none of the parents in this study were content with the notion that their children would just "do all right" in school; they wanted their children to excel. In pursuit of this goal, each parent had specific ideas about what a "good education" involved. Parents' overarching definitions included (a) challenging academic programs with caring and committed teachers, (b) parent involvement in their children's education (though involvement was itself defined in a variety of ways), (c) a connected relationship between families and schools, and (d) a sensitivity to the ways that race and culture impacted the schooling experiences of their children. These definitions were created through the sense they made of their own school experiences, intertwined with their perceptions of their children's school experiences and the academic and social goals they had for their children.

The parents of this study not only shared common definitions of a good education with each other, but with the many Black parents before them who sought alternatives to the public schools their children had been given. As long as there has been formal education for Black children, Black parents have wanted their children to be

academically successful, and they have selected a variety of schooling options in order to provide their children with better opportunities for academic success. Whether through funding segregated Black schools out of their own pockets (Walker, 1996); through sacrifices (monetary or time) incurred to send their children to Catholic schools (Slaughter & Johnson, 1988) or through becoming involved in independent, Afrocentric schools (Shujaa, 1994), Black parents have consistently sought to establish relationships between themselves and their children's schools, they have searched for caring and committed teachers, and they have spoken out for curricula that includes explicit teaching and learning about race and culture. With this history in mind, the analysis detailed in this chapter explicitly acknowledges the connection of the parents interviewed to their predecessors through shared ideas about what a good education should involve.

Additionally, the parents' definitions of a good education resonate with what educational researchers have said about the elements of an educational experience that meets the needs of Black children—calls for challenging curricula (Mehan, 1997), caring teachers (Noddings, 1992), more sensitive efforts at including parents in their children's education (Lareau & Horvat, 1999), and more culturally relevant teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 1994) echo the ideas expressed by the parents interviewed for this study. In an age in which desegregation and integration efforts have often been deemed less successful than originally hoped (Failer, Harvey, & Hochschild, 1996), the high degree of congruence between parents' definitions of a good education and researchers' recommendations draws attention both to the continuing struggle of traditional public schools to provide a good education for Black children and to the potential of charter schools to do a better job of helping parents in this struggle. Though test scores have not

yet shown charter schools to be better at educating Black children, the parents interviewed for the present study indicated that they were pleased, for the most part, with their children's current academic progress after having been enrolled in Umoja Shule and Orange City Academy.

However, while parents were satisfied with their charter school's ability to fulfill their definitions of a good education, the analysis presented in this chapter also poses some challenges for educators and researchers working in charter schools and traditional public schools. The first challenge arises from how the parents of this study have characterized a good education. Many parents verbalized fairly traditional ideas about what a good education should look like. From their opposition to children “just playing” in Head Start and preschool classrooms, to preferences for teachers who are disciplinarians and the sole authority in the classroom, parents expressed their desire for their children’s schools to be similar to what they themselves experienced as students. Though many charter schools fit the “back-to-basics” curricular format that many parents identified in their definitions of a good education, these same ideas run counter to many of the “progressive” reforms being attempted in public schools. The challenge then, is to initiate dialogue with Black parents about the similarities and differences between their ideas of a good education and the ideas of the teachers and administrators who are directly involved in their children’s education.

Another challenge to educators that surfaces in the analysis of these parents' definitions of a good education relates to how parents described favorable relationships between teachers, parents, and students. Specifically, both Theme Two (A Good Education Involves One’s Parents) and Theme Three (A Good Education Connects

Families and Schools Together in Support of Children) supports close collaboration between parents and teachers and the idea that teachers should function as parental figures for students. Obvious tensions exist as a result of these ideas; though parents may want these types of relationships exist between themselves, their children and their children's teachers, teachers may either be unwilling or unable to take this approach with parents and children. These tensions were first outlined by Lightfoot (1978), in her writing about the relationships between parents and their children; and teachers and their students. Specifically, Lightfoot discussed the idea that parents, in seeking a good education for their children, prefer that their children be seen as individuals and treated as such. This particularistic orientation is a product of parents' own relationships with their children. However, because of the nature of their jobs, Lightfoot illustrates the ways in which teachers must think about the welfare of the *group* of children that they teach, rather than the unique needs of individual children. Especially in calling for more teachers who interact with students in ways that a parental figure might, the parents of this study place a tall order.

The last challenge to educators presented by parents' definitions of a good education is apparent when one moves away from the commonalities in their definitions to recognize that each parent brings different set understandings to their conceptualization of a "good education." Though the commonalities in definitions of a good education originated from the combined influence of personal experiences and practical considerations, these personal experiences and practical considerations also produced variation in the foci of parents. For example, though parents agreed that they wanted their children to be academically successful, some parents were able to articulate

more specifically what was involved in their definitions of academic success; while Korretta explicitly described the ways that she wanted teachers to present curricular content to her niece, LaTrice was unable to go beyond saying that it was the “learning” that her child received that was important to her. Other parents, like Ron, did not come from families in which parents were integral to the educational experiences of their children, and he voiced uncertainty about how he would be involved in his children's education. VaLinda also did not have parents that were especially involved in her life, though they made the decision to enroll her in a private school, consequently, she talked only vaguely about how she was involved in her children’s education.

Perhaps the most explicit “deviation” in individual parents’ ideas about a good education related to Theme Four – A Good Education Addresses the Impact of Culture and Race on the Schooling of Black Children. Parents at Umoja Shule and Orange City Academy stated that they had concerns about whether the treatment their children received from White teachers was fair, and they discussed their desire to have their children taught about the history and heritage of Black people. However, in discussing the reactions of friends and family to their decision to enroll their children in Umoja Shule, Koretta, Daphne, and Jenay commented on the fact that they did not send their children to the school so that they could become “militant,” “power to the people type kids.” These comments placed them in direct opposition to the beliefs of the founder and principal of the school. Given the differences in opinion between these parents and Wanda Howard, it is clear that communication between administrators, teachers and parents is as needed in charter schools as in traditional public schools. In summary, the analysis provided in this chapter points to increasing need for proactive dialogue between

Black families and the schools which serve their children, charter or otherwise. In the next chapter, the narratives of several parents are more closely analyzed in order to highlight the ways that the themes discussed in this chapter are present in their decisions to enroll their children in charter schools.

CHAPTER FIVE: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF FIVE PARENTS' SEARCH FOR A GOOD EDUCATION

Introduction

In exploring how parents described the process of selecting a charter school, it quickly became clear that most parents did not conceptualize their decision in terms of a linear, "start-to-finish" process. Although there were similarities in the ways parents gained information about potential schools—flyers; newspaper, radio, television, and billboard advertisements; word of mouth; school visits—parents' discussions of their choices were characterized by remembrances of situation-specific events and their particular ideas about a good education. Within the open-ended interviews about their decisions, parents gave stories about themselves and their children, talked about ideals and goals, and referenced information sources relevant to their selection of a charter school. The variation in the information parents chose to share was also reinforced by the fact that parents and their children "came from" different places before arriving at Umoja Shule and Orange City Academy. Some parents decided to enroll their children in a charter school after preschool, others transferred their children from public schools to charter schools, and some parents transferred their children from private or magnet schools to charter schools.

Thus, due to the nature of the responses parents gave, what was gained was not a picture of the broad process that all parents went through in selecting a charter school for their children. Rather, a finely nuanced understanding of the ways in which the themes discussed in the last chapter come into play was developed. Additionally, through closely examining parents' narratives about their choice, I came to better understand what types of environments, people, and schools parents saw as most able to provide their children

with a good education. In order to highlight how themes of a good education were represented in parents' choices, and how parents constructed their ideas about a good education, five parents were selected as the focus of the present chapter—Jeremy and Tonika¹², LaTonya, Patricia and Pamela.

The five parents were selected in order to represent diversity both in the content of their narratives and in the representation of the themes discussed in the last chapter. Secondly, parents were chosen to represent the demographic variation present in the group of parents that was interviewed. Of the five parents, LaTonya and Pamela were born, raised and currently live in Orange City; Patricia was born in Sheldonville but spent time in other states because of her father's military career; and Jeremy and Tonika currently live in Sheldonville, although they grew up in states outside of Michigan. Though all of the parents were educated in public schools, One parent (LaTonya) has had experience with private schools through the enrollment of her son in a private Christian school. LaTonya has a high school diploma, Pamela and Patricia have undergraduate degrees, and Jeremy and Tonika have graduate degrees. Pamela and Patricia have one child, while LaTonya, and Jeremy and Tonika have three children.

For each of the parents discussed in this chapter, I begin with a description of the parent and the setting within which their interviews took place, and I discuss the defining elements (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zibler, 1998) of each parents' story as derived from the analysis of the narratives¹³. I then present an analysis of their narratives,

¹² Jeremy and Tonika's narratives are analyzed as one since they were married and interviewed as a couple.

¹³ This is consistent with the "holistic-content" approach to analyzing narratives presented by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zibler

focusing specifically on how these parents' ideas about a good education were represented in these narratives.

Jeremy and Tonika

Jeremy, 39, and Tonika, 38, were an academic couple who had recently relocated to the Sheldonville area after receiving jobs at a local university. Their oldest child, Jada, was in junior high at the time of their interviews, while their sons Kofi (five years old) and Malik (four years old) were both enrolled at Umoja Shule. Both Jeremy and Tonika had grown up in the Midwest, although not in Michigan. After meeting in college and marrying, they had lived in Illinois while pursuing graduate degrees. Additionally, before coming to Sheldonville, Jeremy and Tonika spent two years teaching in Mozambique. This experience seemed to have had a profound impact on both of them, particularly Jeremy, who translated this experience into a focus on providing his children with exposure to diverse experiences. Jeremy and Tonika had been married for fourteen years at the time of our interviews and they were both strongly invested in the idea of Black people in America as members of the African Diaspora and an international community of people of color. Consistent with this, they talked about their interest in starting a business which had as its focus the creative dissemination of various art forms related to the experiences of Black people throughout the Diaspora.

Over the phone, we agreed to do our first interview at Tonika's office on campus. I arrived at her office the next day; it was in various states of disarray due to her ongoing work of organizing an extensive library of resources relating to her field, computer science. While we waited for Jeremy, Tonika cleared a space for me and we talked about the university and her own doctoral work, which she was hoping to "wrap up" within the

semester. Jeremy arrived shortly, having grabbed lunch between teaching and our scheduled appointment.

