
An Investigation of Two Urban Public Elementary Schools Operating within a School Choice Environment

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School choice generally refers to the freedom that families have to select the schools their children will attend. Over the past several years, school choice has been offered as a strategy for school improvement. Media coverage from newspapers, magazines, and syndicated television programs inform the public about choice, and initiatives put forth by recent Presidents Reagan, Bush Sr., Clinton, and Bush Jr. have all supported varying forms of school choice for families. Recently, the United States Supreme Court ruled 5 to 4 in favor of school choice involving public dollars for private, mostly religious, education in Cleveland city schools (Lane, 2002). The historic ruling reversed the decision made in 2001 by the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals. The Supreme Court justices asserted that a voucher given to parents for use at religious schools does not constitute an official sponsorship of religion, which is prohibited by the First Amendment of the Constitution (Friedman Foundation, 2002). Because school choice is a pressing issue, it is important that researchers study the characteristics of schools in which families seek vouchers as well as schools in which families do not. Indeed, school choice is an important policy issue affecting teachers not only in Ohio and Michigan but teachers across the nation.

Although school choice as a national educational reform movement (Goldring & Sullivan, 1996; Witte, 1992, 1996) has gained recent media attention, the concept is not new. Adam Smith first conceptualized the idea of school choice as a

national policy issue in 1778

(Arren & Jencks, 1972; Gutek, 1972), and Milton Friedman (1962) proposed the first version of the modern school voucher in 1955. Today, school choice is a vastly controversial issue that is gaining momentum on many fronts (Witte, 1998).

The purpose of this study was to explore the day-to-day life in two Ohio urban public elementary schools in which families had applied for a privately funded school choice voucher. Specifically, I investigated how one school (in which 8% of families applied for school choice vouchers) was different from another school (in which 4% of families applied for vouchers). The selection of schools was based on the assumption that a 2% shift in enrollment changes schools in substantial ways. According to Armor and Peiser (1998), student exiting rates as much as 2% may have "serious adverse effects" (p. 176) on schools. For example, fewer students in school often affects school funding formulas, causes reductions in operational expenses, necessitates laying off of teachers, and negatively influences the quality of student programming.

I wanted to explore the ways in which two schools were affected by a voucher program and to seek out explanations for any differences that might have emerged. My goal was not to enter the two schools with a set of predetermined hypotheses to test; rather, my purpose was to explore how the two schools may have differed using a naturalistic inquiry perspective.

The Setting

The setting for this study was the Dayton City Schools, a district of approximately 25,000 students. The two schools that I studied serviced primarily African-American students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and operated using a Montessori instructional theme for nearly nine years.

Currently, many studies are underway across the country that examine the effectiveness of school choice; however few are examining schools qualitatively to provide a contextual frame from which school choice decisions are made.

For this article, I will refer to the two schools by fictitious names: Walnut Grove School and Sugar Hill School. Both schools were located less than 10 miles from one another.

I became interested in Walnut Grove and Sugar Hill schools because they had recently been affected by a private school choice voucher program called PACE (Parents Advancing Choice in Education). The PACE program aspired to provide funds to low-income families to assist and encourage students to attend primarily private schools in the Dayton area. Implemented during the 1997-98 school year, the PACE voucher program was publicized by local media such as radio, newspapers, billboards, and flyers.

Parents who applied for PACE vouchers were selected by lottery. However, unlike other school choice programs across the country in which families simply file an application, families seeking a PACE voucher had to be persistent. In the PACE program families were required to have their children tested (and agree to repeated testing), to gather and reveal their financial statements, to complete a screening procedure, and to participate in an orientation program in addition to filing an application before they were considered possible candidates for vouchers. This process often took months before the families were informed of their status.

Gaining Access

This study was part of a larger project conducted at the University of Dayton titled, the School

Effects Study (SESt). The SESt project was designed as a five-year study to investigate schools from which students exit or enter as a result of the privately-funded school PACE voucher program. I first became involved with the SESt research team in February 1998 as a doctoral student.

In order to gain access to the schools, several meetings were conducted between the SESt team and the superintendent for Dayton City Schools. The primary purpose of these meetings was to work collaboratively with the superintendent, to share ideas regarding the value of the SESt, to jointly identify the schools to be studied, and to negotiate the timeframe for collecting empirical materials.

In April 1998, the superintendent informed building principals and school board members (via memorandum) that he was endorsing the SESt, which had been previously approved by the University of Dayton's Institutional Review Board. One month later, a meeting was held between the SESt research team members, the superintendent, deputy superintendent, and the building principals. The purpose of this meeting was to introduce SESt researchers to the building principals, and to address questions about the project. A handout was distributed at the meeting to clarify different aspects of the project, and the research began the following week.

