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African American Parent Perspectives On School Segregation And Integration

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AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT PERSPECTIVES
ON SCHOOL SEGREGATION AND INTEGRATION

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching.

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CHAPTER ONE

Research Rationale and Context

Introduction

Nearly 60 years after the Supreme Court ruled constitutional separate schools for white children and black children with *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the Court overturned this “separate but equal” ruling with the unanimous decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Supporters hoped the ruling would mark “the beginning of the end of the dual society in American life and the system...of segregation which supports it,” (qtd. in Patterson, 2001). Over 60 years since the *Brown* decision, however, the majority of American public schools are once again racially isolated. For this reason, many have viewed the effort to integrate American schools as a failure, and education reformers have focused on other tactics for improving schools. In this project, I seek the perspectives of African American parents and students who attend segregated and integrated schools to find out if integration efforts could be worth revisiting. My research question is: *What are African American parent perspectives on segregation and integration in a large urban district in the Midwest?*

Chapter Overview:

This chapter will discuss first my rationale for exploring the potential of reviving integration efforts. This research question has significant implications for rectifying the nation’s severe achievement gap between white students and students of color. Next, I will provide historical context for contemporary issues of segregation and integration, and personal context that includes my own transformative educational experiences that

have led to a passion for this topic. Finally, I will review my research question and prepare the reader for the literature review that follows in Chapter 2.

Context and Rationale for Research:

In the years since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, an emphasis on data and achievement has created a national climate of high stakes standardized testing and has awakened Americans to the “achievement gap” between white students and students of color. There exist decades of data showing that students of color—specifically, African American, Latino, and Native American students—perform well below their white peers. This well-documented phenomenon is known as the *achievement gap*.

The relationship between the achievement gap and the nation’s economic gap between white and black people is cyclical, and the consequences ripple across cities, communities, and generations. Compared to white people, black people earn less income, own less wealth, and are more likely to live in poverty (Condron, 2013). Education is directly related to these disparities: Students who struggle academically have fewer choices for continuing education after high school and are more likely to drop out. Students who drop out are also more likely to hold a criminal record. In a globalized, postindustrial economy with fewer skilled labor jobs than previous generations, there are few job options with a living wage for less educated workers (Massey, 2007, qtd. in Condron). The cycle of economic inequality continues when people living in poverty send their own children to under-resourced schools that fail to adequately educate them to the degree they educate white students. It is difficult to break out of the cycle of poverty without an education that gives students the knowledge and skills for better-paying

jobs—and, for reasons I will explore, it is difficult for parents of color in poverty to send their children to higher performing schools.

During the first decade of this century, many education reform efforts concentrated on identifying and closing “failing” schools while also expanding charter school options. Meanwhile, leaders in education and policy largely ignored re-segregation and its possible role in contributing to the achievement gap. In Congressman John Lewis’s memoir *Walking with the Wind*, he comments on the political trend away from integration: “What is happening right now in the poorest communities of America—which are largely black communities—is the worst situation black America has faced since slavery.” Of the movement toward school vouchers and the undoing of court-ordered integration, Lewis says these measures have turned us away from one another “into separate tribes,” eating away at the fragile ties “that hold the most tenuous parts of our society together.” Furthermore, he argues, Black activists who dismiss integration are “an affront to the struggle of hundreds of thousands of people, black and white, who devoted and in many cases sacrificed their lives for the principles it is now so fashionable to dismiss” (in Kozol, 2005). Given the complex factors involved in creating the demographics of our schools, I wondered if black and brown parents would agree with Lewis today, and if integrated schools are educating black and brown children better than segregated and apartheid schools. My research intends to illuminate whether efforts to integrate schools are worth renewing because of their potential to close the achievement gap. For those schools that are racially and culturally diverse, I am interested in African American parents’ perceptions of how these learning environments impact their children’s development.

Transformative Educational Experiences

My personal interest in equity stems from my own experiences as a white, middle class student in a racially, culturally diverse high school in a mid-sized Midwestern city. Our district housed many of the accelerated and AP courses in a separate building downtown, which made clear the contrast between the mostly white demographics of the advanced program and the substantial racial and cultural diversity of my home high school. It was obvious that our district's accelerated program did not reflect the diversity of our city, and I wondered why. As the editor of our school newspaper, several staff members and I reported on the disproportionate suspension rate between white students and students of color in our home high school. This investigation was the beginning of my exposure to the "school to prison pipeline" and the discipline policies that disproportionately affect students of color and their access to a fair and adequate education.

At my mostly white private college, I remained deeply proud of my high school and the experiences I had been privileged to have because of my relationships with people different from me. As I became aware of the existence of some culturally focused charter and public schools, however, I began to wonder if learning in a diverse school environment was as beneficial or more beneficial to students of color than learning in a racially segregated school environment. As a white student, I was not in a position to decide integrated schools were the answer to the achievement gap simply because they had worked for *me*.

I had the opportunity to explore this question during a semester studying abroad in Quito, Ecuador. I interned at a K-8 school for indigenous students, where the

curriculum included Quechua language classes and traditional medicine and healing practices. This school, which was affirming and revitalizing Quechua culture in a new generation of *indigenas*, clearly benefitted the youngest members of the most socially oppressed demographic in Quito. Yet the director of the school expressed to me that as a new eighth grade class approached graduation each year, the students experienced intense anxiety about entering the “regular” school system for high school, where they would face racial discrimination from both students and teachers. In my case study of this school, I determined that their culturally focused program nurtured students in innumerable ways, but did not adequately prepare them for success in their diverse city.

I now teach fourth grade at an urban public elementary school with 39 percent black and East African students, 30 percent Hispanic students, 19 percent white students, 9 percent Native American students, and 3 percent Asian and Pacific Islander American students. Our school is one of a few that closely reflect the diversity of our large metropolitan school district in the Midwest. My colleagues and I hope that this provides our students with opportunities to learn how to communicate and work across differences—invaluable skills for preparing them to be committed citizens in an increasingly diverse and globalized society. But is this setting so effective for improving achievement that it is worth replicating on a large scale? That is, would re-energized efforts to re-integrate public schools help to eliminate the achievement gap?

My answer as a former white student may not be the same as the parent of a black or brown student. Nekima Levy Armstrong, for example, a former president of the Minneapolis NAACP, argues that segregation is not the problem causing inequality in housing, education, and quality of life—the issue is a lack of investment in black

communities (Gee, 2016). In her view, racially isolated neighborhoods and schools could thrive if given equal access to certain resources. On the other hand, alumni who did attend successfully integrated schools post-*Brown* have described the power their experiences gave them to break social barriers in spite of institutional norms (Eick, 2011). Additional parent perspectives will be essential to paint a full picture of what role, if any, school demographics play in students' academic and social development.

Conclusion

This chapter began with the historic *Brown* decision that declared schools separated by race inherently unequal. I then explained that despite this landmark case, American schools remain significantly segregated by race and income. Within and among segregated schools, there exists a crisis-level achievement gap between white students and students of color. The reasons behind our re-segregated school system are varied, and the social, political, and economic context in 2017 is markedly different from 1954. But the civil rights issue remains the same: Students of color deserve to receive the same quality education as their white counterparts, and if they are not achieving the same standards, then there is a difference in the quality of their educational experience. The hopes of those who fought for *Brown*, that economic and social inequalities could disappear, and there could be opportunity for all, have not yet been realized. In part, this is because integration efforts did not fully succeed. People who resisted integration by any degree left their communities and self-segregated in new locations. Court cases like *Parents Involved v. Seattle* made it impossible for school districts to enact enrollment policies based on race. In 2019, though there are new challenges, perhaps there are new strategies for integrating schools.

This chapter also discussed my personal rationale for exploring this topic. My friends and classmates of color enriched and challenged my life as a white, middle class student. Our relationships and shared experiences prepared me for life in a complicated world. But as a white educator, I cannot impose my privileged experiences on others. Instead, this project calls for the voices and stories of parents of color, to examine how school demographics affect student achievement. Chapter 2 will review the literature related to re-segregation, racial isolation, integration efforts, and student achievement. In Chapter 3, I will discuss the methodology for conducting my action research, including quantitative data analysis and narrative interviews. Chapter 4 will include my analysis, and Chapter 5 will conclude with my findings and the implications for policy and practice.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Introduction

This capstone project explores the question: *What are African American parent perspectives on segregation and integration in a large urban district in the Midwest?*

Chapter 2 begins with an explanation of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a relevant framework for educational research with a transformational worldview. The next section more deeply examines counterstorytelling as a methodology that derives from CRT and seeks to give voice to those outside dominant positions of power. My goals for this capstone include spurring social action and foregrounding the voices of African American parents; CRT is therefore a natural theoretical fit.

The next section of this chapter explains how the *Brown v. Board* decision may be considered a symbolic, rather than substantive civil rights victory, and traces the causes and effects of re-segregation over the last several decades. Next, the chapter discusses African American family engagement in schools and African American perspectives on school choice. The existing literature not only provides important perspectives for consideration, but also highlights methodological approaches relevant to this study. Finally, Chapter 2 concludes with a discussion of the academic, social, and emotional effects of segregation on African American students.

Critical Race Theory

Critical theory, as it applies to schools, may be defined as a set of working assumptions about education that “question and analyze educational aims, institutions, curriculum, instruction, and relationships in order to raise consciousness and bring about

transformative change in society and education” (Gutek, 2000, p. 309). Critical race theory, or CRT, is the radical movement and theoretical framework that seeks to transform the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado, Stefancic, and Liendo, 2012). This section will define essential terms and provide an overview of the guiding principles of critical race theory as it applies to education. I will also examine common criticisms of CRT and conclude with the recommendations of CRT researchers for future scholarship.

It will be necessary to define the terms race and racism before defining critical race theory. My working definition of race derives from Omi and Winant’s (1994) *theory of racial formation*, which postulates that race is socially constructed in a process by which “social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings” (p. 12). So while Delgado et al (2012) define race as any “notion of a distinct biological type of human being, usually based on skin color,” for me, it is key to consider the process by which this notion of race is ascribed to another human being. Race, for Omi and Winant, is a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world; it is “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle” (p. 13-15). Like Capper (2015), I also find Wellman’s (1993) definition of *racism* helpful: “culturally sanctioned beliefs, which, regardless of intentions involved, defend the advantages whites have because of the subordinated position of racial minorities.”

Critical race theory emergences from the field of legal studies and posits five (Delgado, 2012) or six central tenets that make up its framework (Capper, 2015; Dixon

and Rousseau, 2005; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw, 1993). Since Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) first extended CRT to the field of education, scholars such as Capper (2015) have adapted these tenets:

1. **Racism is endemic to American life.** In other words, racism is deeply and permanently embedded in American institutions. Capper explains the necessity for educational leaders, particularly white leaders, to understand that working against racism is a life-long process. The problem of racism is not simply ‘solved’ by confronting one’s own racist beliefs, attending diversity trainings, engaging meaningfully with people of color, and even improving the educational outcomes of students of color. Because of how deeply racism is ingrained in American life, reversing its effects requires change on an institutional level (p. 801).
2. **Whiteness as property.** Ladson-Billings and Tate trace the centrality of property to American society back to the colonists’ seizure of and settlement on Native American land, to the military conquest of the Mexicans, to the construction of Africans as property (p. 53). Harris (1993) goes on to show how the importance of property in American life connects to the racism embedded in American life, explaining that “whiteness and property share a common premise—a conceptual nucleus—of a right to exclude” (p. 1707, in Capper, 2015).

In American education, this exclusion has been present throughout history and continuing today, starting with the denial of access to any school for African Americans during slavery, segregated schools, white flight, vouchers, public funding of private schools, schools of choice, and tracking (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005). It can further be seen in the ‘typical’ curriculum of a traditional public

school, which maintains a “white supremacist master script” that mutes and erases the stories of African Americans whenever they challenge the dominant culture’s authority and power (Ladson-Billings, 1998, in Capper). Finally, Ladson-Billings argues that *any* racial equity initiative that does not directly address and confront power, privilege, and the embeddedness of racism *is itself* preserving and protecting whiteness as property.

