"CONTROLLED" SCHOOL CHOICE: UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL DECISION MAKING FOR FAMILIES OF LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND/OR MINORITY BACKGROUNDS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

"CONTROLLED" SCHOOL CHOICE: UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL DECISION MAKING FOR FAMILIES OF LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND/OR MINORITY BACKGROUNDS

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Increasing the role of parental choice in education, particularly for parents of low socioeconomic status, is a school reform policy currently receiving a great deal of attention. As a result, various versions of school-choice programs are being implemented throughout the United States. In an effort to better understand how parents of low socioeconomic status make sense of increased educational decision-making opportunities, the present study utilized ethnographic methodology to examine the educational experiences of such families from their own perspectives. Semi-structured interviews with ten parents of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds and three years of participant observation at a local elementary school revealed that parents are continuously engaged with their children's education, although not necessarily according to white, middle class notions of parental involvement. Although educational decisions are often a natural outgrowth of parental engagement, parental engagement does not necessarily result in "school-choice" decisions per se. Exploring past and present educational experiences of participating families was valuable in gaining insight into how parents knew about and understood a novel school choice policy. Unfortunately, school choice reform efforts in the local community have not positively impacted many of the families who participated in the present research. This is particularly disturbing because families in the present study represent the families the school choice policy was theoretically aiming to provide increased decision-making power. The complicated ways in which parents interact with their children's schools, as well as

the ways in which the schools interact with children and their parents seems to impede rather than promote genuine collaboration and communication between parents and schools. This hinders parents and teachers ability to obtain a mutual understanding of the unique strengths and weaknesses of a particular child. When understood in the context of the unequal distribution of power in home-school relations, parents who participate in their child's education in non-traditional ways will likely be excluded from many routine aspects of their child's education. Therefore, providing disadvantaged parents with one additional, formal educational option was unlikely to alter their children's education in meaningful ways.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Project Overview

Improving the educational experiences of children living in the United States is theoretically a goal shared by many Americans. The definition of improvement as well as the ways in which such improvement can be attained is often a source of contention. Nevertheless, improvement in the form of higher standardized test scores and increased racial integration are often cited as outcomes suggestive of positive change. Enhancing the ability of parents of low socioeconomic status and minority backgrounds to select the schools their children will attend via novel school choice policies is one school reform effort currently receiving a great deal of attention. This intervention is important to consider because such parents are generally less able than more affluent parents to simply relocate if they want their children to attend a particular school.

In an effort to better understand how parents of low socioeconomic status and minority backgrounds make sense of increased educational decision making opportunities (i.e., novel school choice policies), this study first aimed to understand the educational experiences of such families from their own perspectives. Educational experiences were conceptualized broadly and included parents' personal educational experiences as children, their children's educational experiences, as well as their experiences in the local community. These factors were often intertwined and contributed to knowledge about and participation in the local controlled school choice program. However, participation in the program occurred in a variety of ways, but not necessarily as it was conceptualized and portrayed by the school district.

In order to situate the present research in the empirical literature, background information and previous work on various school choice policies is reviewed in the first chapter. A theoretical re-conceptualization of previous research is presented and serves as a flexible guide for the current project. It is hoped that such a re-conceptualization helps minimize stereotyped assumptions about families of low socioeconomic status and minority backgrounds.

In chapter two, the context of the study is described in detail so that readers have a backdrop against which to interpret the findings. This includes information about the city in which the parents live, the controlled "Schools of Choice" program, as well as the researcher's engagement with the setting

Chapter three presents data from in-depth interviews with parents about their personal educational experiences as children and adolescents. Such early experiences varied a great deal for this group of parents. Despite these differences, the participating parents shared educational hopes and dreams for their children. Salient memories from parents' childhood educational experiences contributed to parents' tendency to highlight interpersonal or structural aspects of education. Parents with stronger interpersonal frameworks of educational experiences may be less inclined to make decisions about structural changes and vice versa.

Chapter four begins to explicate the ways in which parents are continuously engaged with their children's education. Participating parents reported qualitatively different models of engagement with their children's education. The nature of parental engagement is important in understanding how parents negotiate educational decisions. Educational decisions often appeared to be a natural outgrowth of parental engagement. However, these decisions were not necessarily "school-choice" decisions.

In chapter five, results suggested that parental knowledge about the particular school choice policy implemented in the local community varied a great deal. Parents with intimate working knowledge about the school choice program were those who had frequent and systematic contact with the schools. Other parents were not as fortunate, and received informal information, inaccurate information or reported receiving no information at all. Finally, findings about how parents with program knowledge actually made school choice decisions are presented. In chapter seven, conclusions and implications of the study are discussed.

Literature Review and Rationale

Increasing the role of parental choice in education is a school reform policy receiving a great deal of attention on local, state, and national political agendas. As a result, various versions of school choice programs are being implemented throughout the United States, many of which are described below. Because school choice is essentially a policy idea, the majority of school choice research is best classified as policy evaluation. As a result, many researchers studying school choice programs are interested in determining whether or not a particular school choice policy produces desired outcomes, typically defined as improved standardized test scores and/or racial integration. Given the emphasis on policy evaluation, it is not surprising that methodological considerations are of great interest within the school choice literature (Viteritti, 2000). Randomized field experiments are considered to be the gold standard, and researchers have exerted much effort to conduct such research (Howell & Peterson, 2002).

Despite these efforts, no firm conclusions can be drawn about the capacity of school choice plans to improve academic achievement or racial integration (Mintrom, 2000). The lack of significant findings is typically attributed to selection bias. Perhaps the most consistent finding in the school choice literature is that parents with the most educational resources are more likely

to utilize school choice options when provided with the opportunity to do so (Lee, 1995). As a result, neighborhood schools often lose the families who are best equipped to advocate for school change. Despite the lack of convincing empirical evidence that increasing school choice results in improved education, the idea enjoys a great deal of support by American citizens in general (Peterson, 1998), as well as parents who are provided with increased educational opportunities for their children in particular (Rasell & Rothstein, 1993). The proliferation of various school choice programs throughout the country, as well as President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, indicate that school reform efforts aimed at increasing the educational options available to parents are unlikely to lose momentum any time soon.

Given the current political attention being paid to increasing school choice options, and the implementation of pilot school choice programs, especially for parents with children attending low-performing public schools, it is important to gain a more sophisticated understanding about the ways in which parents make decisions about their children's education. Factors that potentially contribute to parental decision making are rarely studied in depth, and often researched at only one point in time. Most commonly, research is conducted immediately prior to a school choice decision. Demographic variables such as race, ethnicity, religious background, socioeconomic status, parental educational attainment tend to receive a great deal of attention. To a lesser extent, the ability to seek out relevant information, perceptions of academic excellence, dissatisfaction with child's current school, racial composition of schools, transportation, discipline, safety, and pedagogical themes are examined. Because schools, society, and families interact in complex ways, it unlikely that variables measured at a single point in time can capture the rationale behind any parental decision. The growing body of interpretive studies demonstrates that educational experiences are not predictable or deterministic

(Mehan, 1992). In fact, parents often react to structural changes in the educational systems in complicated ways (Wells, 1996).

Although some research sheds light on the parental decision-making process for families of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds, much more work needs to be done. Who decides to send their children to schools outside of their neighborhood school and why? What happens to children in their new schools of choice academically and behaviorally? Which parents decide to continue their child's education in the school of choice and which parents decide to have their child return to the neighborhood school or to a different school and why?

The current research was aimed at elucidating educational decision making employed by parents and children traditionally studied as the recipients or targets of educational reform efforts. Understanding the ways in which these parents make decisions about their child's education informs the school choice debate in a way that traditional policy evaluation research cannot. The theoretical framework employed in the present project was developed from a re-conceptualization and extension of the existing school choice literature. Guided by studies in the interpretive tradition, a fundamental theoretical assumption of this work is that parents are not simply passive recipients of school reform efforts, or bearers of cultural capital, who do not make active decisions about their child's education. Instead, it is assumed that parents gain a wealth of knowledge about their neighborhoods, communities, schools, society, and children interacting with and interpreting the world in which they live. Parents' interpretations of their own educational experiences, referred to as "*distal educational experiences*," as well as the educational experiences of their children, referred to as "*proximal educational experiences*" may guide initial educational decisions. These interpretations may also modify future educational decisions. Taking the lived experiences of low-income and minority children seriously required a

re-conceptualization of the school choice literature that emphasizes the dynamic nature of decision making. Therefore, in the present study, parents' distal educational experiences, local knowledge, and proximal educational experiences were explored, highlighting the ways in which this knowledge and experience influences any particular school choice decision.

School choice. The educational system in the United States continues to fail large numbers of its students each year. American students do not fare well when their performance is compared to students in other industrialized countries. When analyzing achievement scores on standardized tests, students progressing through the American school system consistently do worse than their international counterparts. In fact, the performance gap continues to increase throughout students' educational careers, reaching its peak in the high school years (Peterson, 1998). Although this is troubling in and of itself, the international achievement gap pales in comparison to the creation and maintenance of unequal educational opportunities available in the United States. Due to current educational policies and practices, almost any measure of educational achievement, including college entrance exam scores, grade-point averages in high school and college, and graduation rates, reflects a discrepancy between white and minority students from African American and Latino backgrounds with white students outperforming their minority counterparts nationally (Singham, 1998; Steinberg, 1997). Children living in urban areas with large minority populations are perhaps the most negatively impacted by current educational policies.

Several scholars have observed that inner city schools performing poorly on standardized achievement tests are often unable to improve their schools due to excessive bureaucratic regulation (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Godwin & Kemerer, 2002). In such school systems, unions and school boards often use their political power to micromanage the ways in which potential

solutions to poor academic performance are implemented. This results in low levels of discretion for teachers and administrators struggling to create innovative change. These bureaucratic constraints serve to exacerbate the achievement gap between populations of predominantly minority children living in large cities and non-minority children. In fact, the longer minority children remain in the public school system, the worse they do academically when compared to their white counterparts (Peterson, 1998).

The unequal opportunities existing in the public educational system, in combination with the failure of past policies and practices to integrate schools and produce academic gains for all students, have resulted in a new wave of school reform efforts, namely school choice. School choice is a term that refers to a wide variety of school choice alternatives, which will be described in more detail below. The major theoretical thrust of most school choice plans is the application of the market metaphor to the educational system. In the market metaphor, parents are cast in the role of educational consumers, and schools unable to attract sufficient numbers of students will be forced to either improve their services or close their doors (Good & Braden, 2000). Because it is relatively easy to recognize that current educational policies already provide parents of high socioeconomic status with many choices in their children's education, most school choice plans are aimed at increasing the options of either all students in a geographic area, or increasing the options for families of low socioeconomic status in particular.

On principle, increasing school choice enjoys the support of many prominent leaders from a variety of political persuasions. Milton Friedman, the conservative economist often credited for the idea of school vouchers, Christopher Jencks, the new-left sociologist, John Coons, a school finance equity reform lawyer, John Chubb, an anti-bureaucracy political scientist and CEO of Edison Schools, and George Bush, former President of the United States all

believe that increasing the role of parental choice in education will improve academic performance (Catterall, 1992). The former President, Bill Clinton (Peterson, 1998), and the current President, George W. Bush, are also staunch school choice supporters. Currently, there are no other school reform efforts receiving as much national attention.

In fact, under President Bush's *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001,* families with children attending low-performing schools are provided with several options to improve their children's education. The NCLB reflects the four principles Bush's education reform plan: "stronger accountability for results, expanded flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work" (*No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* Fact Sheet: http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/esea/factsheet.html). Parents have three primary options including public school choice, supplemental services and charter schools. First, parents may transfer their child to a better-performing public school immediately after their child's current school has been identified as failing, defined by poor standardized test scores. Second, parents with children in failing schools may request between five hundred and one thousand dollars from Title One funds to provide their children with supplemental services including tutors, after-school programs, and summer school. Third, the act provides federal funds for the creation of charter schools, which would provide parents with alternatives to public schools. Presumably, parents will make these decisions after reviewing their child's annual school report card which provides information about the standardized test scores of students in the school as well as their child's individual performance.

School-choice policies. In order to set the stage for this project, various types of school choice plans currently implemented throughout the United States are briefly described. School choice is a term that refers to a range of educational policies aimed at increasing the extent to

which parents are able to make meaningful decisions about their child's education. Perhaps the most restrictive, yet most common, type of school choice is the choice parents make when deciding where to reside. In traditional school districts, each family's home is located within an attendance zone for a particular school. The quality of schools in a given attendance zone may influence a family's decision about where to live (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002). However, not all parents have the ability to relocate in order to maximize the quality of their children's education. Thus, attendance zone choices restrict decision-making power to families with a fair amount of economic resources.

Beyond the educational choices some families make in purchasing a home located in a particular attendance zone, there are a handful of alternatives within public school districts that may provide parents with additional school choices. Schools-within-schools are available to some students, often times in the form of a special academy or program that is physically housed within a regular public school. These special programs may be geared to so-called gifted and talented students who take several courses in the school-within-school while spending the remainder of their day in regular education classes.

Magnet schools are a more comprehensive version of schools-within-schools. Magnet schools were initially implemented across the country as a way to help integrate schools (Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996; Young & Clinchy, 1992). The concept of a magnet school typically involves a school adopting a school-wide theme, such as foreign languages, the arts, math, or science, which will attract students from a variety of demographic backgrounds from across the school district. Magnet schools are a popular school choice option, and in 1990, magnet schools enrolled an average of 20 percent of high school students in large urban school districts (Blank, 1990). Although any student may technically attend a magnet school, they must meet district-

determined qualifications. This often results in a magnet school student body with greater academic skills than non-magnet school students in the same district (Godwin, Kemerer, & Martinez, 1998). Parents with higher levels of education tend to seek out magnet schools due to perceptions of academic excellence. Further, students of low socioeconomic status, minority backgrounds, and poor standardized test scores are underrepresented in magnet school programs, even when prior academic achievement is not a selection criterion (Blank, Levine, & Steel, 1996).

Some states, such as Minnesota, have adopted statewide open enrollment policies in which students may attend any public school outside their attendance-zone district (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002). Students are initially assigned to their attendance-zone schools, but have the opportunity to enroll in a different school on a space available basis. These open enrollment plans may also be referred to as inter-district choice programs. Given the types of parents who seek out magnet school alternatives to regular public schools, it is not surprising that parents of higher socioeconomic status are also more likely than parents of low socioeconomic status to participate in open enrollment choice options due to their ability to provide transportation and greater access to information about the program (Armor & Peiser, 1998).

Charter schools represent the newest type of public school choice for families. Charter schools are essentially public schools designed and implemented by any group of people who receive approval from a state-designated authority (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002). Because charter schools are viewed as public schools, they typically receive a certain amount of money per student enrolled. The specific amount equals approximately the average per-pupil expenditure received by other public schools in the district (Hassel, 1998). The first charter school legislation was enacted in 1991, and since then, more than two-thirds of the states have introduced charter

schools (Hassel, 1998). Despite sharing a common name and key characteristics, charter school laws vary considerably. Some states allow only existing public schools to convert to charter schools, while others permit the creation of new schools. Although charter schools are technically classified as public schools, in several states private for-profit organizations operate charter schools through subcontracts with public school systems. Some state charter school regulations provide charter schools with a great deal of autonomy allowing them to operate without restrictions imposed on them by state regulations and teacher organizations. In other states, teachers' unions virtually control the charter schools (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002).

The families who elect to send their children to charter schools seem to be more diverse than families who send children to magnet schools and utilize open enrollment plans. In a study examining fifty charter schools in Texas enrolling 16,000 students during the 1996-97 academic year, approximately fifty percent of the students attending charter schools were members of minority groups (25% Hispanic, 15.7% African American, 4.1% Asian, 3.7% Native American, 1.1% other). The authors of this study point out that this is in contrast to American public schools which enroll approximately 34% minority students (Vanourek, Manno, Finn, Jr., & Bierlein, 1998). Charter schools in this sample also reported slightly higher percentages of low-income students, as well as students with limited English proficiency. Parents of students in charter schools ranged in their level of educational attainment with approximately 29 percent of them holding a college degree, and approximately 12 percent with no high school diploma (Vanourek, Manno, Finn, Jr., & Bierlein, 1998).

Perhaps the most extensive and most controversial form of school choice is a publicly funded school voucher plan (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002). In school voucher programs, families receive vouchers of varying amounts to use at public or private schools of choice that will accept

their children for admission. Some programs restrict the use of vouchers to nonsectarian schools, to low-income students, or to students whose public school has failed to achieve acceptable educational outcomes. Currently, only three states have state-funded voucher programs; Wisconsin, Ohio and Florida. In each of these states, many public schools were failing to provide students with a quality education. The voucher programs were implemented to provide students attending poor public schools with an exit option. Very little systematic data is available for the Ohio and Florida programs due to their recent implementation. However, the voucher program in Milwaukee, Wisconsin has been in place since 1990, and results from this project have been the source of much debate among scholars (Viteritti, 2000; Witte, 1998). The most consistent finding from this voucher experiment indicates that parents, especially mothers, who utilized the vouchers to send their children to a different school, had more education than parents of children in the Milwaukee Public School System who did not utilize the vouchers (Witte, 1998).

In addition to inter-district choice programs, another public school option available in some areas is intra-district choice. Intra-district choice programs allow parents to choose any school within their attendance-zone school district for their child to attend. Some intra-district choice programs are referred to as controlled school choice policies because parents are allowed to choose schools for their child as long as each school's population approximates the demographic composition of the community. In controlled school choice programs, there are no attendance-zone schools. All parents must make a decision about which school their child will attend. Parents rank their school preferences and students are assigned to schools in a way that maintains racial balance while maximizing parental preferences. The most well known controlled public school choice programs are located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, East Harlem, New York, and Montclair, New Jersey (Nathan, 1989). Because *all* parents are forced to make

decisions about where their child attends school, controlled school choice is often referred to as an optimal model of school choice. In an ideal controlled school choice program, parents receive information about each school's pedagogical themes and academic performance before ranking their choices. Another unique feature of controlled school choice programs is the provision of transportation for all students to attend their school of choice. In theory, parents of low socioeconomic status are not left without decision-making power because of a lack of information, or an inability to provide transportation.

To summarize, there are numerous variations of school choice plans currently implemented throughout the United States. Many, if not all, of these programs were initiated to address the academic shortcomings of public schools educating large numbers of poor and minority children, or to integrate schools racially. There appears to be a consensus in the literature that in almost every school choice alternative studied, parents with higher levels of education are more likely to send their children to schools outside of their attendance zone (Lee, 1995). Attendance-zone schools often lose the families who are most able to create change in neighborhood schools, leaving the families with fewer educational resources behind.

Re-conceptualizing the School Choice Literature

As described above, school choice refers to many different types of programs aimed at increasing the educational options available to parents. Despite the wide variation in school choice plans, researchers studying most versions of school choice tend to treat educational decisions in a similar fashion. I argue that the school choice literature should be re-conceptualized in two important ways. First, in most school choice studies, parents are classified in two categories: choosers and nonchoosers. This classification unintentionally privileges the experiences of families who believe white suburban schools provide superior academic

experiences to minority and nonminority children alike, and precludes the possibility that some parents may "choose" to send their children to their attendance-zone schools for equally valid reasons. Also implied in the choosers versus nonchoosers distinction is the notion that the only parents who care about their children's education are the parents who "choose" a school outside of their attendance zone. However, choosing to send your children to a new school requires several steps prior to simply making a school choice decision. Parents must first be aware of a school choice option. Research has demonstrated that not all programs are created equally when it comes to the distribution of information (Fuller, Elmore & Orfield, 1996). Second, the majority of school choice studies are policy evaluations that treat school choice as a one-shot phenomenon. In most studies, parents are provided with a new educational opportunity for their children via the school choice plan, and they either take advantage of it, or they do not. This decision is often studied without acknowledging any previous or subsequent educational decisions.

Choosers versus nonchoosers. "Choosers" typically refer to parents who learn of a school choice plan allowing them to send their children to schools outside their traditional attendance-zone schools, and then "choose" to send their children to a different school. "Nonchoosers" refer to parents who did not capitalize on this new opportunity, and did not send their children to a different school. At face value, these classifications seem to merely reflect the decisions parents make. However, this conceptualization implies that only parents who "choose" to send their children to schools outside of their neighborhood are making active decisions about their child's education, reinforcing the stereotype that many parents of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds are aware of better educational opportunities for their children, but do not exert any effort to improve their child's education either because they are lazy or do not value

education. If parents are unaware of a new school choice opportunity, they are not engaged in their children's education because they did not seek out information about the school choice programs, which by default categorizes them as nonchoosers. Another implied assumption in the choosers-nonchoosers conceptualization is that only schools outside the attendance-zone of low-income and/or minority families are worthy educational institutions.

This conceptualization is particularly problematic because previous work, primarily outside the realm or school choice literature, suggests that some minority families make active decisions to enroll their children in predominantly minority neighborhood schools for reasons directly related to providing their children with optimal educational experiences (Bell, 1987). There are also compelling arguments made by scholars that this is exactly the type of environment in which young minority youth thrive (Adair, 1984; Golan & Eisdorfer, 1972). Graduation rates of African American institutions of higher learning extend this concept to the college years. Gill summarized a study conducted by the Southern Regional Education Board which found that 115 African American institutions of higher learning enrolled approximately 250,000 students (1991). Of the one million African American students in college at the time of the study, approximately 75 percent attended predominantly white institutions. However, approximately 50 percent of all African American graduates came from predominantly African American institutions (Gill, 1991). Despite the unspoken assumptions in the school choice literature, minority schools should not be considered by default undesirable or inferior to predominantly white schools.

Within the school choice literature, qualitative research conducted by Amy Stuart Wells in Saint Louis suggests that some African American high school students and their families prefer their predominantly minority neighborhood schools in the city to white suburban schools

in the county (1996). Some of these children and families place a high value on education, and when given the choice, they feel neighborhood schools provide a better education than suburban schools. Therefore, they "choose" to attend these schools.

Educational decisions. Of the existing studies examining the impact of school choice programs, none have located parental decisions about where to send their child to elementary, middle, or high school in the context of the wide range of educational decisions parents make for their children throughout their child's educational career. Further, most school choice studies examine one parental decision in isolation of all prior and subsequent educational decisions (see Wells, 1996 for an exception). Very little information is known about how particular parents make decisions about where to send their children to school when faced with a novel school choice policy. Understanding how parents made past educational decisions for their children may shed light on reactions to a particular school choice option. Parents make decisions about where (or whether) to enroll their child in an early childhood program of some sort, which teacher in a particular grade will teach their children, whether or not their children will be involved with extracurricular activities and after-school programs, and which courses their children will register for in high school to name a few.

One of the earliest decisions parents make is whether or not to send their child to preschool. Numerous types of early childhood programs are available to children and families. Several variations include head start programs, early childhood programs operated by public schools, private preschools, in-home day care, day care provided in the caregiver's residence, and preschools operated by religious institutions. Parents must consider a variety of factors in order to make such decisions. This process is similar to later educational decision making in that parents of higher socioeconomic status tend to have more options at their disposal than parents of

low socioeconomic status. For example, any private preschool or other day care option requires a certain amount of tuition. Although some low-income parents may receive financial assistance to help supplement the cost of day care or preschool, they may be faced with additional barriers preventing them from utilizing private early childhood programs. Examples of such barriers include the lack of transportation, strict admissions policies that exclude particular types of children, and the lack of available child care options.

Decisions about particular teachers, extracurricular activities, and after-school programs may also provide relevant information about future school choice decisions. In light of Delpit's recent work on the growing cultural conflict in the classroom (1995), these types of educational decisions may be especially important in gaining a deeper understanding of the educational decision-making process of African American parents. This cultural conflict reflects concern with the educational values schools adopt, which guide both curriculum and programs. Delpit describes a "rift" that sometimes occurs between progressive white reformers emphasizing the creation of a classroom setting that is open and "humanized" and African American reformers emphasizing success on standardized tests and other basic skills. These African American reformers hope to increase the likelihood that students of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds learn the skills required to pass through various "gatekeeping" points which allow access to the middle class and upward social mobility (Delpit, 1995). Obviously, parents adhering to both of the above world views value their child's education. However, the decisions they make will vary depending on their beliefs about what is best for their children.

Parents who wish to increase the likelihood that their children will pass the "gatekeeping" points in society may seek out teachers who are also committed to teaching the fundamental skills of a traditional education. They may also enroll their students in after-school programs

with a similar focus. When provided with a choice about where to send their child to school, parents may choose schools that emphasize these same educational values. White parents of higher socioeconomic status may not have to worry as much about their children passing through the same "gatekeeping" points. Therefore, they may seek out very different types of educational opportunities for their children. For example, perhaps these parents would want teachers who did not utilize a traditional approach. Or, if given the choice among various after-school programs, these parents may choose programs that allow their children to develop critical thinking rather than improve their ability to complete multiplication problems. These parents may seek schools with similar pedagogical approaches if provided with a school choice option.

Very few studies in the school choice literature have examined the underlying values implicit in school choice decisions from a theoretical perspective of any kind. Most often, the authors administer a questionnaire or telephone survey to parents asking them which aspects of education are most important to them. These data are simply analyzed by demographic variables, and subsequently reported with no acknowledgment of pre-existing values based on lived experiences in the world. Schneider and colleagues provide an exception (1998) in a survey of 400 head of households in New York and New Jersey, both states with long-standing choice programs. White parents were less likely to emphasize the importance of a school's test scores than Hispanic, African American, and Asian parents. Further, parents with lower levels of educational attainment were more likely to emphasize the importance of test scores than parents with more education (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000).

As several scholars have argued, the literature on course selection in high school seems particularly relevant to understanding how families might make educational decisions when provided with a choice from a wide range of alternatives (Lee, 1995; Schneider, Marschall,

Teske, & Roch, 1998). Findings from the course selection literature suggest that less advantaged students are less likely to select rigorous academic courses, which only serves to magnify social differences (Lee, 1993). Critics of school choice argue that a similar process will occur when disadvantaged families select schools that are academically less rigorous, perpetuating their lower-class status. If parental school choice decisions are conceptualized as part of an ongoing series of educational decision making, patterns among particular sets of decisions may emerge. Understanding how parents make decisions about where to send their children to elementary and middle school, may enhance our understanding of course selection in high school. Conversely, understanding how families help their children select courses in high school may increase knowledge about how parents will choose schools for the younger siblings of their high school students if provided with school choice. Knowledge about how parents navigate the educational system may help increase the likelihood that students from all racial and economic backgrounds choose educational opportunities that will maximize their chances for future academic success, which may or may not be schools located outside of the traditional attendance zone.

One additional issue occasionally studied in the school choice literature lends support to the notion that one school choice decision is actually only one educational decision among many. Student mobility in school choice programs is often reported as a characteristic of families participating in school choice studies. However, I argue that re-conceptualizing the notion of mobility will allow for a more holistic understanding of school choice decisions. If school choice studies are reporting mobility rates, they are essentially reporting that parents have made two educational decisions. However, typically only the first decision is examined. For instance, in Milwaukee's school voucher program, Witte reported high levels of student mobility for students utilizing school vouchers to attend schools outside of their attendance zone. In fact, the average

annual attrition rate for these families was 33.4 percent (Witte, 1998), compared to 22 – 28 percent for regular public schools in Milwaukee. Of the initial class of 341 voucher students, only 57 students remained in their voucher schools over the course of four years. Mobility rates indicate that parents make one decision to use a voucher, and a second decision to terminate participation in the voucher school. The large number of students leaving their voucher schools suggests that in order to understand how *all* parents make school choice decisions for their children, not only parents who remain in schools of choice, researchers must conceptualize school choice decisions as one type of educational decision. In this re-conceptualization, mobility reflects more than a methodological problem or an outcome measure, it is an educational decision in and of itself.

Amy Stuart Wells has moved the school choice literature a step in the right direction. She conducted a qualitative study investigating the school choice decisions and experiences of African American high school students living in the city of Saint Louis who were provided with the option to transfer to predominantly white high schools in the suburbs. Wells demonstrates the importance of examining the decision to remain in the attendance-zone or transfer to a suburban school as one link in a larger chain of educational decisions (1996). Further, she classifies all students according to their school choice decisions, regardless of what those decisions may be. In doing this, she acknowledges that some African American students and families "choose" to attend city, neighborhood schools (1993). First, there are "city" students. These are the students who chose to remain in their inner-city, neighborhood schools when given the option of attending white, suburban schools. Second, there are "transfer" students. When provided with the option to attend the suburban schools, these students chose to leave their city school and enroll in a suburban school. Third, there are "return" students. These students chose to attend a suburban

school, and then made the decision to return to their city schools. In these choice classifications, Wells does not unintentionally privilege the experiences of the students choosing to attend white, suburban schools over the experiences of students choosing to remain in their city schools.

A review of the school choice literature with an emphasis on understanding how parents of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds make decisions about their children's education reveals that a re-conceptualization of the school choice literature is necessary. First, as with any area of research, investigators should be careful not to unintentionally privilege the experiences of the white, middle class. This is particularly important in the school choice literature because many school choice programs are aimed at increasing the educational options available to families of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds who do not share the same life experiences as the white, middle-class. Although this is not an issue that can ever be completely laid to rest, conceptualizations that refer to families who choose to remain in predominantly minority neighborhood schools as "nonchoosers" implies that only parents who decide to send their children to schools outside of the neighborhood make active educational decisions. Second, most of the school choice literature treats decisions about where to send a child to school as the only educational decision parents make. As described above, this is not the case. Parents are continuously making decisions about their child's education, as well as decisions that may impact a child's education. Without attempts to locate a particular school choice decision in the context of other educational decisions, a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which parents make decisions about their child's education is out of reach.

This study addresses the shortcomings of previous research by recognizing that choosing to attend a predominantly minority neighborhood school is an active educational decision for some parents. Further, it acknowledges the possibility that these neighborhood schools may do a

better job educating minority and low-income children than schools outside of the neighborhood in predominantly white communities. As Wells demonstrates, some students and families reach this conclusion by direct experiences with both types of schools (1996). This is evidenced in interview data from the "return" students and parents, which indicate that school choice is often times comprised of two or more educational decisions. Thus, in the current research, a decision about which elementary school a child will attend is conceptualized as one educational decision among many.

Current Study

In addition to the problems described above, many studies examining school choice programs fail to obtain a comprehensive understanding of educational decision making due to the lack of attention to familial and local contextual factors that may influence any particular school choice decision. This study aimed to extend the school choice literature in three major ways. First, parents' distal educational experiences are explored in order to determine the extent to which parents transfer their own educational experiences as a child to the educational opportunities they seek for their children. Second, parents' knowledge of the local context is examined in order to appreciate the ways in which educational information is conveyed to parents by the school district, and shared among parents and community members. This local knowledge influences how parents perceive, think about, and interact with their child's education. Third, proximal educational experiences of the children in each family are explored in order to understand how the lived educational experiences of children in a particular family interact with distal educational experiences of the parents and local knowledge to influence the ways in which parents engage with their children's schools and make subsequent educational decisions.

Distal educational experiences. Parents with higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to send their children to schools outside of their attendance zone than parents with lower levels of educational attainment when provided with a school choice option. This is perhaps the most consistent finding in the school choice literature (Lee, 1995). Despite this finding, very little work has been done examining the extent to which parents' particular educational experiences as children influence the particular types of educational settings they choose for their children. Some studies examining the characteristics of parents who send their children to private schools reveal that parents of private school students were more likely than parents of public school students to have had experience in a private school as a child (Oguwa & Dutton, 1994). This finding lends support to the idea that parents may wish to recreate their own educational experiences for their children.

A summary of a voluntary city-suburban desegregation plan in Boston suggests that African American students from the city who attended suburban schools were often times employed in settings that required them to cross racial lines on a regular basis as adults (Orfield, Arenson, Jackson, Bohrer, Gavin, & Kalejs, 1998). Former students acknowledged that the skills they acquired during their school years helped them in their current work with people from diverse backgrounds. Since this desegregation plan has been in place since 1963, long-term results are available. However, many school choice programs have only recently been implemented, and a substantial amount of time must pass before they can be evaluated in a similar way. Nevertheless, this finding suggests that people of minority backgrounds who attended predominantly white suburban schools may be more likely to seek occupational opportunities in settings with diverse employees than people who attended city schools. This difference in employment is provocative and, if extended to school choice, suggests that

differences may emerge among adults who attended schools with diverse populations in the types of school settings they choose for their children.

Although the school choice literature essentially ignores past educational experiences of parents beyond their level of educational attainment, the research described above suggests that understanding parents' distal educational experiences may provide insight into educational decision making for their children. For instance, the types of schools parents attended as youngsters (private versus public, integrated versus segregated), and the educational experiences accrued in different schools, may influence the educational decisions they make for their children. Additional types of educational experiences may include how the parents felt about and engaged with their own teachers. It is possible that parents' distal educational experiences provide a foundation on which to base future school choice decisions. Although distal educational experiences are inextricably intertwined with parents' race and class, race and class are not sufficient in understanding educational decisions. Distal educational experiences may provide a foundation for understanding future educational decisions. However, due to the dynamic nature of decision-making, this foundation is also not sufficient in understanding the underlying mechanisms driving a particular educational decision.

The local context. If distal educational experiences provide a rudimentary understanding of educational decision making, this understanding is refined when the local context is considered. Distal educational experiences in and of themselves may lead parents to a particular set of educational decisions. However, parents accrue an abundance of experience in the world by the time they have school-age children. This experience results in some amount of local knowledge about the educational system in a particular community. Local knowledge might include informal data gathered from interactions with other parents and community members,

official information provided by the school district, as well as information reported in the local media. Some parents may have a large amount of local knowledge, and other parents may have very little.

Telephone surveys conducted with parents in four school districts in New York and New Jersey indicate that parents with lower levels of education actually consult more sources of information than parents with higher levels of education (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). Further, they report that the types of information people find useful varies by educational levels. Parents with more education report that information provided by their friends and family members is most useful to them, while parents with less education report that formal sources of information provided by the school system are the most useful to them. Because race and class are often related to educational attainment, it is not surprising that white parents consult fewer sources of information than African American and Hispanic parents. White parents also reported that the information they found most useful was the information provided by friends and family members. The converse was true for African American and Hispanic parents who reported that school-based sources of information were the most useful to them. Another interesting result of this study was that parents who live in a district with a school choice program were more likely to report that school-based sources of information were more useful to them than parents who did not live in a district with a school choice program.