Defining Elements of Jeremy and Tonika's Story

Central to Jeremy and Tonika's story was the balance between Tonika's role as a detail-oriented pragmatist and Jeremy's role, as he jokingly described it, as "the emotional idealist, damn it!" Through these roles they affirmed and finished each other's sentences while taking turns providing both the details and the emotional context surrounding their decision to enroll their sons at Umoja Shule. Jeremy often framed his comments in terms of feelings--"we were really happy with that day care, "I just felt very comfortable," "I felt very good about having them in there;" while Tonika gave the details--numbers, considerations, chain of events --around what they experienced during their search.

Jeremy and Tonika's narrative reflection on their daughter and sons' previous day care grounded their ideas about a good education. As a university-run "lab school," Pullman had "lots of adults" and "professional teachers," and it was described by Tonika as a school that "people signed up to get into while they were pregnant," while Jeremy termed it "exceptional." In their story, both parents saw the school as a foundation for what they wanted to find for their sons in Sheldonville.

Jeremy and Tonika's Story: Multicultural Half-Stepping

Jeremy and Tonika began their story by talking about their desire to have both of their sons in the same environment, both for "convenience" and because "they had always been in school together:"

...we figured us moving to a new place, it would make them both feel more secure if they knew that they were, you know, one could see the other periodically throughout the day. We knew we couldn't get them in the, we didn't think we could have them in the, a school together all day but we thought Kofi would be in

kindergarten and that he would come over to, we had actually signed him up for Sheldonville Recreation, uhm, Day Care Center. And so, you know, he could be there after school and Malik would be there for the whole day.—Tonika

Jeremy and Tonika found out about the Day Care Center “just by asking people,” “investigation,” talking with “...people we worked with. People that we ran into. Real estate agents.” Jeremy also talked about looking in the phone book and getting information from a “referral service.” In considering different options, Jeremy and Tonika made it clear that it was important to them that they go “look at the place.” As with several other parents, money was an important consideration for Jeremy and Tonika, in addition to convenience, the potential for their sons to be “together” for part of the day; and the extent to which the educational environment was going to be an integrated setting:

Made our down payment. We couldn't get it back. Our registration fee or whatever. And so we signed them up over there and, uh, Kofi would be going there half a day and Malik would be going whole day. And we went around the center, we talked to the people and we would have been happy there. It was majority White. I mean like, you know, there, it seemed to be only two or three Black kids at the center and I didn't see any others.—Tonika

In recounting their initial impressions of Sheldonville Day Care, a question posed by Jeremy provoked a detailed description of Pullman, their children's previous day care in Oak Park, Illinois. This narrative was the focal point in their interview and was significant in determining what kinds of schools they thought could provide their children with a good education:

Jeremy: What did one of the kids say about the first time when we went to visit?

Tonika: Kofi or Malik?

Jeremy: Yeah, it seemed like somebody, like one of them didn't like it.

Tonika: Maybe Malik. Yeah, I don't remember why, maybe cuz the playground didn't look like his playground at Pullman.

Jeremy: Yeah.

Tonika: They got really nice playgrounds, they got really a nice school in Oak Park.

Jeremy: Yeah, in Oak Park.

Tonika: Even though there were only a couple of Black kids in the class. They had a lot of lab teachers. They have Black lab teachers. They had, they had, uhm, Asian kids in the class. Maybe one or two, wasn't a lot.

Jeremy: Mm hm.

Tonika: I can't think of their having Indian kids this past year.

Jeremy: But we were really happy with that day care. I mean it was exceptional.

Tonika: Yeah.

Jeremy: I thought it was exceptional...it was a teaching, it was a lab, it was actually a lab teaching school...

Tonika: Mh hm.

Jeremy: For the university.

Tonika: So there were a ton of adults.

Jeremy: Lots of

Tonika: They had the two professional teachers.

Jeremy: Master teachers.

Tonika: Master teachers and then students were in there all the time...so the students, the kids, the preschoolers had a lot of one-on-one attention.

Jeremy: A lot of attention...a lot of attention.

Tonika: And, you know, they did lesson plans.

Jeremy: Mh hm.

Tonika: I mean it was really, they were doing bugs for a month. They would have bugs laid out. And take field trips where they'd go out and get stuff. They read books about bugs, I mean they really, uhm, more about the whole development of the kid...

Jeremy: Right. ...So on that side it was very much structured. Uhm, and, you know, that's what I really liked about it...The structure that they had, you know, in place, their goals and everything. So you know it wasn't about a kid just like kind of getting lost in the shuffle.

Tonika: Or watching TV.

Jeremy: Or watching, yeah, none of that stuff. It was a learning environment.

Tonika: Uhm, huhm.

Jeremy: And the kids, and the kids, I mean that's the main thing. The kids enjoyed it, you know.

The experience that Kofi and Malik (and Jada, who also attended Pullman as a young child) had at Pullman served as a foundation for Jeremy and Tonika's thinking about what was possible to obtain in a number of ways. Pullman was "a lab school," in which the teachers were "master teachers." And, although it was "expensive as hell," the price was worth it because of the time and attention given to their sons, and the quality of the

experience they received while there. Jeremy used the words “comfortable and safe” to describe his son’s experience at Pullman. When asked to elaborate, he said:

Comfortable and safe about leaving them there. Comfortable and safe about the attention they were getting. Comfortable and safe about just about everything... You know, I just, just really I felt very good about having them in there. And so, you know, whenever I start grumbling about the money, it always would come down to that.

However, Pullman also served to ground Jeremy and Tonika’s thinking in another way. It was clear through their descriptions that Pullman was not as “diverse” as they would have liked it to be, and when they arrived in Sheldonville, they had hoped that their son’s next school would be more diverse and not as “majority White” as Pullman had been:

I was actually a little disappointed to be truthful when I looked at Sheldonville Elementary and when I looked at Sheldonville Day Care. We would’ve ok, coming out of Oak Park I felt like we were going back into Oak Park again in some respect. And like he said, we came here to a city that had higher Black population, so I just thought it was going to be, you know, at least a quarter of the kids or half the kids Black or I don't know, it was going to be more than what they had.—Tonika

When asked why it was important to them that their children's school have more Black students than in Oak Park, Jeremy and Tonika answered from two different perspectives.

While Jeremy emphasized the importance of kids being able “to see other people like themselves,” Tonika emphasized how she thought it was critical that children be in an environment in which they wouldn’t be “singled out:”

For you to feel like like you're a just part of the scenery. You know, you don't stand out and other kids aren't going to point you out and teachers aren't going to point you out, you know. And I guess it can happen even in the schools that are maybe the majority Black or half Black if you have White teachers, they still could stigmatize the Black kids. I guess it could happen anywhere. Actually a friend told me about an incident with her kid, a Nigerian friend of mine whose kid had gone to Sheldonville Elementary and how her son and a couple other little Black boys in the class, maybe two or three of them were kind of, uhm, targeted by the teacher, you know. This was when he was in third or fourth grade, or maybe fourth or fifth, but still I thought about that kind of stuff and I didn't want

my kids to get into, uhm, ever, I hope they, ah, they will have to face it one day unfortunately. But that didn't make me feel comfortable...to know that they could be singled out.

In addition to feeling disappointed that there was not more student diversity at Sheldonville Elementary, Tonika and Jeremy also voiced concerns that, like their daughter's previous school, the school seemed limited in their conceptions of multicultural education:

Tonika: You know, like you'd have the history and then you'd have these gray boxes with Native American history or with Afro-American history or with Chinese-American in the little gray boxes. Which means you may or may not read that, it's your choice. ...It's not part of the real text. ...It's the sub-text, you know. ...So it's very implicit in what in how that's interpreted by kids.

Jeremy: Truly marginalized.

As a result of their disillusionment about the lack of diversity of the Sheldonville school and day care, Tonika and Jeremy investigated two other charter schools, both of which did not to fit their conceptions of what a good education should "look like." Jeremy described the first as "kind of lock-step and rigid," and Tonika described the other as focusing on "filling out worksheets" and she "just wasn't impressed." Umoja Shule was their last option—but it also presented some concerns for Jeremy and Tonika. In particular, although it had an African-centered curriculum, Jeremy was very conscious of the ways in which it failed to be as "multicultural" as its brochure stated. Additionally, Jeremy had fears about the students who were being enrolled at Umoja Shule:

I was also concerned about the school being, not a dumping ground, but it being a, it being a place where kids who had been, uh, who had troubles in other schools, you know, kicked out or other troubles getting into, coming into Umoja. So, in fact, I wanted to know the, you know, I wanted, I know this seems kind of very classist, but I wanted to know the mix of kind of families there. And how many kids kind of came from that kind of situation into the school.

When asked why this was important to him Jeremy responded by saying "...You know, if the kids hang out with the high achievers they are going to do all right, you know?" After Jeremy had a chance to speak with the principal and teachers at Umoja his concerns were addressed and he said that "I guess I was satisfied." Based on their assessment of Sheldonville Elementary, and on the available charter schools, Tonika and Jeff made their final decision about Umoja Shule after visiting the school, close to the time that the school year was about to start:

...it was empty, you know, and she (a teacher) was just kind of telling us. And she told about the program and she walked us around and we were still kind of like uhm, you know, we took the forms and filled them out and we knew right away. One of the things that excited me when we went in, I think I was maybe a little more excited about it than Jeremy at first. Cuz his concern was that it was going to be Afro-centered to the, you know, exclusion of other cultures... And he still has those concerns, you know. And so, uhm, one of the things that excited me about it was the, uhm, I saw some of the things the kids had done like building bridges and stuff. And Kofi loves that kind of stuff and I thought, boy, he could really, you know, grow in a place like this. ...Uhm, the preschool didn't seem as, I wasn't so excited about the preschool. Just because the program, the space seemed really small and I didn't know, the program, I didn't get a good sense of what the program was for preschoolers. ...But I did like the idea that it was for him, for Kofi, I mean the space was open enough that I was thinking they probably would see each other a lot throughout the day. ...So that part I liked. And the cost was a not quite half, but almost half the cost.

J: Right. ...

T: So...those were deciding factors. And Malik could be there all day and Kofi could, and that was the other thing, all day

J: Yeah.