Method

Currently, many studies are underway across the country that examine the effectiveness of school choice; however few are examining schools qualitatively to provide a contextual frame from which school choice decisions are made. The method used for this study was a naturalistic inquiry approach developed from an ethnographic case study perspective (Merriam, 1988).

This method employs multiple research procedures to explore schools and is considered legitimate methodology for holistic and open-ended queries such as the day-to-day life in schools (Ely, 1991). I had no preconceived ideas about what I would find upon my first entry into Walnut Grove and Sugar Hill schools—except that Sugar Hill School had a higher application rate for vouchers than did Walnut Grove School. Moreover, I knew very little about the dynamics of the local school district prior to my entry in the schools because I lived and worked in Wilmington, Ohio, located approximately

40 miles from Dayton.

To address my question about differences, I used a two-phase data collection process. During the first phase, empirical materials were collected from May 11-15, 1998. In phase two, an extended timeframe was established to include school activities from January through May 1999. During this time, I was unable to adopt an insider perspective on school life; however, I did interact closely with school faculty to achieve what Adler and Adler (1994) call peripheral membership. As a researcher in the schools, I became relatively unnoticed (more during 1999 than in 1998). Phase two of the project allowed me to become immersed in the environment and the evidence (Goffman, 1989). The extended timeframe also allowed me to check my own perceptions of what was happening and to examine my own biases.

As is the case with ethnographic research, several types of empirical materials were gathered: interviews, observations, demographic profiles, curriculum descriptions, field notes, photographs, and documents. The bulk of my evidence came from my field notes and the semi-structured interviews with teachers, administrators and parents. An interview guide was developed to encourage teachers and administrators to talk about the curriculum and their roles in the schools in a conversational manner. Another interview guide was used to ascertain the ways in which parents and family members were involved in their schools.

Informants were to be selected by the principal because of the agreement we had with the district superintendent. Relying on the principal for the selection of informants has limitations. Most notably, the principals may have selected informants who presented only positive accounts rather than negative ones.

Once in the schools, all informants were asked to sign an informed consent form, which stated that a pseudonym would be used for the informant's name and school. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim into text before coding. Five interviews were not audio taped either because the informant refused or was unable to meet in person. Telephone interviews were conducted for people unable to meet in person. In total, 33 teachers and administrators, and 23 parents from Sugar Hill and Walnut Grove Schools were interviewed for the study. Additionally, I also interviewed Michele

Beery, Ph.D., an Assistant Professor of Education at Wilmington College who provided me with insight into the praxis of teachers who work in Montessori schools. According to Dr. Beery, Montessori theme based schools are typically peaceful places where soft communication such as whispering is promoted and valued. Having no experience with the Montessori method (other than what I had researched and read), my interview with Dr. Beery grounded my research in a theoretical base. In short, Montessori pedagogical techniques are dominated by five basic beliefs: (1) a scientific approach to education which is divided into successive planes; (2) an understanding that children are inherently spontaneous and wish to learn; (3) that mental development, like physical growth, does not occur at equal rates for every child; (4) that children must be given liberty or "breathing space"; and (5) an orderly or prepared environment is a prerequisite for developing independent and rational individuals (Goffin, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to increase credibility (validity) and dependability (reliability) in the study. For instance, an audit trail (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) was carefully maintained so that someone external to the study could review the process and results. Multiple data gathering techniques were used to eliminate bias through triangulation. Triangulation is the process of cross-checking with other sources to verify the accuracy of information (Denzin, 1978).

The informants' responses to questions were documented on audio tape and in field notes. Responses to questions were then used to challenge my early assumptions and to disprove any of my preconceived ideas about the school cultures. For example, one of my tentative conclusions, (and later an emerging hypothesis) was diversity. That is, it seemed more evident that Walnut Grove School was more racially and ethnically diverse than Sugar Hill School. Therefore, to learn more about diversity, I sought out informants who had experience with both schools. In one instance, I interviewed a Caucasian parent who had her son transferred from Sugar Hill School and into Walnut Grove because of alleged racial slurs he experienced from African-American students.

Peer Consultation

During this study, I periodically disengaged from the setting and discussed the progress of my work at scheduled research meetings with members of the SESt team. Peer consultation is an important strategy for collecting data because the feedback from colleagues provides opportunities to check one's thinking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, peer consultation meetings were conducted approximately every two weeks. The meetings provided an opportunity not only to examine the direction of the study, but served as an occasion for all SESt members to share their experiences and opinions. Sometimes the SESt members had different perspectives and did not agree with one another.