Taken together, these findings have important implications for understanding how parents of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds may make decisions about their child's education when faced with increased school choice. Given the weight parents may place on school-based information, it is important to fully understand the types of information parents receive from the school district, both formally and informally. In this study, sources of

local knowledge are explored in order to obtain a more contextualized understanding about how parents negotiate distal educational experiences and local knowledge to make educational decisions for their children.

Proximal educational experiences. Proximal educational experiences may also modify existing preferences and attitudes about particular educational settings. For the purposes of this study, proximal educational experiences are comprised of the educational experiences of the children in a particular family as well as the ways in which parents are engaged with their children's education. These experiences range from how children are treated by the school staff members to the academic and behavioral performance of students. A parent may make one decision about their child's education based on distal educational experiences, but decide to pursue a different educational option after receiving feedback about their child's unique school experiences. For instance, if teachers convey to a parent that their child is not performing at the appropriate grade level due to intellectual deficits, the parent may choose not to enroll their child in a school with an intensive academic focus for fear that the child will not do well. This parent may decide to continue the child's education in the current school, or register the child in a remedial program at a different school. Alternatively, this same parent may question the professional opinion of the teachers. The parent may feel that his or her child is not hindered by the deficits described by the teachers, and choose to send the child to a different school staffed with teachers who aim to motivate their students to learn, rather than label them as deficient in some way. In addition to academic outcomes that shape parental decision making, other proximal educational experiences may influence educational decisions including exposure to special education labels and programs, as well as discipline referrals and suspensions.

Research has indicated that many commonsense ideas about why parents might send their children to schools outside of their attendance zone are not sufficient in understanding school choice decisions. For example, some research has found that parents who send their children to schools outside of their attendance zone were dissatisfied with their children's previous school. This has been found for parents utilizing educational vouchers (Witte, 1998), as well as parents who send their children to private schools (Oguwa & Dutton, 1994). Other research has shown that parents who make decisions to send their children to schools outside their attendance zone are not necessarily more dissatisfied with their child's public school. Instead, these parents are simply taking advantage of a new educational opportunity available to them (Martinez, Godwin, Kemerer, & Perna, 1995). These contradictory findings suggest that researchers hoping to gain an in-depth understanding how parents make school choice decisions must look beyond simplistic explanations, which attempt to attribute most school choice decisions to either demographic characteristics of families or to the school attended immediately prior to the school choice decision.

Rather than exploring parental satisfaction with the attendance-zone school the child attended immediately prior to the school choice option, I argue that researchers should consider all of the educational experiences of a particular child in order to gain a more complete understanding of decision making. Parents' decisions about one child's education may be influenced by the experiences of that child's siblings. It is often assumed in the school choice literature that demographic characteristics of parents (race, class, educational attainment) are the most important predictors of parental decisions. However, this assumption is highly deterministic and implies that parents of low socioeconomic status, with low levels of education are passive players in their child's education and ignores the possibility that parents are involved with their

children's education and may make changes in their decisions based on the unique experiences of their child. This is particularly true for parents who do not send their children to schools outside of the neighborhood.

In Stepping Over the Color Line, Wells and Crain reported that at least one parent in their study made different educational decisions for two of her children based on her perceptions of their ability to succeed in an academically rigorous environment (1997). This mother perceived that the predominantly white suburban schools had a more intensive academic focus than the city schools in her attendance zone. Based on past academic performance, and the mother's perceptions of academic ability, this mother decided to send her son to the suburban schools because she felt he could handle the more difficult coursework. However, she decided not to send her daughter to the suburban schools. This mother did not want her daughter to do poorly when faced with challenges that exceeded the mother's perceptions of her daughter's academic abilities.

Although making differential decisions for individual children was not a focus of the study, this finding points to the importance of avoiding the more deterministic views of parental behavior. In this instance, the mother considered the unique experiences and abilities of her children to make her decision. In most studies, it is assumed that parents will make the same educational decisions for all their children. This assumption ignores the interactive and dynamic nature of educational experiences, and subsequent school choice decisions.

Negotiating past and present. Distal educational experiences and attitudes about education are most likely modified as people grow older and gain more life experience. In this research, local knowledge and proximal educational experiences are examined as factors with the potential to shape existing parental preferences, which may be initially established as a result of

parents' distal educational experiences. First, it is assumed that as parents live in a particular community and interact with other community members and parents, they obtain a rather sophisticated understanding about which educational institutions are supportive of their children and which are not. To some extent, this local knowledge may modify their previously held views about education. Second, as children progress through the school system, all families become engaged with their children's education in a variety of ways. They often receive both formal and informal feedback about how their children are doing academically, behaviorally, and socially. Feedback is provided from numerous sources including the parents' interactions with school staff, their children's direct experiences which are communicated to the parents via the children themselves, as well as more traditional indicators of school performance including report cards, and possibly standardized test scores. Proximal educational experiences may also shape or modify educational decision-making.

For example, based on positive educational experiences in a predominantly minority neighborhood school as a child, minority parents may wish to enroll their children in a similar educational environment. Teachers at the parents' school may have shared a similar cultural background, lived in the same neighborhood, and known their students and their families outside of the school setting. Parents with such experiences may have felt nurtured and comfortable in their neighborhood school, and would want their children to have a similar experience. However, local knowledge may inform a parent that the current neighborhood school is staffed with teachers who are not invested in their students' education and who do not share the same cultural background as their students. An initial decision to register a child in the neighborhood school may be altered as a result of this contextual information. In this case, a parent must weigh the benefits of attending a neighborhood school with the potential negative consequences of an

education provided by uninvolved and unfamiliar teachers. Alternatively, a minority parent may have had a negative experience in a predominantly white school as a child. This parent may wish to send his or her children to a neighborhood school where their children would be members of an educational community of students and families with shared cultural backgrounds. As mentioned above, knowledge about the neighborhood school may or may not alter this initial decision, which was based primarily on distal educational experiences.

Summary

The overarching goal of the current research was to develop an enhanced understanding of school choice decisions in the context of the lived educational experiences of the participating families. Rather than obtaining a broad, superficial understanding of school choice decisions made by large numbers of parents, the aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of parental decision making by more fully contextualizing the educational experiences of a particular group of students, one family at a time. In order to capture the complexities of distal educational experiences, local knowledge, proximal educational experiences, parental decision making, and to help prevent stereotyped assumptions and generalizations about the value minority and low-income families place on education, in-depth interviews with parents of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds were conducted and analyzed against the backdrop of ethnographic data collected over the course of three years of participant observation at a local elementary school located in a predominantly African American working class neighborhood. Ethnographic data helped contextualize the educational experiences of the participating families. Interviews allowed parents to explore their school choice decisions in the context of other educational decisions without being forced to fit their responses into a preconceived framework about which factors influence their unique decisions. Qualitative data

gleaned from the interviews was analyzed in the context of each child's unique educational experiences in order to highlight the interactive relationship between parental decisions and proximal educational experiences including they ways in which parents are engaged with their children's education.

Illuminating the educational decision making for a subgroup of families living near an elementary school located in a predominantly working class, African American neighborhood in order to help minimize generalizations and false stereotyped assumptions, is a goal of this research. This goal is inductive, rather than deductive in nature, and emphasizes understanding and explicating the real life experiences of the participants rather than testing a specific set of hypotheses about outcomes.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do parents' distal educational experiences provide insight into how they make school choice decisions for their children?
2. How do parents of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds make decisions about which schools their children will attend in the context of controlled public school choice?
3. To what extent does local knowledge of the public school system impact educational decision-making?
4. In what ways are these parents engaged with their children's education?
5. How is educational decision making shaped by the unique educational experiences of an individual child?

CHAPTER TWO

METHODS OF INQUIRY

Overview

In order to address the research questions guiding the present study, multiple methods of inquiry were necessary. The study design for the current project can best be described as iterative and emerged from my sustained involvement with a local elementary school located in a working class, predominantly African American neighborhood of a small Midwestern town, "Korbel." Guided by phenomenological and ethnographic approaches, the primary aim of the methodology was to gather "deep" information and represent it, as closely as possible, from the perspectives of the participants. Because phenomenological approaches are nested in the context of personal knowledge and subjectivity, they are often helpful in understanding subjective experiences, gaining insights into people's motivations and actions, as well as challenging stereotyped assumptions. The primary data collection methods may be classified as ethnographic and were comprised of participant observation at the local elementary school mentioned above and in-depth interviews with ten parents living in the neighborhood of the school (within a 1.5 mile radius from the school) with at least one child enrolled in the 6th grade at a school in Korbel.

As with any research, in addition to the primary data collection methods, numerous personal experiences and local knowledge played important roles in the current study. A description of such information is presented here so that readers gain a more contextualized understanding of both the setting itself as well as the author's experience with the setting. First, a variety of documents were reviewed in order to fully appreciate the setting in which participating parents made decisions about their child's education. Materials available for analysis included legal documents, newspaper articles, and district-wide evaluations conducted

by external consultants. A description of the local context as it is portrayed in these documents is presented below in order to help readers contextualize the data, and better understand what living in Korbel might be like for families of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds. Second, my personal experience with Korbel is important in understanding both my motivation to explore the present research questions, as well as having better insight into how participants in the study interacted with me. After presenting information to help readers contextualize the current study, a description of the primary data collection methods is provided. Finally, abbreviated histories of participating families are presented to help further contextualize the findings.

Situating the Study

Korbel is home to approximately 70,000 permanent residents, excluding approximately 30,000 undergraduate and graduate students attending the local University. Korbel is located in the Midwest, and the areas surrounding the town are primarily farms which produce corn and soy bean crops. There is also a large factory located in Korbel, which employs a large number of residents. Korbel's housing patterns have been and continue to be racially and economically segregated. In general, poor and working class families live in the north section of Korbel, and are predominantly African American. Families of middle to high socioeconomic status live in the southwest area of Korbel, and are predominantly white. As a result of segregated housing patterns, the schools in Korbel have historically been racially integrated through the one-way bussing of African American students living in the north to schools located throughout more southern areas of Korbel. Partially responsible for placing the burden of busing on African American students was the school district's history of closing schools located in the north area of

Korbel, and opening new schools in other areas of town. Currently, of the eleven elementary schools in Korbel, three are located in the north and eight are located in the south.

The primary aim of this section is to situate the local school district in the broader community context, and to locate the current controlled school choice policy in the long history of the district's seemingly well-intentioned attempts to improve the education of African American students. A closer examination of such attempts reveals that although the school district has not often outwardly and openly opposed interventions aimed at improving the education of African American students, it has continuously employed creative tactics to limit the impact of any single intervention from desegregation in the 1960s to the current court-ordered controlled school choice policy. The actions of the school board are inextricably intertwined with the history of the local community and are presented alongside information about the racial climate of the community when possible.

The city of Korbel. The earliest formal attempt at desegregation in the Korbel schools can be traced back to the early 1960's, almost a decade after the U.S. Supreme Court decided in Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas on May 17, 1954 that racial segregation in public schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. According to an article in the local newspaper on the history of busing in Korbel, the Korbel school board and the Citizens' Educational Council selected community members to serve on a panel to study desegregation in the school system in 1963 (News Gazette, 3/19/97). This coincided with the passage of a state law mandating that the percentage of each school's African American population match the percentage of African American students living in the district within 15% (Daily Illini, 3/25/93). Despite the new law and the school board appointed panel, de facto racial segregation in the Korbel schools continued until 1967, the year the school board finally adopted

the Equal Educational Opportunities Committee's recommendation to integrate schools. According to a former Equal Educational Opportunities Committee member and then CEO of the Urban League, the proposed desegregation plan was severely limited (Daily Illini, 3/25/93). He believed the school board did not adopt the policy because it was truly dedicated to integrating schools. Instead, the board decided that it would be easier to limit desegregation efforts than to directly oppose them (Daily Illini, 3/25/93), a strategy that has been repeatedly utilized by later Korbel school boards to prevent any meaningful change in the education of African American students in the district.

The strategy chosen to racially integrate the Korbel schools in 1967 was the involuntary busing of African American students living in northern Korbel to predominantly white schools in southern Korbel. Converting Lincoln Elementary School, a formerly all African American school located in a predominantly African American neighborhood, to a magnet laboratory school was a tactic aimed at enticing the white community to accept the desegregation plan. African American students who attended Lincoln before the desegregation plan comprised a large number of the students bused from north to south Korbel beginning in 1968 (News Gazette, 3/19/97). After the desegregation plan was implemented, each school's African American population ranged between 5.1 and 35.5% (News Gazette, 3/19/97) while 13% of the total district population was African American. Despite the involuntary busing of African American students, desegregation, as defined by the 1963 state mandate that each school's African American population reflect the district's African American population within 15%, was not fully achieved.

The local community did not respond favorably to the proposed desegregation plan. The plan initially faced opposition from three groups: African-American parents and leaders who

did not want African American children bused to white schools, white parents who did not want any children bused for integration purposes, and white parents and community members who did not want African American children to attend the same schools as white children. When African American parents and leaders fighting for desegregation learned that the plan was limited to the involuntary one-way busing of African American students, they also opposed the district's plan (Daily Illini, 3/22/93). Despite community opposition, the plan was implemented in the 1968-69 academic year.

In addition to adopting a desegregation plan that converted Lincoln school to a magnet school for mostly white families, the school district engaged in other practices to ensure the one-way busing of students from north Korbel to south Korbel schools. Because they had been poorly maintained, schools in the northern section of the city were closed while schools in the southern section of the city were constructed and opened. Lawhead was closed in 1959, Willard was closed in 1960, Gregory was closed in 1965, and Switzer was closed in 1977. East Rock was opened in 1951, Woodbury was opened in 1955, Hellen Keller was opened in 1958, Pine Plains was opened in 1963, and Kingston was opened in 1967. School closing and opening patterns in combination with involuntary busing plans resulted in the structural displacement of African American students away from schools in their own communities to schools in predominantly white residential areas (Johnson, 5/21/96).

Education was not the only segregated institution in Korbel. During 1963, the Korbel County NAACP and the Korbel-Easton Improvement Association held demonstrations to end local discrimination in housing and employment that had been pervasive in the city since the early 1900's (Sterne, 1994). Janet Andrews Cromwell traced the history of African American settlement in Korbel from the establishment of Korbel in the 1850's in a University of Illinois

Masters Thesis written in 1934 (Sterne, 1994). Cromwell wrote that most of the towns' early African American residents settled in Korbel by default. African Americans were often migrating to Chicago, but would run out of money, or take jobs before they reached Chicago. There were few African Americans settling in Korbel County in the mid 1800's. However, as time passed, more African Americans decided to make Korbel County their home. "The 1850 census listed 2 'free coloreds' in the county. By 1860, there were 41 blacks in the cities; by 1870, the population had grown to 163; and by 1880, that number grew to 462. Initially, this population was not clearly limited to one area: an 1878 survey shows black residents scattered throughout Korbel County. But by 1904, African-American residents were clearly concentrated in a northern part of town...." (Sterne, 1994). African Americans were initially drawn to the northern part of the town by low rents, and then explicitly forced to remain there by segregation policies (Sterne, 1994).

In addition to housing policies that segregated African Americans and whites, movie theaters, restaurants, schools, parks and stores were also segregated (Sterne, 1994). According to an Easton City Council and Tenant Union Member, there were still segregated lunch counters in Korbel in 1960 (Sterne, 1994). A newspaper article written by the president of the Illinois NAACP and president of the Korbel County NAACP, described the economic impact of housing segregation in Korbel and the discriminatory practices residents in north Korbel had to face. "The northeast area was red-lined by limited city services, financial institutions' unwillingness to make home loans, insurance companies' failure to provide homeowner policies, educational opportunities, and access to recreational facilities. As a result, red-lining caused the northeast area infrastructure to deteriorate." (News Gazette online). Although red-lining is no longer legal

and African Americans are not explicitly forced to remain in the northern section of the city, a majority of African Americans continue to reside there.

Despite problems with segregation in the larger community, the school district was under the impression that their limited desegregation plan had quieted any racial tensions existing in the local schools since its implementation in 1968. However, on April 29, 1971, a race riot occurred at one of the local high schools indicating that the desegregation efforts of the district had not addressed underlying racial tensions among students. Before the school day began, approximately 200 white students waited for African American students to exit the school buses that brought them from their own neighborhoods to the high school, located in the southern section of the city, and attacked them with belts (Daily Illini, 3/22/93). The riot resulted in four students requiring emergency care. The school board decided to close the school for a four-day weekend in response to the event so that they could have sufficient time to meet with school staff, parents and students. However, no official action was taken to make the school a more inviting place for African American students.

In response to the school board's general lack of concern for the welfare of African American students, an African American activist, formed the Concerned Citizens Committee (CCC) of Northeast Korbel, a group of community members concerned with the mistreatment of African American students by the local schools (Johnson, 5/21/96). From 1969-1978, this group actively fought to focus the district's attention on the disproportionate number of African American students in special education, the high rates of suspensions, expulsions and truancy for African American students and the lack of staff diversity.

During this time, the CCC drafted a Uniform Curriculum Proposal for all students which included year-round schooling for poor children aimed at addressing some of the problems in the

school system. The board rejected this proposal because it would limit the freedom of students to choose courses. The CCC then filed a complaint with the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) and was able to successfully argue that the disproportionate number of African American students in special education was evidence that district teachers had difficulties teaching African American students. The district's response to the involvement of the HEW was to hire an African American woman to manage the special education program (Johnson, 5/21/96). The hiring of an individual African American administrator, rather than addressing systemic problems in the district, is another tactic the district has employed to quiet the outrage of community members concerned about the education of African American students while simultaneously making no meaningful changes in actual educational practices.

In addition to virtually no progress in improving the education of African American students, the segregation of schools continued to be an issue in the district. Various redistricting plans were proposed to address segregation. In 1979, the minority student population of the district had grown to 26% (News Gazette, 3/19/97). The board decided to examine redistricting to achieve racial balance in all schools, with a particular emphasis on the four schools out of compliance with the state law mandating that each school's population of African Americans reflect within 15% the district's population of African Americans (North Ridge, Dixwell, Springfield, and Foote Middle School). Three of the four schools out of compliance were located in the northern section of the city. In 1981, a state appellate court freed schools from adhering to the mandate that each school's African American population reflect the district African American population within 15% (News Gazette, 3/19/97).

In 1981, the district hired consultants with experience in desegregation to help develop recommendations for a new redistricting plan. Two of the recommendations included reducing

the number of African American students and increasing the number of white students bused for desegregation purposes, and consolidating the two high schools into one campus. Public opposition to the recommendations was substantial (News Gazette, 3/19/97). The final decision by the board was made in March, 1981 and included the following components: 1) a number of 6th graders were returned to elementary schools, which had become kindergarten through 5th grade schools in 1977, 2) Dixwell Elementary School, located in north Korbel, was closed and the students who attended Dixwell would now attend Foote, which would be converted to an elementary school and 3) seventy African American children living near Lincoln Elementary School would be reassigned to that school. Despite the recommendations of consultants to reduce the number of African American students bused while increasing the number of white students being bused, the desegregation plan that was adopted actually increased the number of African American students and decreased the number of white students bused (News Gazette, 3/19/97).

The racially motivated actions of the local school district in the 1980s paralleled similar actions in the larger community with regard to low-income housing. In 1985, the Korbel Public Housing Authority was subject to a federal investigation for encouraging African American families toward prefabricated public housing located in the northern section of the city, and white families toward 'Section 8' programs where rent in privately owned housing is subsidized with federal government funds. According to Jonathan Sterne, a graduate student studying Korbel's history, African-Americans who sought public housing were not aware that Section 8 programs were available as an alternative (1994). Efforts to restrict African American residents of Korbel to the north section of the city were not limited to low-income families. Sterne also revealed that in 1981, the *Korbel-Easton News-Gazette* reported that although 'black families can now be found in all parts of the two cities,' the heaviest concentration of African-Americans--that

is to say, the majority-- still live in what the paper euphemistically called 'the traditional neighborhood.' Although redlining had long been illegal, the paper reported real estate agents steering African American families to the northern sections of the city (1994).

The controlled school choice program. In 1996, a group of African American community members expressed concern to the local school board about the long-standing practice of the one-way busing of African American students to achieve racially balanced schools and the disproportionate rates of student discipline and special education referrals for African American students (Hyland, 2000). The Korbel school board ignored the concern of the community members which resulted in the community members filing an official legal complaint (Hyland, 2000). This complaint, an investigation conducted by the United States Education Department's Office of Civil Rights (OCR), and an independent evaluation conducted by the district's consultant (Peterkin & Lucey, 1998) revealed the pervasiveness of the racial discrimination experienced by African American students. More specifically, African American students were shown to be underrepresented in gifted and advanced placement classes, and overrepresented in discipline referrals, and special education programs. African American students had lower attendance rates and higher drop-out rates. There were also very few African American staff members district-wide. The OCR investigation outlined actions that the district should take to address these racial inequities. The consultant to the district recommended that the district implement a controlled public school choice plan (Hyland, 2000). This school choice plan and other initiatives were ultimately entered into a formal consent decree in the federal district court.

The controlled public school choice plan was implemented in the 1998-99 school year and requires parents of elementary school children to choose one of eleven schools for their children regardless of where the family resides. Theoretically, parents make their decisions after

consulting the Family Information Center, created as part of the controlled school choice plan, for information about the particular pedagogical themes of various elementary schools. Parents then rank their first, second, and third choices. A number of slots are reserved in each school to ensure that the number of African American students in a particular school is proportional to the number of African American students in the district. This plan is referred to as "controlled" school choice because the consent decree mandates that the racial distribution of African American students at any single school proportionately reflects the percentage of African American students in the district within 15 %. In 2000-01, the percentage of African American students in the district was 31.8 %. Therefore, the percentage of African American students at any given school should range from 17 – 47 %. Seats are also reserved for students who are in a "walk zone" or 1.5 mile radius of each school. In theory, preference is given to students who have siblings who attend the preferred school.

At the time of this study, the Schools of Choice program continued to operate in Korbel, but had not achieved its goal of racially integrating all the schools. The results of this research will demonstrate that the Schools of Choice program has not been consistently experienced in the way it is described by the school district. This was true for the white parents of low socioeconomic status and the African American parents who participated in the present study. Before introducing the participants, a brief description of Woodson Elementary School is provided in order to help the readers further contextualize the experiences of the participants.

Woodson Elementary School. Woodson Elementary School is the cornerstone of the current project. It is located in a predominantly working class, African American neighborhood in the northern area of Korbel. Up to and including during the time of this study, many negative assumptions were held in the community and in Woodson itself about the students who attended

the school and lived in the Woodson neighborhood. Woodson students are viewed as lazy, unmotivated, unintelligent, and dangerous. Further, some would suggest that Woodson families do not care about education, do not want their children to respect teachers, are not employed, and often engage in illegal activities. Woodson's poor performance on standardized achievement tests often places the school in the local spotlight and fosters its reputation as a "bad" school. Furthermore, Woodson staff members often speak about the students in terms of their "behavior problems." How can they be expected to teach disruptive children who cannot behave in school?

Initial Experiences of Woodson Elementary School

The overarching goal of the current study is to understand how families of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds make educational decisions for their children. In order to begin to understand the complexities of decision making, it is necessary to first gain insight into the families' lived educational experiences. Because my own personal educational experiences influence how I interpret and think about the children and families at Woodson Elementary School, I explicate some of my salient memories in more detail in Appendix A. Below, I attempt to share my experience of Woodson Elementary School and how I understand it because my interpretations of the setting are inextricably intertwined with my account of the children and families who are and have been educated there.

Interestingly, on my first day at Woodson, I found myself standing next to my own kindergarten teacher at a school assembly. First, I was surprised that she recognized me. Then, I was surprised at what she said to me after we exchanged pleasantries. She told me that she had gotten Woodson confused with the other new elementary school in the district, Branford. Branford is located in an affluent, and mostly white, area of town, while Woodson is located in the traditional working class, African American section of town. She had actually gone to

Branford at the beginning of the day to report for duty, but learned that she was at the wrong school. When she realized her mistake with the help of the secretary at Branford, she whispered that she had wanted to return home and not work for the day. I asked her why, and she referred to the location of the school. She also thought to add a comment about how "different" Woodson was from the school I had attended as a child. As she went to reprimand a child for talking to his friend, she called back to me in a sarcastic voice, "Good luck." I remember wondering what the student she was scolding thought of her, and was not surprised when he responded to her with a very annoyed look on his face.

How did I come to be at Woodson Elementary in the first place? The summer after I graduated college, I decided to seek employment as a substitute school teacher in the local school district. Part of me had always wanted to be teacher, and if I worked as a substitute teacher, I could pick and choose the days I wanted to work. I felt very unqualified to "teach" and quickly came to realize and remember from my own childhood experiences that substitute teachers are not supposed to "teach." The best substitute teachers I remembered permitted students to have a little fun while their regular teacher was unable to work. However, I did try (although mostly unsuccessfully) to follow the teacher's lesson plans for the day. The only group of students I can remember ever fully listening to what I said was a fifth grade class at Woodson Elementary School. In fact, the students in that class were so engaged and well behaved, I remember thinking that either they were really quiet and shy children, or someone was watching their every move. Only years later, after meeting the regular teacher of the fifth grade at Woodson, would I come to understand why those children were so well behaved.

My own kindergarten teacher's reaction to Woodson is consistent with the community narrative about Woodson and the students who are educated there. This community narrative is

pervasive, and is also deeply entrenched in many of the teachers and staff working at Woodson as well as staff members at the central administration building. A brief description of the substitute teaching system and my experience with it illustrates this point. After completing the necessary paperwork to obtain a substitute teaching certificate from the State Department of Education, a person is qualified to substitute teach at any regular education school in the state. I should note here that I selected only the Korbel school system, and my experiences are limited to Korbel's particular operating system. If I wanted to teach on a particular day, I would place a telephone call to the substitute coordinator at the central administration office of the Korbel school system on the afternoon the day before I wanted to work. She would then provide me with a list of schools and grades that needed coverage. I was eagerly anticipating the day I might work at Woodson, and was often disappointed when it was not one of the schools listed. In addition to my knowledge of Woodson from my experiences as a resident of Korbel, I had learned about Woodson in a course I took as an undergraduate in Community Psychology, and was interested in the work graduate students and faculty members were doing there.

On one occasion, I was provided with the list of schools available and decided to inquire specifically about Woodson although it had not originally been listed. The coordinator was openly surprised at my request, and told me that there was indeed an opening there for the following day. At the time, I attributed this to an oversight on behalf of the administrator. However, as I engaged with the school over the course of three years, I learned that this was representative of the ways in which Woodson and the central administration interacted. On many occasions, Woodson staff struggled to cover teacher absences because there were no substitute teachers available. Furthermore, the principal would actually deny teachers opportunities for peer consultation and continuing education opportunities because she would be unable to get

substitute teachers to cover their classes. Although the underlying assumptions about Woodson were not made explicit, it would appear from the behavior of the substitute teaching coordinator that Woodson was not a top priority in terms of locating substitute teachers. Further, she had also assumed that I would not want to teach at Woodson.

As a graduate student, my interest in the (mis)education of students from minority backgrounds grew as I learned more about the community work of more senior students in the program. The experiences they spoke about resonated with my educational experiences as a student in the Korbel school system and with my experiences as a child living in Korbel. I was fortunate to become engaged with a group of graduate students and faculty members known as *Partners for Progress* who were working to help foster relationships between Woodson School, the surrounding community, and the University. Over the course of my prolonged involvement with Woodson, I was continuously confronted with the dominant narrative of Woodson students and families particularly by white teachers and school staff. This narrative is described in detail in Tamara Gathright's doctoral dissertation, Locating Ideology in Talk and Practice: Understanding the Referral of African American Students to School Social Services and Special Education (2001). Major themes about the predominantly African American student body at Woodson articulated by school staff members suggest that students are viewed as lazy, unmotivated, unintelligent, and dangerous. The dominant narrative suggests that Woodson families do not care about education, do not want their children to respect teachers, are not employed, and are often engage in illegal activities. Throughout my involvement at Woodson, I was struck at how rigidly this narrative was held despite repeated and direct experiences with children and families who acted in ways that were inconsistent with the narrative.

Two years after I initially substitute taught at Woodson, I entered the school again as a graduate student interested in becoming involved with the *Partners for Progress* group. The first person I encountered in the school was Peggy Hall, the school social work intern at the time. Peggy is a friend of a family friend who I had met and spoken with at several social events. She provided me with a tour of the school, her advice about working there, and my first glimpse into the dominant narrative described above. As a first-grade African American girl ran up to Peggy with a huge smile and gave her hug, she was actually whispering to me that I should be very "careful" with the children at Woodson. She responded to my puzzled look by offering further explanation. It would be important that I try to avoid any physical contact with the children at Woodson because many of them had ringworm and lice as a result of dirty living conditions.

Approximately three years later, on one of my last days at Woodson, a new teacher, who had actually been a babysitter of mine when I was a young child, expressed the desire to rid herself of all the hardships involved with teaching children from such deprived and immoral families. She reported that she wished it was her leaving instead of me. Although the previous descriptions are both examples of white school staff adhering to the dominant narrative, there are also a number of staff members, typically African American women, who strongly resist it. I was fortunate to know these sometimes quiet and other times not-so-quiet resistors, but these relationships took much more time to develop. My time at Woodson made me uncomfortably aware of how people perceive me, and how unbelievably bold people were in assuming that I shared their views about the students and families at Woodson. As time went on, I became more comfortable challenging some of these assumptions. But, I must admit that in the days I was repeatedly immersed in the school culture, it was exhausting to interact with people who held such negative beliefs about the students they were teaching. These were students who longed to

have positive relationships with their teachers, and who I knew would never truly achieve them because of their teachers' beliefs about who they were and what they could (or could not) become.

I share these experiences at the outset because this project is, in many ways, a culmination of my sustained involvement with Woodson students and their families. As anyone who is engaged in a setting for a period of time, many times I acted and reacted emotionally rather than intellectually. Although I have been distanced from Woodson and Korbel for a period of time, many strong emotions are evoked as I am analyzing data and writing this manuscript. And, I am becoming more acutely aware that in some ways, this dissertation project might be considered as an act of resistance to the dominant narrative running rampant at Woodson and Korbel about which children are worthy of educators' time and attention, and which families care about their children and value education. Like many of the families interviewed for this project, sometimes my reactions were adaptive, and sometimes they were not. Nevertheless, they were based on my perceptions and experiences at the time, and they were mine. It is my hope that this project serves as a first step in explicating both the unique and shared experiences and perceptions of families of minority backgrounds and/or low socioeconomic status who are too often treated as a homogeneous group rather than human beings trying to help their children survive in an educational system that is set up for failure rather than success.

Evolution of the Project

Overview. The current study evolved from an ongoing Community-School-University partnership at Woodson Elementary School aimed at improving the educational experiences of the students attending the school via increased community and parental collaboration (Good et al., 1997; Kloos et al., 1999). Although an oversimplification, the current research might be

summarized as occurring in two phases. The first phase was comprised of participant observation at Woodson Elementary School over the course of three years. The data collected during this time was utilized in the present research as a vehicle for understanding how teachers and school staff think about and work with the students and families at Woodson, but is not a primary focus of this study. During the course of my participant observation, I certainly met and interacted with a number of parents at Woodson. However, parents' perspectives were underrepresented in my work. As an attempt to enhance understanding of parents' experiences, attitudes and beliefs about education, and more specifically understanding their school choice decisions, in-depth interviews with parents were conducted and serve as the primary source of data in the present study. In order to gain more contextualized knowledge about the educational experiences of Woodson neighborhood parents and their children, I also analyzed the "official" educational histories of one child per family in relation to parents' own educational experiences and their understanding of the local school system. These histories are "official" in the sense that these are the records kept in the child's permanent educational file managed by the school district. These multiple methods provide data from very different perspectives about a variety of issues relevant to the education of African American and white students who attend school in a racially and economically polarized city currently under the watchful eye of the federal courts for a long history of discriminatory educational practices and policies.

Participant observation. In order to further contextualize the current research, I will provide a description of my participant observation at Woodson over time. During my three years of involvement with the partnership and Woodson School, I was provided with numerous opportunities to become intimately involved with the school's operating framework as both an insider and an outsider. From an outsider's perspective, I engaged with Woodson Elementary

School in a variety of consultation roles which included participating as a member on the school discipline team, working with a first-grade teacher experiencing difficulties with several children in her class, assisting the principal in various capacities including document preparation and small grant-writing activities, as well as assisting the teacher's aide supervising the in-school discipline room fulfill her responsibilities. From a role much closer to that of an insider, I substitute taught one of the two fifth grade classes for the last month of the 2001-2002 year. The permanent teacher was absent due to her maternity leave. Substitute teaching provided me with an up-close look at the school culture, which included both the official and unofficial practices and policies. As a participant observer, I found myself in the middle of a tense working environment laden with assumptions about who was on whose side, and who was not to be trusted. In many ways, it was like any situation where different personalities and characters come together day in and day out. In many others, interpersonal strains were exacerbated because underlying the unspoken uneasiness and the outward conflict were fundamental beliefs about Woodson children and their families. As if this were not enough to create a stressful work environment for teachers and school environment for children, teachers and school staff also had an extremely demanding job to do. I noticed that tension was never truly resolved and the rifts between people remained, mostly in silence and almost always along racial lines.

Data consultant. In addition to the above roles, which evolved naturally from my involvement with the school, there is an additional role that emerged more formally and is also relevant to the current research. As a graduate student in psychology with experience working with large data sets, the principal of Woodson recognized that I might be a potential collaborator in her efforts to systematically understand the educational progress of Woodson students. Two graduate student colleagues and I offered to help her attempt to identify educational practices

that appear to be working well for students at Woodson, as well as practices that may interfere with academic progress. This project was particularly important to Woodson due to the school's long history of poor academic performance.