Based on how they discussed the issues involved in their decision to enroll Kofi and Malik at Umoja Shule, it seems that a school which embodied Tonika and Jeremy's ideas of a "good education" may have existed only in rare instances, and perhaps only in the ideal. Indeed, Jeremy talked of feeling like they were always having to "settle" when it came to their children's education, by making choices between nice schools with a lack of student (and curriculum) diversity, and "average" schools with greater student

diversity. In finally "settling" on Umoja Shule, it was clear that Jeremy and Tonika saw Umoja Shule was the best option of those available. However, even after making their decision, Umoja Shule still presented questions for Tonika and Jeremy. They continued to be wary of the "kind of kids that Umoja let in" and critical of the lack of a "truly multicultural focus" in the school's curriculum.

LaTonya

LaTonya Richardson was a twenty-five year old mother of three children. Darnell, the oldest, was enrolled in Orange City Academy, while Tera, her daughter, was enrolled in a neighborhood daycare along with her youngest son, David. LaTonya worked full time in a nearby manufacturing plant, and often made "extra money" through covering other workers' shifts. LaTonya lived about twenty minutes away from Orange City Academy, in a neighborhood more closely connected to the large urban city of Monroe.

We had our first interview late on a Sunday morning. LaTonya had worked a double shift the day before, and came to the door in a t-shirt, shorts and bathrobe. After putting her dog in a back room, she let me in the front door and downstairs to a partially finished basement. At the base of the stairs, in the right corner, were two short, rickety bookshelves stacked haphazardly with well-worn children's games and magazines. In the far left corner of the basement was small television and VCR, both of which sat on a wheeled entertainment stand in front of a black leather sofa. During our interview, we sat at an old Formica table at the bottom of the stairs, near the bookshelves. Before we began, LaTonya excused herself for a moment, disappeared and came back a minute later with a pack of cigarettes and an ashtray.

Sitting there with her during our first and second interviews, LaTonya exuded a strength and maturity that was compelling. In talking with her and learning of her life experiences, I knew that authors describing the “power” of the Black woman must have had women like LaTonya in mind. Members of my family would have called her an “old soul.” Much of her talk about her childhood and relationship with her mother reflected a tumultuous upbringing in which she witnessed her mother’s drug use and relationships with abusive men. As LaTonya got older she began distancing herself from her mother:

...you know how you watch a horror flick film and the scary parts comes a long so you close your eyes, you know it is about to happen, but you don’t want to see it. So, uhm, I just didn’t want to see it, I didn’t want to be involved. If I was at a distance and I heard about it but I didn’t see it, then I was kind of all right with that.

Even while addressing her mother’s difficulties, she acknowledged that in other ways her mother was a strong and perseverant woman. Reflective and purposeful, as we began our first conversation, she talked candidly about her current separation from her husband, her desire to be “different than” her mother, and her philosophy about raising her children:

I seen and I know what my mom did wasn’t good in a whole lot of ways, so, why put myself through that so my kids can end up like that. Because it’s like I’m in a situation now where things aren’t working out between me and my kids’ father, but, I mean, how do I change that, do I continue to feel sorry for myself and say that, uhm, “he did this to me and if it wasn’t for him it’d be like this,” instead of, I can say “since he is not here, I should do this...”

Although LaTonya herself had dropped out of high school, she later returned to get her G.E.D., and had aspirations of obtaining a degree in labor relations. In reference to her goals and herself she said that "I know what I want and I've always believed in if you know what you want then you will be able to get it...I never think that I am better than anyone else but also I don't think that anyone else is better than me."

Defining Elements of LaTonya's Story

LaTonya described herself as "a talker," saying "I believe you can get so far talking." Her emphasis on the importance of talking and freedom of expression was evident throughout her description of the search process she took en route to enrolling her son at Orange City Academy. Her penchant for verbal expression had its origin in her childhood experiences, as illustrated by the following narrative:

I try to talk to them (her children) like me, talking to you, if they are having a pain about something, they don't like a particular something, I tell them, express it. Yeah, so, uhm, people, like when I was growing up, I remember about this boyfriend my mom had. I didn't care for this man whatsoever, and I always had problems with staring at people and I stared at him. And he told me to get out of his way and I despised him from that day forward...I didn't appreciate the way he treated me. He treated me like I was the one beneath him and just because you're a child, doesn't mean you are beneath an adult. You are just younger, that's all. And ah, he tried to belittle me, as far as I was concerned, and I didn't appreciate that. So uhm, you know how Archie Bunker would tell Edith to stifle herself, I would never tell my kids to stifle themselves. I would never use the expression shut up. If I say something like that, I want to say be quiet, but, uhm, I don't want them to think that they don't have an opinion, they don't matter, because it's just not true to me...

In descriptions of scenarios illustrative of her philosophies about life and education, and in her descriptions of her son's private school experiences, she placed high value on conversation and dialogue as ways to learn from others and solve problems. LaTonya often referred to "talking" and conversations at key points throughout her interviews, and this was a central characteristic involved in her search for a good education for her son.

LaTonya's story was also distinguished by her conception of the difference between the education that White children and Black children receive. As stated in the first chapter, LaTonya saw struggle as Blacks' birthright, while Whites, for the most part, were born "to have." LaTonya, and many of the other parents who were interviewed, characterized the Orange City Schools as disorganized, overcrowded and undisciplined.

In LaTonya's estimation, it would not be possible for her son to receive a good education through the predominantly Black public schools in her community. As further confirmation of her beliefs about the inequities in the schooling of White and Black children, LaTonya referred to her own experiences and the experiences of a girlfriend, who, after moving to the predominantly White suburbs, enrolled her child in the neighborhood public school because "their public schools are better...They have more things available to them." For LaTonya, a good education would only be available to her son through private school (particularly since many private schools in her area were still majority White), and Orange City Academy was the next best thing.

LaTonya's Story: I Want the Best

In talking about finding a school for Darnell, LaTonya began by talking about his first school, a private Christian school called Sierra Christian Academy (SCA). She described SCA as embodying "strength" and commitment in its approach to the education of children:

Everyone is not born smart, so that means you have to struggle and in order to struggle you have to have the strength to do. So, uhm, so private school means personable strength, ah, ah, commitment. Commitment because to me the school that my son went to, these teachers were really committed. It was almost as if their jobs were on the line if they didn't do the best that they could. That's the way they took it.

After investigating "so many schools" she settled on SCA because of the "personable way" they treated their students, and because it was affordable, at \$130.00 a month. In her characterization of the school, LaTonya noted that children at the school resolved conflicts with each other through talking instead of fighting:

...But, uhm, mostly like when there was a disagreement, the kids wouldn't fight. They wouldn't fight. That's like amazing to me where I come from...Because, children that I grew up with. If we had a problem, we were throwing up our fists

at something. You know, we didn't have the uhm, the understanding or the knowledge of knowing how to talk things out. But for some reason, none of these children did. I don't know if it was because of their religion or, or just what the parents was teaching. Because your kids do as you do, not as you say. So, these children were seeing these things at home, they were gonna do it where ever else they were at.

Another aspect of SCA that she admired was their approach to discipline, which again involved "talking," and was different than she remembered about her own elementary school experience:

As a matter of a fact, at his predominantly White school, he was always threatened with a paddle, but never paddled, okay? But their views were different and I respected their views because they were Christians and I respected the way they did everything because before they hit you they were talking to you. They were sitting you down. We were having conferences, what ever it took before we got to that point. Now, you go to a school like Morton (the neighborhood elementary school) and you're going to get your ass hit because someone said you did something. No questions were asked, it was that you were in trouble and I don't believe in that.

SCA's approach to discipline appealed to LaTonya not only because of its emphasis on talking through problems, but also because of the fairness, consistency, and disciplined environment of the school. Unfortunately, she was unable to continue paying for her son's tuition, and placed her son in her neighborhood public school until she "figured out waht to do." LaTonya contrasted SCA with the public school her son was enrolled briefly before coming to Orange City Academy and described the classroom environment of Darnell's public school as having "no discipline, no order:"

If two or three people are speaking at one time, who is hearing what? You are not hearing anything. Whether or not you want to hear what one particular person wants to say, you still hear and uhm that is the type of things that is going on there. She's (the teacher) holding a reading class and, but other kids are talking and playing. I'm like, I don't even believe it.

Because of the chaotic classroom and school environment, LaTonya worried about Darnell's ability to maintain focus on his school work, saying that she "didn't want him to

think school was a bad place to be." Consequently, LaTonya focused her energy on finding another place for Darnell, saying that:

Darnell had come from a different place. It is like coming from another country to another one, that's how it was for Darnell. Darnell was coming to something completely different. Where Darnell had come from, there wasn't any violence. There might have been some teasing, but it was all fun and games. You know, no one got their feelings hurt and cried because of it, and in the public schools, these are the types of things that are going on.

LaTonya saw the "best" was private school, with its "small class sizes" and the importance attached to parent involvement and communication. In contrast, the worst was her son's public school, which she described as having a "whatever" attitude, particularly toward conflicts between students:

What ever they see, they handle it, what ever way. You know, that's, that's what they say, whatever. That's the way they handle it. You know, I don't like that. I don't like that. You know, certain things and issues and stuff like that should be confronted, uhm a certain type of way. You don't let it get to the point where there is a big fight before you have that sit down talk and then call the parents in or something, you don't do that. You take the time and for something, I mean, the, the teachers at Darnell's private school, we had each other's phone number. That was a rule there. You had the teacher's phone number and you were, it was made available for you to call them when ever you needed them and you also had to do the same for them, for them to be able to call you when ever they needed you. You had to be involved. That was just the way the school was ran. You had to be involved. You couldn't, couldn't not be.

Due to her financial situation, Orange City Academy was the closest thing that LaTonya could find to a private school environment, and she enrolled Darnell there during the year of our interview. However, she remained suspicious about how the school was different from neighborhood public schools:

That's another thing I don't understand too, these schools are free so they are public. Okay, how are they, how do they have access to some of the things that the public schools are not getting?...Like a situation like computers. How are they not, you know, how do public schools not get the same thing?...Foreign languages. You know, why don't public schools, regular public schools have

foreign languages in their classes? You know, I am just saying, I don't understand that.

LaTonya's ideas about a good education had much to do with the interactions her son had with other students, and with teachers. While Darnell was in public school, LaTonya noted that he was teased and involved in physical altercations with classmates, which "never happened" while he was attending SCA. She attributed this partially to the fact that parents "from my generation don't care as much" and she thought of herself as different, "more mature" than most mothers her age. However, she also attributed her son's experience in public school to the generally lack of caring that pervaded the school, on the part of teachers as well as administrators. Her perceptions of the city public schools led her to support the idea that predominantly Black public schools were the lowest on the educational totem pole, and private schools (or schools that Whites in the suburbs attend) were at the top, with charter schools somewhere in between. However, the bottom line for LaTonya was that "...in certain situations, Whites have it the best. That's just the way it is...." and she wanted *that* best for her children.