Data Analysis

The final intent of this study was to develop a set of hypotheses that might begin to explain the dynamics of two schools with different rates of parents' expressing a desire to leave by applying for PACE vouchers. The results are intended to inform the reader about the differences in these two Ohio urban public elementary schools with Montessori themes. The frame I used to code the empirical materials was one of differences. I was particularly interested in differences between the schools and did not; therefore, interpret similarities.

There are several ways to derive meaning from qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). For this study, I used a method suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The actual analysis process entailed data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification in order to create a thick description of the two schools.

First, I organized the recorded transcripts, field notes, and memos from the two schools into four large notebooks. I used two notebooks for Sugar Hill School and two for Walnut Grove and divided the transcripts by years (1998 and 1999) and by role (i.e., principal, teacher, parent, and other). To meet what Lincoln and Guba (1985) set as a "criterion of referential adequacy," the following materials such were collected: field notes, observer comments, photographs, archival materials (including informational brochures, school calendars, attendance notes, school newsletters, and newspaper articles).

Initial interpretations regarding the field notes and transcripts were made in the margins and by attaching notes if needed. Then, I created codes for the data by labeling sentences, phrases, and sections for the text by hand as conceptualized by Seidel and Kelle (1995). The goal of this work was to understand the school as it was revealed by the informants, not one projected by the researcher (Ridenour et al., 1999). I simplified the complex data into a manageable classification scheme called "unitizing" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by writing on a separate sheet of paper the phrases, sentences and paragraphs that were meaningful in describing what I had experienced, as well as what the informants had told me.

Brief Portrait of Walnut Grove School

Walnut Grove School was located at the crossroads of a bustling five-way intersection. Sirens from police cars and fire trucks whirled outside the building nearly every time I visited. Inside, however, the climate was warm and inviting. The floors were carpeted and a wingback chair was strategically positioned in the hallway next to an end table and large brass reading lamp, much like one might find in a living room. Soft classical music played in the classrooms and drifted out into the halls, largely because the classroom doors were kept open during lessons. Brightly colored construction paper posters graced elaborately designed bulletin boards to highlight winning science fair projects. During my observations, I overheard teachers laughing together, sharing stories, and showing genuine interest in one another in the teachers' lounge and in the hallways.

The stories shared by the informants demonstrated important differences in the daily life of the two schools. Ms. Lovejoy, for example, was a former teacher at Walnut Grove for eight years but now was working at Sugar Hill School. She had this to say, "Oh, I think it [Walnut Grove] was a wonderful school. It's an extraordinary school in many ways. Very efficiently [managed] and very clean; and the dedicated teachers are highly committed" (Sugar Hill transcripts, 1999, p. 247). And Ms. McLure, a parent said, "I don't know what they [the teachers and administrators] get paid here but there's a lotta different kinds of kids here, and they don't treat nobody different" (Walnut Grove transcript, 1999, p. 480).

The unconditional acceptance and caring attitude toward children coupled with the strict adher-

ence to the instructional theme struck me as a major difference between the schools. Walnut Grove was not a school for the privileged few; it was a school for all children, rich and poor. During one of my visits, I observed several lines of children standing patiently and whispering quietly outside the nurse's station as the school nurse performed "head checks" on the children for head lice.

Overall, Walnut Grove, (the school with a fewer number of families who applied for the PACE vouchers to exit) was more diverse, smaller in size, had fewer observable problems with discipline, and operated in strict adherence to the Montessori instructional theme. There was also greater parental presence in the Walnut Grove building than Sugar Hill School. These findings are important as one considers potential differences between the two schools.

Brief Portrait of Sugar Hill School

Sugar Hill School was a large school located in a once affluent neighborhood. There were two buildings on its campus. The original structure housed children in grades one through six, in addition to a primary building for younger children ages three, four and five. Built in 1917, the main building was quite old and deteriorating, about which many of the informants expressed dissatisfaction. Mr. Skinner, the principal, said, "Being an older building with a flat roof [the roof] gives out [and] there's leaks. I have water on my gym floor. There's leaks in the hallways. All that comes from being an older building. It takes time to cure those [problems]. You have to be patient, realize I can't do everything right away" (Sugar Hill transcript, 1999, pp. 48-49). The primary building was newer. Built in the 1970's, it operated independently from the main building, although the building principal made it clear he was responsible by having full oversight for both buildings on campus.