The mobility hypothesis. The general academic achievement of the student body, defined solely by performance on standardized tests, consistently falls below national, state, and district averages. This poor academic achievement contributes to the local community's assumption that Woodson is not a "good" school. Anecdotal evidence provided by several teachers and staff members suggested more complicated accounts of student achievement at Woodson. However, little information about variation among students at Woodson was available to explore whether or not these anecdotes were representative of a shared student experience. A number of literacy specialists and the principal hypothesized that students who had attended Woodson for an extended period of time were making substantial educational progress, but that the high mobility rate at Woodson prevented these gains from impacting the overall average scores of students at Woodson. According to state school report cards,[1] the district-wide mobility rate has remained relatively consistent in recent years: 25.7% in 1997-98; 21.4% in 1998-99; 19.8% in 1999-00; and 20.8% in 2000-01. The mobility rate at Woodson is higher than the district average and has substantially fluctuated in recent years: 68.4% in 1997-98; 29.6 % in 1998-99; 35.8% in 1999-00; and 45.3% in 2000-01. Despite considerable changes in the mobility rate from year to year, teachers and staff members at Woodson often exaggerate the mobility of their student body

[1] The Better Schools Accountability Law of 1985 (Section 10-17a of the School Code) requires all public school districts to report on the performance of their schools and students through school report cards. This report card includes information about student characteristics, the instructional setting, the finances of the school district and student performance on state assessments.

(Hyland, 2000). It is not surprising, then, that high student mobility was called upon to explain lack of academic progress.

In order to explore the mobility hypothesis, we first had to gather appropriate data. This proved to be a difficult task due to the bureaucratic resistance of the local school district, and perhaps more importantly, the district's limited ability to organize and analyze data for the purpose of understanding educational progress as opposed to meeting simplistic administrative requirements. Administrators were not outwardly unwilling to support our project, but they did not make the existing district data readily available to us for analysis. In order to facilitate the project, University members of the partnership met with school district administrators and the principal of Woodson on numerous occasions from October, 2000 to February, 2001 to describe the goals of the study. As a result of these discussions, a district technology specialist provided us with electronic student data collected over two academic years. However, the structural organization of these data prevented a longitudinal analysis of student performance. In addition, these data were limited in scope and included standardized test scores as the sole indicator of academic achievement. Due to the shortcomings of the district's existing data, we decided to create a data base that would allow us to gain a more complete understanding of Woodson student progress over time.

Access to meaningful data. The creation of such a data base required acquisition of meaningful data. After reviewing the district's electronic data, we made attempts to obtain additional data from student cumulative education records, which are the paper files held at the student's current school. These records contain a wealth of information about a student's educational history including schools the student attended, report cards, special education information, standardized test scores, absences, information about retention, kindergarten

readiness assessments, and information about enrollment in early childhood programs, to name a few. Because extracting information from cumulative education records is a time consuming process and confidentiality concerns prevented partnership members from assisting school staff in obtaining the necessary information, we decided to focus our study to a subgroup of Woodson students. We chose to work with the records of all 5th graders because they were the oldest group of students at Woodson. Their cumulative education records would have more information than those of younger students.

From February, 2001 to March, 2002, partnership members again met with school administrators and principals to explain our new vision for the project. These meetings often involved "educating" school officials about the limitations of their own data in order to convey the importance of gathering additional information. Shortcomings of the district data exist in both the *content* of the electronic database, as well as the *structure* of the database which prohibits individual longitudinal analyses. In December, 2001, two faculty supervisors met with the interim superintendent of schools and the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction to discuss the study. As a result of this meeting and the support of the district administrators, the project moved forward. Partnership members reviewed nine sample cumulative education records to identify the most important pieces of information to be extracted from the records of all 5th graders. We requested to have the following materials copied from student records: elementary scholastic and attendance card, standardized test scores, alternative reading assessments, kindergarten readiness assessment, and special education information. The elementary scholastic and attendance card summarizes a great deal of student information including schools attended, teachers, final grades, reading levels, promotions and retentions,

early childhood programs, and date of birth. In March, 2002, we received the requested information for all 5th graders at Woodson (n=32).

Is student achievement different at Woodson? Analysis of the 5th grade data did not support the mobility hypothesis. Students who had attended Woodson for their entire elementary school career did not perform better than students who had only recently begun to attend Woodson. However, we were not convinced that Woodson was to blame, in the sense that Woodson teachers provided an inferior education for African American students while teachers in other buildings were experiencing overwhelming success. In fact, we hypothesized that other schools were not necessarily providing a better education for African American students and students of low socioeconomic status. Therefore, we wanted to explore the educational histories of 5th grade students from similar backgrounds attending other schools in the district. In order to implement this next phase of our research, we again met with district administrators to describe the revised version of the project and gain administrative support. Because we already had a wealth of information about the 5th graders at Woodson, we focused our request to 5th graders attending other schools. In order to ensure an appropriate comparison group and to narrow our sample further, we included students from backgrounds similar to those of the 5th graders at Woodson. Because almost every 5th grader (n=30) at Woodson lived within a 1.5 mile radius of the school in a predominantly, working class, African American community, we requested data for all 5th graders residing in the same residential area attending other schools in the district. Because some of the parents of these students may have chosen to attend a school outside of their immediate neighborhood, this group of students is not a perfect comparison group. However, investigating the academic achievement of these students, and contrasting it with the performance of students who remain in their neighborhood school is an interesting comparison.

The district administrators supported this project and facilitated our acquisition of the appropriate data. In June, 2002, we received data for the additional 5th graders (n=99). Our initial hypothesis was supported in that there does not appear to be a particular school in the district successfully educating the students in our study. Further, the African American students, in general, experienced poorer academic performance than white students.

When the controlled school choice program was implemented, parents of current elementary school children were not required to choose a school for their child. If parents with students in elementary schools did not visit the Family Information Center and request a school transfer for their child, they were assigned to the school they attended the previous year. Parents of kindergarteners and students new to the district were required to rank their school choices.

What does this mean for the group of students in our initial study? It is somewhat complicated. Parents of 5th graders at Woodson were not required to visit the Family Information Center and request that their child attend Woodson. Therefore, they may or may not have made an active decision to enroll their student at Woodson. Parents of 5th graders living in the 1.5 mile radius of Woodson attending other schools were also not necessarily required to make an active decision about where their child would continue his or her elementary education. This is due to the fact that, prior to the controlled school choice program, some students from the Woodson neighborhood were bused to schools outside of the neighborhood in order to help balance the schools racially. Students who began their education at non-neighborhood schools were, by default, enrolled in those schools unless their parents visited the Family Information Center to request a transfer. Taken together, it is unknown whether or not these parents actively decided which school their child would attend.

The school choice hypothesis. My role as participant observer provided me with access to the teachers' interpretations of the poor academic performance of their students in the context of the new controlled school choice program. Despite the uncertainty about whether or not parents made active decisions to send their children to Woodson described above, some staff members at Woodson made claims about the educational decision making of families living in the Woodson neighborhood. Like the mobility hypothesis, school choice was called upon as an explanatory factor for poor student performance at Woodson. The school choice hypothesis rests of the belief that parents living in the Woodson neighborhood who are invested in education send their children to other schools because of Woodson's negative reputation. According to this hypothesis, students at Woodson do not have families that value education. Further, if there were any capable students or families at Woodson in the past, school choice has attracted them to other schools.

This explanation was articulated by many white teachers and school staff, and seemed to be an attractive alternative to another explanation, which was less popular among the white staff and more popular with several African American staff members. The African American teacher's aide in the in-school suspension classroom often articulated the view that many of the white teachers at Woodson were racist and did not like African American children. She attributed the students' poor performance to the behavior of their teachers rather than their parents' decisions to send their children to Woodson School. Furthermore, she repeatedly reported to me that many parents were not aware of the Schools of Choice program, and that many African American parents who did have experience with the program for their younger children found it disheartening because they were not able to send their children to their neighborhood school. This is because the neighborhood schools were often out of compliance

with the racial guidelines of the consent decree. As will be demonstrated in the results section of this project, several of the families interviewed reported similar experiences.

Interviews

Ten women with children enrolled in the 6th grade in a Korbel public school participated in formal interviews. The parents were selected from the population of 130 families who resided within a 1.5 mile radius of Woodson Elementary School in February 2002 identified above. A purposive sample (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was drawn from the population of interest in order to ensure maximum variation on two dimensions: attendance at Woodson and academic achievement over time. I wanted to ensure that I spoke with some parents who had experience with Woodson, and some who had not. It was also important that I select some parents whose children attended Woodson for only a portion of their elementary school education, and others who remained at Woodson until graduating to middle school. Academic achievement for sampling purposes was defined broadly and included multiple measures of performance including standardized test scores, grades, reading levels, special education status, and discipline referrals. The goal of sampling along this dimension was to ensure that I interviewed parents of children who are doing well in school, as well as parents who have children who are not doing well in school. "Doing well" is a somewhat complex phenomenon. For instance, some children may have above average grades and poor standardized tests scores and vice versa. Other students may be excelling in some subjects while performing below grade level in others. Because the academic achievement of individual children may be one context that influences parental educational decision making, I wanted to ensure that I interviewed parents who have children experiencing varying degrees of academic success across multiple measures of performance.

Interviews took place over the course of two to four meetings, most commonly in the homes of the participants. All interviews and observations were performed by the author. Audiotaped interviews were initially transcribed by undergraduate research assistants, and then carefully checked and corrected by the author. Interview excerpts are presented verbatim in order to represent the experiences of the participating women and their children as accurately as possible. This is particularly important in the present study as the ways in which parents engage with others around the education of their children influences parent-school relations as well as educational decision-making. The research design facilitated simultaneous data collection and analysis, which permitted the data and data analyses to continuously inform one another. The decision to focus on school choice and to interview parents about educational decision making emerged from my work at Woodson Elementary School. Interview questions were formulated and reformulated based on prior responses and interpretations.

Locating the parents. Because this study is concerned with the perspectives of families whose voices are not well represented in the literature, I exerted a great deal of effort in locating and following up with parents in order to increase the likelihood that I interviewed a range of families about their experiences. In other words, I did not want to simply interview the families who were most readily available and willing to come into the office for an interview. This task was both easier and more difficult than I had originally anticipated, and it is an important piece of the "data" that is often left unspoken.

After the parents were selected based on the sampling criteria described above, I typically contacted them via telephone to inquire about their interest in the project. I told them a bit about who I was and why I was interested in talking with them. Some parents asked me many questions, and it seemed as if parents were "checking" my intentions and motivations. Often

times, I mentioned that I was from Korbel, that I was currently a student at the local University, and that I had spent time working at Woodson over the past three years. This occurred in a conversational format, and I was pleasantly surprised at parents' responses and willingness to engage in conversations about the education of their children. In fact, not one single parent I spoke with refused to meet with me to talk about their child's education. More often than not, parents began to launch into their views and experiences immediately on the phone. The first time this occurred, I tried to interrupt the parent and ask them to meet in person. This was fine for that particular parent, but I quickly realized that I was acting in a very circumscribed, professionalized manner, which was not consistent with my more conversational and informal approach with parents. It seems like an obvious mistake now, but I had telephoned parents to ask them what they thought about an issue, and then wanted them to wait to speak about it days later at a scheduled appointment. I experienced much more success completing interviews on the first attempt if I discarded my professionalized practices. Instead, if parents wanted to talk on the telephone, I listened. Also, what often naturally occurred after we spoke on the telephone was a request on my behalf to "stop by" at that time. This approach was much more acceptable than trying to schedule an appointment days in advance. It also allowed me to enter the homes of people as they were engaging in their daily routines. On more than one occasion, I was invited to stay and eat lunch or dinner. And, I felt very welcomed in most homes.

Not all of the parents came to participate in the interviews as described above. Two participants did not want to engage in interviews in their homes. Instead, one invited me to her place of work, and the other suggested that we meet in a local coffee house. These two women also wanted to set up the appointment in advance. One of the two women was white and the other described herself as bi-racial (Japanese and white). They also had previous experience

engaging in "interviews" for research purposes. Another parent participant was not available for an interview at the time I had initially telephoned her. She requested that I call her back later in the week. When I did, I learned that her telephone number had been disconnected. Fortunately, I had access to the parents' address and stopped by her home to inquire about the interview. She agreed to participate, and we conducted the interview on the spot.

Non-participants. Although no parents refused to engage in an interview when I spoke with them on the telephone, there were four parents who were initially selected based on the sampling criteria who were not interviewed. The reasons these parents were not interviewed are important with respect to this piece of research because my experiences do not support the assumptions many researchers make about parents of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds that portray non-participants of traditional office-based research as somehow unwilling or disinterested.

One African American woman I spoke with on the telephone reported that she did not know if she could say anything important about the schools, but that she would be happy to talk with me. Because it was one of my early telephone calls, I had tried to schedule an appointment for later in the week. She was reluctant to set something up at a specific time and day and told me to stop by the house on a Monday or Tuesday because those were her days off work at the local factory. The next Monday, I stopped by the house. Although I heard voices inside, no one answered the front door. I went home and tried to telephone this parent because I had assumed that they had not heard me at the door. Now, I am not certain as to whether or not they did not hear me at the door, or they did not want to answer the door. The parent was not available to speak with me on the telephone when I called. I went to the house on several occasions after that, and each time either no one was home, or they did not answer the door. On one occasion, there

were two women sitting on the front porch drinking a beer. As I got out of my car and walked toward the house, the younger woman jumped up, and ran inside. I spoke to the older woman who remained on the porch. I told her who I was, and she was very nice. She told me that the parent I was trying to speak with was out for the evening.

At this point, I began thinking that people living or spending time at this particular house seemed to be fearful of my presence there. I was speaking about this to one of the African American staff members at Woodson, and she informed me that no one wanted to answer the door if a white lady was on the other side. This experience was something new for me. I do not think anyone has ever been fearful or intimidated by me in my life. But, I understand that my race indicated that I was most likely someone who should not be trusted. I was also confused because I assumed that parents would assume that I was white by talking with me on the telephone. The teacher's aide I was speaking with laughed out loud at this remark, and adamantly agreed that no one would confuse my speaking voice for anything other than white. She offered to go to interviews with me, but I decided to continue without her as my "escort" because she can be very outspoken and I was not sure how the parents would react.

Despite this feedback, and my repeated failures at meeting this particular parent, I decided to stop by one last time because she had never told me herself that she did not want to speak with me. I went to the door, and again no one answered. As I was walking away, a pizza delivery truck pulled into the driveway and the delivery person walked to the door. I followed him up to the house, which surprised him. A young man who appeared to be in his early twenties spoke with me for a minute. He was cordial, but clearly did not want to postpone eating his pizza to talk with me. He suggested that I try her back in a few months because she was very busy.

Another parent I had selected to request an interview did not have a telephone number. I went to the address the school district had provided to speak with the parent in person. No one answered, and the house looked vacant. There were people sitting on the porch outside at the house next door. I walked over and inquired as to whether or not they knew the person who had lived there. They informed me that she had moved "down south." The third parent I selected, but did not interview was actually the grandmother of the school-age children. I only learned of this when I telephoned her to request her participation. One of the children had answered the telephone, and I was surprised when an older man gruffly told me that the woman I was calling had recently passed away. I apologized, and told him why I was calling because it seemed disrespectful to not inform him of the purpose of my call. He then seemed much gentler, and told me a little bit about what a wonderful woman she had been, and how she had taken such care of their grandchildren, and how she handled any and all school-related business in their home. Although I did not ask him to participate, he said he supposed he could talk to me. He somewhat hesitantly reported that he did not know much about the children's education and that he was very busy with out-of-town company. I could easily imagine relatives coming to ensure that he would be okay, and to help him care for the children. It was almost as though he reluctantly offered to talk with me because he knew that he would now need to become the overseer of the children's education since his wife was gone. This idea seemed understandably difficult for him to accept.

The fourth parent that I spoke with via telephone who did not participate in an interview was very willing to speak with me, but had a very busy life. In retrospect, I should have agreed to the first suggestion she made for us to get together. She braids hair for a living, and invited me to come over to her house while she was working with one of her clients. We spoke on the phone

almost daily for approximately one month. Unfortunately, I moved from Korbel before I had a chance to interview her.

Rather than arbitrarily select the number of parents who would participate in the study at the outset, new participants were recruited until the point of theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). At this point, data became somewhat repetitive and no major new insights were gained (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Below, I provide a brief description of the ten parents who participated in the interviews. This allows readers to interpret the findings within a broader familial framework. Following each parent's excerpt, I have provided a brief summary of their child's academic performance, which was gathered at the time of the initial data analysis described above. Parents' names are in **boldface** font, and children's names are in *italics*. Summaries of this information are provided in table format (see Appendices B and C) to serve as a guide that readers can refer to while reading the remainder of this research.

Participants

"**Teresa**." Teresa is an African American woman in her forties. She is married and has five children ranging from 9-13 years of age. Teresa was born and raised in Korbel, and has lived in Korbel for the majority of her life with the exception of a year she spent helping her sister care for her children in another state. Teresa was one of the first students in Korbel to be bused for racial integration. She was consistently one of few African American children in her school classes. Although Teresa describes her family has having their fair share of difficulties, Teresa received a great deal of support from her teachers. She excelled in school, and obtained her Bachelor's degree from the University in Korbel. Following her graduation, Teresa was employed at a number of different agencies in Korbel. As her own children grew older, and she learned more about the mis-education of many African American students in Korbel, she decided

to return to school in order to obtain her teaching certificate. She has successfully obtained her teaching certificate, as well as a Masters degree in education. Teresa and her husband are both currently employed in the Korbel school district. They decided to raise their family in the northern section of Korbel in a predominantly African American, neighborhood in which most households have at least one, but often two working parents. The neighborhood is well maintained, and on a warm summer day, residents are caring for their lawns, washing their cars, talking with neighbors, while the children are playing games and riding their bikes.

"*Marcus*." Marcus is Teresa's second youngest child, and is the target student in Teresa's family for the purposes of the current study. Marcus is an African American male attending the magnet middle school in the district. Marcus attended Lincoln, the district's magnet elementary school prior to the Schools of Choice program, from kindergarten through 4th grade. Marcus' grades indicate that his academic performance in elementary school was average from kindergarten through 3rd grade. In 4th grade, his grades dropped significantly. He received a failing grade in Reading, and near failing grades in Spelling, English and Math. The reading levels recorded at the end of each academic year suggested that he was reading below what would be expected for his grade level throughout elementary school. Marcus' standardized test scores in Reading and Writing fall significantly below state guidelines. However, his performance on the Math portions of the tests was above or equivalent to expected levels. Marcus was absent, on average, 8 days per year. He received no discipline referrals in 3rd or 4th grade, the only two years discipline data were available.

"**Willina**." Willina is an African American woman in her fifties. She is married to her second husband, and has five children. She has three biological children. One daughter lives with her and is attending a local community college. Her other daughter has graduated from college

and is contemplating returning to school for a Masters degree. Her son graduated high school and is currently employed in Korbel. Willina also adopted two of her husband's sister's children, who were in 6th and 7th grade at the time of the study. Willina moved to Korbel at age 13 after being born and raised in Mississippi. She lived in Korbel through high school, and then moved to Minnesota with her first husband. Her three biological children were born and raised in Minnesota. Willina returned to Korbel after divorcing her first husband and has continued to reside in Korbel since that time. She is currently employed as a registration clerk at a local hospital, and works twelve hour shifts at night. Her husband works as a janitor during the day, and plays in a band in the evenings and on weekends. Willina and her family moved from the Woodson School neighborhood to a more southwestern area of town. They purchased a small home on the outskirts of a predominantly white, working class neighborhood, which is located on a busy street.

"*Travien*." Travien is the youngest of Willina's five children, and has lived with her since he was a toddler. Travien is an African American male attending Adams Middle School. He attended kindergarten, 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade at Woodson before the 4th and 5th grade, which were spent at Helen Keller. Helen Keller is the school closest to their new home, and would have been Travien's attendance-zone school had the Schools of Choice program not been implemented. At Woodson, his grades were average to slightly below average. However, his reading levels were significantly below grade level and did not improve at all during 2nd grade. At Helen Keller, his grades ranged from poor to below average. At the end of his first year at Helen Keller, he was classified as a special education student with a learning disability. The majority of Travien's standardized test scores were significantly below state guidelines in all areas with the exception of writing in the 3rd grade. He was absent, on average, 6 days per year for elementary school. He

received no discipline referrals in 3rd grade at Woodson, but received 7 discipline referrals in 4th grade at Helen Keller.

"**Marie**." Marie is an African American woman in her forties. She lives with her father, and is raising seven adopted children who are 7-16 years of age. Several of those children have been with her for most of their lives, but she has also more recently obtained custody of several of her grandchildren. Marie goes to great lengths not to distinguish the children she has raised from the children who came to live with her more recently. She does not want to make the children feel as though they are treated differently, or that the children who have lived with her longer are favored in any way. In addition to her seven children, Marie was also caring for one of her sister's children at the time of the study. Marie was born and raised in Korbel and has lived in Korbel her entire life. Many of her childhood teachers continue to teach in the school district. With respect to her level of educational attainment, Marie graduated from high school, and attended the local community college to obtain a degree that would allow her to teach dance and gymnastics. She continues to be involved in teaching dance to African American girls and takes them to participate in competitions across the state. She does not work full-time, but does work as a substitute teacher's aide in the local school district when she has the time. She takes parenting very seriously, and acts as an advocate on behalf of other African American parents experiencing difficulties with the school system. She has recently returned to school to take courses in child development in order to learn as much as possible about how to help her adopted children with special needs. Marie's family lives in the same neighborhood as Teresa's, which was described above. On each interview visit, many neighbors and relatives dropped by to spend time with the family. The door was always open, and everyone seemed welcome.

"*Tameka*." Tameka is one of Marie's early adopted children and has lived with Marie for most of her life. With respect to her chronological age, Tameka falls in the middle of the family. She is an African American female attending Adams Middle School at the time of the study. Tameka began her education at a private, religious, African American school for kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade. At that point, Marie obtained custody of more children and was unable to afford private school tuition for all seven children. Rather than send some of the children to a private school and some to public schools, Marie decided to enroll all of her children in the public school system. At that time, Tameka began attending, Branford, a predominantly white school in the southwest section of Korbel. She was a student at Branford for the remainder of her elementary school education. Tameka has received a special education classification of "mental impairment." Although she receives special education services, the nature of those services are unclear. Tameka's school records from the private school were not available for review. However, her grades from Branford school are above average with a special note that these grades are based on her progress as it pertains to her individualized educational goals. All of Tameka's standardized test scores were significantly below the expected levels, and did not necessarily increase each year. She was absent, on average, 16 days per year for 3rd, 4th and 5th grade. She received no discipline referrals in 3rd or 4th grade.

"**Stacy**." Stacy describes herself as bi-racial and is her thirties. Stacy's mother was Japanese, and her father was Polish. She is divorced from the father of her two children, and raising them alone. She was born and raised in a small town approximately 45 minutes from Korbel. She attended college in her home town, and then moved to Korbel with her husband before giving birth to either of her children. In Korbel, she attended the University and graduated with her Masters degree in Social Work. She is currently employed full time at the local Mental

Health Center. Stacy and her two children live in a racially diverse area of Korbel on the outskirts of the northern area of town. There are a variety of people living in this established neighborhood. Many of the homes are large and have been well maintained or renovated, but others have not.

"*Zach*." Zach is the younger of Stacy's two children and currently attends Foote Middle School, the local magnet middle school in the district. Zach attended a local early childhood program in the district prior to his attendance at Lincoln which is the local magnet elementary school before the Schools of Choice program. Zach attended Lincoln from kindergarten through fifth grade. He has a special education classification of "learning disability" and receives supplemental services as result. Zach's grades throughout elementary school were most typically average to slightly below average. His reading levels are significantly below grade level. Zach's performance on the science and social studies subtests of standardized tests was consistently well above what would be expected when compared to his peers. However, his Reading, Writing, and Math scores were well below state guidelines. Zach was absent, on average, 6 days per year during elementary school. He received no discipline referrals in 3rd or 4th grade.

"**Ann**." Ann is a white woman in her thirties. She is divorced from her first husband, and has remarried. She has five children, three from her first marriage, and two step-children from her current husband's first marriage. Two of her biological children are adults and do not live with Ann. They have both graduated high school and are working full time in the area. Ann was born in Maryland, and moved to Korbel with her family when she was 13 years of age. She attended middle school and two years of high school in Korbel before becoming pregnant with her first child. She dropped out of high school and did not graduate. Ann lived in a trailer park in a small, predominantly white community just outside of Korbel. She worked at various low-

paying jobs until the birth of her third daughter. At that time, she attended classes at the local community college and obtained her G.E.D. After divorcing her first husband, she returned to the local community college and obtained her Associates Degree in Child Development. She is currently employed full time as a clerk in a small business. Ann moved back to the city of Korbel with her current husband because they found a house that they could afford to buy. She had a strong desire to leave the trailer park. Ann and her family live in a predominantly African American neighborhood in the northern area of Korbel. The neighborhood is comprised mostly of small houses, which are not well maintained. Several of her immediate neighbors have large fenced-in yards that are home to large, barking guard dogs. Ann's husband is employed full time as a mechanic.

"*Leigh*." Leigh is the youngest of Ann's three biological children, but older than both of her step-brothers. She currently attends Foote Middle School, the magnet Middle School in the district. Leigh is enrolled in gifted, or advanced courses there. She attended school in the smaller community outside of Korbel until her family moved to Korbel prior to her 4th grade year. There were no grade reports from kindergarten to 3rd grade available for review. In 4th grade, Leigh attended school at Woodson and remained there for 5th grade as well. She received above average grades, and was reading at the expected level. Her scores on standardized tests were well above average, with the exception of science which was slightly below average. Leigh was absent 1 day during her 4th grade year, the only year attendance data was available for her. She received no discipline referrals in 4th grade, the only year such data were available for her.

"**Rose**." Rose is an elderly, African American widow in her seventies. She is the mother of 14 children who are now adults and living independently. She is currently raising 4 of her grandchildren who range in age from 5-14 years, and had lived with Rose for approximately 5

years at the time of the study. Rose was born in Korbel after her parents moved to Korbel from Tennessee. She was an only child, and her parents separated when she was very young. She attended school in Korbel when she stayed with her father, and she labored in the fields as a child in Tennessee when she stayed with her mother. She did not attend school at all after completion of the 6th grade. She married her husband and lived in Tennessee for a short time before moving back to Korbel where she raised her children. Rose is a homemaker and has never held a paying job. She is very proud of her family, and especially of her husband who was an excellent provider for her family, and her oldest son who is a minister. Rose lives in a predominantly African American neighborhood in the northern area of Korbel. Her house is in need of some repairs, but appears to be one of the nicer homes in the neighborhood. There is a home-made sign on her front door that reads: "No drinking, No smoking, No swearing in this house" and is signed by herself and her husband.

"*Kayla*." Kayla is the second oldest of Rose's grandchildren. She is a bi-racial female attending Kennedy middle school. Her father, Rose's son, is African American, and her mother is white. Kayla attended an early childhood program prior to her attendance at North Ridge elementary school for kindergarten through 5th grade. Kayla's grades in kindergarten and 1st grade were unsatisfactory. She was retained in the 1st grade, and received low average grades for her second year of 1st grade. Her grades for 2nd and 3rd grades were average, but her grades in 4th grade were poor. Her reading levels were significantly below grade level, but did increase slightly each year. Kayla's available standardized test scores were significantly below state guidelines, but she did not complete all of the tests in the 3rd grade. She was absent, on average, 17 days per year for elementary school. She received 1 discipline referral in 3rd grade, and 2 discipline referrals in 4th grade.

"**Faith**." Faith is an African American woman in her late twenties. She was born in Korbel, and attended elementary school and part of middle school in Korbel before her family moved to a larger city in the state. She is the single mother of two children, but helps her own mother care for her younger siblings, who are of school age. Faith and her two children live with her mother during the week, and return to their own home on the weekends. Faith graduated from high school while pregnant with her first child. She expressed a desire to enlist in the Air Force, but reconsidered the idea when she learned that the military would obtain custody of her daughter if something were to happen to her. She has been employed sporadically since high school. At times, she would live with the father of her daughter. When her romantic relationship with her daughter's father ended, she decided to move back to Korbel with her mother, who was ill at the time. Currently, Faith operates a small hauling business. She owns a pick up truck, and hauls debris to landfills for a fee. Faith has a strong desire to move back to the city in which she attended high school, but will wait for her daughter to finish school in Korbel first in order to minimize disruptions in her life. Faith's mother lives in a racially mixed neighborhood in the northwestern section of Korbel. The majority of houses are small, but maintained. Faith's own home is in a public housing project, and she reported that she does not live there during the week because it is easier to transport her children and her siblings to and from school from her mother's house.

"*Jennifer*." Jennifer is the older of Faith's two children. She is an African American female attending Foote school, the magnet middle school in the district. She attended kindergarten in a school outside of the district, and began 1st grade at Springfield elementary school. She continued at Springfield for 2nd grade, and then transferred to North Ridge elementary school for 3rd through 5th grade. Jennifer's grades were average to good throughout

elementary school. Her reading levels were slightly below grade level, but increased each year. Jennifer's available standardized test scores were below state guidelines, with the exception of science. She was absent, on average, 17 days per year for elementary school. She received 1 discipline referral in 3rd grade, and 2 discipline referrals in 4th grade.

"**Hazel**." Hazel is an African American woman in her fifties. She is the biological mother of four children who range in age from 12 to 20 years, and many foster children. She has lived in Korbel for approximately twelve years with her second husband. She was born and raised in the largest city in the state. With respect to her own education, she graduated high school and obtained her Associate's degree in child development. She worked at a residential facility for children with significant developmental delays, and then decided to return to school for her nursing degree. Instead of enrolling in a nursing program, she met her first husband, and started a family. She has been a homemaker since that time. Her first husband died many years ago, at which point she moved to Mississippi, where her mother was living at the time, for 10 years. She met her second husband in Mississippi, and they moved to Korbel in 1991. Her husband is employed full time at a local factory. She rears her own children, foster children, and cares for her daughter's young children during the day. Hazel and her family live in a large old home in a predominantly African American neighborhood in the northern section of Korbel. She and her husband are currently in the process of renovating their home.

"*Keith*." Keith is the youngest of Hazel's four biological children. He is an African American male attending the magnet middle school in the district. He attended an early childhood program for a brief time, but did not complete a full year. He attended Woodson from kindergarten through 5th grade. Keith's grades indicate that his academic performance in elementary school was average to slightly above average. However, the reading level recorded at

the end of each academic year suggested that he was reading below what would be expected for his grade level until the end of 4th grade. At this point, he was reading at the appropriate level. Keith's standardized test scores in 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades are significantly below state guidelines in all areas. He was absent, on average, 17 days per year. He received no discipline referrals in 3rd or 4th grade, the only two years discipline data were available.

"**Dianne**." Dianne is a divorced white woman in her thirties. She is the mother of two children who were in 5th and 6th grade at the time of the study. Dianne was born and raised in a relatively small town in a neighboring Midwestern state. She graduated from high school and immediately attended college at a state university. She met and married her husband in college, and she was a homemaker until their divorce two years ago. She is currently employed full time at a local landscaping company. Dianne and her husband moved to Korbel when their children were in preschool. They bought a house in a traditionally African American neighborhood in the northern section of Korbel, and Dianne reports that her home is one of the best kept in the neighborhood. At the time they purchased their home, Dianne reported that she was unaware of the racial makeup of the neighborhood. She would like to reside in a different neighborhood, but cannot afford to move.

"*Mindy*." Mindy is the older of Dianne's two children. She is currently enrolled in honors courses at the magnet middle school in the district. Mindy began her elementary school education at Woodson and attended kindergarten and first grade there. Prior to the 3rd grade, Dianne applied for Mindy to attend Lincoln, the local magnet elementary school prior to the Schools of Choice program. Mindy attended Lincoln from 2nd-5th grade. Mindy's educational records indicate that she was an above average student. Her grades were A's and B's, and her reading level at the end of 5th grade was equivalent to that of an 8th grader. Her scores on

standardized tests were also average to above average in all areas. She received no discipline referrals in the 3rd and 4th grade. Mindy was absent, on average, 4 days per year during elementary school.

"**Crystal**." Crystal is a single white woman in her twenties. She has two children who were both in 6th grade at the time of the study. Crystal was born and raised in Korbel, and has lived in Korbel all her life. She attended the local public schools, but did not graduate high school. Crystal is not currently employed, although she does receive disability benefits as a result of severe rheumatoid arthritis, which leaves her unable to perform in most occupational capacities. She is heavily medicated for chronic pain, and appears somewhat "groggy" most of the time. One year prior to the study, Crystal and her two children lived in the same trailer park in which she was born and raised, located in the northern section of Korbel. She reported that there were too many "Mexicans" residing in that trailer park, which had been predominantly African American and white in the past. Crystal moved to a different trailer park approximately 3 miles from Korbel in a rural area. She is more content in her current neighborhood because it is comprised of mostly white people.

"*Tyler and Misty*." Tyler and Misty are Crystal's children and, for the purposes of the current study, are both target children because they have been in the same grade throughout the majority of their education. Tyler is almost one year older than his sister, Misty. He initially attended kindergarten at Woodson, but Crystal enrolled him at Lincoln, the magnet elementary school after learning that he would be retained in kindergarten. He began his second year of kindergarten at Lincoln with his sister who was entering kindergarten for the first time the same year. After approximately two months, Crystal transferred both of her children to Woodson due to her dissatisfaction with Lincoln. She reported that staff members at Lincoln encouraged her to

make that decision. Tyler and Misty remained at Woodson for the remainder of their elementary school careers, and are currently attending the magnet middle school in the district. Both children have special education eligibilities under the "mental impairment" classification. They receive intensive special education services. Their grades are below average to failing and their scores on standardized tests are well below those of their same-aged peers. Tyler received 25 discipline referrals in 3rd grade, and 10 in the 4th grade. He was absent from school, on average, 19 days per year. Misty received 6 discipline referrals in 3rd grade, and 10 in the 4th grade. She was absent from school, on average, 29 days per year.

Overview of Data Analysis

Guided by a grounded theory approach emphasizing discovery and theory development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), data analysis and data collection in the this research proceeded simultaneously in order to enhance both the data themselves and the emerging theoretical interpretations. Data collection was shaped by ongoing analytic interpretations, while emerging interpretations in data analysis were often supported or revised based on additional data collection.

In order to maximize the utility of the grounded theory approach, I adhered to Charmaz's recommendations for coding (1983) throughout data collection and analysis. Data was coded in two often overlapping stages, initial or open coding and focused coding. In open coding, the data was viewed from as many vantage points as possible. However, coding was limited to what could be defined and discovered in the data which included themes and categories of statements, feelings, attitudes, behavior, interactions, and cognitions to name a few. Although initial coding required me to stick "close" to the data, multiple theoretical interpretations were maintained. In focused coding, codes from the initial coding scheme were applied to larger amounts of data.