3. Acknowledging majoritarian narratives and responding with

counterstorytelling. This tenet of CRT relies on the notion that majoritarian, or dominant narratives in American society serve to protect and promote institutional racism. As Delgado (1989) explains, the dominant group tells stories that remind it of its identity in relation to outgroups and normalize its privileged position (in Dixson and Rousseau, 2005). One common majoritarian narrative, for example, includes the idea that intelligence is genetically determined, and racial inequities confirm this. Another majoritarian narrative explains differences in achievement by differences in talent, concluding that resources are best invested in ‘worthy’ high-performing students than in their lower performing peers (Pollack and Zirkel, 2013, in Capper).

Given the dominance of majoritarian narratives, an area of CRT known as ‘voice scholarship’ focuses providing a ‘counterstory’ as a means of challenging the dominant story (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005, p. 11). These stories, once analyzed through a CRT lens, ideally galvanize substantive social action. This chapter will discuss counterstorytelling to a much greater extent later in this chapter.

- 4. Interest convergence.** This is the idea that progress toward racial equality only occurs when whites also benefit. For example, white principals who promote African American teachers can then claim to support equity and culturally responsive teaching, even if they only have a superficial understanding of these issues (Knaus, 2014, in Capper). The monumental passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 is cited over and over by CRT scholars as a prime example of interest convergence. This will be discussed further in this chapter's section on re-segregation.
- 5. Critique of liberalism.** Critical Race Theory rejects widely accepted liberal ideas such as colorblindness, meritocracy, and the neutrality of the law. When an educator claims not to "see" race or denies that race matters, or when educators are unaware of the ways their schools are not race neutral, this is colorblindness in action (Capper, 2015). Colorblindness is particularly dangerous because it ignores the permanence of racism and the impact of racism on an individual's educational experiences.
- 6. Intersectionality.** Tate (1997) explains that the goal of CRT is "the elimination of racial oppression as part of the larger goal of eradicating all forms of oppression" (cited in Capper, 2015). Therefore, CRT must acknowledge its roots in legal studies and embrace its intersectionality with gender studies, ethnic studies, history, and sociology, in order to work toward the ultimate aim of racial justice.

Critical Race Theory has evolved over twenty years in the field of educational scholarship and has been subject to criticism since its beginning. In its early days, mainstream legal scholars such as Richard Posner called CRT the 'lunatic core' of

‘radical legal egalitarianism’ (Crenshaw, 2011, in Ledesma and Calderón, 2015). CRT has also been criticized for being pessimistic and lacking remedies. Further, CRT scholar Robin Hughes issues a stern warning to emerging researchers not to adopt CRT simply because it is trendy, a phenomenon she calls being “CRTilicious” (in Ledesma and Calderón). Though CRT is no longer a new theoretical lens, it is still vulnerable to criticism, which is why Hughes urges scholars to be wary of works that simply ‘sprinkle CRT here and there’ amidst the text. Ladson-Billings (2013) agrees: “Just because a scholar looks at race in her work does not make her a critical race theorist” (in Capper, 2015). Therefore, Critical Race scholarship, in order to remain powerful and resonant, needs to be thorough and rigorous (Ledesma and Calderón).

Given both the transformational power of CRT and its somewhat vulnerable position in academia, Ledesma and Calderón suggest that whenever possible, scholars should connect CRT to its historical roots, meaning ethnic studies, women’s studies, and history. Additionally, scholars need to place at the center of their work communities of color, especially as they seek remedies and practical suggestions. Dixson and Rousseau (2005) further emphasize the importance of analyzing counterstories with the express aim of spurring social action.

My impetus for researching African American parent perspectives on segregation is my own long-held interest in the effects of segregation on students and families. I am convinced that the most productive, ethical, and potentially transformative lens through which I might analyze the voices of these experts is CRT. Given the role of counterstorytelling as a CRT method, the next part of this chapter explains this research approach.

Counterstorytelling as a Narrative Research Approach

This section continues with definitions of narrative inquiry and counterstorytelling as a narrative research approach derived from critical race theory. The first part explains how narrative inquiry builds on sociocultural theory. The second part of the section delineates how counterstorytelling works as a methodology of critical race theory and transformational worldview. Finally, this section will build the case for counterstorytelling as my methodological approach.

Narrative inquiry builds on sociocultural theory, which seeks to understand how human actions are related to their social context (Moen, 2006, p. 2). In this type of qualitative study, the researcher seeks to discover “the essence of the experience through an interpretation of the rich, textual data” provided by the participant describing the experience in question (DeMarrais, 2004). It differs from other qualitative research approaches because of the way it reverses the traditional roles between researcher and participant; in narrative inquiry, the researcher is the learner and the participant is the expert on their own experience (DeMarrais, 2004). In other words, narrative privileges the storyteller because the researcher acknowledges the authority of the storyteller (Kramp in DeMarrais, 2004). Attention to the power dynamics between researcher and participant are of utmost importance in this study, given its goal to understand the lived experiences of a historically marginalized group of which I, the author, am not a member.

Counterstorytelling is a method of critical race theory and a form of narrative research. It assumes the major tenets of CRT, including the assumption that the experiences of people of color are racialized, gendered, and classed, and it views these experiences as sources of strength (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It also postulates that, as

individuals who live in a racialized society, there are dominant or majoritarian narratives that privilege white, male, middle class, and other dominant social locations as “normal” or “natural.” For example, the idea that students of color should assimilate to the dominant middle class, white culture of traditional schools, is a majoritarian story. Counterstorytelling, therefore, provides alternative narratives from the points of view of those who are not often heard. Solórzano further describes it as a “tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of the racially privileged” (32). Delgado (1989) notes the historic roots of narratives and their power to preserve and transform: “Oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation (qtd. in Solórzano, p. 32). Counterstorytelling, with its deep historic roots and transformative potential as a research method, is an essential component of a social justice research agenda that empowers the marginalized and eliminates oppression.

There are clear benefits and disadvantages to counterstorytelling as a narrative inquiry approach. Kim (2008) speaks more generally about its usefulness as a way of problematizing the notion that knowledge is objective. As we have seen, the denial of the existence of a plurality of experiences is a majoritarian narrative and therefore subordinates the experiences of people outside social groups in power. Narrative research, therefore, allows researchers to challenge dominant views of education so we can reshape our understanding through the lived experiences of those involved (Kim, 2008).

The disadvantage of using narrative research methodologies in education, however, is the political context in which we are situated. Writing in 2008, Kim argues

that No Child Left Behind ushered in a challenging era for narrative research, wherein the National Research Council called in 2007 for “rigorous, systematic and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge.” Even with the December 2015 passage of ESSA and the potential to move away from high stakes testing, I believe narrative researchers in the field of education still face a challenge in 2017 to prove that their research is rigorous and systematic. Counterstorytelling will never be “objective,” but the idea that knowledge is objective, rather than historically and culturally defined, is both a majoritarian idea and frankly, irrelevant to a study seeking the authentic perspectives of marginalized individuals.

Historical factors leading to re-segregation

This section will discuss the historical factors that have led to the re-segregation of schools. Despite the landmark passage of *Brown v. Board* (1954) over sixty years ago, urban American public schools today are still significantly segregated by race (Kozol, 2005). This section will discuss initial desegregation efforts following the Brown decision. Next, it will examine the economic factors and social policies that result in segregated neighborhoods and exacerbate current patterns of separation. Finally, the third part will discuss litigation around issues of segregation that has passed since *Brown* and its impact on segregation.

Desegregation efforts following *Brown*

In order to understand the current re-segregated state of American public schools, it is important to examine the initial process of desegregation following *Brown*. This monumental case was an extraordinary symbolic victory. While civil rights activists reveled in the victory, opponents of desegregation took to protesting, which sometimes

turned violent. This led some to doubt that the monumental upheaval of public schools for which *Brown* called could actually transpire in such a polarized climate.

Indeed, it took more than a year after the initial *Brown* decision for the Court to pass what became known as *Brown II*. While white protestors rioted in the streets, Justices Black and Douglas worried that the Court “should not issue what it cannot enforce,” and the others were afraid of antagonizing the South by setting time limits for action. Chief Justice Warren knew the Court had limited power to enforce a firm order, especially given the conservative nature of the Congress at the time (Patterson, 2001, p. 83). Finally, the *Brown II* ruling came that district courts must work with schools to “admit to public schools on a racially nondiscriminatory basis with all deliberate speed” the children in question. The mandate “with all deliberate speed” was intentionally vague so as not to further alienate those who would be charged with desegregating schools, but it also meant that nearly ten years passed before substantive desegregation took place under the Civil Rights Act of 1963 (p. 84).

The social and political resistance to desegregation during the 1950s and early 1960s helps explain why it took so long for schools to integrate. It also, though, calls into question the true legacy of *Brown*. South Carolina district judge John Parker famously used *Brown* to rule that the Constitution “does not require integration...It merely forbids the use of governmental power to enforce segregation” (Patterson, p. 85). This is significant because it underscores the resistance to desegregation at all levels of decision-making. Critics of the decision who saw the slow progress of *Brown* and observe today the rapid re-segregation of schools therefore call this monumental litigation symbolic rather than substantive change (McNeal, 2009, p. 563).

Derrick Bell further theorized that the Critical Race Theory tenet of interest convergence also explains both why *Brown* passed when it did and why it ultimately resulted in limited change. *Interest convergence* is the principle that 1. Progress toward racial equality is accommodated only when that interest converges with the interests of whites in policymaking positions and 2. This progress only lasts as long as it is convenient for those in power (Bell, 2004, p. 69). Policymakers in the 1950s, Bell argues, were motivated by the desire to improve the international image of the U.S. democracy in the midst of the Cold War. In its highly public fight against communism, the United States needed to show that all its citizens could enjoy democracy and freedom.

Dixson and Rousseau (2005) extend Bell's argument to explain the failure of desegregation efforts in St. Louis. In order to provide greater racial balance, African American students could attend suburban schools and white students were encouraged to attend magnet programs in city schools. Unfortunately, African American students took advantage of the transfers while few white students did. This resulted in an increase in revenue for the white suburban schools, which ended up becoming the main beneficiaries of the desegregation plan (Morris, 2001, in Dixson and Rousseau). As this pattern persisted across metropolitan areas, Tate et al (1993) suggest that by focusing strictly on the process of physical desegregation, *Brown* neglected other strategies that could have "challenged the fundamental structure of schools that reproduced the same inequitable social hierarchies that existed in society" (in Dixson). In other words, *Brown* failed to undo the structures that had created and perpetuated school segregation in the first place (Harris, 1993, in Dixson).

This phenomenon can be explained by the CRT tenet of whiteness as property. Morris (2001) argues that in the case of St. Louis, the fact that most white parents did not choose to send their children to mostly African American magnet schools signifies their view that a predominantly African American school provides a less valuable education. Furthermore, the advertising used to entice African American families to the white suburban schools “reified this perception that the ‘property’ of city schools was of lower educational value” (Dixson and Rousseau, 2002, p. 20). In St. Louis as in other American cities, whiteness continued to determine a family’s automatic rights and privileges to a high quality education, even after *Brown*.

Economic and social factors of segregation

Re-segregation is due in part to the segregated nature of many cities and communities and in part to litigation and legislation that limits what administrators can and should do to integrate schools. Sixty years after *Brown*, much of the nation still lives in racially isolated neighborhoods, which is reflected in school populations. For the first 350 years of colonial and U.S. development, the government legally imposed the residential segregation of African-Americans by whites. After the 1964 Civil Rights Act, this residential separation became more informal, but the pattern remains. Audit studies show that housing discrimination cuts across a variety of institutions and involves white landlords, homeowners, bankers, realtors, and governmental officials, who discriminate against black renters when the circumstances are right (Feagin, 1999, p. 81).