The atmosphere at Sugar Hill was different than that of Walnut Grove. The majority of classroom doors were kept closed, in part to keep the noise level down. Interestingly, a microphone and loudspeaker were used at lunch to get the students' attention in order to dismiss them. In contrast, children at Walnut Grove raised their hands and asked to be excused before being dismissed. On the playground, a bullhorn was used to reprimand misbehav-

ior. However, Walnut Grove teachers gently informed the children when it was time to go indoors. Going in and out of the buildings on the Sugar Hill campus was relatively easy as compared with my entry into Walnut Grove. There was no buzzer to press or intercom to answer in order to gain entry. Visitors to Sugar Hill were not required to wear buttons identifying them as visitors. Day after day I walked the Sugar Hill hallways and no one questioned my presence or purpose. At Walnut Grove, however, people would stop me and ask if I needed directions or inquire about what I was doing there.

Throughout the Sugar Hill hallways one could hear phrases such as, "Shut up and get off that ledge," or, "For the second time this morning, I need you to shut your mouth in the hall." In contrast, phrases such as these were not heard at Walnut Grove. Most interestingly, two-way radios were used extensively at Sugar Hill. "Base one to floor one, base one to floor one" could be heard in the hallways and on the grounds. When I arrived in the principal's office for the first of my many meetings with him, the secretary used her radio to call out, "Mr. Skinners [sic] you [sic] 3:30 is here. His reply through the secretary's speaker, "10-4, tell my 3:30 I'm on my way." The use of two-way radios gave me the impression I was on a military base, not an elementary school campus.

To conclude, the portrait of Sugar Hill School (as painted by the informants) was one of a school struggling to control its children, to maintain its facilities, and to collaborate its teaching methodologies, which varied from direct instructional techniques to pure Montessori.

Conflicting Teaching Strategies

The teachers at Walnut Grove followed the Montessori instructional theme very closely whereas many of the teachers of Sugar Hill used strategies such as worksheets and direct instruction which conflicted with the school's theme. Approximately one half of the teachers at Sugar Hill were not trained in the use of Montessori pedagogical techniques, and several of the classrooms were characterized by traditional modes of instruction, that is, teaching with overhead projection units, classroom desks arranged in neatly formed rows. Several of the informants indicated that the teachers who were not trained in Montessori method were a source of anxiety for the

teachers who had studied the method. Mr. Flanders, a teacher at Sugar Hill said, "I'm retired military, and haven't had a chance to go to [Montessori] training like the others. I do a little of everything in my class" (Sugar Hill transcript, 1999, p. 19). At Walnut Grove, the principal was very careful to hire teachers certified in Montessori. Likewise, the classrooms at Walnut Grove were more open, and the teachers along with the children often sat on the floor and in small groups for their lessons.

Parental Presence

Interactions with parents at Sugar Hill were minimal in comparison with those of Walnut Grove. One reason for the discrepancy may have been the parent resource room teacher, who was absent because of a long-term illness for all of my visits. At Walnut Grove, the parent resource room teacher coordinated my interviews with parents. Acting on directions given by the principal, the resource room teacher conducted several follow-up calls to parents to confirm my interview appointments. Teacher informants also supported my observation that parental involvement was better at Walnut Grove. In fact, in response to the PACE voucher program, parents at Walnut Grove developed color brochures, a marketing video, and wrote positive newspaper editorials in support of their school. Sugar Hill parents did not make these same efforts to promote their school.

In short, I was able to interview more parents at Walnut Grove than Sugar Hill simply because more parents were accessible. Moreover, the parents at Walnut Grove seemed to be focused on finding the best educational setting for their children. Collectively, they may have been better able to produce a better educational environment as a group than parents with similar passions at Sugar Hill.

Educational Leadership

The principal's leadership style at Sugar Hill was less collaborative than the Walnut Grove principal. His style was more top-down and hierarchical, much like a boss in a corporate setting. In hindsight, his style may have reflected his attempt to rescue the school from the disorganization that resulted from the laissez faire attitude evident in the previous principal's administration. (This conclusion was drawn from the insight of the informants). In comparison, the principal at Walnut Grove empowered teachers and promoted shared decision-making among both

her support staff and teachers. She encouraged teachers and parents to participate in important as well as in routine decisions.

Fiedler's (1971) contingency model suggests that there is a situational nature to effective leadership. The model explains why certain leadership behaviors work best in some schools but not in others. For instance, at Walnut Grove, the principal was trained in the Montessori method whereas the principal at Sugar Hill was not. Additionally, an organizational chart was displayed in a hallway display case at Sugar Hill. This organizational chart showed the principal's name at the top like the CEO of a large corporation. Below his name were the names of the two assistant principals, and the faculty department heads. I found no evidence of an organizational chart at Walnut Grove. Put simply, the principal's style at Walnut Grove was more congruent with the school culture found in Montessori schools than the style of the principal at Sugar Hill.