The purpose of focused coding was to develop analytic categories and identify emerging patterns, as opposed to descriptive summaries of data. As potential categories, themes, and patterns emerged from the data, attempts were made to actively search for examples that discounted interpretations and hypotheses.

As illustrated in the interview guide (see Appendix D), parents were asked to discuss their experiences in a chronological order beginning with their own experiences as a child and leading up to the experiences of their children. The parent participants in this study were asked to provide a wealth of information about their experiences with, reactions to, and decisions about their family's education. There were numerous possibilities for the analysis and presentation of these experiences. Although the nature of the data themselves were amenable to chronological analysis, the ways in which parents make meaning of their experiences with education seem to be continuously negotiated throughout their lives and during the actual interview. Parents occasionally made comments about the interview or interview process indicating that they may not have explicitly thought about the ways in which their personal experiences with education and their child's experiences with education have shaped the educational decision-making process. Examining such meta-communicative comments and nonverbal data was an important aspect of data analysis. Additionally, different parents employed different strategies to illustrate their points. The use of emotionally-based arguments and reenacting past conversations as actual dialogues were common throughout the interviews.

CHAPTER THREE

DISTAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Overview

The overarching goal of this project is to understand educational decision making for a group of parents who live in a community that has theoretically provided them with increased educational options for their children via a controlled school choice policy. As described above, both the existing school choice literature and many local teachers and school personnel assume that parents who care about their children's education will utilize the new Schools of Choice program in Korbel to transfer their children from schools in the northern to southern areas of town. In this chapter, parents' distal educational experiences are presented as a foundation for understanding global attitudes toward education, which are generally positive. In addition to reporting positive past educational experiences, many parents also reported that they valued education and held many hopes and dreams for their children's education regardless of whether or not they utilized the school choice program to send their children to different schools. Despite these similarities, there were also differences. In general, past relationships with teachers were more salient for the African American parents in this study. Involvement in extracurricular activities was more salient for the white parents.

Educational Hopes and Dreams for Children

From the outset of this project, I assumed that there would be a set of fundamental commonalities across almost all families that would serve as an anchor among countless differences. Perhaps the most unsettling lesson learned from this project is *not* that there are no shared hopes, dreams, and ambitions for all children, but that some people choose not to recognize or acknowledge that most people hold such wishes. I start by arguing that although not

recognized by all of the actors I have come in contact with, most parents want their children to receive an education and achieve in school. Further, they hold a positive attitude toward education in general and understand the value of education regardless of their opinions and feelings toward a particular school or set of educational experiences.

In their own words, families have expressed such attitudes toward education despite recounting numerous hardships and obstacles they have been forced to wrestle with in the local school system. Teresa, an African American teacher, directly expresses her feelings about education when discussing why she and her husband have both chosen to be educators:

> So that's what we do. And we're very, very fond of school related activities and very pro-education, and what all it can do to change people's lives and all that. So we're a real positive, education-oriented household (Interview, 5/19/03).

Rose, an older African American woman raising her grandchildren, describes how she and her grandchildren view school in a positive light when asked if they have enjoyed their education:

> I really think they do. Yeah, they do. They don't wanna miss. Kinda like I was when I was growin up. Yeah, they really do enjoy school (Interview, 6/6/03).

Faith, an African American woman, expresses great pride when her daughter does well in school as evidenced by good grades on her report card, tests, or assignments. She demonstrates her feelings to her daughter by praising her for good work:

> Mostly an A, B student-Yessss. And I love 'em all! I mean I praise her!
> (Interview, 6/11/03).

Parents also demonstrated the importance they place on their children's education when discussing how education and schoolwork must come before the children engage in recreational

activities. Below, Willina, an African American hospital clerk, is describing the value she places on education, working hard, and doing well in school when she recounts conversations she has had with her own mother, who cares for the children after school while Willina is at work.

> Willina: Mom, kids need to do their homework and then play, you know. Times are suited better for them to play after they do their homework.
>
> Mother: Well, I'll work with them in getting their homework done and so forth.
>
> Willina: Okay, I hope so.
>
> Mother: And I will work wit'em. You are too hard on those kids, you are mean.
>
> Willina: Mom, they need to do they work, playing is not everything, you know. Watching TV, even playing the games, I don't...cause I make... you know, get on my kids' cases when they make bad grades, I always tell 'em, 'You got to pull your grades up.'(Interview, 5/16/03).

Willina also recognizes that children may not always want to work on their homework outside of school, but that it is a parent's obligation to ensure that the work is done, and done well. Similarly, Marie is another African American parent who speaks about a parent's responsibility for their child's education. Whereas Willina is speaking about elementary school children, Marie is speaking about older children who may place more importance on holding a paying job than on completing school:

> Some parents let you quit at sixteen because you have done nothing all your life anyway and it's probably best if you go on and quit and get a job or whatever. But I'm not one of those kind of parents, so don't even think about it. Cause if you do quit, I'm going to put you away where you will continue. Because I'm not gonna have that. Giving up and dropping out is not an option here, you have to go through all the way, you cannot...you

> can't quit. We don't have any quitters in here. So that's why I don't let 'em work jobs or whatever unless you are secure in your education. Then, you can work a few hours or whatever. Cause I want you to have your own money and your own success but you can't just say, you're pissed off so therefore you don't want to work no more, you got the attitude, if you can not do well, successfully in school and you getting an attitude and running out of class and stomping your feet and throwing all your books, you can't do that at McDonald's because there's gonna be a law suit (Interview 5/16/03).

Also implied in Marie's statement is the notion that doing well in school is an important predictor of how well a person will be able to function as an employee. School is taken very seriously in her home, and children must complete school and do well before she will allow them to attempt to take on additional responsibilities.

In addition to not allowing children to terminate their education prematurely by dropping out, Hazel, an African American foster parent, discusses not allowing children to emotionally 'give up' on their education because they have had a difficult time in school. She illustrates this point by recounting a conversation she had with one of her foster children who did not want to attend school for fear of being 'kicked out:'

> Child: They gonna kick me out anyway! I might as well not go.
>
> Hazel: They're not gonna kick you out! Everybody in my house has to go to school. So, you gonna go to school (Interview, 6/2/03).

Interestingly, all of the parents described above were African American whose own level of educational attainment ranged from the completion of 6th grade to obtaining a graduate degree. None of them were explicitly asked about the value they placed on education, or if and how they

tried to ensure their children's academic success. Only one of the white parents interviewed discussed the value she placed on education. Dianne explained:

> So, I have a value on education, and would want, and that's why I'm at, you know, because my parents set the example. Yes, when you're involved in your kids' life, when you're in the PTA, you're doin this or that with your kids, it's not a spectator sport to have children. And, so, and I've never done that. I mean, so I learned from my parents' example, who are...my mother immigrated to this country after WWII, and my father was a first generation American, with a strong push to be American, and live the American dream, and blah, blah, blah, and so....that's why I'm so screwed up (laughing).
>
> *Interviewer*: Sounds like they had a strong value in education....
>
> Oh sure, they valued it. And wanted us to do better than they ever did
>
> (Interview, 6/17/03).

Ann, another white parent, demonstrates her feelings about education when discussing her hopes for her children's education. She reports that she wants all of her children to graduate high school, and then specifies that she would like them to graduate before they get married. Ann does not convey a strong feeling about the importance of education, attending school, and completing all schoolwork well. Instead, she discusses a minimum level of educational attainment that is acceptable to her. It is the end, rather than the means, that is of importance.

To summarize, all of the African American parents interviewed discussed the value of education either directly or indirectly, even though they were not explicitly asked about whether or not they valued education. To these families, education is not something to be taken lightly. This sentiment seems to be relevant to any discussion about the educational experiences of their children. Further, they emphasize the process of fully engaging in school and with schoolwork as

opposed to the ultimate level of education to be attained. Two white parents discussed the value of their children's education. One made her values explicit, and linked them to her own parents' attitudes toward education. The other implied her value in education when discussing the level of education she hoped her children would attain.

Personal Educational Experiences

In addition to questions about their children's education, parents were also asked to reflect on their own personal schooling experiences as children and adolescents. With few exceptions, parents spoke fondly of their own education regardless of their personal level of educational attainment. Some parents remembered relationships with teachers who made them feel as though they were capable, smart, special, and worthy of time and attention. Other parents remembered participation in extracurricular activities as a positive aspect of their education.

Relationships with teachers. Faith recalls how accomplished students felt when a particular lesson finally "clicked" for them. Her vivid account of the relationship students had with a certain teacher is something I think many adults can relate to easily.

> And we'd call her back then, you know back then, Ms. Killer Miller. But Ms. Miller, I say, is the best teacher I had. Ms. Killer Miller at Springfield. She was a beautiful teacher, fourth grade... I mean, she's made sure... and she stuck on to... She sure did. She made sure we got the lesson. She didn't pass the C student for her class... or a B student I don't think. She made sure. We'd need extra help? She'd say, 'Are you goin' outside for recess?' We said, 'Yeah.'... She say, 'No you're not.' 'So, you figured you'd do some work?' 'No.' 'Yes you do.' You know, so, she'd ask you, you know and she like, 'Don't you need to do this and this here, and you do that there?' And I don't think we never had no problem at the classroom with nobody... no one stayin for recess.

> I tell ya... I wanna say this, a couple of times after my ma... I couldn't stand math. Oh! I would a couple of times, I would stay in, she'd tell you, 'You goin' to recess, Faith?' I'd say, 'Yes.' She said, 'No, ya not.' Well, we never had... nobody talk back to that woman. And I don't think she's ever...not too many progress reports out sayin' that she might talk back to her... and then she tell to the parents, 'If they don't pass the test, they don't go outside.' She said, 'I got fans in here, and I got the windows open. They not gonna fall out.' And she make you stay and get it too! And, you get it and you be so happy afterwards! You know, and then you can go outside and play with the kids... 'Yeah! I got it!'... 'Yeah, I got here last week, and I'm not in here this week!'... Yeah, it's about the best teacher I had. And that's, yeah... She stuck with you (Interview, 6/11/03).

In addition to "sticking with" the children, some African American parents reported that their teachers were involved in their lives both in and out of school. This was particularly true for African American teachers. Faith describes enjoying spending time at her 6th grade teacher's house. This teacher also would not allow students to give up:

> I remember her address, cause I walked to her house. Her name is Betty Clark. She's a good teacher, too. And sometimes she'd get so mad at me, I'm like, 'Look, I had just tried and it's this and that!" And she's like, 'Look here at your table, you gonna learn this, you gonna sit here and learn this.' She said, 'You not gonna be one of my stupid students!' And I was like, 'Oh!'... And she's like, 'Look uh, come on over 'ere, pummel it in your head, you gonna learn it.' I never forget it. And I will sit down, 'Okay, all right...' Cause she's like... she's not gonna give this to the math teacher, I'm tellin' ya... I cannot stand math. And she's like, 'Faith, it's math time today.' And she's, 'Don't make me come over there and pound it into your head!' I was like, 'Ms. Clark, I can't!"

She said, 'there's no such thing as can't.' Then, she made us feel better. 'So I ca... I can't... then I tell her, I can't!' 'What did it say?' She said, 'What do it say?' You said, 'You better not say that word, can't up there on that paper.'

(Interview, 6/11/03)

Willina has an interesting educational history in that she lived in Mississippi until she was twelve years old at which point she moved to Korbel. In Mississippi, most of the students and teachers were African American. When she began school in Korbel, most of the teachers and other children were white. In the following passage, she reports that her African American teachers in Mississippi were strict, and wanted to ensure that their students learned the material. This was in contrast to some white teachers, who did not care whether or not she finished school:

Willina: And black teachers are was a lot stricter then the white teacher, cause the black teachers wanted you to learn and you had to learn — you didn't have no choice.

Interviewer: Mmmm.

Willina: Cause you would get in trouble with them as well as your parents. They was they were rough on you.

Interviewer: And they all probably knew each other.

Willina: Oh yeah, Mmmm. So, you still couldn't get away with nothin. And, so you know, and they didn't take nothing off of the black kids, you know. If they didn't do what they said, they out, you know ... else they standing in the corner or whatever. They did not have no trouble with black kids because they wasn't gonna have it and it wasn't so. And then you come here, you know, it's quite different, okay, you know, new studies, you know, make the grades and whatever and they just pass you on or whatever. Some

> teacher care a lot, some didn't care, so you know they just pass you on through, finish school and that was it Interviewer: MmmHm.
>
> Willina: Um, I know my 9th grade teacher told me, well told the whole class, 'If you make below a B in regular math, you will flunk out in Algebra.' So... I always liked Math, Math was my favorite, so I made a C in her class, so I didn't take Algebra. When I got in my senior year, I took Algebra, I made A's and B's. I said the teacher lied to me, I said I could a took Algebra (Interview, 5/16/03).

In contrast to Willina's experience with white teachers, Teresa, an African American woman, describes relationships with white teachers as one of the key factors to her educational success. Although she might not have come to school as the ideal student, her teachers clearly cared about her as a person and were committed to her education. She also reflects on the race of the teachers, and how at that time, she was not negatively impacted by not having African American teachers. She remembers school as the place where she could excel regardless of what might be happening in her home:

> So my elementary years were really fun and positive for me and I had a big circle of friends, and I was really popular with them. In my life, I've had every disadvantage that they say makes children hard to teach. We were very, very poor. My dad was...he drank all of my young years. He was an alcoholic. And you know he would never have said that and nobody else would probably say that, but he drank every day. And there was a lot of drama at my house, and all my cousins and everything came in and out...and, you know...some parents would be fightin' and their kids would come to our house. They'd be traumatized...and we'd get up in the middle of the night. My dad would go over and intervene and it...just all kinds of stuff went on at my house. We never had enough

> money for everything. I had…you know…hand-me-down clothes, hand-me-down hand-me-downs…a lot of times I came to school with clothes 'way too big. My teachers would have to pin 'em up on me and stuff. Just…you know …not to paint a very bad or dismal picture about my family, but we definitely were not the model home…you know, a nice little homework area and three square meals and nice clean room…nice clothes hangin' in the closet ready to go…Mom up in the morning combin' my hair, braiding it, and …A lot of days I came to school my hair was just whacked (laughs)…and you know still…and then the other thing is, I've never had any African American teachers. I had only ALL white teachers and they were pretty much white principals, and pretty much white staff. I can kinda remember two black teachers that were at Dixwell and that's it. And um none of them…I was never in their classes. But I did have teachers who were very warm and loving and who believed in me and who would put their arms around me and say, 'Oh I know you can do this. You're so bright. You have such a good brain. Don't let it go to waste. Why don't we try this way.'….. My teachers really played an important role in making me feel like, you know, anything could happen. My future could be bright (Interview, 5/19/03).

And, indeed, her future was bright. One of her middle school teachers recommended that she attended a prestigious high school in town for children with a great deal of academic talent. Teresa went on to graduate from college, and eventually returned for her Masters degree. However, she is deeply concerned about what might have happened to her had she been growing up today instead of the 1960s.

> And I just think like in this day and age if I were my exact same self, this probably just wouldn't happen. It just would not happen because you know I would just be on a list of

> troubled kids and troubled home and dysfunctional family and all that. And, so you know, as an adult before I ever knew I would be a teacher and everything it would be very hard for me to throw the towel in on kids because I can just see their potential. You know...just look beyond all the faults and beyond all the mucky muck and just say this person still came into the world for some purpose and has so much to give if it's cultivated right and so ...just like for me...like I said I could still be...have the [stutters] not really knowing how to pronounce words and tongue-tied and everything...I could still be, you know, walkin' around with three or four kids and don't know where their dad is and could have been a teen parent and everything IF people had just given up on me and said, 'I just don't think she's likely to succeed. She comes from just a huge family...her parents had too many kids, they're poor, they should have stopped at one, and she's never gonna be anything. Her hair's never combed, her nose is nasty...you know...she's wearin' these old dirty clothes out of the laundry pile. She just should not be considered for any kind of scholarship or anything like that.' And the teachers I had back then, they were just very committed and dedicated and they did have to look over a lot ...like send notes home...they'd never get home (Interview, 5/19/03).

For parents like Faith, Willina, and Teresa, teachers played a large role in whether or not students were challenged to succeed or encouraged to be content with passing on to the next grade. For these parents, the relational aspects of school were the most salient. It was the relationships with teachers that they most fondly and vividly remember from their own educations. For other parents, involvement in extracurricular activities was an important contribution to their personal positive experiences with education. Interestingly, only white parents spoke of their participation in organized extracurricular activities.

Extracurricular activities. When asked whether or not she enjoyed school, Dianne's affect brightened, she was smiling and speaking with enthusiasm:

> Dianne: Yeah, I liked all my school experiences. I really enjoyed high school A LOT. And, when I was in elementary school, when I was in 6th grade, elementary school was through 6th grade, I went to junior high in 7th and 8th grade, and um, I can't remember what they called it, but there was a different way of teaching when I was in 6th grade. We were like guinea pigs, for how they graded us, I mean we got, we didn't get your standard report card, we would get S's and, 'she's trying hard,' it was like a mid-70s kind of thing (laughing). It was very interesting, and a unit by unit thing. It didn't last actually, that was the only year they did it.
>
> Interviewer: Oh, Okay.
>
> Dianne: But I enjoyed it, and then I really enjoyed high school a lot.
>
> Interviewer: What was it about high school?
>
> Dianne: I don't know. I just liked high school. I was in EVERYTHING. I was in everything but future farmers of America, which in hindsight is probably the one organization I should've belonged to. Because now I really like working on the horticultural stuff.
>
> Interviewer: Uh huh.
>
> Dianne: So, but who knew? (Interview, 6/17/03).

Despite holding somewhat ambivalent feelings about her own education, Ann, a white parent, reported that that participating in extracurricular activities was one positive aspect of her own schooling:

> Boy that was a long time ago. I guess it was okay. I made it to the eleventh grade. So…I always did extra-curricular activities. I always participated in school stuff. I was in drama and plays and all that. (Interview, 6/5/03).

Stacy was the only other parent who expressed global ambivalence about her own education, which seems to be rooted in her status as an outsider in a very small, predominantly white Midwestern town due to her ethnicity:

> Stacy: Well, I mean, I did well in school. Um… hopped up through, I kinda slacked a little bit at the end, but National Honors Society. But, um… I don't think I was bad. I didn't have the greatest education in Milford…Um, it's a very white kinda town, and um… my father was Polish and my mother was Japanese. So we were probably one of very few non-white families, let alone… bi-racial, this weird kinda mix. So that was not valued. That was kinda like 'Ugh, your Chinese', you know that whole… so I had that whole thing hanging over me. And um…
>
> Interviewer: So, when you say most, it's pretty much all white, right?
>
> Stacy: It's all white, but I think maybe... two black families, and maybe like a, Chinese doctor and maybe an Indian doctor (laughs), you know. And then, so it's pretty bad and… you know, it's very much like Harley Davidson town and drinking whiskey out of the bottle and… But otherwise, it's like blonde haired, blue-eyes, tight jeans kinda… Yeah, so I was looked at as a sort of aberration, though… you know to a certain degree, it was okay. I look at things like subjects that could be really fascinating and um, like History and Social Studies and stuff, but just these were taught so poorly that I just went into my head in class. And, so I didn't have to listen. And, I think that's probably the one

thing that got me through and it's probably what my son does...it's creativity and imagination, and if it's boring and I'm not challenged...um, I'll just go off. So...

Interviewer: So the teachers then, were probably all white, or...?

Stacy: Um... yeah, when I was... my sister... my siblings are all older, my sister reminded me of a story in third grade. I was in third grade. And, I'm left-handed, and they were trying to get me to switch hands. And um, I uh, told my family and some of my siblings were so much older, they were almost like parent figures, my sister was at the U of I at the time getting her Masters in Education and had written a paper on the damage done by trying to get left-handed kids to be right-handed, and gave me a copy and told me to take it to school. And, my school teacher in third grade, one day I went home, the same teacher, and said, 'Oh Mom, you're cooking feesh tonight.' And my family's like looking at me, like 'What is she saying?' And I said, 'Feesh.' And I... (Laughs)... They said, 'What's feesh?' And, I said, 'Ms. Andrews calls it feesh.' So...see, you're being a good school teacher saying '-ish' as 'feesh' and telling me the right one was the other... Yeah, I had some good teachers who stand out, but that was probably the foundation of my story. (Laughs). (Interview, 5/23/03).

At the outset of this passage, Stacy seems hesitant to reflect poorly on her own education. She has been successful in obtaining her Masters degree in social work and had always done relatively well in school. She conveyed the sense that she did not want to appear unaware or unappreciative of the fact that she has experienced success in school and that others have not. However, when thinking about specific instances that stand out in her mind, she realizes that much of her education was not conducive to learning, especially for a student who is different from other students and teachers (Interview, 5/23/03).

Crystal, a white parent who is currently receiving disability insurance for severe rheumatoid arthritis, is the only parent to hold very negative views of her own education. She stated at least twice during her interview that her schools did not "do anything" for her and are not currently "doing anything" for her children. Her educational experiences did not improve her life circumstances. She also spoke repeatedly about the schools "going to hell." Crystal attributed much of the schools' decline to the growing number of Latino families moving into the Korbel area, and more specifically into the trailer park in which she lived. Despite expressing very negative feelings about schools and education in Korbel, Crystal did discuss her own involvement in extracurricular activities in high school in a positive light.

Summary

To summarize, the parents interviewed in the present study have had very different experiences with educational settings and school personnel. None of the parents presented an educational history without obstacles; however, almost all of the parents conveyed a global positive view of their own education. African American parents were more likely to explicitly express the value they placed on education, and were more likely to highlight relationships with their teachers in recounting their own educational experiences. White parents were less likely to explicitly speak about the value they placed on education, and were more likely to highlight involvement in extracurricular activities in their educational histories. When asked to reflect on their own education, some parents speak about interpersonal aspects (i.e., relationships with teachers) of their experiences while others speak about structural aspects of their particular schools (i.e., extracurricular activities). Readers may refer to Appendix E for a summary of these findings in a case by theme table.

CHAPTER FOUR

PROXIMAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Overview

Parents' distal educational experiences were presented above as a foundation for understanding future attitudes and subsequent decision making about education. Parents in this study held many hopes and dreams for their children's education. Further, they generally reported positive personal educational experiences. Some parents tended to highlight the importance of interpersonal relationships with teachers while others highlighted involvement in extracurricular activities as the most positive aspects about their own educational experiences.

In this chapter, proximal educational experiences are presented in the context of this group of parents who care deeply about their children's education. This chapter explores the ways in which the unique educational experiences of children (i.e., proximal educational experiences) might influence educational decision making for parents. For many parents, the experiences of their children naturally led them to become engaged with their child's school and subsequently make decisions about their children's education. Three types of parental engagement were described by the participating parents and included reactive engagement, proactive engagement, and indirect engagement. Educational decisions often occurred as a natural outgrowth of the parental engagement with respect to reactive engagement and were often intended to remedy some type of mistreatment of a child by a school. In addition, parents made more formalized educational decisions about educational placements and services for their children. To a lesser extent, parents also made proactive educational decisions to enhance the educational experiences of their children.

Parental Engagement

Parental engagement for the purposes of this study is intentionally broadly defined to avoid excluding ways in which minority and/or parents of low socioeconomic status may be involved in their children's education. As evidenced in these interviews, parents were engaged in their children's education in a variety of ways. Parental engagement in this study consists of formal and informal activities, direct and indirect involvement, as well as proactive and reactive interactions with school decisions, personnel, practices and policies.

Reactive parental engagement. Reactive parental engagement was common across interviews and indicated that many instances occur when parents feel that they are left with no other choice but to try to address the wrongdoing of their children's schools. Understandably, parents felt strongly about any perceived mistreatment of their children by school staff members. Parents in this study reacted to numerous incidents related to their children's education. These incidents involved particular practices or policies impacting children, interpersonal interactions between children and school staff, and challenging school staff members' assumptions about children. When reacting to incidents of mistreatment, parents reported using whatever resources they had available to improve the situation for their children.

Practices and policies. Marie, an African American parent who views herself as an advocate for all children, describes the ways in which she feels she must approach the school system before the system acts in the best interest of children. In the following excerpt, she describes a situation in which a child with special needs was not receiving the appropriate educational services in middle school. Although this student was not her child, as she was recounting the situation, she became angry and her voice grew loud:

...got to Foote middle school they didn't even have a special a special aid specialist there! Then, they hired a part time one. She did not even have a classroom. Later after all the fights and arguments with the teachers and everything because the teachers were treating them as regular students and these kids were getting F's and D's. This particular child hid under a table from her special ed teacher--hid! And, they suspended that child. But, I intervened because I was gonna take it to law if they had suspended her. I said she will not-shall not... and I will come to school with her everyday and that's exactly what I did! I had to get belligerent, and downright ugly with the teacher (Interview, 5/16/03).

Marie feels very frustrated with the teacher, and feels as if the teacher would not respond appropriately to her concerns had Marie not conveyed her intense affect. The nature of Marie's systematic contact with the school system has provided her with knowledge about how individualized education plans (IEP's) should be implemented. Other parents do not necessarily have this knowledge accessible to them when they advocate for their children. This excerpt from Marie's interview, in which she utilizes quoted speech to communicate her point, continues below:

> [I] said, 'You have not read her IEP's, you have not looked at her IEP's, there is no support for her um... 'She can read,' they said. 'Well, yes she can understand this.' I said, 'Well, I don't care if she can. She only reads only according to MY papers right here, where she took her state test, she reads at a second grade level. And, according to her IEP you have to treat her as a according to that. I don't care what she might master, maybe Science and something that she just simply enjoys and she can say a big word you know like cardiovascular.' You know what I'm saying? I can't say it myself, and that fascinates her. So, she's gifted in that area,

> but what about the other areas? Why is she struggling like this and the homework, this child was… her parents were so strict because she had done so well that they didn't understand, were not educated themselves, but pushing their kids toward education. They were on their child thinking she was just becoming a behavior problem because she had got to junior high (Interview, 5/16/03).

Here, Marie begins to articulate an interesting point, but quickly returns to the practices and policies issue. It has been her experience that even parents begin to adopt teachers' beliefs about their own children, which Marie clearly feels is less than ideal. Further, she seems to believe that parents who allow teachers to dictate interpretations of their own children risk allowing teachers to mistreat them by not providing them with the services they need. Below, she shares her views of this particular situation:

> And, I didn't see that. I saw a whole different story. I saw a child being traumatized by a school, I saw nobody looking out for her best interest. If a child hides from a teacher for 2 hours, there's something wrong with the administrative department, not the student! Students don't hide. If it was fear she had walked out left the building, in the bathroom hanging out with her friends…She was under a table. Nobody looked at that--nobody. (Interviewer: Mmmm*)*. Nobody, nobody looked at that. It was me (Interview, 5/16/03).

In addition to forcing school staff and other parents to better understand children's needs by threatening to bring in "the law," Marie is also very aware of which administrators have the power to remedy unfair situations. When she has been faced with a problem, she does not hesitate to contact an administrator. For example, when one of her children was unable to enroll

in the magnet middle school in the district on the basis of her race, Marie advocated for her admittance by contacting the superintendent of schools:

> It was a discrimination when my oldest daughter was there...point blank was told to me that they didn't want anymore Afro-American children. Even though we had our admittance letter. So, I had to call Richard Abel, who was in Florida at the time with his mother. And, Richard Abel called this particular principal at that time, and I don't want to use names. (Interviewer: That's Okay). And ...the principal refused to let my daughter in! Finally, Richard Abel sent myself, my husband and this particular principal a letter stating that she had to be admitted in the school (Interview, 5/16/03).

Although some of Marie's actions might be viewed as adversarial, her experiences have demonstrated to her that this is one of few, if not the only, style of interaction with the school system that results in change. In addition to engaging with the educational system in the aforementioned ways, Marie is also very involved with her children's schools on a regular basis both formally and informally. Formally, she is a member of the Parent Teacher Associations at an elementary school, middle school, and high school. She also substitute teaches from time to time in the local schools. And, she is the parent representative on one of the high school's Building Support Team, which is the group of people who make decisions about whether or not particular students should receive special education services. Informally, Marie speaks of "walking the halls" as do some of the other African American parents. This is an attempt to ensure that teachers are treating children appropriately, and to send a message to the children and the school that you care. In addition to school-related activities, Marie is also a Girl Scout troop leader and teaches dance to girls in the community to help them prepare for performances and competitions.

Clearly, Marie has the ability to interact with the schools in a variety of ways, which tend to depend on the demands of a particular situation. Other parents interact with schools in similar ways, but generally do not have the same quantity of interactions with the schools. In addition to demonstrating some of the ways in which parents are engaged with their children's schools, the previous excerpt illustrates an important point that was true for some of the African American parents. Although their own children attend particular schools, their interactions with schools are not limited to those attended by their own children. If there are other family members, relatives, or friends attending other schools, parents are likely to intervene on their behalf. The responsibility of ensuring that children are treated fairly extends to all important people in the parents' lives.

Teresa is a mother who described the ways in which she felt she was forced to engage with the school system to prevent long-term negative outcomes for her son. Although certain people upset Teresa throughout this process, one particular person does not symbolize the injustice. Instead, it is the way the system (i.e., practices and policies) operates that is unjust in Teresa's mind. In the interview, Teresa describes a situation in which her son was treated in a way that was not acceptable to her. At the time, Teresa had not yet become a teacher in the district. Like Marie, she fought extremely hard to remedy a situation that could have negative long-term consequences for her son. Unlike Marie, Teresa was worried because she did not want to be labeled as a "problem" parent who created trouble for the teachers and the school district. As Teresa described this incident that occurred two years prior to our interview, she almost seemed unable to believe that it had happened. Although she did not make the connection, the situation with her son and the way he was treated was completely inconsistent with her own educational experiences as a child. When her son was in the 3rd grade, he was arguing with a

classmate, who was actually his good friend. Teresa reports that her son made an attempt to separate himself from a potentially physical situation, but was unsuccessful:

> But, anyway he walked off and the boy came up and pushed him, and then he turned around he started swingin' at the other student, but the boy was backin' up. Well, then a teacher grabbed the other student from behind and had her arms around his waist and he kept swingin,' and he just inadvertently hit the teacher on her arm. Just barely. But then they took it as 'he hit a teacher.' And so they wrote him up for hittin' a teacher. (Interviewer: Both [kids] were at Lincoln?) At Lincoln. Both boys got a two day suspension out of it. Which...that was fine, and he was really upset about it because he hardly ever got in trouble. In fact that was the first time ever being suspended. The other student...he said, 'Man, I get this all the time. I just stay at home and play video games and stuff. I don't care about bein' suspended.' But, like I said he [her son] was really upset. And, then I was...I thought he shouldn't even get the two day detention [in-school suspension] but since it had already...everything had already been settled without them meeting with us, I would go ahead and take the two day suspension.

Teresa continues to describe how she and her husband learned more about her son's behavior. Her husband worked at the school, and spoke with some of the people who observed the incident. They reported that although Teresa's son was in a fight with another student, in did not intentionally try to hurt the teacher in any way. Teresa goes on to convey the school's actions in addition to the suspension, which were to file a police report documenting "assault and battery" because he hit a teacher. She seemed to understand the policy dictating the steps they took, but also conveys her outrage, especially in the context of her own graduate work in the field of education.

> And, I was in graduate school then, in Education, and I had been reading a lot of literacy articles and all that, and it said something about "black males will have their first contact with the law by the age of 10." Most of them will have a police record by the age of 10, and he was 9, and I was like...so now he's been reduced to a statistic. That'll be, like if something else happens, they'll say, 'Well, he already has a prior offense.' .....And, I'm shortening the story, but we ended up goin' to the School Board...writing a letter to the School Board, to the Urban League, to the NAACP...all these other places...because we thought...Well, really what had gotten me irritated was I started talkin' about it to other people at church and stuff. And, sure enough almost every other person that had children older than mine said, 'Oh, that happened to my son when he was in fourth grade.' 'Oh, that happened to my son when he was in third grade.' 'Now that happened to...'

Members of Teresa's church are predominantly African American, and she is growing more upset as she retells the story during the interview. In addition to so many African Americans sharing similar experiences, Teresa learned from the white women she worked with that their sons engaged in similar behaviors, but did not receive the same severe consequences:

> So, likewise I started sayin' to them [white women at work], I'd say like, 'You know, such and such happened to my son, and he's gonna have a police record.' Almost without a doubt...without exception everyONE of those white women said, 'Can they do that?' 'My son, beat up a little boy...' 'My son hospitalized a boy and he never got a police record.' And, different ones would say the same thing. And I was like, 'Okay I talked to Betsy, I talked to Janet, I talked to Trudy..." All of them said, 'Well, you know that happens with boys because they're so rough. My son...a friend of his...he broke his leg when they were in third grade and nothing happened. They called a meeting, the parents

> met, and we just kind of said, 'Okay, we see how that happened' and nothing happened like that. I don't think they can do that.' That's what they kept saying. On the contrary, went to choir rehearsal…eight or nine different Black parents said, 'Oh, my son has a police record. He couldn't even get in the military because of something he did in fourth grade.' And, I was like, 'How can that be?' So, then I was irritated…... Well, I wanted the whole thing expunged. I want it taken out of the computer…out of the police record…like it never existed. And that's what ended up happening, so he went back to having a clean slate. Because I thought it was just awful. Because he and the boy that he got into it with were still very good friends. They stayed friends (Interview, 5/19/03).

The amount of effort Teresa and her family had to expend to ensure that their son did not simply become a "statistic" was overwhelming. Reliving the experience by telling the story in its entirety seemed to drain Teresa of energy. She expressed feelings of irritation and anger, but none of them were directed at a particular person or group of people, even though she thought the principal seemed to have formed negative opinions of the family as a result. Perhaps this is why despite having the incident removed from her son's record, there was no sense of closure or accomplishment from this struggle. The "policy" and the "system" remain unchanged.