Patricia

Patricia Kirkland was a thirty-four year old, recently divorced parent of one son, who was enrolled at Umoja Shule. A resident of Sheldonville since her adolescence, Patricia worked as a database manager for a bank based out of the city. After talking by phone, we agreed to meet for our first and second interviews at her sister Annette's business, a small bookstore specializing in multicultural books, cards, jewelry and artwork. On the morning of our first interview, I arrived at the store before Patricia; Annette let me in and asked if I would like some soda or juice to drink while I waited. Annette's store had a decidedly Afrocentric focus, although there was a section of

greeting cards that featured themes from Latin culture, and two displays shelves in the front of the store that held different multiculturally-oriented children's books. After about ten minutes, Patricia arrived. She had a motherly presence, piercing light brown eyes and because of "good genes" she looked about five years younger than her age. After talking with her sister for a moment, Patricia came to the back of the store near the restrooms and pulled out two folding chairs for us to sit on during the interview.

Patricia had been educated in a variety of different schools. As a very young child, she had attended preschool on the military base where her father was stationed. In early elementary, she attended all-Black schools in Monroe, and after her parents divorced, she, her mother and her sister had moved to Sheldonville, where she was bussed to a predominantly White school. She talked often of her mother's involvement in her education, and this impacted her own understanding of her role in her son, Douglas' education.

Defining Elements of Patricia's Story

The defining elements of Patricia's story were her high academic goals for her son, and her desire that her son be taught to have pride in being Black. Patricia had very specific academic goals for Douglas, and was pleased with Umoja's accelerated academic program. As her only child, Patricia wanted to support Douglas in gaining an education that would put him "where I think he needs to be." Patricia believed that "It is not enough now just to have a Bachelor's degree. You know, you have got to have a Master's to do something, and if you really want to do something you better get your doctorate." At several times during her interviews, Patricia talked of wanting to prepare Douglas to be the "head of the household," and she spoke admiringly of her ex-husband and his father

and the way that they "stepped up" to be the heads of their families. Doing well in school and continuing on to college and graduate school dominated Patricia's ideas about how Douglas could be successful professionally and personally.

Connected to Patricia's ideas about Douglas assuming a leadership role in his family were her concerns about his racial identity. Patricia talked with pride about being able to trace both sides of her family back to their origin as slaves on two different plantations, saying that "...for my son it is very important that he know his heritage...heritage is part of who you are. It is a part of what you do, your culture..." Just as she wanted to instill in Douglas a sense of the responsibility he would have as a father and husband, Patricia also wanted to ensure that he grew up with a strong sense of self-esteem related to his identity as a Black man. These ideas drove her decision to enroll Douglas in Umoja Shule, and guided her perceptions of his other schooling experiences.

Patricia's Story: Ethnic Pride and Self-Esteem

Patricia began talking about her decision to enroll Douglas at Umoja Shule by discussing her choice of Douglas' preschool/day care. Central to her decision about a day care was obtaining childcare from "someone who would treat my baby like they were their own." However, as Douglas got older, his day care environment did not meet Patricia's academic standards. As she said:

...he was at an environment where all's he did was play all day and he needed to learn...but every day all they did was like play. They read him some books and stuff, but it wasn't enough for him to grasp. He was working more on his motor skills and stuff. He learned to walk and that kind of thing. But as far as I just felt like he was missing out on his ABC's. I was talking about the Sesame Street stuff to help him along. But it just wasn't enough.

During our conversation, Patricia made it clear that she had specific goals in mind for her son, at one point saying that she was particularly happy with Umoja because of the principal's accelerated academic program:

....by the time he is 15 he will graduate with an associates degree so I am not going to complain too bad. (Laughter) You know, and everything, I just want him to be able to be at like, to be there I guess, at a first grade level in kindergarten and everything and I just want to follow through with that at home.

Patricia's academic goals for Douglas involved wanting him "to go as far as he can, and she had fairly traditional ideas about the roles he would take in the future as "head of his household:"

I don't want him, I want him to have his education already. I want him to have his house already. I want him to have his bank accounts all set. His job established, so that you never know on these two family working households and the wife gets pregnant, she may be able to work and she might not. Then you are dependent on her income. Well, you know what I am saying (laugh).

Patricia talked at length about how her decision to enroll her son Douglas at Umoja Shule had much to do with issues of race. The center point of her story was linked to changes in Douglas' attitude toward White and Black people after going from a Black day care to an integrated preschool:

...Yeah. My story is a little deep here. (Laugh). Basically, Douglas was, he was when I first came home after my divorce and things, he attended an all Black like little day care kind of deal. And he never saw any difference in color or anything like that. And later I was concerned because of the fact that was the only environment that he was around. And so, I put him in a mixed environment, almost to Dalton, or Maplewood, I would say. And that, that was good at first. He learned a lot more and they would teach him things like that and then the color issue started to come about.

In mentioning the "color issue," Patricia paused, and then qualified her next statements by saying:

And, I am not prejudice to that point, you know what I am saying, where, where, but I do want, I just, I do want, you know what I am saying (laugh) I am not

prejudice to the point that I am saying I don't like other races. I respect others in their own race and all that kind of stuff....So, I just, too, there is a lot of heritage. A lot of things I want him to carry on, and know about his family, and, and Black people too.

Though her son was learning in the "mixed" preschool, the root of the issue for Patricia was the fact that "it got to the point that he was coming home and saying 'my mother is darker than I am and my sister is darker than I am,' and that he only liked women my color (Patricia's skin tone was café au lait) or White." As her son's dislike of dark people became more pronounced, Patricia became increasingly concerned. In her interview, the following narrative was central in defining her reasons for enrolling Douglas at Umoja Shule:

He was like three....And, so you know. A lady came into the store, she was a dark African American woman and she came in and he said "you are Black. Black is nasty." Well, that was the end of that. (Laughter). You understand me? Oh, no, you know what I am saying? (Laughter). ...I am like we aren't teaching him that at home. His father's people don't teach him that, you know, so somebody was influencing him and so they felt like it was maybe one of the White teachers there and that kind of thing and stuff because there was a particular teacher there that he just loved and she was White. And they, he got to the point where every time he got to see White women in stores or White women where ever, he was always running up and he would, would hug the White woman but would not want to be bothered with the Black ones and I was like he is too young to be that prejudice that early. That has to be taught. You know what I am saying? So, so, that is when he got yanked out of there.

In attempts to change her son's developing perceptions, Patricia talked with him about other people in his family and tried to emphasize that "you have got to learn to look at the inside of the person." Additionally, she talked with her son several times about brown skin being a part of who he and his family was, and about brown skin being beautiful:

I was like there is nothing wrong with the color. Look at grandma, look at you... You are the same color as grandma, and daddy is the same color as you and grandma too. And Tiny is the same color and everything and brown is beautiful. Mommy likes brown and that stuff...And that stuff and so he still, you know, he couldn't relate that *he* was brown.

For Patricia, her son's attitudes about race were particularly hard to bear. In our previous interview, Patricia had talked with pride about her family's history, and the significant things that people in her family had done. Patricia projected into the future and worried that her son would want to marry a White woman out of hatred for his own skin color, and to Patricia, this potentiality threatened her ability to convey the heritage of her family (and Black people in general) to her future grandchildren:

I like teaching the heritage. The tribes of Africa. There is so much to know that we have been denied the privilege of knowing. About this here how to protect you from the sun like over there and the strength of the women in the tribes. There is a lot of heritage there and stuff and so I just don't want to lose that heritage. I have other friends at work who their families are mixed and they don't teach them. You know, I am not just that way about Black. I am that way about this Spanish girl at work. She tries to teach her children Spanish, her husband is Polish. He won't teach the children anything about Poland and the things that they went through. You know what I am saying? Yeah. And I got another friend, she is mixed. Her dad is Mexican, her mom is Black, and they were supposed to know two languages. He wouldn't teach them the Mexican language. My friend, she is Russian, even though they are White, she is Russian. I mean the dad was Russian and the mom was English or whatever it was and the deal was that they were supposed to be bilingual, the kids were...And, so the kids were but the father refused to teach them Russian and now they can't even really communicate with their grandparents. They can understand a little bit about what they are saying, but they are talking Russian and stuff and so, I just think the heritage is there.

Because of her fears about her son's sense of racial identity and her fears about the possible consequences of her son's overidentification with White people--White women in particular--Patricia searched for alternative schools for Douglas, schools in which he could "lean to be proud to be Black." Patricia elaborated further on the reasons for her decision, by referencing Jawanza Kunjufu's book, "Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys," saying,

Patricia: Uhm, I don't know how much you know about the theory that when the little Black boy gets to be about 4th grade, they lose them in the school system

and so that was apparent. I didn't want that to happen to him so Umoja basically was a school that was supposed to be geared toward Black males.

Heather: How did you learn about it?

Patricia: I heard about it from, who did I hear about it from? My sister.

Heather: What did she tell you?

Patricia: Lots of customers came into her store telling them about Umoja and the children's and stuff and how the children were learning a lot. It is a Black cultural environment and they really taught them self esteem. That is what the whole thing was. It was teaching him that the Black male to self esteem.

Unlike Jeremy, Tonika and LaTonya, Patricia was deeply concerned with obtaining an education for her son that stressed the development of self-esteem in Black children, particularly Black males. Especially since her son had little opportunities to be around "positive Black men" Patricia was drawn to Umoja Shule. And though her son's academic achievement was her number one priority, she was not willing to sacrifice his perceptions of himself as a Black person in order to obtain it. In fact, of the parents interviewed for the study, she was one of the most adamant about choosing Umoja Shule because of its African-centered curricular focus, which distinguished it from other charter schools in Sheldonville.

Pamela

Pamela Sutton was a 42 year-old jazz singer and part-time "art consultant." I first met Pamela through volunteering at Orange City Academy. From the beginning of the school day until lunchtime, she worked as a volunteer teacher's aide in her daughter Amara's classroom. At five foot ten, Pamela was difficult to miss among the first and second graders, and this was particularly so given her fuchsia lipstick and beautifully kept dreadlocks which streamed from a ponytail she often wrapped with a multicolored silk scarf.