Besides housing market discrimination, scholars offer two other primary explanations for racial segregation in American neighborhoods: residents’ preferences for neighborhood racial position and differences in socioeconomic status (Spivak and

Monnat, 2013). Spivak and Monnat examine patterns of residential mobility across race and class, suggesting that two dynamics may be happening simultaneously. As incomes rise, people may have greater residential mobility—more choice over where they live. However, existing residential patterns are resistant to economic mobility. For example, the authors suggest, more privileged groups may defend their social and physical space from outsiders, and integration is especially difficult for people of color since their race, unlike income, cannot change (2013).

For those without rising incomes, segregation by race and class is both more likely and more difficult to overcome. Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino have found that since 2000, people in poverty are more and more likely to be living in poor areas, increasingly segregated from those outside poverty (2012). As the income gap widens, the poor are geographically isolated, and African American residents are increasingly likely to live in segregated neighborhoods, regardless of socioeconomic status (Spivak and Monnat, 2013). During the initial period of desegregation, African American children were bussed long distances to integrate formerly all-white schools. Today, bussing is mostly a thing of the past. As neighborhoods remain segregated, so do schools.

The role of litigation in re-segregating schools

Many legal scholars blame the slow initial progress toward racial integration on limited role of courts in enforcing desegregation mandates. Significant progress was not made until the Civil Rights Act under the Johnson administration, because it provided a concrete way for the mandates to be enforced through the denial of federal funds and action against non-complying school districts (McLean, 2009, p. 566). Unfortunately, a

series of school desegregation court decisions in the 1990s halted this short-lived progress by greatly relaxing desegregation standards.

In 1991, the Supreme Court diminished school district accountability for maintaining integrated schools in the case of *Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell*. If schools had made a “good faith effort” to attempt all practical measures to eliminate segregation, “it was permissible for desegregation orders to end, *even if removing the desegregation order resulted in re-segregation*” (emphasis mine) (McLean, p. 566). This case is extremely significant because it essentially ensured that the effects of *Brown* would be short-lived, giving court-ordered mandates an expiration date. *Freeman v. Pitts* (1992) further diminished district accountability, maintaining that private choices that lead to re-segregation are beyond the scope of judicial control. These cases, along with *Missouri v. Jenkins* (1995) (McLean, p. 567), effectively ended the era of mandatory school desegregation. By accepting as adequate a one-time, “good faith effort” at desegregation, and by naming the cause of re-segregation to be private choices, the Court sent a message that the re-segregation of public schools is not a public concern under the control of the judicial system.

The severe relaxation of desegregation standards increased with *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007). The central legal issue concerning *Parents Involved* was whether school boards are permitted to consider race in student assignment plans in order to achieve or maintain racially integrated schools. Seattle, an area with de facto segregated neighborhoods, had an integrated district in that voluntarily created an open choice student assignment plan to avoid re-segregated schools. A community group of parents sued the district when a white student was

assigned to a different school other than the one with the selective biotechnology program into which he had been accepted. In a 5-4 decision, the Supreme Court ruled that “school districts may not assign or deny students to schools on the basis of race, *even if the intent is to achieve racial integration.*” (McLean, 2009, p. 567-70). This case drastically limits what school officials can do to address re-segregation trends. According to the precedents set by the three 1990s cases, school districts who attempt all practical measures at segregation can be freed of court mandates. But even when districts such as Seattle are concerned enough to take desegregation efforts into their own hands, they are dramatically limited in what they can do, explicitly forbidden to implement policies based on race.

The drastic impact of the *Parents Involved* case becomes direr when considered in the context of potential opportunities to overturn it. Pitre points out that the community group, Parents Involved In Community Schools, made up of mostly white and middle class parents, “was able to exert a type of power most minority and low-income families are unable to exert.” Given that districts are unable to implement desegregation plans that explicitly assign students based on race, the students and families most negatively impacted are low-income families and families of color. Unfortunately, these same families “lacking sources of power are unable to fight for the type of education they wish for their children” (Pitre, 2009, p. 547). Furthermore, desegregation advocates face a particular challenge with contemporary de facto segregation, because its causes are private and thus outside the scope of direct governmental action.

African American family engagement in schools

Central to my project is the notion that African American families are the experts on their children. This first part of this section discusses the challenges related to fostering partner relationships between educators and African American parents. Second, this section will discuss the strategies schools have used to engage with African American parents and families. Finally, the last part of this section provides an overview of studies that have analyzed the relationship between parental engagement and African American student outcomes.

Citing researchers such as Barton et al (2004) and Howard and Reynolds (2008), I prefer the term *parental engagement* over *parental involvement*, as it reflects a more authentic relationship between parents and schools. Traditional models of parent involvement, such as Epstein (1997), who includes in her definition volunteering at school and school decision-making, are too simplistic, fail to account for power differences between parents and teachers, and assumes a level playing field among families (Greene, 2013). A more helpful model for understanding parental engagement is the Ecologies of Parent Engagement framework, in which “parent engagement is situated as a relational phenomenon that relies on activity networks and the crucial importance that both space and capital play in the relative success parents have in engaging in the academic setting of school” (Barton et al, 2004, in Howard, p. 84). *Parent engagement* in this section, then, should be understood as a dynamic process in which parents draw on their own various experiences and resources that influence their interactions at school and with school personnel (Howard, 2008).

Research over several decades draws a strong connection between African American parental engagement and student outcomes from test scores to college enrollment (e.g. Howard and Reynolds, 2008; Jeynes, 2016). Yet research shows the relationships between African American parents and schools remain fraught. Repairing these relationships, according to Greene (2013), requires a shift in thinking by educators. Unfortunately, deficit theories of parent involvement, wherein educators assume that parents are not doing enough or cannot do enough to help their children, are still common (p. 10). This explanation is both inadequate and perpetuates a racist dominant narrative that attributes children's failures to their parents and families.

In addition to deficit models of parent engagement, African American parent-school relationships are also at risk because of the historical legacy of institutionalized inequity in schools. The majority of the teaching force in the United States is white and middle class. Race and class differences between parents and educators challenge schools to facilitate a welcoming environment that addresses these differences in power. Parents actions are also informed by their own experiences as students. Like their children, parents of color bring their own, complex narratives of schooling with them (Greene, p. 91). Those positive and negative experiences affect parents' interactions with school, how they envision their role in their children's education, and their sense of agency to act on their beliefs (Howard, 2008). A perceived lack of engagement may also be due to work schedules, lack of transportation, and miscommunications between school and home (Tillman, 2004).

Researchers have made a number of recommendations to increase African American parent engagement. First, there is a push to redefine engagement itself. We

have already seen that parent engagement is dynamic and interactive. Latunde and Clark-Louque (2016) found that African American parents in their study typically framed engagement in two categories: helping with learning at home, and exposing children to educational activities outside the home. Importantly, both categories are not clearly visible to educators at school, even though parents and children are aware of the parents' high level of engagement. Principal and researcher Myers (2013) found that her African American and rural parents had drastically different notions of engagement than Epstein's (1997) traditional model. She interviewed caregivers who explained that their involvement includes telling their children how to behave in school, engaging in kinship care to keep kids out of the foster care system, and sending children to school clean and well-dressed. For these families, providing a safe home environment, enforcing positive messages about school, and making a good physical impression were important ways to be involved in their children's education.

In addition to widening our definition of parental engagement, researchers have also outlined ways that schools can structure culturally relevant opportunities for increasing parental engagement, starting with a rejection of deficit thinking and an embrace of the "community cultural wealth" borne by the struggle of people of color (Yosso, 2005). Perry et al suggest that instead of asking how to get more African American parents engaged, schools should be asking, "How have African Americans over generations succeeded in maintaining their commitment to education and produced a leadership and intellectual class?" (Perry, Steele, and Hilliard, 2004, in Latunde). This question re-centers the experiences of African American parents and students and exemplifies the difference between deficit thinking and strengths-based thinking.

Greene (2013) also argues for a distinction between the one-way *communication* that is typical between schools and parents, and a two-way *conversation* that builds trust between participants. Latunde and Clark-Louque (2016) conceptualize this dialogic interaction as having a framework of cultural reciprocity (p. 76). In many schools, parents are often positioned as receivers of information (Lightfoot, 2004) and rarely offered positions with decision-making power (Howard, 2008, p. 85). This suggests that schools need to proactively involve parents in positions such as site councils. Further, the researchers recommend a site-level needs assessment to determine how parents conceptualize their roles as educational partners, what is manageable for their schedules, and how they would like to be included in the learning process (p. 94). Latunde and Clark-Louque concur that schools that achieve true ‘cultural reciprocity’ do so when they apply such an inquiry practice to parents and families.

African American families and school choice

School choice often refers to the ideology behind increasing parents’ choices of where to send children to school, sometimes through charter schools, voucher options, or magnet schools. The notion of school choice and the way it complicates segregation in the public education system and parental attitudes toward school is important. This section will build on what has been said previously about historical factors leading to re-segregation, and add to it what is known about the variables that may be important to African American families when choosing a school for their children.

Proponents of school choice argue that it empowers families to make their own decisions about their children’s education. Orfield and Frankenberg (2013) offer a reminder that school choice in the United States is historically linked with segregation.

The notion of school choice emerged in the 1960s as Southern districts reacted to the *Brown* decision. Before 1968, lower courts ruled that districts did not need to desegregate but simply allow black children to transfer to white schools, which few did in the early days of *Brown* (Orfield, 2013). In the North, schools were also segregated due to pro-segregation practices through housing practices and drawing school attendance boundaries. Once the judicial enforcement of *Brown* became more pronounced, many districts adopted open-enrollment policies and optional attendance areas. As white families took advantage of these policies, schools began to re-segregate.

It would be a mistake to conclude that the politics of school choice have arisen solely from white segregationists. There is a well-documented history of black radical leadership promoting school choice as a way to achieve community control and a learning environment that does not “pathologize” children (Patillo, 2015, p. 41-44). However, scholars tend to agree that school choice overall has not resulted in either increased African American student achievement or empowerment of poor and working-class African American parents (Patillo, 2015; Orfield, 2013). In Orfield’s analysis of charter schools in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, he finds that the majority of charter schools are lower performing than traditional public schools. Unfortunately, in an era of school choice, low-income students of color do not actually have a choice between schools that vary in academic quality (p. 145; Bell, 2009, in Patillo).

It is also important to note the impact of the school choice movement on re-segregation. The increase in charter schools has intensified segregation, both in charter and traditional schools. The emerging research shows that charter schools are actually

more segregated than traditional schools (Orfield, 2013, p. 131). But by encouraging “ethnicity-based niche competition” from the traditional school system, charter schools have also intensified segregation in traditional schools (Orfield, p. 150).

Finally, there is the argument that school choice empowers low-income families of color who may be dissatisfied with their neighborhood schools. Orfield suggests that the “seductive” ideas of creativity and competition resonate with Americans in an era that is cynical about government (p. 4). In reality, poor families of color do not have a substantively greater choice that empowers them to select higher quality schools for their children. In her Chicago study, which included traditional and charter high schools, Patillo (2015) concludes that although parents easily communicated the factors they were looking for in a school, the actual limited choices they had did not empower them (p. 63). In addition, the district’s complicated enrollment policies as well as the charter school’s selective lottery system frustrated, overwhelmed, and fatigued parents (p. 61). Greene (2013) further challenges the notion that school choice empowers poor families of color by envisioning them as consumers: “The tendency to conceive of parents as *consumers* of educational opportunities shifts the conversation away from the role that parents play as *citizens* in a democratic society (p. 12). In a post-industrial political economy, the educational choices that parents have, real or illusionary, impact their sense of agency as partners in their children’s education.

Academic, emotional, and social effects of segregation

Given that American public schools today suffer both from re-segregation and a substantial achievement gap between black students and white students, this section will begin by drawing connections between segregation and academic performance. This

section also draws on research about segregated schools and inequitable distribution of resources. While the quantitative data clearly show a devastating gap between the performance of African American students and their white peers, the social and emotional effects of segregation are equally important to consider. Therefore, this section also includes findings about the social and psychological effects of attending a racially integrated or segregated school. Finally, the last part of this section gives background on racial identity development of African American children in urban areas.