People. In addition to identifying problematic practices and policies, some parents recounted events in which a staff member, teacher or administrator personified a perceived injustice. "Proving" that your child was treated unjustly by having the adult who mistreated him or her apologize, rescind his or her accusations, or experience some kind of negative consequence seemed to right the wrong so to speak. Hazel is one parent who felt at least somewhat better after a teacher who wronged her son was reprimanded by the principal after mistreating her son:

Well, Keith's 4th grade teacher, she was new to Woodson, and um, we didn't, she and I didn't get along from the very start. We didn't get along. She started out lyin on Keith. She started out lyin on him. Here's a kid that has been goin to the school, from Morris preschool-Head Start- to Coumbia to Woodson and I have gotten absolutely nothing but good reports. Everybody up there loves Keith. He is such a wonderful kid in school, not a minute's trouble out of him. His 4th grade teacher...I'm not gonna say that nobody was playin favoritism or nothing like that, but she just startin out lyin. She just started out sayin Keith was doin things that I knew was not true. And, he would be all red in the face. And, I'm like, 'What's wrong with you?' Then, I go up there and pick him up, and she had her finger in his face. And, she was sayin this that and the other, you know. And, I'd go up to school and try to talk to her, and she'd tell me, 'I'm not gonna talk to you without the principal.' You know, have the principal sit in on the conversation. And I'd say, 'Well, this is between me and you, you know, if you want her there, I have no problem with her bein there either.' (Interviewer: Right). But, I don't see the...'I'm just tryin to ask you a simple question. What happened today with Keith?' And, she'd say, 'I don't have time now.' And, she'd walk off and then I guess she finally realized that Keith was the type of kid that somebody did something to him, he was going to go to his mom. Then, she started um, makin accusations that even Ms.Waters [the principal] knew was wrong. So, we did call a meetin and go up to the school. The principal called us in and I told Ms. Waters what was goin on and that she needs to call a meeting cause I wasn't going to tolerate this. And, she says, 'Well, I don't blame you, I don't blame you. I'm gonna have to agree with you Hazel. That's not right.' I said, 'I know it's not right.' So, we went up there, we sat down and had a meeting. And, I think it was that... cause I

> expressed my (paused) authority over my child and let her know that she wasn't gonna do my child any kind of way and it'd be okay with me (Interview, 6/2/03).

Hazel prides herself as a parent who does not permit anyone to mistreat her children. This includes her foster children, as well as her biological children. Hazel believes strongly that children in the foster care system are particularly at risk for experiencing problems in the school system. Hazel believes that if school staff members think children do not have parents who care about them, teachers will be more likely to mistreat them. When speaking about her foster children, Hazel passionately describes her role by recounting a conversation she had with a teacher about one of her foster children:

> First of all, 'I want y'all to know,' and they was like, 'How in the world?' I said, 'First of all, she has a voice, and that voice is mine. She is somebody's because she's mine now. So, if you have any issues, if you have any problems, expect me because I'm comin.' (Interviewer: HmmMm). And it changed everything, it changed the way they was treatin her, I mean because there was a voice there for her. It changed the way they talked to her (Interview, 6/2/03).

Forcing teachers to reconsider the ways in which they thought about and treated children was a theme many parents discussed. The excerpts up to this point have been related to the behavior of the teachers and/or children, and were not directly related to the academic progress of the students. Willina, another African American parent, describes an ongoing struggle she has with her children's teachers and her own mother in which she must force them to recognize her children's academic potential and not let them "off the hook." She believes that they do not have her children's best intentions in mind when they make decisions to promote them to the next grade when they perform poorly:

> I said, 'When I get to grade report at the end of the year, either they gonna stay in the 6th and the 7th grade so they can make the grade and pass. Or, they can if their grades pick up good enough for them to go on to the next grade, so be it.' And ... she said, 'Well, did you read the note about Tameka going to summer school?' I said, 'Mom, that's fine.' I said, 'But, if her grades ain't up to par, summer school is not gonna do her any good.' So, when I get the ... 4th quarter grade then I'll make that decision. I had talked to the counselor, also the dean, I think. And, then I also talked to the social worker. I had a conference with the social worker and one of the ladies that was helping Travien, you know, pick his grades up and so forth. And ... we went over his grades. We looked at his grades and so forth you know, and they said you know, and then you know, we could get him some special help in the 7th grade or whatever, you know. I just let 'em finish talking and showing me what he had been doing and I knew what he had been doing. (Interviewer: MmmHmm). And, I said, 'Well, I'm gonna tell you like this, I'll wait for the grade card. And, when I get the grade card for the end of the year and go over each one of those subjects he had a bad grade in or whatever I'll make my decision whether to let him go the 7th or keep him in the 6th (Interview, 5/16/03).

Willina is not opposed to summer school or supplemental help for her children, but she does not feel supplemental educational services will result in a good education for her children. She also does not want her children to lower the expectations they have for themselves and use the fact that they receive supplemental services as an "escape goat." In the following excerpt, she discusses these feelings:

> I said, 'Okay, well that's fine.' And said, 'He'll probably improve on his homework and stuff like that.' But, that's their opinion. My opinion--he did improve, he can improve. He

> can use this as an escape goat, but dear God. I told them if they don't get their work they can stay in 6th and 7th grade til they're 21 but they got to get their work done (Interview, 5/16/03).

Struggling with schools about educational issues was not limited to the African American families. However, both the quantity and quality of such struggles were much more frequent and severe for the African American families. The struggles experienced by the white families in the study were more likely to be confined to one area, and were more likely to result in an improvement in the appropriateness of the child's education. Crystal, a white mother of two children with special education labels, was the exception to this generalization.

Crystal reported repeated difficulties with the schools her children attended, which were all focused on the school's unwillingness to provide her children with an appropriate education. Crystal's children were confronted with negative experiences in the school system, but Crystal admittedly did not react in appropriate ways, and often felt so angry and helpless that she resorted to violence. For instance, when her son was in the first grade, he had been misbehaving at school. One of the teachers had been so frustrated with him that she grabbed him by both of his arms to restrain him. Crystal's son was left with marks on his arms at the end of the day as a result. Upon seeing his arms, Crystal was outraged. She reported that she rushed down to the school, and "bitch slapped" his teacher. The police were called and she was faced with criminal charges. In retrospect, she realizes that she should have taken a more "professional" approach to the incident which may have been more effective in having that teacher removed from the school. However, she seemed to take pride in the fact that her children's teachers were fearful of mistreating her children in the future. Instilling fear in the teachers, for Crystal, was the most effective way for her to ensure that her children would be treated civilly while attending school.

Although Crystal's children were never physically harmed while in school after the above incident, she did report continuously having to battle the school to help her children receive appropriate services.

Assumptions of incompetence. Parents also described situations in which school staff members made negative assumptions about their children which required them to become reactively engaged in their children's education. Throughout elementary school, Teresa had received nothing but positive feedback from Marcus's teachers about his academic performance in school and on standardized tests. Upon his transition to middle school, he quickly realized that he had been placed with a group of children who could not read. When he told Teresa, she was furious. She went to the school, and learned that he had been placed in a reading group with children who had been labeled with learning disabilities. She reported that the teachers at the middle school did not believe that her son was able to read. Teresa described a struggle with them simply to have her son placed in a non-special education reading class. Part of what was so infuriating to her was that she believed the school had not conducted any type of reading assessment in order to provide the appropriate level of work for him. She felt that teachers at the school made negative assumptions about his academic abilities as a result of stereotypes about African American males. It is interesting to note that Marcus' educational records indicate that he was experiencing difficulties with reading throughout elementary school and had had several reading assessments. It is possible that the assessments conducted did not accurately reflect Marcus' reading skills. However, it is also possible that Teresa either misinterpreted feedback about Marcus, or that she was provided with misinformation indicating that he was performing better than he actually was.

In addition to protecting their children from inappropriate behavior on behalf of the adults working in the schools, parents like Teresa reported that they also had to confront assumptions about what their children were able to achieve. Parents described struggling with teachers to force them to push their children to excel, or to realize that their children were not unable to read. These parents did not have the luxury to decide whether or not they wanted to be involved in their children's schooling experiences. The negative situations that repeatedly arose in their children's schools dictated that they must be engaged with schools to insure that they were not being mistreated in any way.

Assumptions of competence. Stacy, the bi-racial (Polish and Japanese) parent interviewed described a situation in which her son was assumed to be more competent academically than he actually was. It is interesting to note that in the context of her struggle to have her son receive a special education eligibility of learning disability, positive actions were taken by teachers to help improve her son's educational experiences. This is in contrast to the experiences reported above. Before providing the details of her son's initial denial for supplemental services, Stacy makes a comment about how fed up she was with the school system at the time of his first informal testing:

> Interviewer: Um, okay so [the early childhood program] sort of did a little bit of testing with him?
>
> Stacy: Sort of, but not real formal testing and any of this test did.... Oh, geez... bringing back all this crap (sigh). He tested out... I think the first time they tested him at Lincoln, which I thought this is not...(pause)
>
> Interviewer: Yeah, and you sort of know...[referring to her personal educational background in social work]

Stacy: This was not... you know... I was relatively naïve about stuff like how much of this is politics and how much of this is... I sound like a conspiracy theorist, but I think... I don't think I am... Um... They're told they can only approve so many kids who are special ed services and blah blah blah ... Um, so the first time he didn't qualify for any services. Well... the kid, he... I mean he... basically had a really hard time learning to read, to write, everything was reversals, numbers written backwards, letters flip-flopped. He couldn't learn anything that required any sequencing, um... the days of the week. I don't know... I think he can... he's twelve, I think he can say the days of the week now, but you'd never know that he... little things like that that are already so glitches. So, um... I had to start being one of those advocate parents and then when he was retested... couldn't tell you when that was... he qualified for services based on math only. But again, this is a kid who seemed like he could barely read. So, we took him a few years ago to a reading group in [local business center], where they did more thorough type of testing... and um... So, we had that support even though they didn't use diagnostic labels and things there. A lot more support for him qualifying, not only in math but in reading. And, I hope that I don't get anybody in trouble by saying this, but one thing I was really grateful for was the excellent special ed people at Lincoln because even though for a while he only qualified... Ah, I think they're all gone anyway... based on math, they still helped him in reading and he got one-on-one time, he got very small group time. Um... and uh, the first time they tested him for speech, they did some stupid little two-minute screening, even though a concern was expressed, and um, a social worker there then kinda advocated last year for a thorough speech and language test and there's also a type of word finding deficit and got him... (Pauses) Um, the speech person who assessed him,

> if you look at him, just based on standardized tests, he looked too… he, he wouldn't qualify. But she added a very well-written description of her observation on him, and um, he qualified for services to help him with that word finding (Interview, 5/23/03).

Contrary to some of the previous experiences described by African American families, Stacy's son was *not* receiving additional services she felt he needed in order to achieve in school. Willina and Teresa reported that their children were being forced to receive services that they did not actually need. These findings suggest that different assumptions were made about these students, which heavily influenced initial placement decisions. Stacy's son was assumed to be competent until his mother insisted that he was not, while Willina and Teresa's sons were assumed to be incompetent until their mothers insisted that they were not. Stacy's situation differed from previous accounts in an additional way. The professionals involved with Stacy's son were very helpful in advocating for her wishes despite the fact that her son's performance in school seemed to contradict her conceptualization of his ability to learn. Perhaps this enlightened understanding of her son on behalf of the educators was encouraged by the fact that Stacy pursued an assessment by someone not affiliated directly with the school. Nevertheless, Stacy reports that educators at her son's school went out of their way, and beyond their official duties to provide her son with additional services. In fact, Stacy reports that the rules were bent so that her son was able to receive an optimal level of educational support.

Although not about remedial special education services, Ann's daughter, Leigh, was subjected to assumptions on behalf of the school staff. Like Stacy's son, Leigh was assumed to be more competent than both she and her mother thought that she was. Specifically, Leigh's teachers encouraged her to take honors courses in the middle school based on her solid academic performance in elementary school. In the following excerpt, Ann reports that she had not known

that Leigh was placed in honor classes. Her struggle with the school was to lighten her daughter's workload:

> And we discovered most of the year, she was put in' all types of honor classes. And, she... when she first started goin' there cause she was doin' eighth and ninth grade work, and coming home with four hours of homework every night. I mean, that's ridiculous.... For a sixth grader to have four hours of homework, you know. After about month, I'm like, 'No way! We need to drop a few things, and put her in...' Cause I mean, she was really stressed out. And, it was really tough on her. So, for about the last... the last two months she's been doing a lot better. We've been having meetings with [the school guidance counselor] and then, you know, they have my cell phone number... they call me whenever. You know, and we have a real good relationship that way, you know (Interview, 6/5/03).

Although this instance is similar to the one Stacy experienced, Ann also has additional struggles with the school that are more reminiscent of those experienced by the African American families. After describing a resolution to the difficulties Leigh had in the honors classes, Ann describes a more ongoing problem in the way Leigh is treated by her teachers with respect to discipline issues:

> But it... it... it's one sided you know, I believe it's one sided, because if the teacher only sees Leigh pushing a girl when the other girl leads as witness saying 'The other girl did this, this, this, this.' And, Leigh still be the only one gettin' in trouble, there's something wrong there. And, that happened three times, yeah... in the last six months. Yeah... (pause)... And uh, you know, I told [school guidance counselor], 'She's gonna defend herself, you know. It's the big truth, of saying, 'Well, just deal with it Leigh, you know,

> and don't be trivial or whatever, you know…' They're not there for my child. You know, and that's how I feel (Interview, 6/5/03).

Ann provides very different accounts of the teachers in Leigh's schools. Some of them she has a good "working relationship" with, and others she feels are "not there for her child." Although the difficulties are something that must be dealt with on a regular basis, Ann's description of Leigh's recent educational experiences do not have the same negative weight of the African American families, but they do require Ann's continued involvement with the school in a similar way.

Proactive parental engagement. Some parents become directly involved with the school when their children were treated unfairly, or when they disagreed with teachers. However, others reported becoming informally engaged with the school as a way to safeguard their children from mistreatment. The type of engagement described below suggests that this parent is proactively involved in her child's school to avoid becoming reactively involved after a problem has occurred. Faith spoke of "walking the halls" in her children's school in order to gain a better understanding of her children's education:

> I make it my business to go to the teachers and she [her daughter] was, 'Mom, why are you goin' to the school?' Well, I'm goin' there, and she'll never know I'm comin' … I just pop up. And you know, I might go to the class here, I might go to the class where her teacher might be in, ya know… but I just come, just sneak surprises and then…(Interviewer: Don't let them know you're there?) Right! Right! The teachers don't even know that I'm comin.' I don't let nobody know that I'm comin.' I go in the office and sign my name, get me a visitor's pass and I go to walkin.' And, I look at different classes. I don't just look at her class. I just go by class, you know… and see, you know,

> the difference in how they're bein' taught and everythin.' So I make my... even I go to my sister's... I go to all the schools, I walk all the halls to find out what's goin' on with different things (Interview, 6/11/03).

All of the parents discussed to this point have mentioned their engagement with their children's schools as a fact of life. There is no option to participate or not participate when their child might not be treated fairly, or might not be provided with the appropriate educational program. Also, the ways in which parents discussed their rather complex engagement with the schools were not consistent with traditional 'parent involvement' activities typical of the white, middle class. These discussions do not necessarily imply that parents are not involved in traditional ways because some of them clearly are involved in activities such as the PTA, and serving as a Girl Scout troop leader. However, it does suggest that the parents themselves may have a very different view of parental involvement than the predominantly white, middle class teachers of their children. Only one parent in the study provided a description of herself as the prototypical 'involved' parent. Dianne is a member of the PTA, a Girl Scout troop leader, attends school-related meetings, and serves on committees in her children's schools. In the following excerpt, Dianne takes pride in her active involvement in her children's education:

> You know, and I was a parent who attended the forums on should schools of choice happen?.....I attended the forums on, I mean I've watched the middle school thing happen-that choice thing. I mean, if something's gonna happen in my kids' schools, I like to know about it. And, so, I'm not, I'm kinda like, as a parent I'm like Vince Lombardi, I like like to cheer and get in the kids' face and I'm not just like sitting quietly on the sideline I guess (laughing) (Interview, 6/17/03).

Indirect parental engagement. The types of engagement described to this point all involve some type of direct interaction with teachers or the school. Before delving deeper into the ways in which parents and schools communicate, it is important to note that parents are also engaged with their children's schools indirectly via the children's academic work (e.g., requiring children to complete their homework, and helping children with their schoolwork). Recall an earlier conversation between Willina and her own mother in which Willina insists that the children finish their homework before they are allowed to play. Willina explains that her children feel good about themselves after completing their work, but that they might not choose to finish their work before they play without assistance from adults. Although these excerpts are reported here to illustrate Willina's engagement with her children's education, they also demonstrate her commitment to her children's education. She wants to ensure they gain a sufficient amount of knowledge in school to help them later in life:

> I help them with their homework whenever they do they homework, and get 'em right. They happy kids, very happy, what they done did their homework. They done turned it in and know what they doing. And, when I be working these odd hours …I told Mom, 'Make sure they do their homework because if they don't, you know, the grades are gonna be missing.' Travien will have paper in his locker that he had done, and some that he haven't done and haven't turned in. And Tameka pretty much the same way, 'I guess I forgot.' Mama said, 'They old enough to know what to do, do they homework and keep all this stuff together.' I say, 'Yes, Mom, but they kids. And if I was a kid, and I could get away with it, I would.' So, they are very good kids, but they like to play too much, and playing is not gonna get em anywhere. I said, ' Travien like to play basketball. Tameka like to play basketball.' I said, 'Well, if she get on the team, you have to do your

> work. If you don't make the grade, you won't be on the team.' So, it's all about that mind power, and if she ain't got that brain knowledge, you know, it's not gonna help you. And, you know, I'm all for school, study, gettin your work done, turnin your work in and so forth (Interview, 5/16/03).

The following excerpt from Hazel's interview illustrates at least two themes previously discussed including "assumptions of incompetence," and "reacting to people." It is placed here to demonstrate an instance of indirect parental engagement via helping a child with homework. When Hazel's son made the transition from elementary school to middle school, he encountered a teacher who did not provide Hazel with what she felt was an accurate description of her son's reading abilities. Her perceptions of her son's abilities were derived from reports provided to her by his elementary school teachers, who she felt were excellent teachers. The following transcript illustrates that Hazel, like Willina, wants to ensure that homework is taken seriously and done well. She and her husband help her son complete a homework assignment. The teacher does not accept the assignment and embarrasses her son in front of his classmates. Therefore, Hazel is forced to take action. She will not tolerate a teacher treating her son in a negative manner that does not acknowledge the effort he has expended, and that does not help him learn from his mistakes. When she recounts this educational experience, she becomes visibly upset, speaks loudly, and at one point, has to take a drink of water to calm herself down:

> Well… somethin' was wrong. I dunno what it was. But, at time for Keith to graduate, he was at a 6.3… that's sixth year, third month… Um, reading score… and when he got to Foote, they said that he was at 3.0. That's third grade, zero month. Now… And I caught up about that. You know, they wanted him to have…(Interviewer: Who did he have? Ms. Johnson?) MmmHmm. (Interviewer: Okay). And uh, Ms. Johnson is a good teacher. And,

> I was back over there, talkin' to her [Ms. Johnson], she said, 'I don't know what they talkin' about,'... She said, 'Because that's not right.' And, she showed it to me on the computer where they had the stuff that they had, had taken... and, she showed me how the test was done, and you know, and the particular stuff... and then, she's like 'I don't know how they arrived at that. So, you need to go back and talk to them.' This is Miss Hamilton over there at Foote. I was told that she was no longer there because I pulled Keith out of her class because she was just so rude. She was really rude.

Hazel's report of her son's performance in elementary school is generally consistent with the educational records provided by the school district. At the end of his 4th grade year, the last year reading levels were available, his reading assessment indicated that he was reading at the expected grade level. In the next segment, Hazel explains her family's involvement in helping Keith write a paper.

> And he did a paper... and we didn't know, um... he... he brought the paper home. And he was tryin' to explain to me and his dad and my daughter, well, how the paper's supposed to been done. So we was up til like two, three o'clock in the mornin' on the computer... searchin', trying to help him get this report in and make sure it was right... I mean... concerned with the neatness of it. Three pages, he wrote. Now, until 2:30, 2:45 in the mornin', this kid's up, he got to be in school at 9:00 o'clock. (Interviewer: Right). We're trying to make sure that he gets it all right.

The level of investment Hazel conveys is noteworthy. Several members of Keith's family attempt to help him with a particularly time-consuming assignment. As she continues below, she describes a situation in which one teacher essentially humiliates her son in front of his peers. It is not surprising that as a parent, she is compelled to react on his behalf:

> He takes it [the assignment] to school, she takes a red pen... she takes it out... (brief interruption for phone call)... She just X-ed it out, all three pages! And told him that ... He uh... I don't even know if I'm sayin it right... he plagiarized himself. And he could go to jail for that. Then, she calls, and I was gone, she calls here, she talks to my husband. And she tells my husband that, she can't believe that uh, Keith would be so dumb as not to... take the instructions down... a lot of... Anyway, when I walked in the door, he [her husband] was like... 'You need to go up to Foote...' And then... the car keys and I went there and I told her, 'This is something that I will not tolerate, not me! You do not talk to my son, you know like he's... dirt. This paper... we took our own first step and got a rough draft, and then we did the right paper-which we thought was right. And, she says, 'Well, it's not right and it's not acceptable in my class and I don't appreciate you feedin' me um... um... presentin me with such garbage!' I did all I could from hittin' that lady... I was SO mad with her. I was so upset with her. And she said to me, 'Even you and your husband should have commonsense.' And, that was it. That wa... that's... that was the one that nipped it in the bud. So, I got Keith out of her class, and because I took him out of her class, he had been doin' so well, she gave him an F. And, I had to stick to that semester, but that was wrong. That was wrong, and they didn't do anything about it. I had set out to go to the other... He was relieved to be out of her class. And he started doin' a whole lot better in his classes (Interview, 6/2/03).

Hazel felt so strongly about the way her son was treated that she made the decision to have him moved to another teacher's classroom at the end of the term. He had been doing very well in school until he encountered this particular teacher, and Hazel's actions demonstrate her commitment to her son's continued academic success. Hazel's engagement with this particular

teacher might be considered as a reaction to her son's mistreatment. However, her decision to place him in a different class is somewhat proactive in that she is attempting to prevent future negative experiences for him.

Educational Decisions

Parents like Hazel have continuously made decisions regarding their children's education prior to the implementation to a school choice policy. In a sense, parental engagement may be considered as a decision in and of itself. It is a decision to engage with a school or staff member on behalf of a child. It is not surprising then that many of the educational decisions parents discussed were rooted in the perceived mistreatment of their children. Just as they became involved when their children were negatively impacted by practices, policies, people, and assumptions, they often made decisions in reaction to similar experiences. Some parents also discussed proactive decisions to enhance their children's educational experiences independent of any mistreatment of their children. However, these decisions were reported less frequently.

Several African American parents made natural decisions that arose from the reactive parental engagement described above. For instance, Teresa decided to have her son Marcus placed in a different reading group in middle school, and made a strong effort to have a disciplinary incident expunged from his school record. Marie decided to take actions to hold a child's school accountable to her Individualized Education Plan in order to meet a child's special needs. Hazel decided to transfer her son Keith to a different teacher's classroom after he was treated negatively by his original teacher. Faith mentioned making a similar educational decision on behalf of her niece following what her family perceived as negative treatment by the teacher. In fact, throughout her niece's education, Faith has insisted that she be transferred from particular teachers' classrooms on three occasions.

Formal decisions. It is interesting to note that the decisions described to this point were not formalized decisions in the sense that parents were presented with several options, and then were asked to select one of them for their children. The decisions were spontaneous, and parents felt that they had no other choice but to respond. Other parents described decisions about more formal aspects of their children's education, such as the types of classes in which they participate and the types of special services they receive. As described previously, Stacy is a parent who advocated for her son to receive special education services for a learning disability. Crystal also made a decision to have her children placed in special education and receive special services although at the time of the study she did not believe her children were benefiting from such services. Dianne and Ann both made decisions regarding their children's placement in accelerated classes or programs. Dianne made a decision to allow one of her daughter's to participate in the gifted program at her elementary school. Ann was faced with a similar decision when she learned that her daughter Leigh was participating in honors level courses in middle school. With Leigh's input, she decided to have her placed in regular education courses so that she could experience educational success. The participating parents who reported making formal decisions about educational placements and services were more likely to be white than African American. This is a provocative finding and if it were found to be more generally the case, suggests that white families may have been more likely to be included by school staff members as important players in educational decision making for their children. This hypothesis would not be inconsistent with complaints made by the African American community, particularly those families who were involved with the consent decree described previously.

Proactive decisions. Proactive decisions aimed at enhancing the quality of educational experiences were discussed less frequently than those aimed at preventing perceived further

mistreatment. These goals may not necessarily be mutually exclusive. However, at least one parent described proactive decisions to help provide her children with positive educational experiences independent of any mistreatment or perceived wrongdoing on behalf of the school. Marie reported that she has made an active decision to enroll her children in extracurricular activities with the explicit intention of increasing the likelihood of academic success. She believes that if children have positive extracurricular activities, they will have more positive attitudes toward school. They will also put forth more effort in their academic work as doing well in school is a requirement for participating in extracurricular activities. When interpreted in the context of the reactive parental engagement described above, proactive engagement of this nature may actually function as a protective buffer.

To summarize, parents in this study were engaged in their children's education. However, different parents were engaged in different ways depending on the experiences of their children. If parents felt children were treated unjustly, parents tended to react to the situation as they felt appropriate. Parents reacted to practices and policies they felt were unfair, to people who were mistreating or mis-educating their children, to assumptions of incompetence as well as to assumptions of competence. Parents were also proactively and indirectly engaged with their children's education. In addition to engaging in their children's education, most parents also made education-related decisions. Although the sample size is not large enough to make comparison statements based on groups, the few white parents in this study were more likely to engage in formal decision making for their children that included issues about special education placements and services.

Academic Performance

In addition to understanding the ways in which parents are engaged with and make

decisions about their children's education, it is important to understand how the children of the parents in this study are actually doing in school. Further, it is necessary to understand how parents make sense of this performance in order to understand how they may or may not utilize such information to make a school choice decision.

The academic and behavioral performance of the children whose parents participated in this study is summarized in chapter two, as well as in Appendix C. In general, the children with parents participating in this study were similar to the larger pool of students from which they were selected with respect to their academic performance. As reported in chapter three, this group was drawn from a group of 130 students living in the Woodson Elementary School neighborhood who attended a variety of elementary schools in the district. As a group, African American students had lower standardized test scores and grades than white, bi-racial, and Latino students. Although this pattern was evident throughout elementary school, the achievement gap was widest in the 4th and 5th grades.

Given the performance of these particular children, and of African American students in the larger group, it is important to understand how parents make sense of these outcomes. If parents locate the deficits within the children or their families, there would be little incentive to change schools when provided with increased school choice. If parents locate the problem within the school, there may be more incentive to change schools, although proximity to home may factor into the decision. However, for parents who stressed the interpersonal aspects of their own education, value the positive relationships they had with their own teachers, and the positive relationships they have with their children's teachers, relationships may have the capacity to outweigh the negative outcomes associated with attending a particular school even if a parent does locate deficiencies within the school.

Making sense of poor performance. The ways in which parents accounted for poor school performance by children was complex. Some parents differentiated themselves from parents of children who did not care whether or not their children were doing well in school. Although this group of parents did acknowledge that the school played an important role in a particular child's education, they felt that there was only so much a school or teachers could do if a child did not want to learn and their parents did not have a solid understanding of what their child was being taught in school.

Blaming the families. Hazel is a parent who feels passionately about this issue. She makes her point in reference to a meeting held at Woodson School in which the principal was transferred to a different position in a different school due to her inability as an administrator to positively impact the performance of students attending Woodson. In the following excerpt, Hazel reports that parents and the children, not the principal, should be held accountable for children's progress, or lack thereof, in school:

> You know, we are, the kind of parents to make sure that our kids are being proper. And that they do their part, to make sure they do the right thing. And so my whole thing was, at the meeting, was that... I don't think it was [the principal's] fault. I think it was the teachers and the students and the parents. Because I don't care how much... how many times your mom sent you to school, if you don't wanna learn... you ain't gonna get it. It ain't my fault, it ain't your tea... teacher's fault. It's not your momma, it's your fault. You've got to be willin' to learn yourself. But she had a lot of parents that just, believe it or not, school is a scapegoat to them. And when I said that I mean, that's the way of gettin' a break. Yeah, ya know, gettin' a break. [Speaking as parents] 'Thank God, ya'll gotta go to school tomorrow!' You know. You don't even know what your kids... what

> they're workin' on in class... they don't know what page they on, and then they... but they want them in school (Interview, 6/2/03).

Interestingly, Hazel is a parent who described many struggles with the schools her children attend to ensure that they are being treated appropriately. She does not discuss whether or not she feels other parents are forced to protect their own children as vigilantly as she must protect hers. Nor does she recognize a potential link between poor performance and being treated unfairly for children from other families, although she reports that such treatment negatively impacted her own son's performance. Perhaps Hazel feels it is the role of parents who care about their children's education to ensure fair treatment and subsequent success in school.

"*Discipline problems.*" In addition to expressing broad ideas about who is at fault when children do not do well, the 'parents don't care' about education message was present throughout many of the interviews with respect to African American families in particular. White parents were most likely to discuss this theme with respect to discipline problems of African American students. In the following excerpt, Dianne discusses the behavior problems that exist in her daughter's middle school, and speculates that the behavior problems of African American students are pervasive throughout the district because their parents do not care about their children's education:

> And I'm sure those behavior problems aren't only unique to Foote, they're probably happening at Adams and Kennedy as well. But, you know, there's...I just feel a lot of....I know there's kids in her class that are crack babies, or that had alcohol or drugs. And, you can't blame the schools and the teachers for having to discipline the kids when the kids don't know, they've never been taught, they're parents don't care. Their parents are....people with problems, and you know, probably in large part because of the race

> issue, and it would not be easy to be a Black person in America, no doubt about it. But, um, you gotta raise above, I guess. But, I don't know, but it seems to me, like everybody was … that so many people their particularly… are quick to pass the buck to say that's happening because you don't like me because I'm Black. This is happening because I'm poor. No. It's because your kid is ill-behaved, because you don't do this. And that, in a school setting, there's rules of conduct that everybody has to follow and those kids don't know it (Interview, 6/17/03).

Dianne holds particularly negative views about African American parents. She believes that African American parents do not care about their children's education. Furthermore, they make attempts to use their race or their poverty as a way to escape responsibility for their children's poor behavior.

Stacy shares Dianne's general understanding of African American families and the problematic behavior of their children. Stacy feels that children who are disruptive in terms of their behavior are especially problematic for schools because they interfere with the learning of students who care about school. She begins with a statement about how her son felt about elementary school, and continues with her own observations of the children. The final segment of this excerpt describes how the school has chosen to address the issue Stacy is raising:

> He had fun. And, um…it's pretty rowdy over there the times I've been over there. But, um… I think they're doing okay with what they have. And, um, seem to be making the best of it like what second quarter… They sent home this letter, they hadda basically, they wrote it a nice direct behavioral letter, but they had to segregate out the kids who wouldn't behave, so that the kids who were behaving and wanting to learn could learn. (Interviewer: How did they do that?) I… I don't really know… They um…(Interviewer:

Separate classes, maybe?) Bad kids in (laughed)... in a bad kid class? And, for the kids who would behave and pay attention and do what they are supposed to, in different sections (Interview, 5/23/03).

Later in the interview Stacy is reluctant to express her views that most of the students responsible for problematic classroom disruptions are African American. She does not share this information without being directly asked:

Interviewer: So uh, his... are most of the "bad kids" African-American kids? Like, is his class still pretty diverse?

Stacy: Yeah, when I've been in, I think they are. I think there are more African American kids than there are Caucasian kids. And, um... they tap that whole... they say it's not exclusionary type of gifted thing, but it is because even though it is only certain classes, you know... well, I have problems with that whole thing, too. But, that's a whole other ... But, anyway, just the segregation that comes with that, um... I can... maybe I'm... I'm not realistic though that because the lack of funding and support whatever, how can they mix kids, teach kids in different ways so that they're all um... learning and encouraged but I think it's kinda an unfortunate shortcut and it's...

Interviewer: The gifted class, you mean...

Stacy: Yeah, and um... (long pause) So, I think that... um... (longer pause) I wi... I know that there... I know that my son is soft and kinda timid as he is, he has friends um... He doesn't just hang around with white kids. So, I know that um, there are well-behaved kids who he interacts with who happen to be African-American. But, he would probably, I would guess that he would say probably a lot of the bad ones are, I'm just being you know... candid (Interview, 5/23/03).

Willina, an African American woman, believes that some African American families are not helping their children enough in school, but not necessarily because they do not care about education:

> And then the Black race is a lot of failed family homes and so and the parents have to work so what can you say. They be too tired to help the kids out or they work in the evening or whatever and the kids have awhile till Mom get home. So there's a lot that would like to help their kids that can't and some that can that do. It's a rough life (5/16/03).

Blaming the tests. Faith, an African American mother, does not hold parents directly accountable for their children's poor performance. In a conversation about low standardized tests scores at Woodson, Faith expresses her understanding of the low performance of students at Woodson:

> Why were these poor test scores? It's those kids and not the teachers. It's the kids, right? I mean the teachers only can teach so much. And they givin' tests out, you goin' by the booklet. So it's not the teachers, maybe it's the people who make the tests (Interview, 6/11/03).

Faith believes that teachers should not be held responsible for low test scores because teachers are only capable to teach so much. If students do not learn what is presented to them, then there must be a deficiency on behalf of the students. She begins to question her own assumptions about the teachers' lack of responsibility during the interview, perhaps partially in response to my silence following her comments about the teachers and the students. The alternative most readily available for her to articulate is that there might be a problem with the tests.

Summary

To summarize, the children of parents in this study are generally not doing well academically. Further, the African American children tend to have lower test scores and grades than the white children in this study. As described in chapter two, the local school district is under scrutiny for discriminatory educational practices toward African American students, which may help explain the differential achievement attained by these students. Although the actual performance of students is important to understand how school choice decisions may facilitate increased academic achievement, it is also important to understand *if* and *how* parents perceive differences in achievement. When parents in this study were aware of poor academic performance, they tended to make sense of it by blaming families of the children, attributing the lack of academic progress to an overwhelming number of discipline problems which interfere with classroom learning, and blaming standardized tests for not measuring achievement appropriately.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Overview

In this chapter, parents' understanding of the local context is explored. The local context is broadly defined and includes any information that may be relevant to whether or not a parent made a school-choice decision. Examples of information that parents were able to articulate include knowledge of the Schools of Choice program in Korbel, their experiences with the program, and family and friends' experiences with the program. For parents who had knowledge of the program, factors they identified as explicitly impacting their decisions are presented and include providing their children with a supportive school environment, the diversity of the student body, and to a lesser extent, consistency in schools and loyalty to staff members.