Pamela grew up in Monroe and graduated from the University of Michigan with a degree in education. After graduating, she moved to Los Angeles to pursue a singing career. While she was there, Pamela met her husband, also from Monroe, who was also pursuing a career in music. As she says, "we hung out, and then we became friends, and then we became lovers, and then we became married, and then we had a child, and here we are now today!" Shortly after getting married, Pamela and her husband moved back to a suburb of Monroe, where they have been living for the past six years.

Pamela lived about ten minutes from Orange City Academy, but because we both volunteered during the same time of day, we agreed to meet at the school for our interviews.

Defining Elements of Pamela's Story

Pamela, a self-described "school mommy," saw herself as being the "gardener" of her daughter's character. In her interviews she talked of her belief that "...everybody does not love your child... you love your child!" With this in mind, Pamela made it her business to play an active role in shaping the outcomes of her daughter's education, including lobbying for Amara to have certain teachers as she progressed through elementary school.

Within her story, Pamela talked about the "vibes" she felt from Amara's teachers. In doing so, she emphasized the interpersonal relationship that teachers had both with her daughter, and with herself. An example of this was her description of one of the other second grade teachers at Orange City Academy that she had *not* selected for her daughter:

My business is the teacher and I think that and my daughter's teacher is very good, I like her a lot. But Mrs. Hawthorne, she's the blonde one? I get a very indifferent kind of vibe from her... that I don't really care for. And I did get that same vibe when I came to investigate. I knew that if my child had been put in her

class that I would have changed her... I knew that. Not that I don't think that she's a good teacher but the vibe was not cool with me...And it may be personal, like you know if you have a stand off with someone woman, you may not like the way I look... you may not like my dreadlocks, you may not like something about me that has made you treat me with this little kind of attitude, but I was not going to, I was going to have him (the principal) to take her (Amara) out if she had gotten Mrs. Hawthorne, without a doubt.

Consistent with this, much of Pamela's story revolved around making schooling decisions that were dependent on the types of relationships she and her daughter had with her daughter's teachers. In this way, Pamela was not unlike the middle class White parents Lareau (1989) described in her book Home Advantage, parents who were much more adept than lower class parents at using their social capital in order to ensure that their children were academically successful.

Pamela's Story: Being a School Mommy and Getting Good Vibes

Of the parents interviewed for this study, Pamela was the most knowledgeable about different schooling options available to parents. She credited her understanding as being a product of the time she spent in California, when she had a roommate with school-age children:

...there are certain school situations when I lived in California there's a lot of alternative school situations in California because California is, California is unique in and of itself . . . so I was aware of alternative schooling, home schooling, schools of choice, charter schools, from being, from having a roommate who had kids, not because I had children then but peripherally I've caught all this... and so then it helped me of course in my life experience when I have a child I can look at the whole picture, where are my choices, what are my choices. I don't have to just send my daughter to the school down the street...

Although Pamela made sure that all possible options for Amara's schooling were open to her, she approached the selection of a school as involving two key components: herself and her daughter's teacher. With this in mind, she looked the process of choosing a school from a pragmatic perspective:

Nothing is perfect, no situation is going to be perfect. What you have to do is utilize what you have with the situation that you either choose to be into or are in, and you work with it. You let the teacher know you are available to her or him... You try to be there as much as you can so your child is comfortable knowing that if there's a problem mommy is there, you know?

In regard to her role in her daughter's education and general development, Pamela saw herself as nurturing her daughter in the way that a gardener would nurture flowers:

... we do a lot of things, she's, I, treat my daughter in the manner that I want her to believe and grow up and think she can she owns the world... not to be an asshole with it but to think confidence...I have to gently plant those seeds and they have to be nurtured gently cause...the parents, their environment, all of those things shape and mold these children. And some of my friends just like I was having a conversation with Renita, we have to understand that what we put in their minds they will reap...

Since Pamela and Amara were new to OCA during the year of the data collection for the study, I asked her to begin her story by talking about her daughter's previous schools. The first school Pamela described was an inner-city magnet school, Perkins Preparatory School, which she described as "an open school" that was "a little too open for my child...my child needs structure." Similarly to LaTonya, Pamela chose Perkins Preparatory over the neighborhood Orange City school because of her perceptions of overcrowding in the school and a general atmosphere of discord among the children:

...if you observe the school down the street from me and I live in a very nice neighborhood but on the other side of Joy Road it's a whole another kind' a vibe and the school is just it's over crowded. Whenever you have too many people in a situation you are goin' have problems.

The second school that Pamela selected for Amara was an Afrocentric charter school located in downtown Monroe. Again, in making her decision, Pamela's evaluations of her daughter's potential teachers were of paramount importance:

The first grade teacher was new but I liked her my instant vibe was okay we'll see how that works out. I did not like the other first grade teacher who was a hoochie mama who was like attitude big time you know that whole thing...It ended up that

Amara's teacher was wonderful so you kind' a, like you know, you take your chances, period, and that's just how it is.

Unfortunately, midway through Amara's first grade year, the teacher who Pamela had selected left in order to pursue a career in school administration. With this teacher gone, the exposure her daughter would have to the teacher's aide for the classroom (now the acting teacher) was a variable that Pamela did not feel comfortable with. In particular, Pamela talked of the differences between herself and the teacher's aide, who she described as a "hoochie mama:"

...I'm not a person who behaves as if I'm better than anyone else, but I'm a very well-educated woman and if I see that who the person that my daughter is going to be exposed to is not real well educated and that their mentality is at a certain level and that they're going to be dealing with my child in a certain mentality. . . I either like or I don't and remove her from that. The teacher aide that was with her first grade teacher her her mentality was different than mine. Her language usage was different than mine, her physical appearance was different than mine, there was some things about her that I did not like . . .

Heather: Like what?

Pamela: She was a hoochie mama! Heather come on, I can't believe you're gonna make me say it--her appearance was different than mine, I mean she had orange hair!! (laughs) she wore a lot of makeup and she talked like this (mimics her voice) you know what I'm saying? . . . that was different than mommy! And so, we just couldn't have that, mm mm, no. There was no way.

For Pamela, a good education was in large part defined by the adults with whom her daughter would have contact. In particular (and as the quote above illustrates), she was very concerned with the background and level of education she perceived Amara's teacher to have. In elaboration of the people and environmental characteristics that she tried to avoid when it came to her daughter, Pamela described her husband's sister's family:

...the very bottom line and I don't, it's just that I have a certain criteria of how I like things around me. . . and they—they're not it... Always I mean I go around them, I hang out with them I love my mother-in-law dearly but they're not like me. Not better not worse just different that's what I try to teach my child. Auntie

Darlene, you know it's, it's you know, what I don't like about I go over to her house and her kids are WILD! They're just on the nut! If my daughter's around them you know when she was younger if she's around that she acts on the nut . . . that's how kids are. It goes back to the old adage they act, I mean if they're around the same behavior if they're like in schools if they're around a behavior that's going on at the time they'll start behaving like that. You have to have controls.

Pamela strongly believed in her responsibility to monitor and control what and to whom her daughter was exposed. As a result, much of her talk about her decision to enroll Amara at Orange City Academy involved people and places that she did not think were appropriate for Amara. In talking about what the positive things that she was looking for in a school environment, Pamela said:

A safe environment. A good uhm program. . . art, music mathematics, computers, which we need at this school. And children need to be in an environment where they are stimulated ... hands-on learning stimulation actual movement, and teachers who really are engaged in helping kids learn. You know, my child has to know that this is business, and you are here to learn, and your learning is your business. My business is to ensure that happens expeditiously and in in a safe environment, so that's it.

When asked if Orange City Academy's "entrepreneurial focus" was important in her decision, Pamela returned to the idea that no matter what type of school her daughter was in, the most important consideration was her child's teacher:

...I can read your book of what your mission is and I can know that your mission is going to turn out to be very different then your every day application of how you deal with things. We all have a mission, we all have a very important goal every morning when we wake up this is my goal today, this is my mission today, but the general application, the consistency may change. I feel like they're focused, I feel like all the teachers are focused I do feel that.

Heather: What are they focused on?

Pamela: On the children, what they're doing here is the business of teaching and I do get that from what I have observed.

Of the narratives that Pamela relayed, her description of her teaching role and the role of Amara's teacher was most aptly conveyed in the following excerpt. In it, she discusses

her daughter's gravitation toward her teacher, Mrs. Ferndale, as an authority, and she provides an explanation of the meaning she attached to the situation:

...this morning when I'm combing her (Amara) hair she, she looks in her book case every morning when I'm combing her hair she'll read a book while I'm doing her hair ... so she grabbed, she got the book about rocks and minerals and she opened it up POW there's a volcano ... oh mommy that's the magma chamber and there, sure enough there's the magma chamber and the side vent, the central vent, the ash, the dust, the lava, blah blah blah but of course she was not interested everything that I try to interest her in because I'm mommy and she's always with me she's going, she's gonna rebel!... We can try to teach them everything in the world on God's green earth and if someone else doesn't say, you know the teacher is like their hero ... what they say goes... no matter how much I talk to her if Miss Ferndale, well Miss Ferndale, cause that's the psychology of the young child... the teacher is the hero no matter what the parent does the teacher is the last word. Why some people who get offended if their child says oh no Miss Ferndale told me it was this way. Well what Miss Ferndale said was the law. And that's their relationship with the teacher which is a good sign to me. That means her teacher is giving her the stimulation, that she is reinforcing what I've already told her or what I've already given her that may not have peaked her interest ... mommy's always care giving, care giving, care giving, care giving but we're always doing things with them they take us for granted... it's just how it is. And I'm mature enough to understand all these things but I want to just know that you're doing what I need, you're learning what I need you to learn... at your level

When asked what it would mean for her to have success in providing an education for her daughter, Pamela replied that:

To me success-and my role has just began... you know she's only in second grade this school goes up to fifth... Success to me would mean that I did my part at home, and that I did my part at school, meaning, I'm okay with third grade but I know who I want her teacher to be. I'm okay with third grade. Fourth grade next year I'll start investigating fourth grade teachers ...this may not be the end of our road for elementary school I may only stay I don't know, I really don't know how long. But I consider success for her to remain on the honor role...I expect that from her, and I work with her...