There is evidence that segregated schools are a contributing factor in the black-white achievement gap (Condrón et al, 2013). When examining and controlling for various forms of segregation—including a school’s quantified ‘deviation’ from integration, its racial composition, and its rate of black isolation—Condrón et al found that separate schools continue to be inherently unequal, in the words of the *Brown* decision. The dominant group enjoys economic, political, and social resources that simply do not benefit African American children unless they attend school with the dominant group. Johnson (2014) found that attendance at a racially isolated school is associated with lower math and science performance for all students, though he characterized the overall evidence about the relationship between racial segregation and academic performance as “tenuous and inconsistent.”

In an effort to provide counterstories to these findings, Horsford (2008) interviewed Black superintendents who attended segregated schools and presided over districts during desegregation efforts. One of the most important counterstories presents a clarified perception of the original intent of the *Brown* plaintiffs. The Black plaintiffs, the superintendent argues, wanted equal access to a quality education *more* than they wanted

desegregation. These educational leaders remembered the segregated schools of their youth as tight-knit, affirming, and academically challenging. As another put it, “There is nothing wrong with something being all Black” (299). Furthermore, many superintendents lamented the displacement, demotion, and unemployment of Black teachers and educators as desegregation efforts began to take effect (301). These perspectives suggest that, while America’s separate schools of 2017 may not be equal, researchers and educators need to resist the majoritarian narrative that racially isolated schools are inherently bad. This reifies the notion of whiteness as property in ascribing inherent value to a school because of its racial composition.

Case studies of desegregated schools further elucidate the social and emotional implications of segregation and integration. For her case study of Miller High (2011), *Race-Class Relations and Integration in Secondary Education*, Caroline Eick interviews students who attended the high school from the 1950s to 2000. Miller mirrored much of the United States in its patterns of desegregation and re-segregation. From the late 1960s to late 1980s, black and white students mixed socially and academically, before returning to what is today a quite divided school community. Eick notes the role of class, observing that during the short period of integration, it was socioeconomic status that stratified the school, and middle class black students had an easier time integrating with white students than did lower-income black students, because they were in higher academic tracks, given more freedom, and had higher expectations (p. 12).

Eick describes interracial and inter-class relationship trends that must be carefully considered. First, students only formed meaningful relationships across difference when they are physically together, not segregated within or across schools. Second, these

connections were facilitated by school authorities who create spaces where high expectations exist for each student and especially where authentic integration is encouraged and supported. Without these relationships and practice communicating across racial and class-based differences, students are radically unprepared for the multiracial society of the future.

Another case study by Amy Stuart Wells (2009) found similar results in how “virtually all” alumni interviewed described the social-emotional benefits of attending desegregated schools, from dispelling fears of other races, to teaching them to embrace differences, to showing the humanness of individuals across racial lines (p. 5). Wells reports “they are quick to note how much more comfortable they feel in multiracial settings or in places where they are a minority.” Another unifying feature of these interviews, however, was the irony and loss alumni described experiencing in the fact that they never returned to such a diverse environment after graduation. This calls into question the urgency of preparing students for a multiracial society rather than a society dramatically stratified by race and class. Wells concludes that schools cannot “fulfill the promise” of *Brown* on their own. If policymakers refocus their energy on desegregation, it will not be effective unless it is in conjunction with other wide approaches.

A final note on the emotional effects of segregated schools on children’s emotional development comes from Storz (2008). Children know when they are suffering from the subtle racism of low expectations and the inequitable distribution of resources. Storz interviewed students at an under-resourced, inner-city middle school who seem to recognize the inequities that exist in their public education. “They [students in the suburban school] progress and learn more faster than us,” explains one student, “probably

because of the money situation or probably because we don't have that many teachers that know all the material without getting out the book" (Storz, 2008). These students identify the unfairness of the separate system, resulting in what Chief Justice Warren warned would generate "a feeling of inferiority as to the status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone" (in Kozol, 2005).

John Dewey wrote about a view of democracy as a path or journey, best described as a way of living with others. "It has no end, other than the path itself" (in Parker, 2003). The current segregated status of many of our schools has a complicated history that includes stories of exclusion and hatred, but also resistance and cooperation. Dewey's view of democracy is one to consider with this complex image of segregated and integrated schools in our minds. Michael-Luna and Marri describe a specific form of multicultural democracy that aims to "incorporate socioeconomic, cultural, and political diversity" by critically asking, "Who is and who is not participating and on whose terms? How wide is the path to participation?" (2011). The literature described in this chapter demonstrates the need for more African American families to participate by sharing their experiences in that milieu which Dewey called the cornerstone of democracy—American public schools.

Summary

In this chapter, I have provided essential background on Critical Race Theory and counterstorytelling, and shown how CRT holds the most potential transformational power as a framework for research. I have also traced the historical, economic, and social factors that have contributed to a current state of re-segregation in our public schools. As many scholars argue, true integration was never fully achieved. In the next section, I

explored African American family involvement in schools, including how parents and teachers may differently conceptualize the parents' role in children's education. Then, I discussed the ideology of school choice and its roots in an era of white resistance to desegregation and black community empowerment. Finally, this chapter concluded with an exploration of the academic, social, and emotional effects of segregation. I noted the evidence for how inadequately and inequitably schools are resourced, while heeding the warnings of Black educational leaders to reject the majoritarian narrative that racial isolation is inherently bad. These findings and their complexities energize me and affirm my decision to conduct in-depth interviews with African American parents, to find out their educational priorities as the experts on their children.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the research methods used to investigate the question: *What are African American parent perspectives on segregation and integration in a large urban district in the Upper Midwest?* The first part of the chapter will explain my choice of research paradigm and methods. This situates my research question within a strong qualitative research tradition. Next, I will describe the setting of and participants who contribute to this study by sharing their perspectives and experiences. I will also explain the Human Subject Research review process and the research tools used to collect data. Finally, I will describe the methods used to analyze the data.

Research Approach, Paradigm, and Methods

The research approach I have chosen is qualitative. Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research as an inquiry approach that seeks to explore and understand “the meaning individuals ascribe to a social or human problem.” Qualitative research appeals to me for this project because it honors the complexity of such human and social problems. In order to answer my research question, it will be more useful to deeply understand the experiences of a few parents rather than gather superficial data about many. A qualitative approach method therefore fits my research question.

The research paradigm or philosophical worldview that aligns with this question is *transformative*. Such a worldview asserts that research inquiry should include an agenda for political and social change that addresses social oppression. The transformative worldview further assumes that the very act of inquiry has the potential to

further marginalize participants; therefore, the researcher must act collaboratively with participants to centralize their voices, experiences, and perspectives (Creswell, 2013). My desire to understand the perspectives of African American parents on their children's school environments stems from a wider question about the value and role of desegregation in closing the achievement gap. Therefore, a transformative worldview keeps the inquiry focused on the experiences of the participants.

As I have described in my literature review, my research is also inspired by Critical Race Theory and counterstorytelling, which seeks to give voice to underrepresented perspectives and to provide stories counter to the dominant narratives about an issue (DeMarrais, 2004). My research methods build on the idea of counterstorytelling as a form of narrative research. Narrative inquiry makes the storyteller the expert and the researcher the learner (DeMarrais). Counterstorytelling, as described in Chapter 2, provides alternative narratives from the perspectives of people of color, whose perspectives are not as prominent in mainstream conversation. Thus, the primary research method I use in this study is the qualitative interview, which is designed with open-ended questions to prompt participants to share their perspectives and opinions (Creswell, 2013).

Setting and Participants

I will be interviewing African American parents of students in a large urban city in the Midwest. These students attend several different schools in the city, including the city's public school district, which enrolls over 35,000 students. In this district, African American students are the largest racial/ethnic group, making up close to 40 percent of enrollment. (The district does not differentiate between African American students and

students who are first and second-generation immigrants from African countries.) White students are another third of students in the district, 18 percent are Hispanic American, 6 percent are Asian American, and 4 percent are American Indian. The diversity of the district's total enrollment compared to the enrollment of individual schools is of central importance to this study. Many of the districts' schools are significantly more racially isolated than the district's enrollment as a whole, while some other schools more accurately reflect the city's diversity.

In narrative research, the inquirer seeks to deeply understand the experiences and perspectives of a few participants, rather than collect superficial data about many. My participants have or have had children in several different elementary schools in the city. All participant and school names have been changed, and demographic data has been provided for a year as close as possible to when the participants' students attended.

Table 3.1

Participant	School	Years Attended
Carol	Monroe Elementary	2013-present
Megan	Monroe Elementary	2015-present
Anne	Grover Elementary	1996-2003
	Jackson Elementary	1994-1995
	Pride Charter School	1998-2002
	Hayes Middle School	2000-2003
	Phillips Arts-Focused School	2002-2006
	Lawrence High School	2006-2010

Aisha	Emmanuel Christian School	2014-present
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Table 3.2

Student Race	Monroe Elem. (2017)	Grover Elem. (2006*)	Jackson Elem. (2006*)
Native American	9%	5%	<1%
African American	39%	43%	51%
Asian/Pacific Islander American	3%	26%	28%
Hispanic American	30%	6%	1%
White American	19%	19%	19%

Student Race	Pride Charter	Hayes Middle (2006)	Phillips Art-Focused (2006)
Native American	0%	1%	<1%
African American	99%	55%	22%
Asian/Pacific Islander American	<1%	27%	3%
Hispanic American	<1%	2%	2%
White American	0%	15%	72%

Student Race	Lawrence High (2010)	Emmanuel Christian**
Native American	2%	
African American	43%	
Asian/Pacific Islander American	39%	

Hispanic American	5%	
White American	11%	

Source: <https://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/DataTopic.jsp?TOPICID=2>

*2006 is the earliest date for which demographic data is available for these schools

**No information available due to private school status

Data Collection Process

The qualitative research tradition supports the purposeful selection of participants that the researcher believes will help elucidate the research question (Creswell, 2013). Because of their differing demographics, and because of my existing relationship as a teacher at Washington Elementary, I selected Washington and Adams Elementary Schools as sites from which to recruit participants. I reached out first to fellow teachers at Washington and Adams Elementary Schools. I described my research question and asked for referrals to parents with whom they had a trusting relationship and who might be willing to participate in an interview with me. I then sent a letter to the parents asking about their interest and willingness to participate. In accordance with the Hamline University Internal Review Board process, I first completed the Exempt Status application to the IRB. I then secured informed consent of all participants via a letter requesting permission of adults to take part in research (see Appendix A).

With each participant, I set up mutually convenient times in neutral locations to interview them. With their consent, I collected data by recording our conversations and taking notes. See Appendix B for the interview questions used. Following in the tradition of narrative inquiry, not all questions may have been asked of all participants, based on the flow of conversation with each unique individual. The set of questions in Appendix B

reflects the general line of questioning intended to guide the conversation with each individual.

Data Analysis

After the data was collected, I transcribed and read through all the data. I looked for general topics that came up during the interviews and began to code the data after testing several organizing schemes. A peer researcher reviewed the codes in accordance with recommendations by Creswell, 2013. The goal of this coding is to aggregate data into around five to seven themes that emerge within the interviews.

In order to prove the validity of my results, I used several validity strategies, or approaches to check the accuracy of my findings (Creswell). First, I clarified my own bias as a white teacher and former student of diverse school environments. Second, I presented discrepant information that came up in interviews that runs counter to my conclusions. This helps to validate my findings by adding dimension to the narrative. Finally, I used peer debriefing, wherein a peer reviewed and asked questions about my research to make certain the study resonates with others (Creswell).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described my research paradigm and methods, as well as how they relate to my research question. I also provided demographic information about the school district, schools, and participants in the study. Finally, I included the protocol for how the interviews were conducted and how the data were analyzed. The next chapter will document how the study proceeded and the results of the research. It will include analysis of the interview data and interpretation of what was collected.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Chapter Overview

This chapter will discuss the results from my research. Each of the four interview participants gave their time to me to share their experiences and their children's experiences at school. As I discussed in my literature review, counterstorytelling is a powerful narrative research approach which reverses the traditional roles between researcher and participant. This chapter, then, centers the stories that the participants told. In addition, because counterstorytelling emphasizes the individual experience in order to counter the dominant narrative about a group, I will not make generalizations about African American parents. I will present the stories from each individual and examine the common themes that emerged, in order to answer the question, *What are African American parent perspectives on segregation and integration in a large urban district in the Upper Midwest?* Throughout the chapter I will show that my results are consistent with the procedures stated in my methods chapter, and I will conclude by documenting the connections with the literature review.