Knowledge of Program

Few parents interviewed had a solid understanding of the schools of choice program. Even fewer knew that the schools of choice plan was implemented as a result of the consent decree between the local school district and a group of African American plaintiffs to remedy the district's history of bussing only African American students to integrate the schools. Many factors contributed to whether or not parents decided to utilize the Schools of Choice program to enroll their children outside of their attendance-zone school, which will be discussed in more detail below. However, knowledge about the program's existence is necessary, but not sufficient for participation in the program. As will be illustrated below, some parents did not have accurate information about the program. Others had no knowledge of the program. Not surprisingly, many parents conveyed their understanding of the program when discussing their school choice decisions. Very few parents provided explanations of the program that were separate from their

own experiences with it. In the following excerpts, both parents' theoretical knowledge of the Schools of Choice program, as well as their school-choice decisions are presented.

Intimate working knowledge. The parents who had the most sophisticated understanding of the schools of choice program were those parents who had direct and frequent contact with the schools from a staff perspective. Teresa is a teacher in the local school system, Marie has worked as a substitute teacher, and Dianne has worked in an after school program. Of the three parents with a sophisticated understanding of the program, only Dianne has a positive view of the program and states that it has benefited her children. Teresa describes some of the problems with the schools of choice program, especially for African American families. Later in her interview she explains her own experience with the schools of choice program and how she had to create unique circumstances in order for her children to attend the same elementary school:

> Teresa: And like I said, went through that ordeal about the school of choice thing and it made me say, there is no real choice for African American parents. You don't really have the full choice of eleven schools...or however many elementary schools we have...we don't really have that full choice. And at one point when...what's her name...[interim superintendent]...came here to talk to us as a staff and this was just kind of a little overlap between my personal life experience and my professional life...she came to talk to us about the fact that Woodson was under enrolled and they were gonna have to make some changes. It's the reason I was reassigned, and I told 'em...because I only had eleven students in this class. And, then the next class had twelve or something...And, the next class had thirteen. So, they took my eleven students and split 'em up between other classes. Because it didn't make sense for me to teach the whole year with just eleven students. And, then I got reassigned as an enrichment specialist and Title One math

teacher. But, it's because we don't have enough students to fill up the seats here. And, the other schools are bursting at the seams. You know I had heard...and I don't know this first hand...that like last year they had kids almost sittin' in the hallway because they didn't have enough room. They had 25-30 kids in a class. And ...

Interviewer: Where was that at?

Teresa: Yeah...at Branford [a school located in a predominantly white, middle to upper class neighborhood in the southern section of Korbel]. And, we had over here ten and eleven kids in a class. But, all being paid the same money and nice facility...nothing wrong with it. On the bus route, on the main trek...no reason why kids can't come here. I live in [name of neighborhood] and kids are bused from my neighborhood all the way out to Branford. They have to take the bus at 7:00 in the morning to get to school...so...kids out there could do the same thing.

This is an important point, as it was relatively easy to travel in Korbel at the time of this study. Rarely did it take more than 20 minutes to travel from one side of town to the other. Teresa continues to illustrate one of the ways in which the school system has failed to implement the novel school choice program similarly for children of different backgrounds, living in different neighborhoods despite claims that it does.

Teresa: If you're gonna bus kids, you can bus any kids anywhere. And, so there would be no excuse for making exceptions out there, raising the number, raising the number, raising the number...and then over here saying we're underenrolled...we're underenrolled. And, I said, you know, when [interim superintendent] came...I asked the question, I said, 'Well, you know, like if I as an African American parent went to the Family Information Center and said, 'I'm moving to Korbel new, and have three school

age children that will be in elementary school,' what they would tell me is, 'Here are all the schools that we have in town. You cannot choose Springfield, Lincoln, or Woodson, because they're already at the limit for African American students. You have to choose over here...East Rock, Pine Plains, Robeson, Woodbury, Branford...those are your choices.' Why then when a white family comes to town and says, 'We have three children' why wouldn't you say, 'Well here's the schools that we offer. And Pine Plains is overenrolled, Kingston, Branford...you can't choose those, but you can choose Hughes, Lincoln, Springfield or Woodson.' Why wouldn't you do it like that?" And she said, 'Well, because um the consent decree has to do with African Americans...it's just not like that.' Okay, well then that's not schools of choice for me...because they have a choice. They can choose any school in the district. I don't have that choice (Interview, 5/19/03).

Teresa's understanding of the Schools of Choice program is rooted in both her knowledge of Korbel's history with respect to educating African American children, as well as her own experiences as a parent with children who have increased educational options as a result of Schools of Choice. Teresa provided a detailed account of why the increased options for parents are only theoretical in nature. In the following excerpt, Teresa describes the creative strategies she had to employ so that her children could attend the school in which she was teaching, which would also be their attendance-zone school.

Teresa: And, so then I ended up coming to work at Woodson. And so that's where the school of choice thing started to really come into focus for me because I was comin' here to work and I wanted all of my children to come here. At the time they were all at Lincoln. Now I think she was a little irritated at the fact that I wanted to move my

children, and I think other people in the district were, too. They were sort of like, 'Why do you need to have your children at your school? You need to be separate from...like they need to do what they're doin' and you need to devote your time to the children that you're gonna serve at Woodson. You don't need to try to provide morning or after school care for your children'...and all that. And, I was trying to make clear to them that, I'm not tryin' to bring my children to Woodson for child care purposes...like I can keep 'em in the morning and I can keep 'em right after school. I know that won't be possible, but it would be...it would work better for my family logistically if we were all on the same time, on the same calendar... You know even now when I have my children goin' to middle school, it's kind of odd that we were on the year round calendar and they were not, but it definitely would not have worked well for me to be on the year round calendar and to have four kids on the traditional calendar. It just wouldn't have worked well. So I wanted them to move here and so then when I went over to Family Information Center the message I received was kind of like, 'Well, Woodson is already out of compliance. They have too many African American kids. So you're children are not gonna get in Woodson. You might want to put them in Branford. They're on a year round calendar...or Pine Plains.' And, I said, "Well, no...I don't really want my kids at either one of those schools. If I don't get 'em in Woodson I would like to leave 'em at Lincoln.'

Interviewer: Why didn't you want them at Pine Plains or Branford?

In this excerpt of the interview, I was curious as to why Teresa did not want her children to attend the other two schools in the district that also operated on the year-round academic calendar. She notes the inconvenience of having her children attend a school located far away

from her home. The distance and time it takes to travel makes it more difficult for parents to attend important events at the school. Teresa continues to explain how even her position as a teacher, and the personal connections she has with different administrators, does not afford her any exceptionality with respect to the program. Finally, after attempting to have special permission for her children to attend the school at which she teaches, she learns of a creative possibility from the school principal. She is recounting a conversation with the principal in the following excerpt:

> Teresa: 'If they qualify for gifted then it would just be a done deal. They would be in and the other child would probably get in because of sibling preference.' So, [two of her daughters] tested for gifted which at that time was third and fourth gifted. They scored very, very high...like a 100% in math, 97% in language arts, and then the reverse...100% in language arts, and 98% in math. (Interviewer: Was that a standardized test or...?) Yeah. They go over to the [administration building] and they test with Ann Johnson whose there with the gifted... And it just...yeah...like the test that they take, and it's probably like an SAT or you know...that type test. And, they take it and then they scored very, very high. Like I said, in language and math. And so they were just a shoe-in for the gifted. So, then they got to come [Woodson] in gifted and that meant that [her son, and two daughters in gifted] were all here, so they just let Marcus get in, too. But, I think the first two weeks of school he went out to Pine Plains (Interview, 5/19/03).

Teresa's interview provides a wealth of information about how the Schools of Choice program operates at a practical level for African American families. As Teresa makes clear, even her connections with the principal of the school in which she works and with an administrator of the school district are not able to provide her with any additional options. Any authority Teresa

perceives administrators might have had is stifled by a fear of acting out of "compliance" with the consent decree and Schools of Choice program on behalf of an African American family. In Teresa's opinion, this is very different from the ways in which white families are treated as participants in the Schools of Choice program. More specifically, she reported class size and the over enrollment of students in schools located in the southern section of Korbel and the under enrollment of students in schools located in the northern section of Korbel. Teresa concluded that, by default, families living in the south were not mandated to bus their children to schools in the north, while the reverse was true. If Teresa's theory was in practice true, African American students would be more negatively impacted than white families as African Americans were more likely to live in the north, while white families were more likely to live in the south.

Because Teresa was not able to enroll all of her children in the school of her choice, she devised a creative plan in collaboration with the school principal that would allow her children to attend Woodson. Teresa was fortunate enough to achieve her goal; however; it is unlikely that someone without such intimate working knowledge of the elementary schools would have been able to engage in the same actions. Further, the time and energy she expended to implement her plan was excessive. Teresa's children were negatively impacted as a result of her engagement with the school choice program. They began the academic year at a different school while their placements were determined.

Marie shared Teresa's understanding of the school choice program. She was also able to articulate the apparent advantages for white parents and disadvantages for African American parents, and for parents with large families who want their children to attend the same school. She explained the ways in which she navigated the Schools of Choice program in the following excerpt, which begins after a brief interruption:

Interviewer: Oh, and you were also talking about how you went to visit Woodson when you were looking before you decided on Branford.

Marie: Right, I went to visit. I went to visit Woodson. I also applied for Woodson

Interviewer: Oh.

Marie: But … um, they only would allow two of my children to go.

Interviewer: I thought they were supposed to give preference to siblings?

Marie: No, no. I have five at Branford right now and one in Pine Plains. It has been hell.

Interviewer: You can't get them all at the same school?

Marie: No. And, I fought all summer. I wrote letters to … the board, I called the administrators. I did everything I possibly can. I went to social workers. I did everything possible to get the one child even with his, his circumstances of being out of town and not knowing anyone and yes it is taking him….he became a behavioral problem in school. We ended up having to pay more money to put him in a boost program so he would have socialization skills. It was terrible, whenever their school had a program so did Branford. But, I have more at Branford so I had to support them, those are my children … So, parties [at the skating rink] and stuff that their schools would do would also be held the same time a play or something was held over there.

Interviewer: Mmmm.

Marie: And, it was horrible, the worst thing they did was to split those children up, no matter what. And, I'm not the only parent, I've had other parents, I had one parent take their children out of school, actually move them out of town for a week just to come back to switch the children to so they could get all together. That's a horrible thing for you to have to do. So, her children spent about 3 weeks out of school just so they could be

placed together, and, and while her one son was in one school terrorizing the kindergarten because … he didn't, he didn't know anybody or knew anything he had to be put on Adderol. He was fighting and cussing teachers out, teachers were upset with him, now the two children are together and there has not even been one call.

Marie continues to describe some of the characteristics of Woodson about which she felt very positively:

Marie: And, it's the most gorgeous school. Actually, on a realistic basis it's prettier then Branford. Even though both schools are together because they put the blue design, and the mural, it's gorgeous. I liked the home setting of the tables in the cafeteria with the little … vase and the flowers. I, I mean, everything about the school is overwhelming. It's, it's a lot of love. It's a lot of care. I also went to the Christmas program. I liked the fact that on picture day that those children were are able to show their own identity by wearing their own clothes…some things that I really, really support about Woodson that … they didn't do … And, another thing is we have a lot of Afro Americans kids that are very gifted and talented. Well, their talents never get seen if they're at a all white school because those are the children who get picked.

Marie begins to articulate a rationale for sending children to an early educational environment in which they are encouraged to express themselves and who they are in a loving and caring environment staffed with people who believe in their abilities. This is essentially the explanation for her selecting Woodson as the first choice for her children when the program was implemented. She made a very interesting school choice decision that is rarely considered as an option for parents of low socioeconomic status in the literature and in practice. When Marie did not receive her first choice of schools, she decided to continue her children's education in a

private school. She participated in the school choice program in the following year, but altered her selection strategy to maximize the likelihood that her children would be able to attend her first choice school. This is an interesting way to exert control over a process in which control is, in theory, not ultimately left in the hands of any individual person.

> Marie: ...I, I applied at Branford because I was already told overwhelmingly that yes, that many Afro American students could not get in at the same time, it it would be overrated...
>
> Interviewer: Mmmm.
>
> Marie: So, so bringing in five. At that time, I had seven in grade school so at that time, there's no way that I could of got all seven Black children, that would of just....
>
> Interviewer: Right.
>
> Marie: ...been over. So, Branford... took them took them all. And, then last year when I tried to get them, my nephew into Branford because all five of 'em, I have five there now...they couldn't do it even on sibling preference, you know, you know, first cousins ratio whatever the fact we couldn't do it. But, I was told at the Family Information Center that I could move all five of 'em from Branford to Pine Plains. I could just up that day, take all my kids out of Branford I could move all Black students to Pine Plains (Interview, 5/16/03).

Marie provides an account of the Schools of Choice program that is less than accommodating to African American families. However, it appears that someone in the administration building attempted to be helpful in providing Marie with information about where she would be able to send her six children, and her nephew who lived with her at the time. When the likelihood of actually getting matched with your school of choice is considered, the program

does not seem to provide Marie and other African American families with choice among all elementary schools. Marie conveys her initial resistance to being denied her first choice. She does not want the administration to have the ultimate decision-making power with respect to her children. Therefore, she chose to continue her children's education in a private, predominantly African American religious school rather than send them to a school that she did not choose. Her next strategy was to obtain more information about the various elementary schools racial compositions so that she could increase the likelihood of a successful 'match' within the confines of the Schools of Choice program. She did this informally through her work as a substitute teacher in various schools. Overall, Marie's experience with the Schools of Choice program is similar to Teresa's in that she engaged in a great deal of work to obtain a school of her choice, even though ultimately it was not her first school of choice. She makes reference to other African American families who have also had to engage in very creative strategies to have their children enrolled in the same school. Marie feels strongly that when children attend schools in which they are isolated from their siblings and family members, the chances of them experiencing behavioral or emotional difficulties increase exponentially. She discussed her own nephew as a case in point. From Teresa and Marie's perspectives, the Schools of Choice program does not seem to increase the quantity or quality of their educational decision-making. Instead, it has made things more difficult for them, particularly with respect to their desire to have their children educated in the same school.

Dianne, a white parent with working knowledge of the Schools of Choice program, understands the origins of the program. Although she is currently employed at a local landscaping company, Dianne was temporarily employed at an after-school program at Woodson. Like Teresa and Marie, Dianne has a rather sophisticated understanding of how the

local school system operates. Unlike Teresa and Marie, Dianne's attitude about the program was globally positive despite her statement about the ineffectiveness of the program. This is primarily due to the fact that she was able to take advantage of the Schools of Choice program to enroll her children in a school located outside of their attendance zone. The following passage illustrates Dianne's understanding of the Schools of Choice program:

> I was glad to see the [Korbel school district] bring in schools of choice because it's also clear that this is a really racially divided town. The little Black children all get bussed to the south end of town. No little White children at that time were getting bussed to the north end of town. Except if you went to Lincoln, which was the magnet school. Choice has not worked. And, that's clear also. And, I finally heard somebody from the [Korbel school district] administration say that at a meeting. Over the course of this last year, since [the new superintendent] has been there. It never has worked like they set it up to be. Never-ever. All the little Black children are still getting bused. Hardly any little White children are getting bussed and the white children who do have to get bused, there's a big stink about because they've gotta ride the bus 45 minutes. Nobody ever complained about that when the little Black children had to be bused. You know, I just...and the hard, cold truth is that what's gonna have to happen is that the little white children will have to get bused, and the little Black children will have to continue to get bused. And it will be really interesting to see what will happen in the next two years (Interview, 6/17/03).

In the next passage, Dianne dismisses the ineffectiveness of the program and expresses her satisfaction with the program in providing her with a way to avoid having her children attend their attendance-zone school, Woodson (an elementary school with a predominantly African American student population):

> I was, nevertheless, I was glad that I had the opportunity to choose where my kids would go to school because we got, we got the heck out of Dodge (laughing) as soon as we could because it was just not right (Interview, 6/17/03).

Dianne's experience with the Schools of Choice program was much different from those of Teresa and Marie. Dianne's choice was to exit her attendance-zone school. The Schools of Choice program provided her with increased options for her children. She did not receive any unofficial messages that ranking Lincoln in the Schools of Choice matching program was not a good idea because her children would not be matched there. The differential school-choice experiences of African American and white families have also been echoed by members in the local community.

Informally informed. Stacy did not have direct experience with the Schools of Choice program. She had made the decision to send her son to Lincoln, the only elementary magnet school in the district, prior to the implementation of the Schools of Choice program. After the program was implemented, she chose to continue her son's education at Lincoln. Parents who did not want their children to change schools were permitted to enroll them at the school they attended prior to Schools of Choice. Although she did not choose to send her son to a different school, Stacy was another parent who had working knowledge of the Schools of Choice program. She, like the others, also expressed her view that the Schools of Choice program had not achieved its intended outcome to balance the schools racially. She did not express strong opinions about the Schools of Choice program, and attributed her ambivalence to her lack of personal experience with the program. When asked about whether or not she knew people who had a difficult time enrolling their children in the schools they desired because of the Schools of

Choice program, and what those people thought of the program, she was willing to make stronger statements:

> Interviewer: Um, have you heard... like your... the friends of your children, have they had any problems with like the Schools of Choice or not getting the schools that they wanted or things like that?
>
> Stacy: Yeah, yeah [Stacy is conveying her understanding of the question rather than responding affirmatively to the question]... um... (Paused) But you know, honestly I don't know, I don't have a lot of details.
>
> Interviewer: Okay. Um...
>
> Stacy: I think a lot of people think it's crap. (Laughs) Whatever it intended to do... I don't know, it's just silly. It just seems to make things come out (Interview, 5/23/03).

Although she did not elaborate on what she meant by her last sentence, she implies that the program did not achieve its intended impact on the schools. The people with whom Stacy comes into contact do not seem to be negatively or positively impacted by the program. In other words, things did not change much for them and their children. They seem to be in on the "joke" so to speak. They have the luxury of dismissing the entire program as "crap." This is in stark contrast to the experiences of Teresa and Marie described earlier. There is nothing funny about the Schools of Choice program to them or their children. The impact it has had on their lives is real.

Unlike Teresa and Marie, Hazel is a parent whose family has not been adversely impacted by the Schools of Choice program. Hazel's children have been able to remain at their neighborhood school, Woodson. They have not been forced to make a change because she chose to keep her children in Woodson to finish their elementary school education. Hazel selected

Woodson for her younger children through the Schools of Choice program, and she received her first choice. Nevertheless, Hazel expresses a negative view about the Schools of Choice program and locates her view of the program in the larger context of Korbel's history. Hazel understands how the Schools of Choice program is theoretically supposed to work. She also reports that the program does not, in practice, actually work that way, which prevents many families she knows from participating in the program. It is unclear which school choice decision Hazel would make if she believed the program was not a sham. In many ways, this is a moot point because Hazel does not believe in the program, and therefore does not engage in thoughts about enrolling her children in schools outside of their neighborhood school. Unlike Teresa and Marie, she is not forced to confront this issue. In the following excerpt, she describes her perceptions of the new superintendent's decision about transportation with respect to the Schools of Choice program:

> Hazel: Now he's sayin that if your kids are goin to schools of choice they can't ride the bus. That's right! [responding to the interviewer's puzzled expression]. If you want your child to go, they're not busin' these kids.
>
> Interviewer: What?
>
> Hazel: That's right. They left it open for you to pick the school that your child go to, but they will not bus em there. That's right. That's how they're doin it now. All right. If, I chose for Keith to go to um, a school that's more, or no, less than a mile from here, he'd have to walk. But, let's say, it's a school, OK, for instance Foote, he's only 7 years old. Foote is less than a mile, is it safe at 7:30am in the morning for a child that's 6 or 7 year old child to have to walk that far?
>
> Interviewer: Right.

Hazel: It's not safe. The bus should take em. The bus should take em. They won't do it. See, they have a, they have a clause in everything that they do. Everything they do! OK, you stay over here in Springfield, and you want your child to go Woodson, you have got to provide the transportation. If not, then your child can go right around the corner to Springfield Schools. They make it hard for kids. [Here she calls to her daughter, also named Hazel, in the other room to corroborate her story. 'Hazel! Ain't that how they do it?' [Hazel responds in agreement with her mother]. If your child lives less than a mile, they have to walk to school. If your lives more than a mile from school....Yep, that's how they do it.

Hazel: They are. But, they won't do it. They won't do it.

In theory, the school choice program does provide transportation for children regardless of the school they attend. However, at the time of this study, there is a separate requirement to have access to transportation. If students live within 1.5 miles of their school, they are not provided with transportation by the school system. Hazel raises this as a negative aspect of the school choice program, which is not necessarily the case. However, if the school of choice happens to be located within the 1.5 mile "walking distance" zone, students would not receive transportation. Therefore, her perceptions were partially accurate. She was mistaken about the specific distance requirement. Hazel discusses a terrible incident in which a young child was hit by a train after trying to cross the tracks when walking somewhere. In her opinion, if the child was on a bus, he would not have been killed.

Hazel: I don't care if it is half a block. If they was on a school bus, the bus would sit there until the train pass on. But, if your child lives so many tenths of a mile, they have to walk. So, if Woodson would be our home school, that's where they would have to go. One time my son even attempted to beat the train. That is dangerous!

Interviewer: HmmMm.

Hazel: He did it cause he saw the kids do it.

Interviewer: Right, you don't think first when your that little.

Hazel: No, you don't. No, you don't even recognize the danger.

Interviewer: No.

Hazel: But that's dangerous, so what they doin' is that if you got a home school that's close enough to your home for your child to walk, then that's the one you gotta go with. You chose to go somewhere you gotta make sure they get there yourself. So, that's very discouraging for a parent that don't have transportation, that don't have a car, or don't have a reliable vehicle, or just simply don't have the time.

Interviewer: Right.

Hazel: They gotta be at work by a certain time, and then they have to take the child. You can't take the kids to Woodson early.

Interviewer: They don't have a before-school program?

Hazel: No. So, that's, we don't have that many options. So, that's discouraging. That makes you feel like, shoot, I gotta go through all that? It's easier to stay on over at this school over here whether you pleased with the school or not. Cause a lot of people got kids in school (Interview, 6/02/03).

Throughout her interview, Hazel utilizes dramatic examples to illustrate her points. Here, she discusses potential physical harm to children to convey the school system's lack of attention and perhaps lack of concern for the safety of her children. Hazel also refers to transportation difficulties for parents who may not have access to a reliable vehicle. Other parents may not be able to take their children to school in the morning due to rigid work schedules. Theoretically,

these issues could be addressed by the school district. As demonstrated in other excerpts, the schools occasionally make exceptions to policies and regulations in order to accommodate individual needs of children. However, Hazel makes it clear that she has never been the recipient of such exceptions. It is not surprising that she feels overwhelmed with the additional burdens of selecting a school further from home for her children.

Hazel's views about Korbel and the school system are not limited to the Schools of Choice program. In the following excerpt, she discusses a recent decision by the Korbel School Board to hire an African American superintendent. She is extremely skeptical about the impact any one program or person can make on Korbel based on her experiences in the community:

> Hazel: I think he should be allowed a chance to be…to work here and make a difference.
>
> Interviewer: Right.
>
> Hazel: But, I'm not gonna tell you that he's gonna make a big difference. And the reason why I'm not gonna say he's gonna make a big difference is because Korbel does what they wanna do. Cause I've been here….Korbel do what they wanna do [speaking slowly and loudly for emphasis]. I don't care how many superintendents they bring in here. When it all boils down, like they said, they usin' this man to cover up what they messed up. And, I truly believe that. Interviewer: HmmMm.
>
> Hazel: Okay. Am I right?

From Hazel's experiences in Korbel, she believes that local school board members try to protect themselves from the negative consequences of their actions. She thinks that the school board's decision to hire a new superintendent was not driven by their desire to improve the educational system for children in Korbel. Instead, Hazel believes that the decision was made to "cover up" the school board's mistakes. Hazel implies that "what they messed up" is not

merely a well-intentioned effort gone awry. However, she does *not* extend that argument to articulate a view that the school board makes decisions that systematically benefit white children in Korbel while creating no change or adverse impacts on children of minority backgrounds and low socioeconomic status.

Inaccurately informed. When selecting parents to contact, I selected two white mothers who appeared to have participated in the Schools of Choice program based on their child's school history. The first mother, Ann, moved to Korbel from a small town approximately 10 miles from the city after the Schools of Choice program was implemented. According to the Schools of Choice program, Ann should have been provided with information about all eleven elementary schools in Korbel at the Family Information Center. Then, she should have rank ordered her choices for her daughter's elementary school. Ann reported in her interview that there was no Schools of Choice program for elementary schools, but that there was Schools of Choice for middle schools. Ann conveys in the following excerpt her experience with the Family Information Center when she first registered her daughter for school in Korbel:

> Ann: Right, well, um... when she left Woodson, when I had School of Choice, which we didn't have School of Choice... Woodson had just gotten done bein' built when we moved here. It had only been up maybe a year. And uh... so she got no choice but to go to Woodson, which was... which was good. I mean, they go year round and that schedule worked really well and it kept things fresh in her mind and I think that's a good idea.
>
> Interviewer: Did you go to that Family Information Center then... before she went to Woodson?

Ann: No, before she went... before she went to Woodson, and then I had to go there again, when, just before middle break.

Interviewer: Gotcha. So, before Woodson, somebody there just told you that this is the school that you'll go to.

Ann: Yeah (Interview, 6/5/03).

According to Ann, a white parent who moved to Korbel from a smaller, more rural area, her daughter's enrollment at Woodson was acceptable. Woodson was a good school from Ann's perspective, and much better than the middle school Leigh currently attends. However, it appears that no one at the Family Information Center informed Ann of her school choice options. In a follow-up visit, Ann had written down the name of a radio station that was broadcasting information about the proposed middle school choice program in Korbel so that I might listen to the program since this was an area of interest to me. I shared with her the news that the Schools of Choice program did exist at the time she moved to Korbel, and that she should have been able to participate by ranking her top three choices. Ann was, understandably, upset. If she were able to choose her daughter's elementary school in hindsight, she would have chosen one of the whiter schools in the southwest area of town. When explaining this to me, she prefaced her statement by telling me that she was under no circumstances, racist (Interview, 6/13/03). When I asked Ann why she thought the Family Information Center did not tell her about the program, her first reaction was to assume that the administrators had no questionable motives and that they had most likely forgotten to tell her about the program. She quickly recanted that idea, and said that if Black families thought they had it bad in the schools, they should experience what it would be like to be "poor and white." She then suggested that the school district might have intentionally withheld information about the Schools of Choice program from her so that her

white child would help balance her predominantly African American neighborhood school racially.

Crystal was another white parent who reported that there was no Schools of Choice program for elementary school students in Korbel. Crystal's children attended both Woodson and Lincoln elementary schools. Crystal believed that she was able to choose which school they attended because Lincoln was a magnet school. This was in fact true at the time her children did switch schools. However, Crystal did not share Ann's positive feelings about Woodson, and reported that she would have been more satisfied if her children would have been able to attend a different school. It is interesting that Crystal never learned of the Schools of Choice program because she is very outspoken. One might hypothesize that school staff members at Woodson were experiencing pressure from the district to educate children in a way that would attract white parents. If they were at risk of losing a white family with two children at Woodson, they might try to avoid providing parents with the information necessary to transition their children to a different school.

Although these are retrospective accounts of past interactions with the school system, two parents of similar backgrounds reported very similar experiences with the school system. Ann and Crystal are both white parents of low socioeconomic status, whose children's attendance at Woodson would improve its unsuccessful attempts at racial integration. Both Ann and Crystal expressed a desire to enroll their children in different schools. Ann's desire *was not* related to any dissatisfaction with Woodson, while Crystal's desire *was* directly related to her unhappiness with Woodson. Regardless of what these parents wanted with respect to school choice and of the court-ordered Schools of Choice program, the school district effectively restricted the school choice decisions of these two parents by simply withholding accurate information.

Not informed. Three parents reported that they did not have a great deal of knowledge about the Schools of Choice program, and that they were not aware of the details about the class action lawsuit or formal consent decree. However, these parents did not seem surprised when I informed them of some of the related issues. Although they were not necessarily shocked about the historical mistreatment of African American children by the local school system, they were surprised by the fact that a group of African Americans organized a class action lawsuit that was successful brought before a federal court. Faith, an African American parent, articulated her surprise at the very beginning of our interview:

> Interviewer: Um, okay yeah so basically and I'm sorry I forget exactly what we talked about over the phone. So, um, do you know about the Schools of Choice program in Korbel?
>
> Faith: Uh, somewhat. I don't know. Yea, just a little bit.
>
> Interviewer: Okay, and so um, that's the thing... it happened after the lawsuit that a group of African American families brought against the school. Have you heard anything about that?
>
> Faith: Mm huh. No, see I wasn't here then.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah, this was about in like '96 or '97. And, um basically, well um, the legal issue was that a lot of African American kids were getting bussed from like the neighborhoods mostly in the north end of town...
>
> Faith: Right.
>
> Interviewer: .... to only schools that are in the south side...
>
> Faith: Okay.
>
> Interviewer: ... because they had to have a certain proportion of each type of student...

Faith: What… Academic?

Interviewer: No, it couldn't be all white students at one school, you know what I mean?

Faith: Oh okay, okay… Righttttt… Mm hmm…

Interviewer: So, they had to integrate the schools. But, they weren't busing any white kids from that end of town [southern section of Korbel] up here [northern section of Korbel] to balance the schools

Faith: Okay.

Interviewer: So… that's unfair.

Faith: That's how it [Schools of Choice program] got started?

Interviewer: Yeah, that… you know… it's unfair because…

Faith: Who brought this up on .... Who did this? The NAACP?

Interviewer: Well, I think a lot of people were involved but it actually was a group of …. I forget exactly how many kids. There was a class action suit…

Faith: They just… They just got together?

Interviewer: Mm hmm.

Faith: For real!? (Interview, 6/11/03).

Faith has a difficult time accepting the idea that a group of people would "get together" and experience some degree of success in making a change in the lives of their children. One of her initial reactions is to attribute the success to a larger organization such as the NAACP, who must have been involved. Later in the interview, Faith discusses the experiences of her own younger brother in the special education system, and laughs when she says she might have to "jump on that bandwagon" referring to the people working to create meaningful change in the education of children in Korbel.

Faith did not have knowledge about the Schools of Choice program, and could not recall why her daughter switched elementary schools after Faith had obtained her own housing. This switch occurred after the Schools of Choice program was officially implemented. Therefore, Faith should have been provided with the option of having her daughter continue her elementary school education at the school she began in the first grade when Faith and her family moved to Korbel. Faith could not recall whether or not it was her decision to move her child from Springfield to North Ridge prior to her 3rd grade year. Springfield was her attendance-zone school when she was living with her mother. North Ridge is a school in the central to southern section of Korbel that African American children living in the northern section of Korbel have been bused to for racial integration. It is plausible that the school district encouraged Faith to enroll her daughter at North Ridge. However, it also may be the case that Faith chose North Ridge, but does not remember the process.

Willina is another African American parent who was unaware of the Schools of Choice program who may or may not have "chosen" her child's school. She does not recall ever being presented with a choice among elementary schools for her children. However, her two children attended Woodson until she moved to a different section of Korbel. This was the year the Schools of Choice program was implemented and technically Willina should have been able to choose for her children to remain at Woodson. However, Willina wanted her children to attend what would have been their new attendance-zone school. As was the case with Faith, it is possible that Willina did officially choose her children's new school. Alternatively, it seems possible that the school district would have encouraged an African American parent to remove their children from Woodson School and enroll them in a school with less diversity. This seems

to be particularly convenient when the parent already expects that the child must change schools due to a change in residence.

The third parent who was unaware of the Schools of Choice program was Rose, an African American widow in her seventies. As mentioned previously, Rose did not convey an in-depth understanding of her grandchildren's educational experiences in general. She had not given a great deal of thought as to why her grandchildren attended North Ridge because they had attended North Ridge throughout their entire elementary school education. Further, Rose reported that there had been no problems at North Ridge and that the children enjoyed going to school and were particularly fond of the principal there. There was no reason to consider changing schools, and Rose assumed that they originally attended North Ridge because their parents lived near the school.

To summarize, the knowledge parents had about the Schools of Choice program varied. Parents who had the most sophisticated understanding of both the program and the events leading up to the implementation of the program were formally involved with the school system as district employees. These parents were also more likely to articulate an understanding about the systematic mistreatment of African American students attending public schools in Korbel. Parents who did not have such intimate contact with schools were more likely to suggest that children who succeed in school do so because their families ensure their engagement with school and schoolwork, or that the children themselves are intelligent.

Parents with explicitly negative experiences with the Schools of Choice program tended to be African American. Only one parent of all parents interviewed had a child who was impacted positively by the Schools of Choice program despite her recognition of the program's overall ineffectiveness. Other parents did not have knowledge about the program, or were

provided with inaccurate information from the district about their options. Based on the information provided by parents in the present study, the Korbel school district has essentially "controlled" their school choice decisions.

Making School-Choice Decisions

As described above, parents varied a great deal in the amount of knowledge they had about the Schools of Choice program. Parents who knew about the program selected their children's schools based on a variety of factors. The ways in which these parents gathered and interpreted information about the schools is important in understanding how they made school-choice decisions. Data about this type of educational decision making was a major focus of the interviews. However, it quickly became apparent that this topic was not relevant to people who did not know they had a choice about where to send their children to elementary school. This section is limited to parents who knew about the Schools of Choice program, and their decisions about where to send their children to school will be referred to as *school-choice* decisions. All parents in the current study have made *educational* decisions for the children, which encompasses a wider range of parental decision making.