Of the parents highlighted in the chapter, Pamela is perhaps the most "traditional" in her orientation toward being involved in her child's education. She volunteered daily at the school, which would have probably been the case at any school her daughter was

enrolled in, charter, magnet, traditional public or otherwise. Pamela is perhaps the most likely to feel that her daughter can receive a "good education," since she is a parent who is very involved, who has had their choices increased through charter schools, and who has a pragmatic sense of what charter schools can realistically offer.

Conclusion

Through the voices of the five parents detailed here, it is possible to see how the themes represented in the last chapter gain or lose prominence in parents' accounts of the process of seeking a good education for their children. For Jeremy and Tonika, and Patricia the most relevant theme was the last discussed in Chapter Four: a good education is one that addresses the impact of race and culture on the educational process. In LaTonya's case, the theme related to parents and families being connected to each other was most important. And for Pamela, the theme related to parent involvement was most critical. The one theme that united all of these parents was their common concern for their children's academic success. To this end, the analysis presented in this chapter raises two interesting issues.

First, it is clear through Pamela, LaTonya, and Jeremy and Tonika's stories that they had concerns about the ability of their children to receive an education in which they were not treated differentially because of their race. Most striking is Pamela's story; if she had allowed her son to continue at his preschool, it is possible that his racial identity could have been impacted in ways which were hard to reverse. Although an examination of how well Umoja Shule is supporting the growth of a positive sense of racial identity is beyond the scope of this analysis, it seemed at least that Umoja Shule offered an educational setting that was consistent with Patricia's own views on "being Black." Given

the focus of the school on "Black males and self-esteem," it seems that the possibility of Patricia's son developing ideas about himself that negatively impact his academic achievement is less likely than had he stayed in his preschool. It is interesting to consider what Patricia might have done had Umoja Shule not existed. Perhaps even more serious than the potential for public schools to be insensitive to the racial and cultural background of their students is LaTonya's indictment of predominately Black city schools as being inferior to those of Whites. Her reality—the belief that private schools offer the best hope to her son for obtaining a good education—stands a much needed mirror against all the efforts of reforms done in order to provide an "equal" education to White and Black students. If LaTonya's experience was the barometer for these reform efforts, it is obvious that they would have been deemed failures. In summary, the fact that four out of five parents had explicit concerns about the ability of public schools to function in ways that are *not* prejudicial is a serious wake up call to traditional public schools.

The second issue raised through the analysis of this chapter is the existence of these Black parents' wish to place a barrier between their children and those they believe to be negative influences on their children's ability to receive a good education. In Jeremy's words, these are students who "have had troubles" in other schools. These people are the parents LaTonya sees herself as "different" from, parents who she perceives to be less committed to being involved in their children's education. These people are those who, in Pamela's words, are "hoochie mamas" or simply just "different than mommy." Although the consideration of issues of class was not a central focus in this study, these issues were apparent in parents' interviews, and they pose an interesting dilemma for those interested in providing a good education for all children. Specifically,

it will be difficult to provide a good education for all children if the definition of a good education is defined as being something that is not equally accessible to all children. This issue, and the continuing dilemma of creating public schools that treat Black children equally is perhaps the most important outcome of the analysis of this chapter.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

I think parents realize that school will be the hugest thing in their kid's life for a long time. I think parents realize that, and I think they realize that it just doesn't educate their mind. It molds their social life, it molds their values, and I think if, it probably depends upon what their experiences are in light of themselves, what they think they want to adjust about that whole thing for their kid, okay? Um, like if they experienced a lot of racism in their life and it was hurtful and damaging and held them back, or they just experienced no quality education because the teacher wasn't educated to pull the best out of them, you know, maybe it was because they were Black and maybe because they just had poor teachers, okay, but I think parents realize that education is pivotal, not just for the material that they get out of the book. And so I think that's why the decision is more than just what building is my kid going to be going to. It's huge in my mind, when you think about the fact that that entity is going to count more with your kid.—Jeremy

This study is an exploration how a group of Black parents who enrolled their children in charter schools defined and sought a good education for their children. In the history of public education for Blacks and in scholarly conversations about the education of Black children, the voices of Black parents have often been lost while researchers and policy makers clamor to present their theories about what the "problem" is and what can be done about it. After the Brown verdict was reached in 1954, an important opportunity to understand Oliver Brown's (and other parent's) ideas about a good education and the route by which a good education could be obtained was disregarded. Although researchers have begun to explore the experiences of Black parents and children who have been involved in the struggle to obtain a good education (Shujaa, 1994; Irvine & Foster, 1996), in the current debate about what forms a public education that meets the needs of Black children should take, the voices of Black parents have not been placed in the foreground. This dissertation offers a detailed understanding of the meanings that a group of Black parents attached to their choice, and it presents an in-depth look at the

processes that individual parents went through in their search to find their children a good education. In doing so, this body adds the voices, knowledge and experiences of Black parents to the ongoing conversation about improving the education of Black children.

Definitions of a Good Education: Findings

A central question of this dissertation was: Among a group of Black parents who choose charter schools for their children, what issues and themes are represented in their talk about their choice? Through talking about their own experiences in school, their observations of their children's experiences, their philosophies about what their children needed, and their hopes about what their children would be able to obtain through receiving a good education, this group of parents thematically defined a good education in four ways. Above all else, their children's schools had to be ones in which their children *learned*. In support of their children's learning and academic success, parents defined a good education as one in which they were involved as parents, and one in which they were involved in a supportive relationship with their children's school and teachers. Lastly, parents defined a good education as one that took into consideration the influence of race and culture on their children's schooling. Often, issues of race and class filtered into parents' ideas about academic success, parental involvement, and relationships between home and school, as illustrated by Figure 1 below:

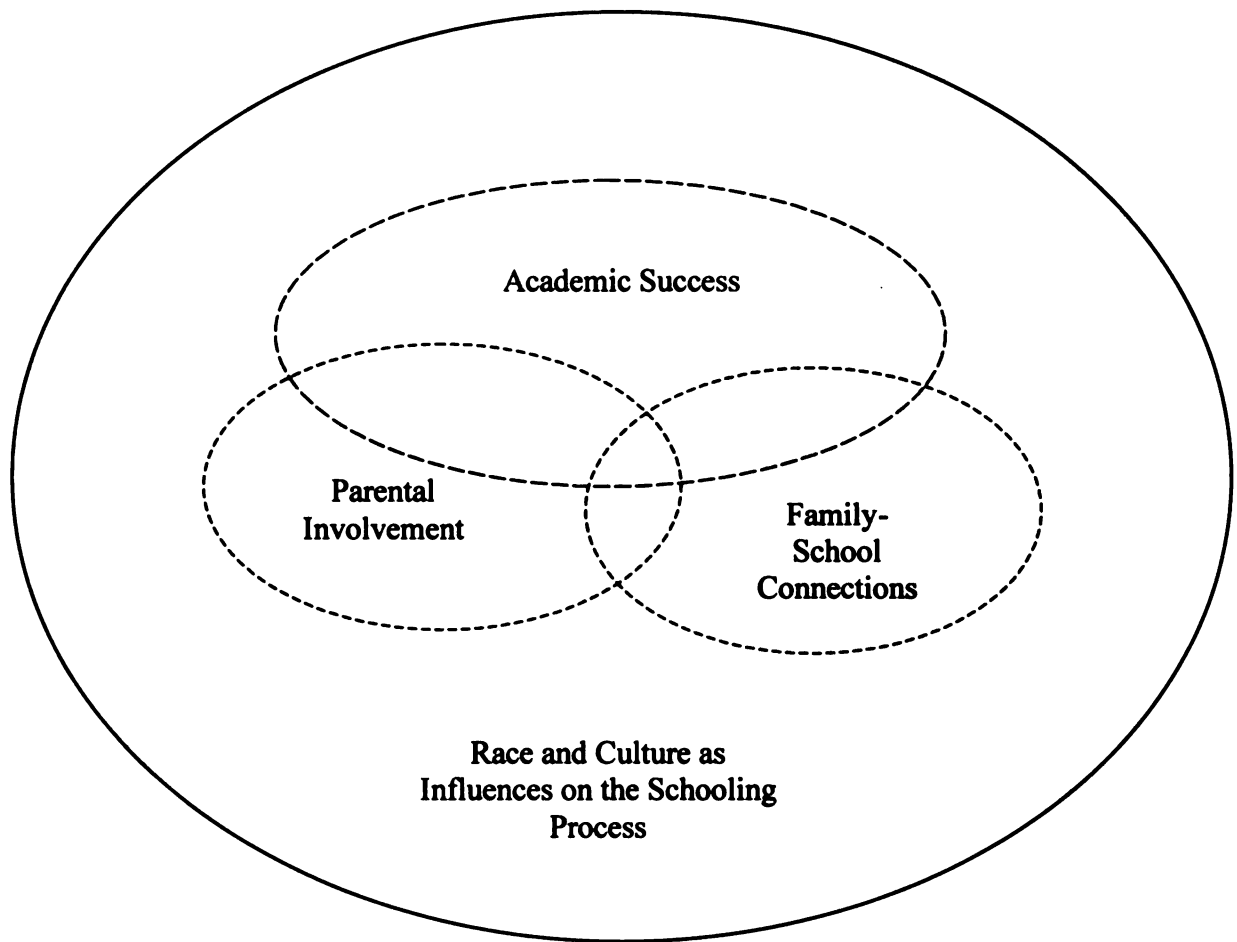


Figure 1: Graphic Representation of Parents' Definitions of a Good Education

The Search for a Good Education: Findings

A second question of this dissertation addressed the process by which parents sought a good education for their children. In looking closely at the interviews of five parents, I was never able to answer this question, at least with the level of depth and detail to which I had aspired when I began the investigation. I did learn some things about process. I found that there were both commonalities and differences within their search processes. As mentioned above, their children's academic success was a non-

negotiable. Each parent placed this as the most important aspect of obtaining a good education, and each parent thought of public schools as not being able to provide their children with a good education. Another similarity was that within parents' description of their search, information obtained through "word of mouth" and actual visits to the potential school were cited the most significant sources of information. That said, it is interesting and significant that parents seldom accepted even the most explicit of invitations, during our many hours of interviews, to unpack the search and selection process.

Implications

One of the most important implications of these findings about the definition and search for a good education is that across the board, Black parents regarded their children's academic success as paramount, and they did not see the public schools as a viable option for their children. At best, public schools were environments that were passable if mediated by heavy parental involvement. At worst, public schools were described as places in which little, if any, learning took place.