Building Maintenance

As discussed, one of the primary concerns expressed by informants at Sugar Hill was the building's poor maintenance. For example, the gymnasium, which served as a meeting place for local community events, a classroom for physical education classes, assembly area, and lunchroom was in need of major repair. The floor had become warped and distorted nearly 20 inches in some areas due to the leaking roof. Several of the seatbacks in the permanent seating area were broken, and plaster peeled from the walls in chunks. The principal at Sugar Hill was very concerned about the building's condition, one time appearing troubled by my presence because the floors had not been cleaned. Walnut Grove did not have building maintenance issues.

Diversity

The student demographics at Sugar Hill were less racially and ethnically diverse than those of Walnut Grove. Specifically, 88% of the student body at Sugar Hill was African-American compared with 56% at Walnut Grove. Additionally, five percent of the student population at Walnut Grove identified themselves as Other (i.e., non African-American or non-Caucasian).

Morning Announcements

The morning announcements at Sugar Hill were different from the announcements at Walnut Grove. In some respects, the tone of the announcements at Sugar Hill was like being at a pep rally every morning. This may have contributed to the active behavior of the students. Each morning, the principal read the announcements and encouraged students to use a "loud voice" to recite the school pledge. Differently from Sugar Hill, the children at Walnut Grove gave the morning announcements and the recited the school pledge in a soft tone over the intercom system.

Findings

In general, school choice advocates suggest families make school choice decisions based on a logical set of criteria, sometimes arguing that parents comparison shop for the best school for their children to attend (Finn, 1999). It was my experience, however, that there are many contextual frames within which school choice decisions are made. Although parents may claim to want the best academic environment for their children, the parents themselves often chose among a much broader context of phenomena that often far outweigh the magnitude of our understanding. In other words, parents make choices from their unique phenomenological fields. This makes it difficult to fully explain why parents make the decisions they do. It is difficult to objectively measure such choices. For the most part, in studies of choice researchers have focused on student academic achievement claiming that families base their decisions primarily on this factor. Findings from this study, however, indicate that there is an emotional connection that parents experience when they are committed to a school, and thus, it is difficult for these feelings not to affect the decisions parents make about schools. For example, attending a school in a building that is well-maintained may be desirable to some parents, if they are, in fact, aware of these conditions. To other parents, different variables such as wealth of diversity may attract them to certain schools. Therefore, the differences found between the two schools (i.e., leadership, atmosphere, teacher instruction, student diversity, parental presence, school size and noise) may begin to explain the differences in application rates for school vouchers.

Conclusions

Teachers, administrators, parents, and policy makers must be aware of the characteristics in schools of choice given the implications of the recent United States Supreme Court ruling in favor of vouchers. The conclusions from my analysis of Walnut Grove and Sugar Hill schools suggest that families at Walnut Grove may have believed their school was better than other schools of choice, and therefore, were not interested in leaving. Conversely, families at Sugar Hill (where more families applied for a voucher) may have believed the voucher was an opportunity to attend a school different from their own-possibly one that was qualitatively better.

Although this study was largely exploratory, the patterns and themes that surfaced suggest that the school in which a larger number of families who applied for vouchers was older, larger, and less well-kept than the school in which a smaller number and proportion of families applied for vouchers. Students

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incongruent with the school's Montessori theme. Declining parental presence and frequent turnover in the administration also emerged as characteristics of the school where more parents applied for vouchers.

One common assertion among school choice theorists (Peterson, 1998) is that schools improve when they are forced to meet the demands of the market (i.e., compete with other institutions). Of the two schools in this study, Walnut Grove appeared to respond better to market forces.

In conclusion, this qualitative study provides a foundation for future studies that will help researchers determine the characteristics that families use when they decide to retain or remove their children from a school. Typically, the trend in this country has been to measure the impact of school choice with standardized test scores as indicators of success

or failure (Elam, 1999; Finn, 1999; Hoxby, 1996; Peterson, 1999). Qualitative data gathered from this study, however, may provide future researchers with additional criteria for testing hypotheses regarding school choice.

The School Choice Trait Inventory (SCTI), shown below, was developed from the findings of this study. The SCTI is offered as a tool for researchers who wish to begin validating potentially influencing factors in school choice decisions. The categorizations used on the SCTI instrument, however, does not represent all the factors that determine school choice decisions as there are countless vari-

ables that families may use. The categorizations represent findings. Consequently, the SCTI is intended to be a starting point for teachers, administrators, and others involved with schools to better understand schools that operate in a choice environment.

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