Five parents, Teresa, Marie, Dianne, Stacy, and Hazel, had knowledge of the Schools of Choice program, and discussed the impact it had or did not have on their families. For Teresa and Marie, the program was described as a failure. Further, it greatly inconvenienced African American families while either benefiting or creating no change for white families. For Dianne and Stacy, the program has not achieved what it was intended to achieve, but it has not created any adverse consequences for their children. Dianne stated that despite her recognition of the program's overall ineffectiveness, she and her children have benefited from it. Stacy had already enrolled her children in the magnet school prior to the Schools of Choice program. And, their

placements were not jeopardized by the program's implementation. Hazel reported that the program's shortcomings prevent many African American families from participating in the program. She decided to select Woodson for her children, and she was able to enroll her older children there because they had already started at Woodson prior to the program. Her younger children were matched with Woodson in the school choice process. Although she does not believe the program is operated as it should be, she has not personally been negatively impacted by the program. As demonstrated above, these parents have had varying experiences with the program. It is interesting to gain a closer look at the ways in which they made school choice decisions in the context of this new policy.

Supportive early environment. Teresa's case is in some ways the most unique because the rationale behind her decision to choose Woodson for her children was related to her position there. As described in a previous excerpt, Teresa wanted her children to attend Woodson so that they would be on the same calendar as she was, which at the time was a year-round academic schedule. There were two other schools in the district with similar calendars, but Teresa did not want her children to attend those schools because of the distance they were from her home. Although this is what she said when she was initially describing the reasons for her school-choice decision, another reason emerges later in her interview. This reason has to do with the race of her children, which is different from the race of most of the teachers and children at the other year-round schools:

> I doubt that those children who go out there are well received either. That's the other reason I know I wouldn't want my kids 'way out in the country at Branford and being a minority in a class and bein' treated like, 'Well Johnnie, don't get in a group with Reanna because I really don't want you in a group with her. And you know she's a sweet

> girl...but Johnnie... Get in a group with Kevin and Megan. Leave out Shanequa over there in the corner.' It's just like...I don't want my children subjected to that kind of prejudice and I know what it's like. I know what it feels like, I know what it looks like, and it is like that. And so...ugh...you know...but I think if we were realistic about wanting to integrate and wanting people in other cultures to mix and take the good and any other pluralism is wonderful and you get the best outcome and all that...if we were honest about that then we could make it happen in an honest way. But we're not honest about that. And, so you know just like I say...I don't want my children to be the underdog anywhere and be mistreated. I don't want teachers teaching them that think they can't learn and stuff... And, I don't want children interacting with them and sayin', 'Well, he's okay you know if we play basketball and somethin'. I want him on my team, but other than that. If we're workin' on a science project...huhuh.' I don't want 'em treated that way (Interview, 5/19/03).

Although Teresa indicates that even if schools were integrated at a practical level, relations between racial groups would not improve until people from different backgrounds truly want schools to be integrated. She does not view Korbel as a community ready for superficial integration let alone the type of integration she considers to promote optimal growth and development. And, until Korbel is ready, she does not want to expose her children to people who may have a damaging impact on them.

Marie is another African American parent who emphasized the relationships between school staff members and students. Marie chose to send her children to a private African American school prior to the Schools of Choice program. She would have continued to send her children there had she not taken on the responsibility of raising additional children. Just as

Teresa's life prompted her to reconsider her children's elementary school, so did Marie's. Teresa had decided that she did not want her children to be the minority in a mostly white school located far from her home. Marie's children attended an African American school first, and she speaks of the "strong foundation" they received there. As her life circumstances changed, she was limited to the public school system, and she could not send her children to Woodson, she began to shift her thinking about schools and decided that she would like her children to attend a school with more diversity. After making that decision, she sought a school with a similar principal to the one at King she admired. In this excerpt, Marie discusses why she decided to send her children to the private school as well as some of the most positive aspects about sending them there:

> Marie: Okay. King was a brand new school, they were just opening up. And, I had to support my own because it was a Christian based and I saw a good opportunity for our children to start. Plus, I always have to support um, anything that's new and of our culture. And, so I put my children at King. Very, very, very, very, very, good, excellent support. Dr. Peyton, Samantha Peyton [principal of King] is probably the best administrator that you could ask for … more or less like Mrs. Flemming [principal of Branford], just got to know the family, the person would visit your home … um… She just knew everybody personally and not only that is that our children looked up to her as an idol, a role model, a mentor. Children would dress like her, want their hair cut like her … um, it was overwhelming. And, she's so positive that that's something you wanted to see, like a star and … So, like I said, any good school starts with the head. If you have a good head, you are going to have a good school, no matter what. If your child was falling

behind she would personally bring that child into her office, personally work with that child.

Interviewer: Wow.

Marie: So, that to me is what we call family, community and the child. That's a, whole, that's putting everything in one whole. She would give, if your child couldn't read, she would put them in reading rooms that cost $300 and $400 for them to be at... she cared. And, she recently had to leave and start her own life which was so sad, but wonderful at the same time ...and the administrator went to her brother which is still dynamic. You know what I'm saying, we got, they still have that that strong foundation behind them (Interview, 5/16/03).

Initially, Marie wanted her children to attend the public school most similar to King. The school that most resembled King was Woodson, which was predominantly Afircan American and had a lot of "love." Marie actually attended Woodson as a child, and had fond memories of her time there. In fact, at least two of her teachers continue to teach at Woodson. It was comforting for Marie to know that her children might have the same teachers as she did as a child. However, as described in a previous section, Marie was not able to enroll her children at Woodson. This prompted another shift in her thinking about where to send her children to school, in which she wanted her children to begin to be exposed to people of backgrounds different from their own in order to better prepare them for life.

Plus I wanted my children to start learning about diversity. It was an all Afro-American school ... it it was... very close. And, I didn't know how environmentally they would respond later on down in life, which I had already seen through some of my Psychology classes and doing research (Interview, 5/16/03).

Marie has thought a great deal about what type of schooling environment will best prepare her children for the future. She speaks about the foundation her children have received in a supportive and nurturing private school environment with students and staff who are predominantly African American. It is only after obtaining this foundation does Marie consider exposing her children to a more "diverse" environment. At this point, she begins to seek a school that has strong leadership, which she feels she has found in Branford and Branford's principal:

> Branford looked at the community, the family and the child. And that was very important to them. And Mrs. Peyton knew every parent, every child, their grandparents, your history and she remembered (Interview, 5/16/03).

Although Teresa and Marie came to different conclusions about what type of school they wanted their children to attend with respect to the racial backgrounds of the students, they both articulated the importance of early experiences in a supportive environment for their children, which was comprised of African American students and staff. Only after positive early experiences did they want their children to become exposed to different types of people, who were most likely to work in predominantly white educational settings. Both Teresa and Marie had intimate working knowledge about the schools from their experiences growing up in Korbel, working in the schools as adults, and having children who attend the schools as students.

"Diversity." For Dianne and Stacy, the racial makeup of their children's schools was also important in their school choice decisions. "Diversity" is something that they both referred to as an important characteristic of their children's schools, yet both parents were more likely to discuss the negative aspects of diverse schooling environments in the context of the "behavior problems" of African American students rather than positive aspects of diverse schooling environments. Unlike Teresa and Marie who seemed to know about the schools from their

personal experiences, Dianne and Stacy made attempts to learn about the schools their children attended by discussing these issues with friends, co-workers, and neighbors. Dianne and Stacy may have engaged in more purposeful efforts to gather information about the schools because neither of them were born and raised in Korbel. They moved to Korbel as adults with children. Therefore, they did not have an existing knowledge base on which to draw in order to make school choice decisions.

Throughout Dianne's interview, she engaged in dialogue that either implied or explicitly stated that she was one of very few involved parents at her children's predominantly African American schools and one of few involved adults in her racially mixed neighborhood. She initially explains that the reason she chose to send her children to Lincoln as opposed to Woodson was because of the poor leadership at Woodson. Then, she discusses the "behavior problems" of African American students as a reason the school did not have a good "reputation." She chose Lincoln on the basis of "strong principal" there. She learned of Lincoln from one of her few white neighbors, but reports that the leadership at Lincoln was the main thing that attracted her there. In this excerpt, Dianne recalls when she first realized that not everyone in her neighborhood attended Woodson or a private school. She was unaware of the magnet school, Lincoln, which was available to students prior to the Schools of Choice program:

> Well, come to find out, my neighbor down the block, her kids all went to Lincoln. They had all, you know, they lived ... I live in the 600 block of North Chapel, she lives in the 500 block of North Chapel. So, you know, I'm seeing kids in their yard playing wondering why I don't see these kids at our school because there are very few white people at Woodson (6/17/03).

In learning about where her white neighbor's children attended school, Dianne learned that Lincoln was a magnet school. This is one of the few parents in Dianne's neighborhood that she feels is an active participant in either school or community. Toward the completion of her interview, Dianne openly expresses her disappointment with the level of involvement of her African American neighbors in helping "clean up" a small area in her neighborhood:

> Dianne: Because usually we just made the call for volunteers, via a flier, we have a very active email list, and most of the people who would ever volunteer would be on that email list even though we would flier the whole neighborhood. And, again even in that endeavor, we don't have people of color helping out. It's all white people in the neighborhood who have been working to make that happen.....We've had some children come help us. And, I think children are how that color barrier is gonna break down, is with the children...getting the children involved (Interview, 6/17/03).

Dianne expresses feeling as if she is the person who must always do all the work when it comes to her interactions with people of color. She speaks similarly, although in less detail, when she discusses how very few African American parents were involved at Woodson. Despite these themes emerging repeatedly throughout her interview, Dianne reports that one of the main reasons for her switching her children from Woodson to Lincoln was the poor leadership at Woodson and the excellent leadership at Lincoln. As time progressed, Lincoln lost some of its appeal to Dianne because it lost its "magnet school" status when the Schools of Choice program was implemented.

Stacy recounts a similar decline at Lincoln. Unlike Dianne who selected Lincoln through the Schools of Choice program, Stacy had enrolled her two children at Lincoln from

kindergarten when Lincoln was strictly a magnet school. She describes the decline of Lincoln vaguely at the beginning of her interview:

> Stacy: So…..back when she was the principal there, things were great. And, everyone wanted to get their kid in there, and there was a waiting list. Um, things started to go downhill there. Um… the last few years there I don't remember how old he was when the principal left. But I wasn't really happy there towards the end. And, um... but I wasn't gonna change... switching out, so...
>
> Interviewer: Um hmm. Yeah, so could you say a little bit about sort of what things went downhill or...you know...?
>
> Stacy: Oh... everything. When the whole... when the Schools of Choice started, and my... I don't have facts to support this, but my own gut is that... there are people in this community who don't want to put their kids in a school on the north end. And, knowing the change from the Schools of Choice would bring more neighborly kids from there to the school... um... certain people bailed... and I think the principal was smart... knew when to retire, and knew when to get out (Interview, 5/23/03).

Like Dianne, Stacy gathered information about Lincoln from her friends, neighbors, and co-workers. Here, she discusses how she learned about Lincoln:

> Interviewer: How did you come to your decision to send them to the magnet school, like what was attractive about it?
>
> Stacy: Uh... word of mouth uh...and let's see… I liked the uh, word of mouth from people who said it has strong teachers, good cultural diversity, I liked that. It was somewhat of a sample of the community... um, with those, you know ethnic diversity, economic diversity, neighborhood diversity, it was just... and generally magnet schools, just of all

that comes with them being magnet schools, um... starting with foreign language early on... Yeah. So...

Interviewer: When you say, all the things that come with a magnet school, could you just say... I mean, I think I know what you mean, but...

Stacy: Yeah... just um... You know I know they lost some of the uh... from what I remember, that they lost some of that I guess... was it right, when the Schools of Choice came, the support for some of the programs that aren't standard. And um... yeah.

Throughout her interview, Stacy seems somewhat hesitant to convey her memories of past events, and states more than once that she has a really bad memory.

Interviewer: Okay. And uh, oh yeah, I was going to ask you because this is a really interesting piece of sort of how people make decisions and sort of who they hear... things from... so we need that word of mouth. Like who do...

Stacy: From people who have been through Lincoln. Kids, fam... parents... but also people who I knew who um, went to that school themselves... people who are now however old, or at the time still were then in their twenties, thirties. My old supervisor here... um, when I first started here fourteen years ago, she went there. So... people who I trusted, who I thought were bright and um... (pause) informed. Yeah, and you know interestingly now, the school... one of the schools that people love is North Ridge of course, and at that point in time, I lived in North Ridge neighborhood. But uh, so by the time we got out of Lincoln... seems like (laughing) we would have gotten better off in North Ridge than... but… yeah. I know a lot of people there who had been pretty happy who are screaming now about the moving of the principal ...[referring to the transfer of the principal at North Ridge].

Interviewer: Um, so in terms of your decision, then it was like word of mouth by people that you trusted, and sort of, you felt like knew. Did you look any um… or do you remember getting any like any official sort of things from the school district that you would have…?

Stacy: Do I remember… (thoughtful pause). No… I know stuff comes but I think I….Well yeah, I get these reports every year of the schools and their size and their description and blabby blah blah blah… (Laughs) But, I paid more attention to um…which I tend to do with everything… to choose like who am I gonna… which dentist am I gonna go to, which doctor; I check it out, I ask people who I trust who know, who've been there, check it out myself and then if I don't like what I find then… (pauses)

Interviewer: Mm hmm. Did you go check out Lincoln before you sent your daughter there?

Stacy: (Pause) No. Ahhh (deep sigh)… I wish I could remember. Maybe her dad did… I don't know if I did, I think there was some type of an…like a… open house or something there. But that was… a long time ago.

Interviewer: House… yeah. And by the time your son [target child] went, you had already known the school, so…

Interviewer: Yeah, it just. Seemed like it made sense to continue (Interview, 5/23/03).

Stacy reports a similar process occurring when she first learned about the early childhood program in the school district and why she sent her son there. She had a good friend who sent her son to the program, and she knew the child care resource center manager at the University who sent her child to the program. Just as she made her decision to send her son to Lincoln, she decided to send him to the early childhood program before he ever started attending

school. Stacy described actively seeking information from people she knew and trusted in the community to make school choice decisions. She made her decisions based on the positive experiences of friends and colleagues. Although she says diversity played an important role in her decision to send her children to the magnet school in the district, she also reports that too much diversity has contributed to the school's decline. When asked what she would do if she had the chance to make the same decisions again, Stacy reported that she would make the same decisions because she did the best she could based on the information she had at the time. It seems that a little bit of diversity is good, but Stacy was not happy once Lincoln became a "neighborhood" school located in the northern section of Korbel.

Consistency and loyalty. Hazel is the fifth parent who had knowledge about the Schools of Choice program. For Teresa, Marie, Dianne and Stacy, the race of either the students and/or staff members at a particular school was very important. However, race was not necessarily explicitly mentioned as a school choice decision-making criterion. Factors such as transportation and leadership were also mentioned. Hazel described another factor which was unarticulated by the other parents. She feels that consistency is very important to a child's educational success. Therefore, she decided to maintain her children's enrollment at Woodson despite the theoretical increase in educational options. She first discusses her view when discussing whether or not she was happy with the imminent reconstitution of Woodson with new teachers and staff members:

> Hazel: No, but I can't relocate my son because they havin a big, you know, swap-around. I mean if I take him out of Woodson because I don't agree with that, and put him somewhere else, then them same teachers may be floatin around somewhere else next year. I think they gonna do it until they get it right. Interviewer: MmmHm- I: I'm sorry,

you were sayin that earlier-that you think with the new superintendent that that's gonna happen with all the schools.

Hazel: Yeah, right. It might happen with all the schools, and it might not. I don't know. But, as it stands right now, the finger seems to be pointing at Woodson. And why they playin Woodson so hard, I don't know. Maybe it's because it's their 3rd year with the low, um reading scores (Interview, 6/2/03).

Later in her interview, Hazel discusses a possible decline in academic performance if she were to choose to send her son to a different school under the Schools of Choice program. She bases her opinion on the slight decline in her son's performance when he transitioned from elementary school to middle school:

OK, well, if you move, you relocate, your child's gonna be in a totally different school, they have to make new friends, get to know their teachers. OK, the kids might do better or might not do better. You might see a drop a grades, you know, because you, some kids do better to start with, some of em don't. When Keith made the switch from Woodson to Foote, he didn't do as well, but he picked it up (Interview, 6/2/03).

In addition to stressing the importance of consistency, Hazel also expresses a great deal of loyalty to the teachers at Woodson. As described in a previous excerpt, Hazel did not question the judgment of one of the Woodson teachers when a teacher at Foote questioned her son's reading ability. She fully believed the teacher at Woodson. In addition to these beliefs, Hazel articulated her dissatisfaction with the Schools of Choice program for not providing transportation to all schools for all children. She also has a view of Korbel as a town that will continue to mistreat African American children and families despite efforts to make positive change. Therefore, her views of consistency and loyalty may be her way of coping with what see

sees as a discriminatory school system. It seems as though it would be difficult to predict what Hazel might do if she were provided with increased educational options in a different environment.

Although some parents in the current study did not have accurate information about the Schools of Choice program initially, I provided them with information about how the program was supposed to theoretically operate during my interactions with them. Two white parents would have clearly made school choice decisions had they known that that was an option for them and their children. Both Ann and Crystal would have chosen predominantly white schools in the southern sections of Korbel. Neither of them had a particular school in mind. However, it is interesting that both of them listed Branford, Woodbury, and Hellen Keller as potential choices. Neither Ann nor Crystal had younger children, so this information was not helpful to them at the time of the study. It did upset both of them to learn of program guidelines which were misrepresented to them.

Summary

In sum, parents who knew about the Schools of Choice program, or who learned more about the Schools of Choice program during their interviews, made decisions, or would have made decisions, based heavily on the racial makeup of the schools. Although there were similarities in the processes parents engaged in, there were differences in the ultimate outcomes for their children. The African American parents who knew about the program were likely to discuss the importance of an early supportive environment for their children. Only after obtaining a "strong foundation" did these particular parents begin to think about the importance of racial diversity with respect to their children's education. However, parental knowledge of the local context tempered idealistic beliefs that a "diverse" educational experience would be a

positive one for their children. Two white parents reported that diversity was important to them. However, the "discipline" problems and perceived lack of involvement of African American families trumped their desire for diversity with respect to their children's education. One cautious conclusion to make from the school choice decisions of the parents in the current study, it is that they tended to choose (or want to choose) schools in which their child would be in the majority. This might help lessen the likelihood of mistreatment by staff or other students. One parent seemed to truly want their children exposed to diverse groups of students, but this was only appropriate because the children had already formed a "strong foundation" in a school in which they were the majority. If this is a major criterion for families in choosing schools, it is not surprising that the Schools of Choice program has not achieved its goal of balancing the schools racially.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

Overview

The overarching goal of the current study was to understand the educational experiences and educational decision making of families from disadvantaged backgrounds against the backdrop of a newly implemented school choice policy. Increasing educational decision-making opportunities for parents of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds was an important local issue at the time the current study was conducted. As a participant observer engaged with a neighborhood elementary school located in a predominantly working class, African American area of town, I observed a disturbing disconnect between my experiences with children and families at the school and commonly held perceptions about the school choice policy. The current research explores this disconnect for ten women of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds in the context of the existing school choice literature, and illustrates some of the ways in which they are misunderstood. By more fully understanding their lived educational experiences, they are understood in a different way. And, although not primarily the aim of this study, this enhanced understanding has implications for school choice interventions.

As the participating women in this study made very clear throughout their interviews, they are much more than bearers of cultural capital. They continuously and passionately refuse to allow themselves, and their children, to exist as passive recipients of life's experiences and the actions of others. If we are to appreciate the participants and their children as unique and worthwhile individuals, de-contextualized judgments about their actions and decisions based on a single dominant standard must be resisted. It is hoped that providing the participants with a vehicle to share their families' unique experiences with educational systems, practices, policies,

and personnel, challenges and/or provides alternatives to the damaging stories often created *about* them.

In this chapter, a brief description of the parent participants and their children is provided to help contextualize interpretations of the interview data (For more information, please refer to Appendices C – G). Next, the findings are discussed within the context of the original research questions outlined in chapter one, which were developed in order to access a more holistic understanding of the lived educational experiences and decision making for the participating parents and their children.

First, the many ways in which the participants are continuously engaged with their children's education are explored in light of the unequal distribution of power in home-school relations. Second, the ways in which educational decisions are shaped by the proximal educational experiences of individual children are examined with an emphasis on understanding how information about academic performance contributes to explanations of poor school performance. Third, the extent to which parents' distal educational experiences provide insight into educational decisions for their children is discussed. Fourth, the ways in which the participating parents understand and make use of potential increases in educational decision-making power highlights the importance of intimate working knowledge of the schools. Fifth, school choice decisions are specifically discussed within the context of a controlled public school choice policy.

Parents

As described in chapter two, parental characteristics, such as level of educational attainment, and employment, were not factors in the sampling process. Not surprisingly, the participating parents were very different from one another in some ways, yet similar in others.

With respect to their own education, they had different levels of educational attainment, different experiences with teachers and students, different degrees of academic achievement. Rose, an African American woman raising her grandchildren, completed the 6th grade and then dedicated her adult years to her family as a homemaker. At the opposite end of the educational attainment spectrum are Teresa, an African American educator, and Stacy, a biracial social worker who earned their Masters degrees. Willina, an African American hospital clerk, and Faith, an African American woman who owns and independently operates a small hauling business, both graduated from high school. Crystal, a white woman currently receiving disability insurance, attended some high school, but did not graduate. Ann, a white business clerk, terminated her education prematurely due to her pregnancy, and had recently returned to earn her G.E.D. and Associates degree in child development. Hazel, an African American foster mother, also earned an Associates degree in child development, as did Marie, an African American substitute teacher's aide and foster mother. Finally, Dianne, a white landscaping assistant, received her Bachelor's degree immediately after high school, and has recently returned to paid employment after being a homemaker for several years.

Children

The children of the participating parents were also very different with respect to their experiences in school and academic achievement, which was often discussed in the context of parental engagement. Despite an attempt to select target children who varied with respect to academic achievement, it was difficult to identify students who consistently performed well on multiple assessment measures (e.g., standardized tests, and report cards). More often than not, students had difficulty in one or more areas of academic achievement. Of eleven target children, only two white females, Leigh and Mindy, performed at the expected level or beyond on both

types of available academic assessments. When the proximal educational experiences of students were juxtaposed with parental engagement, a provocative pattern emerged. More specifically, mothers of children doing well in school academically were more likely to describe *formal* engagement (e.g., utilizing the school choice program as soon as it was available, and selecting courses for a child) with schools. This was true for Ann and Dianne, Leigh and Mindy's mothers, respectively. The ways in which the participating parents were engaged in their children's education is discussed in more detail below.

Parental Engagement

As suggested above, the ways in which the participating parents engaged with their children's schools were often complexly related to other aspects of the family's educational experiences, including the proximal educational experiences of their children, as well as educational decision making. Relations among factors contributing to parental engagement were often overlapping and almost impossible to tease apart, highlighting the dynamic nature of home-school interactions. Interpreting several of the current findings within the context of the unequal distribution of power among parents and schools helps organize the experiences of participating parents with respect to parental engagement.

Unequal distribution of power in home-school relations. As suggested above, interesting patterns emerged with respect to race, socioeconomic status and *formal* parental engagement, under which *formal* educational decision making may be classified. *Formal* in this context refers to the opportunity to select one among several options officially presented by the schools. In *informal* parental engagement and decision making, options are not officially presented to parents by the schools. Instead, decisions often occurred as a natural outgrowth of *informal* parental engagement, which was frequently *reactive* in nature.

Parents making *informal* educational decisions were often *reacting* to negative assumptions about their children, or to perceptions of mistreatment. Of the ten participating families, five African American parents, and no white parents, reported making *informal* educational decisions as the result of perceived injustice.

For instance, recall Hazel's encounter with her son Keith's teacher regarding an incident in which the teacher had "crossed out" Keith's entire assignment in front of his peers. Not only did Hazel interact with that particular teacher in a manner that was not consistent with traditional forms of parental involvement, she made an educational decision to have Keith transferred to a different classroom due to continued difficulties with his teacher. Although Keith was no longer subject to mistreatment by that particular teacher, the manner in which Hazel addressed the issue is likely not valued by the white, middle-class culture of schools (Sarason, 1971; 1996). Findings from previous work on parental involvement indicate that parental concerns expressed by African American parents who are angry and critical are often viewed as undermining teachers' authority, and making it more difficult to educate students (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Ann, Dianne, and Stacy, described making *formal* educational decisions for their children in *reaction* to the educational experiences of their children. More specifically, the parents felt that their children were not well suited to their academic workloads. They requested modifications in the curriculum, which resulted in what the parents perceived as favorable outcomes. For Ann and Stacy's children, Zach and Leigh, coursework demands were reduced. For Dianne's daughter, Mindy, academic difficulty was increased. These three parents were able to provide schools with their opinions, which resulted in the schools accommodating their preferences in formal ways (e.g., constructing an individualized education plan for Zach, removing Leigh from accelerated classes, and enrolling Mindy in advanced courses).

The patterns described above are consistent with theories of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), which suggest that parents of middle and upper class with increased levels of cultural capital (e.g., educated speech, sense of entitlement, and resources to attend school functions during the day), are more involved in the day-to-day functions of their child's school (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). The *formal* engagement described by parents in the current study was more likely to occur for non-minority families, who may be viewed by teachers as better equipped or more deserving to share decision-making power with the school. These parents may therefore be much more comfortable making a formal school choice decision than parents who have not been treated similarly by their children's educators.

Although not a school choice decision per se, these findings have the potential to inform future interventions aimed at improving the educational experiences and/or outcomes for disadvantaged students. Locating formal decision-making responsibility in the hands of disadvantaged parents, who are more often ill equipped to effectively negotiate the school system on behalf of their children, will not be helpful in creating meaningful change for students. Without altering the ways in which the dominant school culture serves to maintain inequitable relationships between parents and schools, any increases in potential decision-making power for disadvantaged families may not be actualized, an issue raised in the high school course selection literature (Lee, 1995), which was reviewed in chapter one of this manuscript.

Proximal Educational Experiences

As mentioned briefly at the beginning of this chapter, parental engagement may be related to the academic performance of an individual child. Given the literature linking increased parental involvement with better academic achievement (Oakes & Lipton, 2003), it is important

to consider the ways in which an individual child's unique experiences may influence parental engagement and vice versa.

Accurate information about academic performance. As illustrated in Appendix D, many of the target students in the present study were not performing well academically. Several parents seemed to be unaware of their child's level of achievement. Teresa, a highly educated teacher working in the local schools, was upset when her son, Marcus, was placed in what she felt was an inappropriate reading group early in his 6th grade year. She reported that the group was for students experiencing a great deal of difficulty with reading, and that he had much more potential. She reported receiving no information throughout his elementary school years that would indicate he was performing poorly. When reviewing his educational records, it was clear that in the 4th grade, his grades declined significantly. His reading level as assessed by his classroom teacher at the culmination of his 4th grade year was below what would be expected for his same-aged peers. Standardized test scores were also below average.

Although it appears that the schools did not provide Teresa with enough information, she could have requested it from them. She also could have observed Marcus reading at home more frequently, which may have alerted her to any problems he may have been experiencing. This is especially true given her educational background and current occupation as a teacher. When considered in light of the previous section that suggests Teresa may have more cultural capital than most of the other participating parents, this discrepancy is particularly disheartening. Teresa is a mother who is extremely invested in ensuring her children's educational success, is employed in the local school system, and has the resources to help her son improve in reading if she were aware that he might be having a problem. Taken together, home-school communication

appears to be lacking. Neither the schools nor the parents are perfect, and both have room to improve.

Previous research has demonstrated that parents of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds who believe their children are performing well are less likely to engage in vigilant monitoring of their children's schoolwork (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001) as this was viewed as unnecessary given their child's performance. If parents do not have access to accurate information, they are essentially prevented from making meaningful decisions about how they wish to engage with their children around schoolwork. However, information sharing between parents and teachers is necessary but not sufficient if truly collaborative efforts aimed at ensuring students' academic growth are the ultimate goal. As discussed previously, the distribution of power in home-school relations must be more equitable in order to facilitate collaboration as opposed to information sharing.

Individualistic versus systemic explanations. When parents lack accurate information about their child's performance and educational experiences, and are unable to access it via regular interactions with schools, they may be less inclined to think systemically about issues of poor academic performance for groups of students. This tendency may be exacerbated if parents think their children are performing better than they actually are. For example, if parents hear about schools failing standardized tests, but believe that their child has performed well on the tests, they might view their child as an exception. Poor performance of a particular school or group of students may be attributed to characteristics of the children themselves as opposed to the larger context in which they are educated. Gathering important information about a child's performance is important, but unfortunately did not occur for some of the participating families. Again, schools and parents both play a role. Many factors may contribute to any particular parent

operating on inaccurate or incomplete information (e.g., schools do not distribute information in a way that is accessible to parents, parents do not actively seek out multiple sources of performance data if it is not provided, information is conveyed via the students themselves and is not actually received by the parents, to name just a few).

Faith, an African American parent, initially articulated her strongly held belief that poor performance of students should be attributed to the students themselves rather than the schools they attend. She insisted that students' inherent abilities or lack there of, negatively impact the ability of teachers to present the appropriate material. Faith's response reflects individualistic explanations for poor performance. She does halfheartedly consider the notion that there may be a problem with standardized tests, or assessment measures (e.g., they do not accurately represent what the students have actually learned). However, she was unable to entertain the idea that a particular school setting might contribute to an individual student's poor academic performance.

When the academic achievement of Faith's daughter, Jennifer, is considered, Faith's beliefs are not surprising. Jennifer does well with respect to report card grades, but below average on standardized tests and her reading assessments. Faith may not be aware of her daughter's standardized test scores, and believes that most aspects of Jennifer's education are going well. As discussed previously, there are several ways Faith could have obtained additional information about Jennifer's performance (e.g., initiating contact with her teachers). For whatever reason, she did not. As discussed in the previous section, these inaccurate beliefs about her daughter's performance may contribute to lower levels of parental engagement as reflected in vigilant monitoring of academic work (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001).

When interpreted in light of the existing school choice literature demonstrating that parents of minority backgrounds are more likely to utilize formal sources of information (e.g.,

performance data provided by the school system) to make school choice decisions (Schneider, Marschall, Teske, & Roch, 1998), inaccurate or incomplete knowledge about any aspect of a child's education is troubling. Although a single explanation for information gaps does not exist, one possibility is that the schools do not provide information in a way that is accessible to parents who are less skilled in navigating the educational system (e.g., with less cultural capital or awareness of the dominant culture of schools). As mentioned above, previous research has demonstrated that these are the very parents who place the greatest emphasis on information provided to them by the schools. This may place them in position to be more easily swayed upon receiving one piece of information about their child's education. In contrast, white parents of higher socioeconomic status reported consulting informal sources of information, such as friends and family members to make school choice decisions for their children.

In the present research, two parents enrolled their children in magnet schools prior to the implementation of the school choice program. They reported utilizing information from friends and co-workers to make educational decisions for their children. Stacy reported that she placed a great deal of weight on the opinions of her colleagues at work. She adopted this strategy when she decided to enroll her son, Zach, in an early childhood program, as well as when she decided to enroll both of her children in the local magnet school prior to the implementation of the school choice program. Stacy's style of interacting with her son's schools is consistent with the dominant culture of the white, middle class although she identifies as biracial (Japanese and Polish). Previous work in this area has also demonstrated that parents with more cultural capital tend to communicate with one another in a way that facilitates helpful, informal information sharing regarding educational issues (Lareau, 1999).

Distal Educational Experiences

Understanding parents' views about their own educational histories provides some insight into why parents might emphasize the opinions of individual teachers. As discussed previously, parents are not simply bearers of cultural capital, but active participants in their own lives. Because this is taken seriously in the present study, salient aspects of parents' own childhood educational experiences were considered in the context of how they think about and engage with their children's education. When asked about their childhood educational experiences, almost all parents in this study responded positively. Although the sample was small, interesting differences emerged between the parents. African American parents in the study were more likely to mention positive memories about relationships with their teachers. White parents were more likely to discuss positive memories about extracurricular activities. This is not to suggest that white parents did not have any positive relationships with teachers, or that African American parents did not have positive experiences with extracurricular activities. However, when permitted to speak freely about their past experiences, particular issues were more salient for some parents than others.

Salient memories of relationships may reflect a tendency to value interpersonal aspects of education, while prominent memories about extracurricular activities may reflect a tendency to place importance on structural aspects of education. The emergent pattern of data is provocative and may differentially contribute to parental engagement and educational decision making. Stylistic thoughts about the educational system may influence the likelihood that parents will change their children's school if provided with the opportunity to do so. Because the local controlled school choice policy is essentially, a structural change to the educational system, parents who think structurally may be more inclined to actively select a new school. As

demonstrated in interviews, positive relationships with teachers are able to flourish under many circumstances. In contrast, structural aspects of education such as extracurricular activities, academic curricula, after-school programs, and pedagogical themes will likely vary depending on the school.

Parents who based decisions on relationships with others may be less likely to switch schools after they have established relationships with individual teachers. This tendency may be exacerbated for parents of disadvantaged backgrounds attempting to cope with a discriminatory school system who have not articulated larger, more systemic issues currently facing African American children. If there are significant differences between schools, children of these parents may be at a disadvantage with respect to quality of resources and curriculum to name a few. Alternatively, if relationships are a protective factor against other detrimental outcomes, as they appeared to have been for several of the participating parents, the children with more solid relationships with their teachers may have an advantage.

Misguided trust and parent-teacher relationships. Building on the implications of the previous section, parents who value relationships with particular individuals may be less likely to question negative experiences of their children as possibly being rooted in an unjust system. Holding a belief that the school system was unjust would require them to think of particular teachers as part of that system, which may feel disloyal and unacceptable. In a sense, when a child is mistreated by an individual person, the likelihood of righting that wrong, so to speak, is much higher than articulating a system-wide issue and then facilitating change. When parents are able to engage with school staff members in a way that allows them to advocate for, or protect their children from particular individuals, they are likely to feel empowered. This is reinforcing and may actually reduce the likelihood that they would seek out alternative explanations for

mistreatment. Although meaningful relationships with teachers provide children and parents with positive experiences, they may also serve to inhibit higher levels of change. Ideally, interventions would be aimed at maintaining existing positive relationships, while simultaneously allowing parents opportunities to experience and discuss larger systemic issues impacting the treatment and education of their children.