Another implication of the present study resides in the way parents' ideas about a good education resonate with the literature on what constitutes "effective" (Sizemore, 1990) or "quality" (Weinberg, 1983) schools, and with the narratives of others about what constituted a good education in their experiences (Shujaa, 1994). This study's support of research and personal narratives seems to indicate that researchers, educators, and policy makers know what works; but that there is a disconnect in making these things happen in the context of public schools, particularly in schools in which the most improvement is needed.

One of the most intriguing implications of this study was the predisposition of parents toward a supportive relationship between family and school. At both schools, there existed an almost imperceptible ease in the way that students, parents, and teachers related to each other. Parents' support of these kinds of connections was as much a product of what they had experienced as children as it was an outcome of their understanding of the ways that relationships between families, communities and schools were becoming increasingly disparate. Parents talked fondly of the way it was when they were growing up, and the interconnectedness of their neighborhoods, families and schools. And, while they reminisced, it was also clear that they saw their present experiences as very different. As Jeremy said,

I don't know whether it's nostalgia or not but I just hope that we're not losing that, and to me, in, in a lot of ways it's inevitable because the more we become a part of the main stream you know...we're moving to different places, you know, where as my grandparents lived in their town for after they came up south for their whole lives, I've already lived in three four different places, you know, five different places, so you kind of lose that sense of community in a lot of different ways... I think I kind of romanticize the past a little bit, you know, in terms of finding, you know, a situation for Jada like I had as a kid...it's a different world...

For parents, like Jeremy, who were living a middle class lifestyle, it seemed that through having their children in a charter school, they could regain, or at the very least, maintain, a sense of "connection" between their family and their children's school. In this way, some parents' decisions to enroll their children in a charter school were viewed as an opportunity to connect with the sense of community they had as children.

Conversely, other parents seemed to want to circumvent the communities that surrounded them by isolating themselves and their children within their homes, and this was particularly true for those parents living in Orange City. For these parents, it was

extremely important that they keep their children *away* from the negativity that they perceived to exist within their community. Perhaps the most dismal and disturbing conversation with a parent about their community took place when I interviewed LaTrice Morgan for the first time. There was one way in and one way out of LaTrice's neighborhood, which had been blocked off several years ago to prevent a flow-through of traffic, much of which was drug-related. When I asked LaTrice to describe the neighborhood, she said it was "active, sometimes violent, and quiet, sometimes quiet...And by us not being like, directly on the corner, you don't know a lot of stuff goes on down here unless you hear like gunshots or something..." Although LaTrice made a distinction between the houses on her street and the projects that were a couple of blocks down, she plainly recognize that the "trouble" of living in close proximity to the projects (nicknamed "The Gardens") was still very much a threat to her children:

They (LaTrice's children) tell me "We can't go in The Gardens, we can't go near The Gardens." ...And I'm like, "You sure can't." And they think all bad kids come from The Gardens and I have to tell them, "No, everybody that comes from down there is not bad," you know. A lot of them are, not everybody in there. And they're like, "Oh yes, they are." But the kids come from down the street and they talk, I mean, you know, they talk real bad now like they are grown, some of the kids. And they (her children) are like, "Ma, they live in The Gardens, don't they?" ...I'll say, "Just cuz they acting bad don't mean they live in The Gardens." But most of them do, most of them do...

All of the parents living in Orange City expressed a concern that their children be isolated from the increasingly prominent negative elements in their communities. For these parents, Orange City Academy was a safe haven, and it presented for them the possibility that their children would not have to deal with the problems that children in the neighborhood public schools had to face—violence, overcrowding and apathy. Within Jeremy and LaTrice's contrasting examples, there exists a further implication of this

study. What constitutes a good education in parents' minds is at least in some part influenced by the communities in which parents live.

Future Research

Building on the point above, future research on Black parents' choice of charter schools should closely examine the dynamics of communities in which parents can choose charter schools. By examining the issues from this more sociological perspective, it may be possible to gain a more systemic understanding of how the educational success and quality of school serving Black children can be increased.

This study focused on Black parents who had selected charter schools for their children. In future research, we need to tell the stories of Black parents who have access to charter schools but decline the opportunity. We need to understand how and why they decided to keep their children in public schools. In particular, research which utilizes a narrative life history approach may allow researchers to understand how race, family, education, community come together to shape parents' ideas about what they should do in order to provide their children with a good education.

Lastly, future research should focus on understanding the experiences of Black children as they progress through charter schools or are a part of different kinds of school environments, so as to better understand, from a student's perspective, what a good education "looks like."

Conclusion

Most of the parents interviewed were happy with the charter school that they had selected; they had the sense that their child was succeeding academically, that they were able to be involved in their child's education, that there was a strong sense of connection

to the schools they had selected, and that the schools attempted, each in their own way, to address the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of their student population. However, two things remain troubling about the choices these parents have made. First, as many opponents to charter and choice have reiterated, when parents choose to “disinvest” in public schools, the result for those students that stay in the public schools is usually negative.

Secondly, in talking with several parents about their level of satisfaction with the school they had selected, they indicated that they were willing to take their child out if they began to perceive that their child was not doing well academically, or if they perceived other problems with their child’s education related to the themes discussed in this study. With this in mind, we could ask ourselves if charter schools promote or hinder the responsibility and commitment of parents to make the schools that they do have in their communities better. Undeniably, charter schools and school choice policies encourage and support an individualistic orientation toward education—as Pamela stated “I have to do what’s best for my child.” Although charter schools may buttress communities that are already cohesive, there is little research to suggest that charter schools and choice programs do anything to empower communities of people rather than individuals, especially when individual's communities are in the process of unraveling. Proponents of charter schools argued that the existence of charter schools will promote a competitive environment in which public schools would have to “put up or shut up.” Instead, in some districts in Michigan, public schools have either “put up or shut down.” And, when a school closes, an important piece of what makes a community vibrant and positive goes with it, as other researchers have shown (Dempsey & Noblit, 1994). I think

though, that asking about the responsibility and commitment of parents is only addressing a small piece of the problem.

As researchers and educators, we need to ask how empowered the parents actually are in making these choices. After all, they are still choosing from a limited number of schools. More important, if parents don't like the schools that they choose, often their only recourse is to go back to the public schools they have openly rejected. When parents have to struggle in order to ensure the basic personal and educational needs of their children—that their children are able to obtain books that are “just sitting in the gym waiting for someone to pass them out,” or that their children are able to have toilet paper and soap when they go into the restroom, or that their classrooms are free from excessive dust and dirt, or that their children go to school without fear of being physically injured by bullies—empowering parents to make change in their children's schooling takes on a whole different light than what is in the minds of those who support choice and charter schools.

We have to ask ourselves, in these circumstances, what would I do? If I considered my neighborhood public school substandard, and the teachers and administrators within it unresponsive, what would I want for my child? What principles would I uphold? One fact is made clear by my research. Many urban public schools are sick and dying, and many Black parents recognize this and take steps to remove their children from these environments. As individuals, these Black parents are hoping to ensure the academic and social success of their children. However, when it comes to the academic and social success of all *children*, charter schools allows us to live the fantasy that if public schools are forced to get better, they will. The reality is that many don't.

In answering the main research questions of my dissertation, many other important questions are raised. For example, if many "traditional" public schools close their doors for good, and the problems they experienced begin to manifest themselves in charter schools, will someone propose a new kind of school that will eventually put charter schools out of business? And, if this cycle repeats itself, what will happen to the children and parents who are pawns in this game? Most significantly, my research leaves two important and serious questions unanswered and open for further research—

Under what circumstances will Black parents and communities be truly empowered through education?

Will Black children, as a group, ever receive a “good education?”

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

List of Charter Schools with Legislation and Number of Operating Charter Schools

State	# Operating Charter Schools
Minnesota	38
California	145
Colorado	60
Georgia	27
Massachusetts	34
Michigan	132
New Mexico	5
Wisconsin	30
Arizona	180
Hawaii	2
Kansas	15
Alaska	17
Delaware	4
Louisiana	10
Rhode Island	2
Connecticut	16
DC	18
Florida	70
Illinois	14
New Jersey	30
North Carolina	59
South Carolina	5
Texas	87
Mississippi, Nevada	1
Ohio	15
Pennsylvania	31
Idaho	2
Missouri, Virginia, Utah, Arkansas, New Hampshire, Wyoming	0

Data for table obtained from the State of Charter Schools Third Year Report (May 1999)
The number of schools in operation is based on data obtained by September 1998.

APPENDIX B

Dissertations Related to Parents' Educational Decision-Making

Name, Date	Data Type	Participant Characteristics	Questions Asked	Results
Moran, P.W. 1994	Telephone Interview	All El. School parents in a midwest district requesting a school transfer in a 7 month period	Parents' demographic characteristics, School selection factors which influenced decisions, how long parents considered transfer before making decision	Parent choices somewhat segregated by SES. Students historically most successful are those that are transferring. Convenience and instructional program were most important reasons given for transfer
Gibson, M.W. 1994	Surveys and telephone interview	Private school parents in 3 districts	What motivates parents to choose a private school?	Parents who chose religious schools gave following reasons: religion, moral values, warmth of school climate, small class size, committed teachers. Parents who chose independent schools gave following reasons: small class size, committed teachers, quality curriculum, quality instruction, responsiveness to parent expectations
Roden, M.D. 1992	Survey	Suburban parents in an open enrollment district	What decision- making factors are related to open enrollment? What factors lead parents to choose differently?	Most parents said student safety was most important factor. Academic factors were also important. Race and decision-making factors were statistically related

Joyce, C. F. 1992	Survey Semi-focused interview	Parents in 2 school choice districts	Reasons for choosing a public elementary school of choice?	Eight most important reasons: teacher quality, school order, discipline, specialized curriculum, teacher morale teacher accessibility, school responsiveness, multi- approaches to teaching. Least important were similar family income and similar ethnic backgrounds
Griffeth, R.H. 1991	Survey	Parents of Sec. school children who enroll them in independent schools	Reasons for choosing an independent secondary school?	Academic emphasis, including college preparation, strong curriculum, capable and caring teachers were most important reasons. Personal attention and good discipline were next most important categories of reasons. High self- esteem, cleanliness and safety of the school were also cited.
Omamn, E.M. 1997	Survey, Focus groups, observation, and in-depth interviews	6 low income parents who were given a tuition scholarship by a private foundation	Influences & factors which influenced parents of low income students to make a school choice?	Family values, discipline to promote safety, caring atmosphere. Teachers seen as caregivers and basic skills curriculum advocated by the school.
Lobdell, D.R. 1995	10 in-depth interviews23 random sample surveys, review of literature	Parents who applied for a school site transfer or were moved to a site other than the assigned school	Perceptions of El. School parents regarding children's schooling experiences?	Themes affecting transfer decision or school choice decisions included interpersonal relationships with staff, safety and student interpersonal relationships, educational quality, family perceptions of a caring school environment

APPENDIX C

Contact Letters and Consent Form

Letter to Umoja Shule Parents

(Date)

**Heather M. Pleasants
900 Long Blvd. 291
Lansing, MI 48911**

**Name of parent
Street address of parent
City, State, Zip code**

Dear (Name of parent):

My name is Heather Pleasants and I am a volunteer at Umoja Shule. I am also a graduate student at Michigan State University. I am writing to you because your name was chosen from a list of parents at Umoja Shule, and I am interested in including you in a research project I am completing. I would like to talk with you about how and why you chose Umoja Shule for your child. I am also interested in talking with you about how you have been involved in Umoja Shule.