Carol: Grandmother of a seven-year-old boy and nine-year-old girl at

“Monroe” Elementary

On a sunny Thursday afternoon, I interviewed Carol, the soft-spoken, impeccably dressed grandmother of a first grader and third grader at “Monroe” Elementary School,

the most racially and ethnically diverse of the schools in my study. Her hopes and dreams for her grandchildren are “that they would continue their education and get a college degree.” As the first person in her family to graduate from high school, Carol described how she “cherishes” education and hopes her grandchildren feel the same way. Their family chose Monroe because it offers a preschool program, and because several other members of their family, including their dad, had attended Monroe.

Carol described her overall satisfaction with Monroe’s handling of her grandchildren’s social, emotional, and academic development. Her third-grade granddaughter had been classified as a gifted and talented learner, and her first-grade grandson had been diagnosed with ADHD, so both children required individualized attention that she felt the teachers had been “very helpful and understanding” with. When asked about what qualities were most important in a school, she said, “I think the teachers have to be open to different cultures. They have to be welcoming.” And, for children like hers, “there should be resources for different types of students.”

Although the racially diverse demographics at Monroe were not among Carol’s top priorities in choosing a school, she spoke at length about the value of diversity. “I think it’s important for people to be involved with people of different cultures and races. It just opens them up.” Carol confided that she felt some members of her family were narrow-minded in their thinking and that attending Monroe “has helped the children become more open to different cultures and different ways of living...it’s not limited to just our own.” Furthermore, Carol worried that attending a less diverse school might “confine” her grandchildren to believing stereotypes about groups of people.

Carol was specific that she viewed open-mindedness and tolerance as attitudes that her grandchildren will need to survive in the working world.

People need to be able to communicate with others. They need to be able to see how others live. They need to be able to accept other people, no matter their background. You need to be able to get along in this world in order to survive and in order to get ahead. You get out into the working world, you're going to meet all kinds of people. You have to be able to adapt, and that's one of the important reasons to be in an integrated type of school system.

This integrated environment was also important for Carol and her grandchildren when she compared it with a school that has a majority of white students. This, she feared would be “an environment where they don't feel comfortable.”

The value Carol places on diversity and integration goes beyond the impact it has on her grandchildren's worldview and communication skills. While she acknowledged that it is important to hold space for people who have shared experiences, she told me, “I wholeheartedly believe in integration. For one, I know growing up that the schools in the South may have been separate, but they weren't equal. I mean, there was no funding. A lot of times the public schools get shortchanged regarding funding even for arts, extracurricular[s], even for people who are on different [ability] levels.” For Carol, the inequity of resource distribution impacted her choice in a significant way.

I wondered how much Carol's own school experiences had impacted the value she placed on racial and cultural diversity at school, especially because she grew up a generation before the other parents I interviewed, in the decades just following *Brown v. Board*. The schools she attended, in the same neighborhoods that Monroe draws from

today, were mostly white. “There weren’t very many Blacks at the school, at any of the schools,” she told me. “It was just a different time, the 1950s, 1960s.” She did not remember feeling isolated or uncomfortable and said, “It worked out fine for me” and “It wasn’t a big deal to me, and I got along well.”

I asked Carol more about going to our city’s schools in an era where school districts were first being forced by the judicial system to integrate. She reiterated that she was comfortable being around white people from an early age, perhaps because of the civil rights movement: “My mother was very involved in civil rights, and she attended numerous meetings, which we [kids] were forced to attend. So I was integrated with all types of people, because we interacted with them when I was a kid.”

Overall, Carol said that she had no complaints about the education her grandchildren were receiving at Monroe although she acknowledged throughout her interview that the school had limited resources. “I’ve been pleased with the teachers, the environment, different situations that have come up with my kids. They [the teachers] can’t be the end-all—you can only do so much, so with what they have, they’re doing well.”

Carol’s interview left me intrigued and eager to continue my research. Like Amy Stuart Wells’s case study participants (2009), Carol described the social-emotional benefits of attending integrated schools, both in how comfortable she feels around people of other races and in how she sees early experiences in diversity shaping her and her grandchildren’s worldviews. Given the relative uniqueness of Monroe’s racial diversity, I wondered how other Monroe parents had come to select the school and how their experiences compared with Carol’s. This led me to Megan.

**Megan: Mother of a three-year-old daughter and an eight-year-old son at Monroe
Elementary**

I met Megan at a busy coffee shop in the hours before she had to pick up her children from after school care. Cerebral and passionate, she opened up quickly about her experiences as a biracial woman who grew up with white adoptive parents. Her children are half-Liberian from their father's side.

Megan's hopes and dreams for her children reflected both a strong desire for them to enjoy life in a holistic sense and a deeply-rooted anxiety about their survival in an unjust world. "I want them to live to their full potential within all these structures of oppression that we've been born into." She dreams that these structures "are not going to over-determine their possibilities to live full healthy happy lives." I asked her about what her hopes are for their schooling, given the school system's historical role in maintaining racial inequalities. "I want them to experience school as not just a safe place, but as a place of joy and exploration," she told me. "It's not always going to be like that, just like the world is not always going to be like that, but as much as possible, that's how I want it to be."

As an elementary student in a Midwestern university city in the 1980s, Megan loved school. Her city had a well-funded and well-respected public school system that included Open Schools. She described her elementary school as a collaborative, fun, student-driven learning environment where she remembers students setting their own academic goals and helping each other reach them. "Our classroom was like this country that we made up, and we had our own currency—I mean, it was so fun to be in school, I

loved it. That's what I mean about the fun of being in school that I want my kids to have."

While she enjoyed many aspects of her school, like Carol's schools, they were not racially diverse. "I was one of maybe five kids of color in my class at any given time," she said. Her son, then, "is just having a completely different experience than I am." The diversity at Monroe was a significant part of the calculus in selecting it as their family's school. "I don't want him to be the only Black kid in class," she said. "I know what that feels like. That has a very high value for me because that's my lived experience, and because of the research. If I'm being honest, it's more because of my emotional response." Megan, like most parents, wants the best from her own school experiences for her kids—a fun and rigorous learning environment—combined with some aspects she didn't experience—being in a racially diverse community. "I think Monroe is an incredible school overall. I love that at any given time in my son's class, there's maybe like two white kids."

It is worth noting that Monroe is not considered a high performing school. Its proficiency rates for reading and math are below fifty percent and like most other schools there is an achievement gap between white students and students of color. Megan described several suburban public school districts in the area which are much higher performing than the urban school district. For her, the academic achievement is not worth what she believes would be a more overtly racist environment. "I would never send my kids there," she said. "After talking to all these Black parents about the s--- their kids go through, I would never... One woman was like, my son is 19, he's thinking about college, but he's still trying to get over the PTSD from school."

Private schools are also not an option for Megan. Another of her friends, also a Black woman, sends her kids to an elite private school in the area and her daughter “is getting her butt kicked by whiteness and rich white terrible people.” Unlike Megan, her friend grew up in a city with poorly supported schools and her attendance at the local Catholic school was “the way they got out.” For her, Megan says, “you just never would send your kid to public school.” Megan attributes the differences in their philosophies to their childhood experiences. “My parents were amazing parents but I did get hurt by that environment, and she got hurt in her environment by Black people...so we always joke that I can be romantic about Black people and she can be romantic about white people.” Megan’s friend tells her that Monroe’s test scores are too low to send her daughter there, but Megan also hears that her friend’s daughter “keeps getting blamed for stuff she didn’t do.” Despite the concerns she does have with Monroe, Megan says, “I do think most of the folks that work there do love the kids and are certainly more aware of these issues [of institutional racism] than folks at a place like [the private school.]”

Megan also questioned who decides what makes a school reputable. To her friend she says, “Don’t believe it’s better just because those white people have it. That is not better.” In her neighborhood, just blocks away from Monroe, the perception is that “the best school” is a few miles away. Her son goes there for summer break programming and she doesn’t see how that school is better. It is “like 40% white. And it’s like, ok, is that why it’s better? Because that don’t make no sense to me either...Some of this stuff is perception, some is based on fact, and some is not.”

While Megan is satisfied with many aspects of her son’s experience at Monroe, one thing she is deeply displeased by is the lack of racial diversity in the teaching staff.

She described the staff as a caste system with white teachers and administrators at the top and support staff of color at the bottom. For her this communicates to the children, ““Oh, these are the people that do this kind of job and have the most power in the building, and then everybody else in the building, who’s brown like me, do this. And I think that’s really problematic, like whatever demographic your school is, but especially for a school like Monroe where you do have like 85% students of color and free and reduced lunch.”

She continued, “I know even the teachers and the folks who do have my child’s best interest at heart, there’s a lot of implicit and let’s be clear, explicit bias that does not get interrogated at all. There’s just no mechanism within the schools to interrogate that. On top of that, if you have a teaching staff that’s 95% white, it’s just like, oh, nothing’s wrong, this is just how it’s supposed to be.” This comment was extremely compelling to me as one of those white teachers at Monroe. Although we do have a strong cohort of staff who support each other in understanding and fighting against our racial biases, it is clear that our efforts are neither sufficient nor transparent to families.

Megan started recounting her and her son’s experiences with white teachers at Monroe more specifically. She feels that the language they have used to describe her son, who she herself called “active and rambunctious” but not in an abnormal way for a young boy, reflects institutionally racist notions of controlling Black bodies. She said that the disparities in “what teachers notice and how they respond” is very apparent. “And these are all teachers that I like and think are very competent and really do have the best intentions and know what they’re doing in the classroom.”

In addition to hearing teachers make biased judgments about her son’s level of activity, Megan has also experienced teacher bias around his speech, language, and

academic ability. She told me that his kindergarten teacher called her the first week of school, concerned that he might have a speech issue. Megan was extremely concerned that the teacher had noticed something that she herself didn't see. When she talked with her social network, however, her friends advised her to trust her gut, and she denied the school consent to test her son, who has not had any speech issues since. Megan also questions why her son has not been identified as gifted and talented. "I think all kids are gifted and talented in different ways, but [the label] is an added freebie you can get for your kid so every year I fill out the form." She knows that Black, brown, and indigenous students are underrepresented in this designation and wants to know, "What is the criteria through which you're looking at 'gifted'? Who's making those decisions? The more I talked to other Black mamas, this is par for the course. You're just constantly waiting for the next thing, the next letter you have to write, the next call... It's just an additional pressure that white families don't have."

Like Carol, Megan likes that Monroe is an IB school, which "aligns with our family view of the world." She likes that her son is around kids who are different from him: "I love that he's just picking up different bits of the Somali language because he's just around his friends." Like Carol, she spoke highly of teachers' care and concern for students. But her criticisms of Monroe and the wider public school system are significant. Still, she has picked Monroe over better-resourced schools, believing that despite Monroe's inherent biases, it is still the most nurturing place for her kids at this time. I was curious about parents at other schools: How did they weigh their priorities to make the same difficult decisions for their children? That led me to Anne.

Anne: Mother of a 30-year old son, 27-year-old daughter, and a 24-year-old daughter

Anne is a teacher at Grover Elementary. Tall, warm, and stylish, she welcomed me into her classroom after school one afternoon to talk about her experiences with her children. All three are adults now but grew up attending schools in the city, including the one Anne teaches at now. Like Carol and Megan, she has made decisions for her children that reflect what she did and did not like about her own education. “Each one of them has had a different school experience in some ways, and I was intentional about the different environments based on what I thought would help them,” she told me.