Parental Knowledge

As was described in more detail in chapter two, the local context provided a natural laboratory to investigate one public school choice policy and the ways in which it was experienced by the parents and children it was intended to provide with increased educational opportunities. To provide a brief review, the local community is racially and economically segregated, and the school system's prior attempts to integrate the schools racially have not been successful. Further, many of the reform efforts implemented by the district have been viewed as half-hearted, ill-informed, or ill-intentioned by some members of the community. In 1996, a class action law suit was filed by a group of African American students and their families claiming systematic mistreatment of African American students by the school district. As a result, the school and the plaintiffs bringing the suit entered into a formal consent decree, which outlined the implementation of the controlled public school choice program.

As discussed in detail throughout this manuscript, the participating parents were engaged with their children's education, and continuously made educationally-relevant decisions. However, not all of the parents made school-choice decisions per se. If the school choice policy operated as it was conceptualized, all parents would be required to make a school-choice decision. Therefore, it is important to understand why some of the participating parents did not make a school-choice decision. As described in chapter two, the children of participating parents

were in the 3rd grade when the school choice program was initially implemented. Parents had the option of utilizing the program to send their children to different schools, or declining to participate and have their children complete elementary school in their original attendance-zone school. Theoretically, all parents should have been informed of this option. However, as demonstrated in the interviews, parents reported that they were not consistently provided with accurate information.

Intimate working knowledge. Three parents with the most sophisticated knowledge of the program as well as its origins were either currently or previously employed by the school system. As reported in their interviews, two of them expended a great deal of time and energy to change schools within the confines of the school choice program. Both parents were African American and described the ways in which the school choice policy did not necessarily facilitate increased educational options for their children. In fact, their actions mirrored the perceptions of other minority parents in the district regarding the school choice policy. Parents of color report that they must be very strategic when selecting schools for their children in order to increase the likelihood that they receive one of their three choices, and to ensure that their children will be able to attend the same school. Although there is theoretically a sibling preference, two African American mothers described a great deal of difficulty having their children placed in the same school.

In contrast, one white parent had intimate working knowledge of the schools and the controlled school choice policy. She reported that the policy had increased her school choice options. She was also able to reflect on the overall ineffectiveness of the program, highlighting the lack of racial integration among schools. Two other parents were aware of the program, but were not impacted by the program positively or negatively because they chose to have their

children remain at their original attendance-zone school. It is important to keep in mind that this would not automatically be an option for students who did not begin elementary school prior to the implementation of the controlled school choice policy.

Ann and Crystal reported that they were inaccurately informed about the school choice policy by the school district. Interestingly, both parents were white and of low socioeconomic status, and initially reported that there was no school choice program in operation for elementary school students. The only schools available for their children were Woodson, and Lincoln, the one magnet school in the district at the time. If empowering disadvantaged parents via increased educational decision making power is valued by the school district, this issue requires further investigation. The remaining parents did not report any knowledge of a school choice program.

With respect to school choice, parents must be informed about new opportunities in order to utilize them. Further, school choice options must actually be available. Although this seems like an obvious requirement, the informed, participating African American parents were significantly inconvenienced. The informed, participating white parents either benefited or experienced no adverse impacts from the school choice program. In addition, some of the parents were either not informed or misinformed about the program. When parents do not have accurate knowledge about the options available to them, they are meaningless. Given that there is currently more widespread public knowledge about the school choice program in Korbel, it is troubling that these particular parents were unaware of the policy. It is possible that the policy's recent implementation at the time of the study contributed to their lack of knowledge. However, it is important to consider alternatives (e.g., district administrators did not have adequate resources to convey accurate information, or staff members at the registration center provided skewed information to these particular parents to help balance the racial composition of schools).

If this mismatch between parental awareness of the school choice policy is a result of intentional misrepresentation of the actual options available to parents by the school district, action should be taken to remedy this practice. However, it may also be the case that parents did not articulate accurate understanding of the policy, but did receive it from the district at some point in time. If this is the case, interventions should be aimed at helping disadvantaged parents more accurately understand the school choice options available to them.

The current research suggests that parents with intimate working knowledge of their children's schools are better equipped to understand and navigate the school system in a way that benefits their children. If this is true and we are dedicated to making educational opportunities more equitable, procedures, practices, and policies should be designed to assist parents in obtaining such intimate working knowledge. Intervening in such as way has the potential to increase the likelihood that parents will adopt more systemic rather than individualistic perspectives about the poor performance of particular groups of students and/or particular schools. Informal (e.g., encouraging teachers to invite parents to the classroom, and having parents spend time within the school but outside of the classroom) and formal (e.g., implementing policies requiring schools to provide parents with a forum to share information, linking parents who are unavailable during the day with parents who are able to observe classrooms, and having parents provide feedback regarding the classroom practices of the teachers to name just a few possibilities) interventions aimed at increasing the quantity and quality of time parents are able to participate in their child's school may be helpful in achieving such a goal.

School Choice Decisions

Understanding how parents of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds make school choice decisions when provided with increased decision making power for their children, seems to be a relatively straightforward issue. However, it is somewhat complicated by parents not communicating openly and honestly about racially-driven motivations for sending their children to schools in which they will be in the majority.

Diverse versus homogeneous school environment. Parents varied with respect to knowledge about the novel school choice policy in particular, and knowledge of the local school system in general. Parents who lack intimate working knowledge were more likely to explain poor academic performance with individual characteristics or traits of students and/or their families. Parents with working knowledge were more likely to observe and articulate systematic differences in the treatment of African American students in the district. Interestingly, the African American parents articulating these issues were more likely to discuss the importance of providing minority children with a supportive early environment, and reported that they only sought a diverse setting with respect to students' race and ethnicity after their children had had such a positive early experience. Teresa was one parent who articulated such a view in her interview. She described concerns about the negative assumptions a predominantly white teaching staff and student body might make about her children with respect to their potential for academic achievement. This is consistent with longstanding opinions in the educational literature suggesting that a supportive early environment with children of shared cultural backgrounds is an important experience for optimal social and emotional growth (Golan & Eisdorfer, 1972).

As described above, Ann and Dianne had intimate working knowledge of the school choice policy and broader school system, and were more likely to make formal school choice

decisions for their children prior to the controlled public school choice program by sending them to the magnet school in the district. Although they reported valuing a diverse learning environment for their children, the underlying message was that African American children and their families have many discipline problems that disrupt the learning of other children who are capable of learning and who are engaged with school in a positive manner. It is not surprising then, that these parents also made decisions to provide their children with settings in which they were the majority.

Understanding the desires of parents to have their children educated in a particular environment with respect to demographic characteristics of the other students provides insight into why parents may select particular schools. When parents select schools for these qualities, the likelihood that schools will be naturally integrated decreases substantially. Because it is "controlled," the actual school choice policy should be capable of addressing this issue. However, because parents vary in the extent to which they are able to utilize their resources, some families will be more adept at enrolling their children in the desired school. Teresa utilized such resources to enroll her children at Woodson (e.g., having her children evaluated for the gifted program so that their demographic characteristics increased, instead of decreased, the likelihood that she would obtain her first choice). Other families might utilize economic resources to enroll their children in private schools, or relocate to another school district. Without carefully considering the demographic composition of schools as a decision-making factor while simultaneously understanding the ways in which parents will react if they do not receive their schools of choice, a controlled public school-choice policy will be ineffective in ensuring integrated schools. To the extent that a school district values integration, school choice interventions and reform efforts should be geared toward improving the actual conditions within

the schools to make an integrated environment more desirable to parents and children. Such efforts would not be a novel concept to the field of education, and many innovative strategies have received attention. Within the context of the school choice literature, some charter school experiments have been successful in attracting a diverse student body (Vanourek, Manno, Finn, Jr., & Bierlin, 1998). Further, voluntary desegregation plans have also been able to attract and maintain increased racial diversity (Orfield, et al., 1998). In the following section, the relative strengths and weaknesses of the present study are described, followed by a brief summary of implications and future directions.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The depth of the current study is the most important strength of this research, and may simultaneously be one of the most significant weaknesses. Providing parents of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds with relatively unstructured space to explore their families' educational experiences in depth, was aimed at promoting opportunities to share both their personal and collective struggles and successes with the educational system. The depth of the interviews was critical in understanding the ways in which families from disadvantaged backgrounds made sense of and operated within the context of the controlled public school choice program under scrutiny. Understanding the unique perspectives of families of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds lent itself to more sophisticated knowledge about the shortcomings of school reform efforts informed by traditional, middle-class notions of parental involvement and educational success. Although not the immediate goal of the research, this perspective can inform and improve future school reform efforts geared toward enhancing the educational experiences and/or outcomes for children of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds.

An additional strength of the present research is related to the process of engaging in the research versus the particular outcomes of the study. More specifically, one underlying value of this research was to avoid in reinforcing the tendency to engage in victim-blaming, which occurs when researchers and policymakers ignore the social context of disadvantaged people (Ryan, 1971). In the present study, explicit attempts were made to obtain a more contextualized understanding of families' experiences. This approach was emphasized to help prevent the educational system, via personnel, practices, and policies, from simply locating the primary responsibility for the poor academic performance of disadvantaged students on their families' school-choice decisions. Further, by listening to parents whose perspectives are not necessarily well represented in the broader educational literature, information that may otherwise be left unknown, misinterpreted or oversimplified is gained and subsequently available to better understand school choice utilization rates, and inform future interventions.

Because the present study was aimed at obtaining in-depth information about one particular community, information about the broader community context was gathered to inform aspects of the research including data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This knowledge base provides important insight into understanding how the local climate can influence the implementation of any school reform effort. In the current research, the school choice program would not have been implemented had there not been a consent decree between a group of plaintiffs and the school district to act as a catalyst. Further, the conditions that precipitated the class action lawsuit are also important in understanding how parents make sense of increased educational decision-making power. As noted in the introduction, not all school choice programs are implemented as the result of a court-ordered consent decree. Other programs have been more successful in achieving their goals when participation in the program is voluntary (Fuller,

Elmore, & Orfield, 1996). The conditions under which school reform policies are adopted and implemented have the potential to shed light on the likelihood of a particular policy's shortcomings and successes.

Many of the patterns observed in the present research are provocative and worth pursuing. However, it is difficult to speak conclusively about such a small number of people. This is particularly important to keep in mind when interpreting data suggesting that there may be differences among people based on their socioeconomic status or race. The present sample was less than ideal in other ways as well. For instance, although there were copious amounts of data for the target children of participating parents, there was no information from the educational records of their siblings. Accessing information about how parents made decisions for their other children at various points in time (e.g., when they were beginning kindergarten) might provide a more contextualized understanding about the ways in which parents make sense of increased educational opportunities via school choice.

A final weakness of the present research is related to the quality and quantity of the data collected. In order to gain access into and intimate knowledge about the lived experiences of the participating families, a great deal of time and effort was expended. Therefore, the methods utilized in this study were not necessarily efficient. However, it is hoped that the unique insights gained from this work will inform future research that may not delve as deeply into the lives of the participating families.

Summary

Exploring past and present educational experiences of participating families was valuable in gaining insight into how parents knew about and understood a novel school choice policy. Unfortunately, school choice reform efforts in the local community have not positively impacted

many of the women who participated in the present research. This is particularly disturbing because families in the present study represent the families the school choice policy was theoretically aiming to provide increased decision-making power. The complicated ways in which parents interact with their children's schools as well as the ways in which the schools interact with children and their parents seems to impede rather than promote genuine collaboration and communication between parents and schools. This hinders parents and teachers ability to obtain a mutual understanding of the unique strengths and weaknesses of a particular child. When understood in the context of the unequal distribution of power in home-school relations, parents who participate in their child's education in non-traditional ways will likely be excluded from many routine aspects of their child's education. Therefore, providing disadvantaged parents with one additional, formal educational option seems unlikely to alter their child's education in a meaningful way.

Perhaps this helps explain why many policies that provide parents of low socioeconomic status and minority backgrounds with circumscribed decision-making power via increased school choice have generally not resulted in improved outcomes for children and parents. The present findings related to non school-choice parental engagement suggest that interventions providing parents of low socioeconomic status and minority backgrounds meaningful decision-making power throughout their children's education will be more likely better equipped to facilitate meaningful change and improvement. However, in a society that already makes negative assumptions about mothers of minority and/or low socioeconomic children, it will be very difficult to shrink the growing cultural gap between the actual lived experiences of the participating families and the dominant school culture. As an initial step, the role of a parent advocate may help parents who feel overwhelmed and frustrated with their children's education

on a regular basis. However, a great deal of care is necessary to locate advocates who enjoy working with parents and children, but at the same time respects them as equals. To further close the gap, school systems must be responsive to parents and make an effort to engage them in ways that are meaningful and important from their own perspectives, not only in ways that reflect the values of the educational administration. Handler recommends that social agencies, such as schools, adopt a participatory versus bureaucratic approach to parental engagement in order to help facilitate the empowerment of disadvantaged families (1990).

Ideally, public school choice may increase the educational options available to parents of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds. However, as illustrated here, it also has the potential of perpetuating the power differences inherent in the public school system. Parents of low socioeconomic status and minority backgrounds are less likely to interact with schools in traditional ways. These families are less likely to be treated as equals by teachers and school personnel, which may limit their ability to obtain accurate information about their children's education. Some families and school staff members may engage in a student or family-blaming ideology, which locates responsibility for poor performance outside of the school. Such individualistic and family-based explanations of negative educational outcomes for disadvantaged students restrict the likelihood that parents and community members will identify problems within particular schools and the larger educational system. This is in contrast to the theory driving the current school choice policy, which suggests that there are differences among schools. When disadvantaged parents make school choice decisions that appear to be counterintuitive to school personnel and district administrators, negative assumptions about parents and the value they place on their child's education are reinforced. This cycle further perpetuates the unequal distribution of power in home-school relations, misunderstandings

between parents and teachers, and ultimately less than optimal educational opportunities for children of low socioeconomic status and/or minority backgrounds.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Situating the Researcher

In this section, I present personal educational experiences for several reasons. First, I believe personal experiences are important with respect to how I might understand and interpret the educational experiences of people who did not experience school in a similar way. However, it is important to note that none of my negative experiences drastically changed the trajectory of my education. In that way, they are only minor irritations along the road of educational success. It can be difficult to fully appreciate the potential impact of a particular situation, or set of experiences, when you do not have a contextualized understanding of a person or family. The importance of context is intensified when students and families from similar backgrounds, different from your own, repeatedly share negative educational experiences while you are simultaneously enjoying positive (or at least neutral) educational experiences. Second, memories of these experiences were evoked while engaging with students and families involved with the present study. These similarities suggest that the phenomena described in this manuscript may be reflective of a school culture that is at times negative for all children and their families, but particularly harmful to children and families of minority backgrounds. Third, to some, I might be considered as a distant participant of my own research. I was born, raised, and educated in Korbel, the very community under scrutiny in the present project. Although much appears to have changed for students in Korbel from the time I was a student, much more appears to have remained the same.

Choice, with respect to education, has recently swept the nation as an approach to reform public schools. Most educational choice plans are aimed at providing people without the economic resources to relocate in a desirable school district or pay the cost of private school

tuition the opportunity to make decisions about which school their children should attend. In this manuscript, I will argue that providing this "opportunity" to families of low socioeconomic status will not produce meaningful change in an individual child's education or in the public school system as a whole. However, I make this argument from the privileged perspective of a successful, white, middle-class student. Furthermore, I attended a private Catholic school for the first nine years of my formal education. I feel that I can speak from experience and say that the education I received in the private school was likely not superior to the education provided to children in public schools. Nevertheless, my parents felt strongly about sending me to the school I attended, and should their decisions be disregarded because I may not have benefited academically? If they were unable to pay for my education, are their decisions any less important? Did they care more about my education than parents who did not send their children to private schools? My response to these questions would be "no." However, the answers to these questions are controversial, and undoubtedly many would disagree. Underlying these questions are beliefs about whose children are deserving and whose are not.

As a white student with "involved" parents, I think I was for the most part, viewed by my teachers and other school staff as "deserving" of their time, energy and attention. Further, they held high expectations for what I was capable to achieve. However, there were exceptions that I can remember vividly. One incident that readily comes to mind occurred when I was in the 5th grade. We were learning long division in math, and I had missed several days of school. I asked my father to help me with the schoolwork I had missed. He taught me how to do long division. All was well until we had our first test comprised of long division problems. I completed the test, and did not think about it again until we received our graded exams. I had an "F" on the top of my paper in the darkest, reddest ink I had ever seen. As a student who typically did well in

school academically, I was upset. When we reviewed the correct answers in class, I was surprised and relieved to learn that I had answered all of the questions correctly. When it was time to complete work in our seats, I walked to Mrs. Park's desk to ask her about my test. She was disgusted with my approach to the problems, and I can still hear her voice in my head to this day. She spoke so loudly the entire class could hear and said, "I don't know who taught you to do long division! I've never seen anything like this in all my years of teaching." Although I had every answer correct, she had graded them as incorrect because I did not follow the method she had taught in class. I remember feeling humiliated. I also remember feeling mad at my father for teaching me to do problems the "wrong" way. I did not want to go back to school the next day, and I never felt the same way about Mrs. Park again.

For me, instances like the one described above were rare. I never thought about the treatment of students by teachers in a systemic way until I graduated from junior high in my private school, and began to attend the public high school. I was not directly involved in the incident that first triggered my awareness of the differential treatment of students. Throughout kindergarten through 8th grade, I attended school with primarily the same group of children. All but one of the students in my grade was white. The only non-white student was an African American girl, Kayla Jordan. Kayla had been a good friend, and a rival classmate in the sense that she almost always had the top score on every test or assignment I can remember. She clearly had a reputation for being very smart, if not the smartest student in our entire grade.

When it was time select courses for high school, Kayla informed us that she would not be attending the public high school we would be attending as she had originally planned. Apparently, Kayla and her parents had an unacceptable experience with the guidance counselor at the high school. Despite recommendations from her teachers at the private school, Kayla was

not permitted to register for the advanced level English course at the high school. Her parents were extremely upset, and first tried to convince the counselor to enroll Kayla in the advanced course. They were confronted with so much resistance from the school they decided to relocate to another district in order to register Kayla in a different high school. I remember feeling shocked about the situation, but then I remember feeling like Kayla's parents were completely overreacting. I thought it was silly that they were so upset, and that they would actually relocate so that she could avoid attending a particular school. From my perspective and life experiences, all schools were relatively equal. Regardless of whether or not the high school Kayla attended was different, her parents felt strongly that it was.

Although there were other instances in high school that provided me with a much more realistic picture of how educational experiences vary drastically depending on who you are, or who your parents are, I did not fully appreciate the impact these experiences have on children and their families. I also had very little insight to the fact that I enjoyed the luxury of not having to think about these issues because they almost never directly had a personal impact one way or the other.

Grappling with issues of fairness and education is at times difficult for people who have benefited from an unjust system. This is particularly true for me as I have more recently obtained a critical understanding of the school system and community in which I was educated and raised. I believe that my status as a life-long resident of Korbel has had a major impact on the current project. First, I have an additional source of data about the community in which the school system is located, which is comprised of my own life experiences as well as those of my family. Although this provides a wealth of information, it also adds a layer of complexity to my interactions with participants and to my interpretations of their beliefs and behaviors. Second,

there were several people I interacted with who seemed to be more at ease with me because I was "home-grown." In other words, to some people, particularly African American parents, teachers, and school staff, I was viewed as more legitimate or trustworthy because I had roots in Korbel. Although clearly an outsider in many ways, I was in insider in others. There was a sense of connectedness that I felt with some of the participants in way that may not have developed as readily if I had not been born and raised in Korbel.

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Introduction: "As I mentioned on the phone, I am interested in learning about how parents make decisions about their child's education. Before we get started, let's review this form." At this point, I will ask parents if they have any questions before we begin the interview. After answering any questions, I will give the following prompt:

"I usually like to start interviews with parents in a way that helps me get to know a little bit about their child and their family. So, if you could just tell me a little bit about your family--that would be great." If the following areas are not covered in the initial response, I will ask about them directly.

> Demographic information about parent(s) and all children including race, ages, and gender. Parent(s) occupations. Where is the family from? Where has the family lived? Who currently lives in the household? Why do they live in Korbel? How did they decide where to live?

"Before we start talking about child's name and the decisions you have made about his/her education, some parents enjoy the chance to talk some about their own educational experiences as a child. Please tell me a little bit about your own schooling experiences." If the following areas are not covered spontaneously, I will ask about them directly.

> Where did the parents go to school? What types of schools did they attend (public, private, religious, etc.)? What types of students attended their schools? What types of teachers taught at the schools? Overall feelings about the different educational settings they have experienced. How did they feel when they were there? What do they remember most about their education? Did they enjoy school? Do they feel like their education prepared them for life after school? How they did in school academically, behaviorally, and socially. What expectations or hopes for their children did they have before they actually had children, or before their children actually attended school?

I will thank the parents for talking about their own experiences and then move on to asking them about the decisions they have made for their child. "Sometimes it is easiest to talk about your child's education by starting at the beginning. For some people this is day care, preschool, or an early childhood program of some sort. For others, it is kindergarten or first grade. Please just start wherever makes the most sense for child's name." If the following areas are not covered, I will ask about them directly. More likely than not, I will be able to follow-up on many of these as the parent is talking without interrupting them too much.

> Obtain an educational history for the child including where they went to school, how they did in school academically, behaviorally, and socially. For any decisions parents talk about, I will ask what information they used to make the decision, how they think that decision influenced their child's progress, how they felt about their decision after they made it-were they happy/satisfied/disappointed, etc. If a child has siblings, I will ask parents if they have made different decisions for each of their children. If they have, I

will ask what led them to make these decisions. I will also ask whether or not they would make the same educational decisions for their child if given the chance to choose again.

The final section of the interview may or may not be necessary depending on how much information was covered earlier. I will ask questions about the local community, the local school system, and local schools in order to understand how much parents know about the controlled schools of choice program. I will also want to get a sense for the information parents remember receiving from the school system. This will include any actual information, as well as their interpretations of the information. Because parents may also make decisions for their child based on second-hand knowledge about the positive or negative educational experiences of another child, I will ask the parent if they utilized this type of information when making decisions. I will ask what they think of the local school system, and the particular schools their children have attended. In addition to earlier questions about how their individual child is doing at school, I will also ask parents how their child's school is doing for all children. I will ask questions about whether or not their child is similar or different from other students in their schools, and how their child feels about their school and their education in general.

Appendix C: Demographic Characteristics of Parent Participants

Parent	Race	Education	Employment	Neighborhood	Time in Korbel
Teresa	African American	Masters Degree in Education	Educator	Working Class African American	Lifetime
Willina	African American	High School Diploma	Registration Clerk at Hospital	Working Class White	High School; Returned 12 Years Ago
Marie	African American	Associates Degree in Dance	Substitute Teacher's Aide; Foster Mother	Working Class African American	Lifetime
Rose	African American	6th Grade	Widowed Homemaker Raising Grandchildren	Poor to Working Class African American	Lifetime
Faith	African American	High School	Owns and Operates Small Hauling Business	Public Housing Project	Lived in Korbel from Birth to Middle School; Returned Several Years Ago
Hazel	African American	Associates Degree in Child Development	Homemaker; Foster Mother	Poor to Working Class African American	Moved to Korbel 12 Years Ago
Stacy	Biracial	Masters Degree in Social Work	Clinician	Economically and Racially Diverse	Lifetime Resident of Nearby Town; Graduate School and Beyond in Korbel
Ann	White	Associates Degree in Child Development	Clerk at a Local Small Business	Poor to Working Class African American	Middle and High School; Moved to Korbel from Nearby Town 2 Years Ago
Dianne	White	Bachelors Degree	Assistant at Landscaping Company	Working Class African American	Moved to Korbel 7 Years Ago
Crystal	White	Attended Some High School	Receives Disability for Rheumatoid Arthritis	Trailer Park White and Latino	Lifetime

Appendix D: Educational Characteristics of Children

Parent	Child	Elementary Schools	School Choice	Special Education	Reading Level	Grades	Standardized Test Scores
Teresa	Marcus	Lincoln (K-4th) Woodson (5th)	Yes	No	Below grade level	Average through 4th grade then significant drop	Below in reading and writing; average to above average in math
Willina	Travien	Woodson (K-3rd) H. Keller (4th-5th)	No	Learning Disability	Below	Average to below average through 3rd; then below	Below in all areas except writing in the 3rd grade
Marie	Tameka	Private, religious school (K-2nd) Branford (3rd-5th)	Yes	"Mental Impairment"	Not assessed	Grades on Individualized Education Plan	Below in all areas
Rose	Kayla	North Ridge (K-5th)	No	No	Below grade level	Average to poor	Below in all areas
Faith	Jennifer	Not in district (K) Springfield (1st-2nd) North ridge (3rd-5th)	No	No	Slightly below grade level	Average to above average	Below in all areas with the exception of science
Hazel	Keith	Woodson (K-5th)	Yes	No	Below until 4th Average	Average to above average	Below in all areas
Stacy	Zach	Lincoln (K-5th)	Yes	Learning Disability	Below grade level	Average to slightly below average	Below in reading, writing, math; Above in others
Ann	Leigh	Outside of District (K-3rd) Woodson (4th-5th)	No	No	At expected levels	Above average	Above average except science
Dianne	Mindy	Woodson (K-1st) Lincoln (2nd-5th)	Yes	No	Above	Above average	Average to above average
Crystal	Misty	Lincoln (K) Woodson (K-5th)	No	"Mental Impairment"	Below	Below average to failing	Below in all areas
Crystal	Tyler	Woodson (K) Lincoln (K) Woodson (K-5th)	No	"Mental Impairment"	Below expected levels	Below average to failing	Below in all areas

Appendix E: Distal Educational Experiences

Parent	Reported Interpersonal Memories of Education	Reported Structural Memories of Education	Discussed Value Placed on Children's Education
Teresa	X		X
Willina	X		X
Marie			X
Rose			X
Faith	X		X
Hazel			X
Stacy	X	X	
Ann			X
Dianne		X	X
Crystal		X	

Appendix F: Proximal Educational Experiences

Parent	Type of Reactive Engagement	Proactive Engagement	Indirect Engagement	Educational Decisions	Explanation for Poor Academic Performance
Teresa	-Practices and Policies -Assumptions of Incompetence			-Reactive	-Schools
Willina	-People		-Schoolwork	-Reactive	-Families
Marie	-Practices and Policies	-"Walking the Halls"		-Reactive -Proactive	-Schools
Rose					
Faith		-"Walking the Halls"		-Reactive	-Tests
Hazel	-People		-Schoolwork	-Reactive	-Families
Stacy	-Assumptions of Competence			-Formal	-Children/Families
Ann	-Assumptions of Competence			-Formal	
Dianne				-Formal	-Children/Families
Crystal	-People			-Formal	

Appendix G: Knowledge of the Schools of Choice Program

Parent	Intimate Working Knowledge	Informally Informed	Inaccurately Informed	Not Informed
Teresa	X			
Willina				X
Marie	X			
Rose				X
Faith				X
Hazel		X		
Stacy		X		
Ann			X	
Dianne	X			
Crystal			X	

CURRICULUM VITAE

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Education

Ph.D. June 2005
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Major: Clinical-Community Psychology
Minor: Family Law and Policy
Dissertation Title: *"Controlled" School Choice: Understanding Educational Decision Making for Families of Low Socioeconomic Status and/or Minority Backgrounds*
Dissertation Committee: Julian Rappaport, Ph.D. (chair), Carol Diener, Ph.D., J.D., Thomas Moore, Ph.D., Nicole Allen, Ph.D., Susan Noffke, Ph.D.

M.A. July 2002
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Major: Clinical-Community Psychology
Thesis Title: *Examining the Role of Young Adults' Folk Theories of Mental Illness in the Rejection or Acceptance of Psychotropic Medication*
Research Advisors: Peggy Miller, Ph.D. (chair), Carol Diener, Ph.D., J.D.

B.S. August 1998
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Major: Psychology (with Departmental Distinction)
Honors Thesis Title: *Single Parent Families: Stress, Social Support, Moods, and Parenting*
Research Advisor: Reed Larson, Ph.D.

Honors and Awards

Bush Center Child Development and Social Policy Fellow at Yale University: 2004
Herman Eisen Memorial Award for Outstanding Professional Contributions: 2002
Excellent Instructor for Undergraduate Teaching at the University of Illinois: 2001-2002
Graduate Teaching Certificate, the University of Illinois: 2002
Travel Grants to the Annual Positive Psychology Summit, the Gallup Organization: 2001; 2000
Psi Chi National Honor Society in Psychology: 1998
Golden Key National Honor Society: 1998
Phi Eta Sigma, the University of Illinois: 1997

Committees and Organizations

Institutional Review Board: University of Illinois (2002-03)
School Improvement Team: Stratton Elementary School (2002-03)
Data Consultation Panel: Urbana School District (2002-03)
Qualitative Data Analysis Discussion Group: University of Illinois (2001-02)
Crisis Response Team: Stratton Elementary School (2000-01)
Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Working Group: Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, Urbana Field Office (2000-01)
Partners for Progress: University of Illinois and Stratton Elementary School (2000-03)
Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support Team: Stratton Elementary School (2000-02)

Advanced Clinical Training

Clinical-Child Psychology Fellow: Yale Child Study Center
July 2003-June 2005
Supervisor: Laurie Cardona, Psy.D.
Training Director: Michelle Goyette-Ewing, Ph.D.

Comprehensive pre- and post-doctoral clinical fellowship in child and adolescent psychology. The fellowship included intensive training in assessment, therapy, consultation, and supervision. Settings for rotations included inpatient hospitals, an outpatient clinic, as well as in the community.

Publications

Rudolph, K.D., Kurlakowsky, K.D., & Conley, C.S. (2001). Developmental and social-contextual origins of depressive control-related beliefs and behavior. Cognitive Therapy and Research, 25, 447-475.

Rudolph, K.D., Lambert, S.F., Clark, A.G., & Kurlakowsky, K.D. (1999). Negotiating the transition to middle school: The role of self-regulatory processes and social context. Child Development, 72, 929-946.

Presentations

Clark, A.G., & Kurlakowsky, K.D. (2003, June). It's not about education: Overemphasis on behavior management in schools. Public Schooling: It's not about education. Symposium accepted for presentation at the Society for Community Research and Action: Biennial Meeting, Las Vegas, NM.

Kurlakowsky, K.D. (2003, April). Understanding the psychological meaning of taking psychotropic medication for children and adolescents. Poster accepted for presentation at the *Society for Research of Child Development: Biennial Meeting, Tampa, FL.*

Kurlakowsky, K.D., & Clark, A.G. (2001, October). Teaching positively: Educators' perspectives on a strengths-based approach for working with troubled youth. Poster presented at the *Positive Psychology Summit, Washington, DC.*

Goddard, K., & Kurlakowsky, K.D. (2001, June). Collaborative partnerships: Evaluation, research, and service in a school setting. Poster presented at the *Society for Research and Community Action, Biennial Meeting, Atlanta, GA.*

Kurlakowsky, K.D., Reed, M., & Diener, C.I. (2001, April). Domestic violence and children: Is foster care the only answer? Poster presented at the *Society for Research of Child Development: Biennial Meeting, Minneapolis, MN.*

Conley, C.S., Rudolph, K.D., Clark, A.G., Kurlakowsky, K.D., & Lambert, S.F. (2000, August). Negotiating the transition to middle school: The role of self-regulatory processes. Poster presented at the *American Psychological Association Annual Convention, Society of Clinical Psychology, Washington, DC.*

Kurlakowsky, K.D., & Rudolph, K.D. (2000, May). The impact of parental separations and low perceptions of control on childhood depression. Paper Presented at the *Midwestern Psychological Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL.*

Kurlakowsky, K.D., Ege, P.E., & Diener, C.I. (2000, May). The Circle Academy: Addressing the special needs of youth with severe emotional and behavioral difficulties. Paper Presented at the *Midwestern Psychological Association Annual Meeting, Affiliated Meeting of the Society for Community Research and Action, Chicago, IL.*

Rudolph, K.D., & Kurlakowsky, K.D. (1999, August). Characteristics of the transition to middle school. Paper Presented at the *Education to Careers Annual Meeting, Peoria, IL.*

Rudolph, K.D., Clark, A.G., & Kurlakowsky, K.D. (1999, April). Conceptions of relationships and interpersonal competence in depressed children: Social-cognitive distortion or reality? Paper presented at the *Society for Research of Child Development: Biennial Meeting, Albuquerque, NM.*

Teaching Experience

Adjunct Faculty: Quinnipiac University
January 2005-present
Supervisor: Sharlene Walbaum, Ph.D.

Currently responsible for all aspects of coordinating and instructing an undergraduate course in abnormal psychology.

Supervisor: Social Work Fellowship, Yale Child Study Center
July 2004-June 2005
Supervisor: Howard Kahn, Ph.D.

Co-supervisor of a group of social workers completing post-masters social work fellowships emphasizing clinical work with families, children, and adolescents in an outpatient clinic from underserved populations.

Guest Lecturer: Child Psychiatry Fellowship, Yale Child Study Center
March 2005
Supervisor: Laurie Cardona, Psy.D.

Provide guest lectures to child psychiatry fellows with the goal of enhancing their knowledge of psychological testing and to help them utilize testing reports in their work with children, adolescents and families.

Instructor: Cunningham Children's Home Internship Program
August 2001-present
Supervisor: Carol Diener, Ph.D., J.D.

Served as the independent instructor for the seminar portion of a year-long paraprofessional clinical training program at a residential treatment facility for abused and neglected youth experiencing extreme emotional and/or behavioral difficulties. The seminar included lectures and discussions on the ways in which of individual, familial, and systemic issues impact the lives of the children and adolescents residing at Cunningham Children's Home. Approaches to individual treatment, family treatment, and community intervention were also addressed. Increasing the interns' awareness of cultural and ethical issues was an ongoing goal for the year-long seminar.

Clinical Supervisor: Cunningham Children's Home Internship Program
August 1998-present
Supervisor: Carol Diener, Ph.D., J.D.

Provided supervision to advanced undergraduate interns participating in the Cunningham Children's Home internship program. Additional responsibilities included monthly group supervision sessions, individual supervision sessions on an as-needed basis, evaluating intern performance, providing interns with feedback, grading written case histories and oral case presentations as well as lecturing on numerous topics relevant to working with troubled youth.