If you agree to participate, an African American children's book will be donated to Umoja Shule in your name, and you would be entered in a "parent lottery." If your name is selected from this lottery, you will receive \$25.00.

I hope that you will consider participating in my project. I have talked with Dr. _____ and we think that your perspective will help to increase the awareness and understanding of the involvement of African Americans in charter schools. I will contact you in a couple of days to answer my questions you might have and to talk with you further about the possibility of including you in my project. If you have any questions about this letter or my project, please do not hesitate to call me at 694-0717. Thank you very much for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,

Heather Pleasants

Letter to Orange City Academy Parents

Hello!

My name is Heather Pleasants,
and I'm a student at Michigan State
University. (That's me on the right). I'm
working on a research project that
will help people understand
why and how African American
parents are choosing charter schools
for their children.

I would like to call you to tell you more about my research project. If you wouldn't mind talking with me, please print your name and phone number below and return this letter to your child's teacher. This will not obligate you to participate in any way and your name and phone number will remain confidential—I will not share this information with anyone.

By returning this letter with your name and phone number, your name will be entered in a special "parent lottery." One parent will be randomly chosen and will receive \$50.00.

If you do not wish to be contacted, simply return this letter to your child's teacher without signing it or including your phone number. If you have questions about this letter, my research project, or would like to help me by being interviewed (but do not want to be contacted), you can call me at (517) 694-0717. I would be more than happy to talk with you!

As a parent, I know your time is valuable—thank you for reading this letter! I hope that you will consider being a part of my project.

Sincerely,

Heather M. Pleasants

Your Name: _____

Telephone:
() _____

Teacher And Parent Consent Form

Hello—

My name is Heather Pleasants, and I am doing research on alternative schools. I would like to learn as much as I can about the experiences, educational values, and beliefs of people involved in alternative school settings. As part of this research, I would like to interview you (each interview would last approximately 1 and ½ hours or less) during the year in order to find out about your own experiences.

Additionally, I would like to observe in some of the classrooms of the school (approximately 10-20 times, for about 3-4 hours each time) and observe school events. To insure your confidentiality, I will not use your name or the names of teachers, students, or the school in anything that I write from this research. Tapes of your interviews will be listened to only by the investigators in the research project. Every effort will be made to protect your identity (through the use of pseudonyms) and the confidentiality of any information that will be gained through your interviews. Should you agree to be interviewed, our conversations would be scheduled at a time and place convenient for you, including at your home if that is what you prefer.

Please read the following paragraph and indicate whether you consent to be interviewed for this project.

I understand that my interviews can be shared with me upon my request, and that this information will remain confidential. I understand that fieldnotes and tape recordings will be used in observations of classrooms and school events, but that my name, students' names, names of other teachers and parents, and the name of the school will not be identified in any research reports. I understand that the interviews will last approximately 1 and ½ hours each or less. I also understand that these interviews will be conducted to gather information on the experiences, educational values, and beliefs of people involved in an alternative school, and I understand that I am free to discontinue my participation in these interviews at any time, without penalty.

I give my consent to participate in these interviews _____

Signature

Date _____

If you would like more information about this research or have other specific questions, please feel free to contact Heather Pleasants at (517) 694-0717. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Heather M. Pleasants

APPENDIX D

Interview Protocols

First Interview Protocol

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, your background, what you do for fun, things like that?

What do you remember about your elementary school experiences?

What do you think was most important about your elementary school experiences?

What do you remember about your junior high experiences?

What do you think was most important about your junior high experiences?

What do you remember about your high school experiences?

What do you think was most important about your high school experiences?

What do you remember about your college experiences?

What do you think was most important about your college experiences?

If you are in college now, can you tell me a little bit about what you're doing, what you majoring in, what you hope to do with your degree.

What aspects of your grade school and college experiences have had the least value?

What were your parents' definitions of education and ideas about its purpose?

Did your parents influence your ideas about education and its purpose?

Were there other people who influenced your ideas about education and its purpose?

How are your own ideas similar or different?

Now that you have a child, what do you think about education and its purpose?

How did your ideas about school develop?

First Interview Protocol (Final Revision)

PAST-FAMILY

Visualize a mental picture of three important events that happened to you when you were between the ages of one and ten—describe these events and their significance.

Visualize a mental picture of three important events that happened to you when you were between the ages eleven and twenty—describe these events and their significance.

Visualize a mental picture of three important events that happened to you when you were between the ages of twenty-one and now—describe these events and their significance.

How would you say your parents raised you?

PRESENT-FAMILY

Do you take the same approach with your children?

Tell me about your children—their personalities, things they like to do.

Tell me about your immediate family (ages, occupations, etc.)

How would you describe your relationship with your immediate family?

PRESENT-WORK

How long have you been working at _____?

What do you enjoy/dislike about your job _____?

Where did you work/what did you do before that?

In terms of work, where do you see yourself in one year, five years, and ten years?

RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY

Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person?

Where do your beliefs come from?

ETHNICITY

What are your feelings about being a Black man/woman?

Where do these feelings come from?

What are the most important struggles/obstacles that Black people have to face?

What are particular strengths to Black people have as a people?

COMMUNITY

How would you describe the neighborhood you live in?

What do you like/dislike about the neighborhood?

How would you describe the neighborhood where you grew up?

Where do you think you'll be living in five years, ten years?

What do you remember about your elementary school experiences?

What do you think was most important about your elementary school experiences?

What do you remember about your junior high school experiences?

What do you think was most important about your junior high school experiences?

What do you remember about your high school experiences?

What do you think was most important about your high school experiences?

What do you remember about your college experiences?

What do you think was most important about your college experiences?

If you are in college now, can you tell me a little bit about what you're doing—what you're majoring in, what you hope to do with your degree?

What aspects of your grade school and college experiences have had the most/least value?

How did you develop your ideas about school? Where did these ideas come from?

What were your parents' definitions and ideas about education and its purpose?

Did your parents influence your ideas about education and its purpose?

Were there other people who influenced your ideas about education and its purpose?

How are your own ideas similar or different?

Now that you have a child, what are your ideas about education?

Second Interview Protocol

How have things been going for _____ this year at (Name of School)?

If you were to list the five most important reasons for enrolling your child in (Name of School), what would those be?

DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

What is the story of how you decided to enroll your child in (Name of School)?

What were your perceptions of your child's first school?

Tell me about why you disenrolled your children from that school.

When did you first think about enrolling your child in a different school? What were your thoughts? Did you act on those thoughts?

What made you choose (Name of School) over other schools?

Looking back, how would you describe your decision-making process?

Are you happy with the decision that you've made? Is (Name of School) everything you thought it would be?

What does your family think about the decision you made to enroll your children here?

What do your friends/family think about the decision you made to enroll your children here?

Second Interview Protocol (Revision)

The first thing that I want you to do today is to tell me the story of all that went into your decision to put _____ into (Name of School). I'd like you to take a moment, and think of the first time you had thoughts about _____ going into kindergarten or preschool, and begin your story at that point.

OTHER QUESTIONS ASKED TO ELICIT FURTHER INFORMATION

If you were to list the five most important reasons for enrolling your child in (Name of School), what would those be?

What is the story of how you decided to enroll your child in (Name of School)?

What were your perceptions of your child's first school?

Tell me about why you disenrolled your children from that school.

When did you first think about enrolling your child in a different school? What were your thoughts? Did you act on those thoughts?

What made you choose (Name of School) over other schools?

Looking back, how would you describe your decision-making process?

Are you happy with the decision that you've made? Is (Name of School) everything you thought it would be?

What does your family think about the decision you made to enroll your children here?

What do your friends/family think about the decision you made to enroll your children here?

Interview Protocol Used with Principals and Teachers

Did you begin your working life in education?

How did you become familiar with the (Name of School)?

How is the (Name of School) different from other public schools?

(For Principal Only) Who is the school chartered through? How is it organized?

In your own words, what are the guiding ideas behind the (Name of School)?

Who is your staff composed of?

How are parents involved in the school?

Tell me about the curriculum.

How do you manage student behavior?

Who do you feel accountable to?

Why do you think parents have come to this school?

What changes have occurred from when the school was first founded?

Have there been any changes this year at the school? Are there any major events, changes planned for next year?

What are the strengths/challenges of the school?

What is your vision for the future of the school?

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Name (Please Print)

2. Date _____

3. Please describe your marital status and your family unit (who lives in your current household)

4. In the space below, please give your child's name/children's name and age(s).

5. If your child attended a school before being enrolled in Sankofa, please list the school(s) below:

6. Education (Please Circle Highest Level Attained)

Junior High School

Undergraduate Degree

High School

College-Graduate

High School Diploma

Graduate Degree

Community College

Degree from Community College

College-Undergraduate

7. If you have taken college courses, please give your major and degree attained (if applicable)

8. What is your occupation? Please respond below:

9. Please circle the category below which best describes your immediate family's

yearly income level:

under 4,999	5,000-9,999	10,000-15,999	16,000-19,999
20,000-24,999	25,000-29,999	30,000-34,999	35,000-39,999
40,000-49,999	50,000-59,999	60,000-69,999	70,000-99,999
100,000 and above			

FINAL NOTE:

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