Anne grew up in the 1960s and 1970s in Seattle and Spokane, Washington, with parents who were “very serious about education” and had themselves attended segregated schools in Texas before *Brown v. Board*. Their family was Catholic, and Anne says this meant they attended churches with mostly white families. They also lived in primarily white, working class neighborhoods and attended both Catholic and neighborhood elementary schools with mostly white children. Anne believes that this has given her a level of comfort around white people that has benefitted her. “I think to have a comfort around white people is important...I don’t think it’s necessary, but I do know that I have a comfort around white people that I know some black people do not.” Because she grew up in mostly white settings, however, “I often at times would feel more uncomfortable around Black people than white people.” This came to a head when the family moved and she attended a more diverse middle school (she thinks about 55% Black, 45% white, Asian, and Filipino): “I remember feeling like, this is not a good fit for me.” So the

family moved her to the parish school for eighth grade with “more white people there. And I felt very comfortable.”

In high school she went back to a more diverse school and was more comfortable and “more ready to figure out who am I.” Throughout her school experiences, Anne wrestled with her identity as an ambitious Black student. “What I had noticed was that many Blacks had come to think that if you’re Black and ambitious that somehow means you’re an Oreo or a white girl. So I grew up with having some taunts and stuff about my ambition.” As a precocious high school student, she developed the term *double identity crisis* to describe what she saw among her peers:

So this double identity crisis had to do with black people that didn’t understand what black really was, so they latched onto negative stereotypes about what black is. Which was smoking weed, hanging out and going to parties, skipping class, and not being about your academics. So if you did something different, then every negative stereotype that dominant culture had about you, you weren’t black anymore, you were white. And I knew that that wasn’t true! I knew that ambitious black people that were down for the cause, that probably knew more about black history and were more down for black people than these people over here that would judge black people who wanted to go to college, that were ambitious, that really cared about their grades, that only smoked weed when they didn’t have a test the next day. But to call them on that, it was hard for me, so I would have these talks with some people, like my sister...I had named it, I had termed it, this double identity crisis.

She credits her family with helping her navigate her identity as it developed. Her parents were ambitious, college-educated, and involved in local politics. “So I knew that they were about the promotion of Black people...I knew that what some of my peers were saying and doing and showing, I knew that that didn’t represent all Black people.” Her mother also made sure that as “we were exposed to white people we could be ourselves and still hold onto our goals.” Anne went on to attend a historically Black university, which she loved, even though at first “I was like, Oh my god, I have never in my life been around this many black people...Like I think I was terrified.” As an adult, she says, “If I had a choice, who you want to be around, I’m probably going to pick people who I truly feel comfortable and relaxed around, and some of those people are black and some of those people are white. I just think that there’s nothing wrong with preferring being around people that look like you because you have so many shared experiences that you can relate to.”

Anne’s son was three when he started in the district’s early childhood program. The teacher was concerned and referred her to a screening service. Like Megan, the process was fraught with bias and a lack of tact. The woman who screened her son explained the results to Anne in the public waiting area in a manner she describes as “unprofessional” and “shaming.” Happily, the program made some changes after Anne gave them feedback about her experience, but it was not the last time Anne would have to worry about her son’s learning environment.

After the screening, Anne’s son attended an early childhood special education program for four-year-olds. She was shocked when she arrived for the first time because

about 70 percent of the kids were black boys “very similar to my son, very energetic, you know, maybe not listening the first time...and the white kids that were in there had just obvious delays. Like they were still in diapers, they were crawling, they had hearing aids.” Unlike Megan’s son, however, Anne’s son had a biracial teacher. “She looked at my face and knew immediately what I was thinking...I think that’s one thing that stood out to me was that it was good she was in that role as opposed to a white lady or a white man, I probably would not have taken them as seriously.”

Anne’s son continued on at their neighborhood school, “Jackson” Elementary: a very small, nurturing supportive environment with a low student to teacher ratio and only pre-school, kindergarten, and first grade. Anne says it was a racially isolated school with almost all Black students but that was neither a reason for picking it nor a deterrent. “I wasn’t so concerned with the racial makeup; I just was looking at the program and its proximity to my home.”

When her daughter was school-aged, she and her brother attended another local public school that “just felt perfect.” One-third of the students were Black, one-third were Asian, and one-third were white. “It was just this very nice kumbaya experience,” she said. Once again, diversity in student population was not one of her top priorities, though she said it was a nice benefit: “I have to say that experience really did convince me that diversity can play a very important role in helping to shape your children’s ideals about what the world should look like.” The factor she says that swayed her husband and her the most toward this school was the number of Black male staff. “The other piece,” she said, “was that we went to a Black church...I feel like that type of experience is important for kids of color to just feel that unconditional support from a community. And

I knew they were getting that at church, so to be in a racially segregated or isolated situation [at school] was not that important.”

A few years later, though, the family left that church for another that was majority white. In addition, Anne said, “I just felt differently about my daughters than I did my son. About what they needed to feel beautiful and feel valued.” She enrolled the girls in “Pride” Elementary, a K-4 charter school that incorporates African culture and heritage into curriculum and serves an almost entirely African American student population. As a young girl herself, Anne’s mother “just kind of saw me and knew that I didn’t think a lot about myself as an attractive young person,” which is why she encouraged her to go to a historically Black college. She worried that her girls would “not be looked upon as being pretty or cute because of the standards of beauty that exist in our society.” Therefore “it was very important that I wanted them to grow up knowing their self-worth and valuing themselves from the way they looked, from their curves to their hair texture.” Anne didn’t want things like “those days when you can’t tighten up their hair and you gotta get to school” or “a little bit of ash on their elbow” to get in the way of forming “the strong sense of self that I knew they were going to need.”

While his younger sisters were at the charter school, Anne’s son had moved on to “Hayes” Middle School, where, Anne says, the “kumbaya” of racial diversity finally ended. The school itself was as racially diverse as his elementary school, but like his mom, Anne’s son struggled with finding his identity socially. “People were finding their little groups, and he wanted black friends. He tried and tried” but the kids he wanted to connect with weren’t as interested. Ultimately, Anne says, he found a diverse group of friends that stayed together through high school. While she loved that her daughters were

getting cultural affirmation and support at their school, seeing themselves reflected in their teachers and administrators, she also loved that her son's middle school was diverse.

The charter school was a wonderful fit for Anne's girls, but it only serves kids through fourth grade, so they went on to "Phillips," an arts-focused school that was 70 percent white. The family's decision this time was borne out of programming more than it was about school demographics. Then all three kids went to "Lawrence," the community high school, which was 50 percent Black, 30 percent Asian, and 10 percent Latino. Anne and her husband picked this school because of its proximity to their home and its IB program. She feels that it was a good fit for all her children, though it wasn't without its challenges. For example, her middle daughter noticed how few Black students were in her advanced classes. Anne pointed out that this is an example of how even a fairly diverse school like theirs can provide an extremely segregated learning environment.

Ultimately, Anne is happy with the variety of experiences each of her children had at different points in their development. I was struck by the intense work that it took for her husband and her to facilitate all these experiences. Every parent wants what is best for their child, but as Megan said, there is an unfair burden on parents of Black children to navigate a very complicated and inherently biased system in order to choose 'the right school' even before the actual schooling can begin. More convinced than ever that parents deserve more than one choice of 'the right school,' I set off to hear one more family's story.

Aisha: Mother of a four-year-old son and an eight-year-old son

Aisha is a bubbly, charismatic woman who manages to balance work and family with unending patience and a sense of humor. I apologized for interrupting her dinner and she assured me that with two young children, her dinner is “never not interrupted.” As with the other participants, I asked her what her hopes and dreams were for her boys. She described their daily morning affirmations as a family that they will “have the confidence to walk in their own gifts and really do in their heart what they feel is right; regardless of what the environment says, fall back on your values.” She wants both boys to have the type of college experience she did, living on campus, studying abroad, and “figuring out life in an environment where there are a lot of safeguards in place.” Aisha thinks that master’s degrees may be more common by the time her sons are grown, and so for her, advanced degrees are also “non-negotiable.”

Aisha grew up in Oak Park before moving to this city in eighth grade. Like Megan, she attended a progressive, well-regarded, and well-resourced school that had mostly white students and teachers. In elementary school, she felt more different as one of the only kids on the school lunch program than as one of the only Black kids. “I did not feel that I was Black, I felt that I was poor,” she said. She also felt different because her grandma raised her and her mom was on drugs. Aisha says she didn’t know she was smart until third grade. She remembers not putting forth effort in second grade and ending up in a remedial reading group. Even as a young girl, she was cognizant of who was reading better or worse than her, and she knew she wanted to improve. A teacher gave her a fantasy adventure series that she devoured over the summer and by the next school year, she was in the gifted and talented program. Aisha even tagged along with her

dad to his community college math class and the teacher noticed she could do the work. “It was at that moment that I realized,” she said, “I can do whatever I put my mind to.”

Aisha’s family lived in a somewhat diverse part of town, but she describes their neighborhood as segregated. “In my neighborhood, I was like everybody else, like my mom’s not around, your mom’s not around, so the community that I had outside of school was very supportive and I blended in.” Like Anne, Aisha got teased for ‘acting white.’ “I didn’t speak slang enough. So people would be like, ‘that’s the white girl.’ But that was the only difference I felt.” As an adult, Aisha looks back on her elementary experience and theorizes that she fit in at school despite being different because she was smart and musically gifted. “Some stuff didn’t hit me because people really loved me.”

Aisha’s family also made sure that she had culturally affirming experiences outside of her mostly white school. “Because I was submerged in white culture, I was out doing African dance and tribal dance from the time I can remember until I moved here in eighth grade. My mom and grandmother knew we got all these white people, we gonna have to make sure she understands what it’s like to be around Black people.” Like Anne, Aisha’s early school experiences around mostly white people impacted her comfort level around other black people. “When I am in an all-Black setting, I am unsettled. I am always like, do I really need to be around all Black people? On the flip side, I have friends who work in all-white settings who need to be in all Black settings to feel validated, and I totally understand that. That’s just not my experience.”

Aisha grew to deeply appreciate her early school experiences when she moved here. When her brother, sister, and she all entered their respective grades far ahead of the other students, they slowly realized the school was not up to par with their previous one.

Her brother was given a scholarship to an elite private school because the public school felt they could not appropriately challenge him. Aisha's teacher publicly praised her for scoring highest in the school on a standardized test, and suddenly she felt like even more of an outcast than before. Though Aisha was now in a much more diverse classroom than she ever had been before, "I felt the most isolated I had ever felt in my entire life." Meanwhile, she was extremely frustrated by the low academic expectations the school put on her and everyone else. When teachers gave her "secret packets" of more challenging work, she wondered, 'Why am I the only one getting these? Surely there are others like me.' In fact, as she became close with another smart girl "who didn't act like it at school, I asked, 'Why don't you do this stuff in school?' 'Because I don't have to,' she said." Even band and choir were too easy for Aisha. "Stuff I was ok at [in Chicago], I was actually good at here! You would think it would boost my confidence, but it actually pissed me off."

Aisha was also struck by how inadequate school resources and facilities were at her new school compared to the ones in Oak Park. "We always had the latest technology, never had shabby playground equipment. I never knew I should be grateful for it. Even the teacher's attitudes, K through sixth grade, I had never seen any of my teachers upset...It felt different in terms of the excitement about education." By comparison, the message to "Rise above the ordinary" was so strong at Aisha's old school that she and her siblings still tell each other that message when one of them needs a boost. She remembers being incredulous that she had to share a math book with two other girls. The teacher told them two of them would have to copy the problems down and they could rotate who got

to take home the book to do their homework. No wonder the education didn't feel up to par.

Aisha flourished anyway, but she sees this as an anomaly. "I think I had the perfect storm of engaged people who cared about me academically, people who invested in my with my gifts with music and art, and people in my community who were like, you're beautiful as a black girl no matter what setting you're in. They spoke to all the many facets of me." Now as a mom, though, she is not taking any chances with her boys. Speaking about the 'perfect storm' that nurtured her, she said, "I don't know if regular public school has the capacity to do that intentionally." This is part of the reason why Aisha, unlike the other participants in my research, sends her kids to "Emmanuel," a Christian private school that is majority white.

"Neighborhood school or public school, the education system for my expectations is not there yet," she said. When her older son was only two but showing signs of precociousness, Aisha and her husband started looking for a half-day academic daycare. Instead they stumbled upon a Christian all day preschool. Six years later, both kids still attend Emmanuel despite the fact that the family has to drive nearly ten miles across town every morning and every afternoon. Aisha and her husband love the nurturing learning community and small classes, and as Christians, the school aligns with their values. As a private school, these are a few things they can offer that public schools simply cannot. "Some stuff they [Emmanuel] are not going to tolerate and I appreciate that. Because I work in a public school and some stuff we have to tolerate because we're a public school. Versus if you are throwing chairs and cussing this is not the school for you."

Aisha continued, “To me, public school is a free for all.” At her sons’ school, they are “missing out on a whole bunch of nonsense and I know that you’re focusing on school. Not that it doesn’t happen at school, but the way that it’s handled and the way that it’s talked about is huge...I really enjoy that the backdrop to all this is love and principles of the Bible versus ‘the law says such and such.’ We don’t care about that, that’s not a value system we can fall back on. So that’s why we stayed there.

We talked about the reality of raising Black boys in America in a state of police brutality. “I don’t care if we travel to Iraq or Japan or Kenya, my sons will always be Black boys and whatever media or society is saying about Black boys, my sons will represent that to somebody...No matter what, I have to take responsibility to raise him to understand what it’s like to be a Black boy in America...To know that people are scared of him.” Aisha works as a social worker at a public school that serves an almost entirely Black student population. Because of this, the staff work hard to promote pride in Black culture. Given all of this, I had to wonder if she and her husband considered this school as an option for their kids, even given what she had just said about the inequitable resources and out-of-control behavior that plague some public schools.

“Am I excited about the fact that we have 100% Black students? Yes, 100%. Do I think it is a fault? Absolutely. Because I want you to love being Black even in a room full of white people. And that is where I think we fail our students...What we’re creating in our school is a false sense of reality.” Aisha and her husband feel that their boys receive enough cultural affirmation outside of school that it is not necessary for them to also get it at school. Her older son also dances with a step group that is predominantly black, and like Anne, they attend a Black church where her sons receive validation and acceptance

from other Black folks in the community. Still, even her principal has asked why her sons don't go to their school. "They're not guinea pigs," she told me simply.

Another reason Aisha doesn't want her sons attending a racially isolated school is that, like Carol and Anne, she thinks "you need to learn how to talk to a white person. That's a real thing...Diversity is scary!" She would rather have her boys learn this at a young age, under her guidance, and in a nurturing environment than on the first day of college or a new job. I wondered, though, what Emmanuel was doing, in Megan's words, to "interrogate the implicit and explicit bias" inherent in the school system that is surely present also in this mostly white private school.

"I think that their school does zero diversity at all," Aisha told me, "Because the diversity they have is like, Jesus loves everyone. That's their solution to all things...Do I think there is covert or overt racism that happens at that school? Possibly. But what they all fall back on is the love of God. I'm banking on you loving God enough that you're not going to treat my sons a certain way because they aren't white.

She admitted that this "might not be an accurate thing to do" and that she and her husband may move the boys to a different school at some point if the school gets any whiter, but for now, it is still a good fit for their family.

Common Themes

These four parents share very different experiences that span across more than fifty years of experience in public, private, and charter schools that include varying

degrees of racial isolation and integration. All of them share the same desire: for their children to achieve their full potential in an imperfect and in fact oppressive world.

While each participant shared unique experiences, several common themes emerged. The choices of all four women were influenced significantly by their own experiences and upbringings. At some point, all four of them attended mostly white schools and/or were raised around white people when they were younger. All of them had one or zero Black teachers growing up. This had a deep and lasting impact, from Megan, who shared that this was legitimately “harmful” to her, to Anne and Aisha, who admitted feeling discomfort around other Black people because of their upbringings. Most of them shared the value they felt there was in being comfortable around white people, though this comfort would not be of such high value if white supremacy did not dominate society.

All of them spoke about the value of forming relationships with people who are different than you, though most of them also acknowledged the need for Black children (and adults) to be in racially isolated situations for cultural and personal affirmation. Most of them made choices about their children’s schools based on programming and alignment with family values before they considered diversity, but for all of them, a school’s degree of racial integration or isolation made an impact on their families.

It stood out to me the extreme amounts of time and energy that all participants put into selecting a school or schools that they felt would best serve their children at a given point. All of them spoke about how important education was to their families for multiple generations. Most of them also discussed how important funding is to how well schools

can serve children's varying needs. Finally, most of them shared instances where they or their children were treated unfairly because of their race.

It is clear that the school experiences these women have had as Black parents are racialized in a way that is distinct from white middle-class families. When I set out to begin this research, I knew there were multiple, varying factors that Black parents must weigh in choosing schools for their children. I was specifically interested in how, if at all, the racial makeup of a school impacted African American parents' choices. Parents of all races and ethnicities may consider a school's demographics when selecting a school. My own white middle-class parents chose my schools based on location and racial diversity, which deeply impacted my friendships, worldview, and vocation. This project has confirmed for me what a privilege white parents have when they choose to consider race in selecting a school. My parents knew that they could send me to most any school in our area and I would be academically challenged, feel nurtured, and see myself represented in the curriculum and teaching staff. That made it possible for them to additionally consider the school's racial makeup and how that might benefit me as a white student. Black parents, on the other hand, do not have a choice about whether or not to consider race as a factor in an inherently racist system. For parents of Black kids, the stakes in choosing a school are simply higher than for white kids.

Connections to Literature Review

I began my literature review by explaining how central Critical Race Theory is to my capstone because it seeks to give voice to those outside dominant positions of power. All four of my participants spoke to the idea that racism is permanently embedded in

public education as an American institution, which is the first tenet of Critical Race Theory (Capper, 2015). My choice to use counterstorytelling as a method of research draws from another tenet of CRT, which holds that dominant narratives—the ones to which my interviewees provide a counter—serve to protect institutional racism. Only when such dominant narratives cease to be majoritarian will racism begin to lose its stronghold on the institution of American education.

Through counterstorytelling, my participants challenged traditional notions of what priorities are important in a school for Black children. In telling their stories, they drew on historic roots of storytelling and the power of stories to preserve truth and challenge dominant ideas (Solórzano, 2002). My aim in my literature review was to defend my choice to use counterstorytelling by explaining the value of seeking authentic perspectives of marginalized individuals. I believe that the stories these individuals told hold tremendous value in challenging dominant views of education, and what parents' priorities may be for their children's schools.

In my literature review, I found research that shows that the relationships between African American parents and schools remains fraught. The stories in this chapter show examples of how even highly engaged parents and well-intentioned schools can produce such fraught relationships. Repairing these relationships, as Greene (2013) noted, does indeed require a shift in thinking by educators. I would add that a shift is needed in all other public institutions as well.

One of the researchers I cited suggests that rather than asking how to get African American parents engaged, schools should be asking how African American families over generations have maintained a commitment to education and produced an

intellectual class (Perry, Steele, and Hilliard, 2004, in Latunde). All four of my participants, highly engaged parents themselves, spoke about their school experiences and their parents' and grandparents' commitments to education. There is clearly more to learn from the strong legacy of African American resilience within the oppressive structure of American education.

I also reviewed the literature on school choice as it relates to African American family engagement and student achievement. The research I reviewed tends to show that while both white segregationists and black radicals have championed school choice for various reasons, low-income students of color do not typically have a choice between schools that vary in academic quality. Interestingly, most of my participants were middle class African American parents and still struggled to have choices between multiple schools that would meet their children's needs, though they certainly have had access to more choices through private schools than most low-income parents have.

Another comparison to note is between my participants' experiences and Orfield's argument (2013) against the myth that school choice empowers families who are dissatisfied with their neighborhood schools. Carol, Megan, and Anne all sent their children to neighborhood schools at certain points and had mild to moderate levels of satisfaction with these schools. Aisha, by contrast, was dissatisfied with the public school system to such an extreme degree that she enrolled her children in a private school that does not address or nurture their identities as African American boys. However the level of satisfaction with public school may vary from person to person, my research certainly supports the idea that school choice is a "seductive" notion for Americans, particularly

those that feel disenfranchised. It also supports the idea that whether parents have real or limited choices, these choices impact their sense of agency in their children's education.

My second chapter concluded by reviewing some of the literature on the impacts of segregation on children's academic, emotional, and social development. On one hand, racially isolated schools with mostly African American students are typically correlated with lower economic, political, and social resources which in turn impact academic performance for all students. To wit, Carol spoke about the importance of integration from a resource standpoint: Students legally and ethically deserve access to the resources they need and most schools in the pre-integration South simply could not provide this. On the other hand, a few counter-stories in the literature challenge this stereotype with examples of racially isolated schools that are tight-knit, affirming, and academically challenging. These qualities were the reasons Anne chose to send her daughters to an African-focused charter school through fourth grade.

Two case studies that I reviewed detailed the social and emotional effects of segregation and integration. Both Eick (2011) and Wells (2009) found that alumni of integrated schools reported significant social-emotional benefits to attending diverse schools, including a feeling of comfort in racially diverse settings. Carol, Anne, and Aisha all discussed at length the need they felt for their children to develop the ability to be confident and comfortable in racially diverse situations. Megan also appreciated the diverse group of friends her son has, while also noting how important it was to her that he not repeat her experience of being the sole Black student in a class. All four participants drew from their own experiences in mostly white schools and integrated schools to formulate priorities for their own children.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I shared the stories that Carol, Megan, Anne, and Aisha shared with me. I was privileged to spend time with each of them and hear about their educational experiences as students and as parents. Their stories span much of the more than sixty years since *Brown v. Board* passed and promised an end to separate and unequal schools. The women I interviewed shared impactful stories about how they navigate a system that remains both separate and unequal. My next and final chapter concludes this capstone by synthesizing my findings into recommendations for educators, administrators, and policymakers who wish to disrupt historical patterns of distrust and underachievement.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Chapter Overview

This final chapter of the capstone will focus on the conclusions I have made based on my research. I will acknowledge the limitations of my study and make recommendations for educators and policymakers based on my findings. I will also conclude by considering additional research needed in this area. Finally, I will reflect on my growth as an author and on the personal impact this research had on me as a white teacher.

Conclusions

In my last chapter, I shared the distinct perspectives of four African American parents on school segregation and integration. Each parent made difficult decisions at multiple points in their children's lives about which school to entrust them. At different junctures, they had to weigh many priorities other than racial demographics, including school achievement on standardized tests, proximity to home, special programming, relationships with teachers and staff, educational philosophy, and resources and facilities. Where a school's racial demographics fit into these priorities varied from person to person. For example, while all the participants made comments about valuing diversity in a school setting, this meant different things to each person.

For Megan, while she appreciated the diverse group of friends her son was making, a racially mixed school setting was most important so that her son would not be a minority in his classes, like she was. Carol, Anne, and Aisha, who also attended

majority white schools at different points in their childhoods, talked about how racially mixed school settings could help their children cultivate a strong sense of self, learn to communicate across differences, and to develop a level of comfort around white people. Anne and Aisha in particular talked about the roles that church and family can play in affirming Black identity, lessening the importance of the role school may have in this. In Anne's case, when church was not able to fulfill this role, it was important to her that her daughters attend a racially isolated school to help affirm their identity as Black girls.

All four participants shared instances where they made decisions based on the programs a school offered or how a school's philosophy aligned with their own, before considering the racial makeup of the school. Carol and Megan spoke about how Monroe's focus on international-mindedness, combined with its diverse group of students, supported their families' goals and worldviews. Anne sent her children to different schools that would provide them at different times with special education support, cultural support, and fine arts programming. Aisha's sons attend a private school that she and her husband value for its Christian values and Biblical principles that align with their teachings at home.

An unsurprising topic that emerged from most of the interviews was the various forms of covert and overt racism that participants experienced as students and as parents in the school system. Anne was shocked to see 70 percent of her son's special education preschool classmates were Black boys. Megan's kindergarten teacher thought her son might have a speech impairment before Megan felt she really knew him. Anne's daughter questioned her teachers about why she was one of only a few Black students in advanced classes. Similarly, Aisha suffered the deeply felt low expectations of her new school and

noticed other gifted Black students showing poor effort when they were not adequately challenged and supported. These findings suggest both that additional perspectives are worth seeking and that educators and policymakers have a great deal of work to do to support their African American parents and students.

Recommendations for Educators and Policymakers

In the first chapter of this project I set out to illuminate whether efforts to integrate schools are worth renewing. When do integrated schools educate Black students better than segregated schools, and when are segregated schools the better choice?

The answer, of course, varies from family to family, district to district, and even child to child. Carol felt that her grandchildren needed a racially diverse learning environment to broaden their worldview. Megan felt similarly and valued the fact that her son is not one of few Black boys in his class. Anne acknowledged the benefit of diversity while also advocating proudly for the nurturing environment her girls experienced in a school that is segregated by choice. Aisha works in such a school but spoke about wanting her sons to be proud of being Black no matter who is in the room—and valuing the quality of academics and character education above demographics. So what does this mean for educators and policymakers?

In short, we need to work on providing high quality school options for all families in all ZIP codes. Of course, this is the stated goal of nearly all school districts and state departments of education. What my research shows is the need to center Black and other marginalized voices in the decision-making about what makes a school “high quality.” Further, it shows that Black parents differ in their worldviews and therefore in the

priorities they hold for their children's education. Like Anne, they may also feel that each of their children's special needs necessitates a different school at a given time in their development. Parents like Anne, Carol, Megan, and Aisha need to be active participants in transforming schools, and it needs to be on their terms.

It is tempting to conclude that we need more choices. Each of my participants spoke about making choices at different points about what each of their children needed and what was important to them. Why not provide parents with as many options as possible, so they can choose whether and when it is best send their kids to a racially isolated or racially diverse school? I argue that the focus must be on raising the quality in public schools, not on increasing the number of choices or even in raising (or lowering) the level of diversity.

Much of the literature finds school choice to be a “seductive” idea for parents who have had dissatisfactory experiences themselves or feel disenfranchised from the school system. However, although parents may have choices, they do not always have a choice between more than one high-quality school. Further, it disempowers parents to conceive of them as consumers rather than citizen participants in a public, democratic system (Orfield, 2013; Patillo, 2015, and Greene, 2013). This is even more reason why I must conclude that we need more Black and marginalized parents and community leaders involved in making decisions about *regular public schools*. A competitive and capitalist system of competing schools necessitates winners and losers—and Orfield's research shows that the “losers” in this system are typically students of color. Aisha talked about feeling like she doesn't have “an ear to the ground” for what's going on in public schools because she works at a charter school and her sons go to a private school. While she has

every right to make those decisions, especially because she does not see public education as capable of educating her boys in its current state, the school system is hurting for not having parents like Aisha at the forefront of policymaking. It is a catch-22 because until public school raises its quality, parents like Aisha will participate neither in sending their children to public schools nor in transforming the system. But we need these same parents to be involved in public education, to have their voices heard, and to have their ideas acted upon.

For these reasons, my recommendation to policymakers is first to solicit perspectives from parents of color, and not just those whose children attend urban public schools, but especially those who have chosen private schools, charter schools, or open enrollment in suburban districts. We need to listen with open minds and hearts to the most disgruntled and disenfranchised families in our states in order to begin the healing that is necessary to rebuild trust between Black parents and public schools.

Next, policymakers need to stop incentivizing the creation of new and especially privately run charter schools. The traditional public school system could someday have the capacity to provide all families with high quality choices, but not if they are constantly competing with charter schools for parent engagement and per-pupil funding. Provided that policymakers can secure additional funding for public schools, leaders at the district level need to survey families about the specific priorities they have in choosing schools for their children. The parents I interviewed held a great deal of value in schools' ability to provide adequate programming for their exceptional and advanced learners, as well as their educational philosophies. For some of my participants, these variables ranked high above demographics. The data districts can collect from their own

families about educational priorities should guide their programming and resource distribution.

Another recommendation for educators stems from Anne’s idea of the ‘double identity crisis.’ All parents want a safe and nurturing environment for their children, regardless of the particular needs and strengths each child may bring with them. Schools need to address the need children of color have to have their cultural and racial identities affirmed and strengthened. Especially when children do not have advocates like Anne and Aisha’s families, who made sure they felt affirmed as Black girls outside of school, it is essential the schools and communities partner together to develop ways to provide cultural affirmation at school. When Black children suffer from the double identity crisis that Anne described, all children suffer from incorrectly extrapolating negative stereotypes about Black people and Black culture.

Aisha’s experiences of chronic low expectations also highlight a need for district and state leaders to better support educators in identifying and differentiating for gifted learners, especially Black learners. Megan’s experience with her son failing to qualify for advanced learner programming led her to problematize the notion of giftedness—as she put it, every child is gifted and talented in their own way. Educators need more support, resources, training, and professional development to challenge each of their students to their full potentials.

Finally, the need to diversify our teaching population and school leadership is critical. Megan spoke to the psychological damage that a “caste system”-like staff can enact, when children of color only see themselves reflected at the lowest positions of power. Several of the women I spoke mentioned the impact Black teachers had on them if

they were lucky enough to have one. Aisha told me, “I didn’t even realize all my teachers were white until I got my Black teacher. I never had a Black teacher until I had her and then I never had one again until college.” She noticed there were Black paraprofessionals, nurses, and the aides in the teen parent program. Anne talked about exposing her children to Black professionals, even driving across town to a Black dentist. It is not enough for Black students to see themselves in the formal, written curriculum of schools (though these efforts must continue); they must also be reflected in the “hidden curriculum” of a school’s culture and values (Jackson, 1968). Teaching programs at the university level need to improve their efforts to recruit and support teacher candidates of color. Districts not only need to hire teachers of color; they also need to co-create structures of support for new hires with veteran teachers of color. As a whole, policymakers need to work with teachers’ unions to improve their pay and quality of life so that Black and brown graduates see teaching as a viable career path.

Policymakers need to shift their funding focus away from facilitating the creation of many schools that vary in quality and toward supporting existing schools in providing families with real, high quality choices of schools that can meet their children’s needs and affirm their whole identities. Educators, in turn, need to be responsible and radical stewards of their resources and focus them on providing these choices. In all the decision-making that policymakers and educators must do, it is essential that they center the voices of those parents, students, and teachers who are historically and currently marginalized. The brief experience of narrative inquiry has confirmed for me the importance counterstorytelling has for transforming our inequitable systems.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

As I have already acknowledged, it is important to note that the stories shared with me during my research only represent four parents and four families. The aim of this project was to investigate African American parent perspectives on school segregation and integration. There were inherent limitations present from the outset due to the narrative inquiry methods I chose. For example, it was not possible to survey a large enough sample size of parents to make reasonable generalizations about how African American parents tend to value diversity in school settings. Additionally, the four parents I interviewed are all members of the middle class. More research of this type is needed with participants from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds.

For future researchers, perhaps even at the district level, it would be useful to develop a survey for parents that would solicit their priorities for schools on a wider scale. I must also draw on the researcher who implored schools to ask, “How have African Americans over generations succeeded in maintaining their commitment to education and produced a leadership and intellectual class?” (Perry, Steele, and Hilliard, 2004, in Latunde). My research provided four examples of parents who have maintained such a commitment and who themselves are the products of a multigenerational commitment to education. Further research into the factors that support such results would be useful, but perhaps more importantly, research that will support those African American students whose families are not able to make a multigenerational commitment to education.

Finally, I want to emphasize once more that the American public education system is both Thomas Jefferson’s “cornerstone of democracy” and a deeply flawed

institution of white supremacy. That means that this system has the ability to either maintain the status quo of societal inequity or transform injustice to create justice. I would be remiss if I did not recommend to future researchers this lens through which to view methods and analysis of research.

Personal Reflections

Since my own days as a middle school student, I have wondered about the impacts of segregation and integration on children, schools, and communities. Why DO all the black kids and the white kids sit together in the cafeteria, I wondered, as I spotted Beverly Daniel Tatum's *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* in the public library (2003). In high school: Why are all my advanced classes mostly white students and the most heavily disciplined kids are black? On a study abroad program in Quito, Ecuador: What are the benefits and disadvantages for indigenous children attending a culturally focused K-8 school? In college: How did I benefit as a white person from attending diverse schools? As a teacher in a diverse school: Who is benefitting from the diversity of these schools? How can I affirm the racial identities of all my students as a white teacher in a classroom with multiple cultures? All of this led me to question how Black children may both benefit *and* suffer in diverse learning environments, and how their parents weigh this in conjunction with the many other factors they have to weigh in choosing a school.

While I ultimately wanted to know if Black children benefit as much from diverse schools as I did as a white student, my research did not necessarily answer this, but instead highlighted and confirmed those aspects of the school system that are not serving

Black children and families. I hope that as these voices are centered, we can move toward meaningful, transformative change.

Appendix A: Participation Letter

Letter Requesting Participation

Month, day, year

Dear _____,

I am a teacher and graduate student working on a capstone project for my Master of Arts in Teaching at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. As part of my graduate work, I plan to conduct research with parents in our district from June-July, 2017. The purpose of this letter is to request your participation.

My research is focused on the experiences of African American parents or caregivers of students in [name of district] schools, and their educational priorities for their children. I am specifically interested in the experiences of being assigned to a school and/or choosing a school for your child. Participants will share their stories and experiences during a one-on-one interview of approximately 60 minutes in length, at a location of your choosing.

There is little to no risk if you choose to be interviewed. All results will be confidential and anonymous. Pseudonyms for the district, schools, and participants will be used. The interviews will be conducted at a place and time that are convenient for you. The interview recordings will be destroyed after completion of my study.

Participation in the interview is voluntary and at any time, you may decline to be interviewed or have your interview content deleted from the capstone without consequence.

I have received approval from the Hamline University IRB to conduct this study. This capstone will be catalogued in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository. My results might be included in an article in a professional journal or a session at a professional conference. In all cases, your identity and participation will be confidential.

If you are willing and able to participate in an interview, please keep this page. Fill out the duplicate agreement to participate on page two and return it to me by mail or copy the form in an email to me no later than _____. If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Beatrice Rendon

(515) 201-1288

brendon01@hamline.edu

Informed Consent to Participate in Qualitative Interview

Keep this portion for your records.

I have received the letter about your research study for which you will be interviewing parents about their experiences in selecting schools for their children. I understand that being interviewed poses little to no risk for me, that my identity will be protected, and that I may withdraw from the interview portion of the project at any time without negative consequences.

Signature

Date

Informed Consent to Participate in Qualitative Interview

Return this portion to Beatrice Rendon.

I have received the letter about your research study for which you will be interviewing parents about their experiences in selecting schools for their children. I understand that being interviewed poses little to no risk for me, that my identity will be protected, and that I may withdraw from the interview portion of the project at any time without negative consequences.

Signature

Date

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. As a parent/guardian, what are your hopes and dreams for your child?
2. Describe how your child was assigned to their current school. Did you play a role in selecting the school or did the district assign your child? Tell me about what that process was like.
3. Where did you attend elementary, middle, and high school?
4. When you think back to your own school experiences, how racially integrated or segregated were your schools? Tell me about a time when you were aware of how integrated or segregated your school was.
5. What impact did school have on your racial identity development?
6. What impact do you think your child's school is having on their racial identity development?
7. What qualities in a school are important to you when you think about what your priorities are for your child?
8. Where does demographics rank among your priorities for your child's schools? In other words, how important is it to you that your child attends school with mostly African American children, a diverse mix of children, or mostly non-African American children? Why is it important or not important to you?
9. How do you feel about how your child's school is serving them academically?
10. How do you feel about how your child's school is serving them socially/emotionally?
11. To what extent do you think your own school experiences affect the choices you make for your child's educational experiences?

12. In your opinion, what are the biggest obstacles to closing the achievement gap between white students and African American students?
13. What impact, if any, do you believe it would have on your child's school experience and personal development to attend a school that was more or less racially integrated than their current school?
14. What, if anything, do you wish your child's school would do to better serve you and your child?

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