

Middle class parents' participation in a social network and perspectives of school choice in Detroit: Findings from the perspectives of innovator parents

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Abstract

This community-based, participatory action research study examined confidence in school decisions among social network participants. Participants reflect the perspective of a critical mass of parents who selected Detroit schools across public and charter entities. This study examines how the social network supported knowledge of successful school traits that influenced the selection of schools, willingness to support new cohort families, and perspectives of the reading curriculum. Additionally documented is parental involvement at select schools, perceptions of racially integrated schools and children's experiences at selected schools. This study documented the group's third year in the endeavor of informing about the onset of the children's educational journey. Interview and survey data revealed confidence in public and charter school selections and parents' willingness to contribute time, resources and advocacy to promote educational equality. These results are significant because their school choice decisions contributed to residential and educational sustainability and transformed an uncertain school landscape, against common convention of moving to the suburbs upon their children reaching school age.

Introduction

This study documented the perspectives of parent co-facilitators of a social network. The parents joined forces in 2013 as a response to a bewildering educational landscape that emerged as a consequence of a succession of public school closures and proliferation of unfamiliar charter schools. School choice decisions were informed by information sharing and led to selecting and enrolling their children in city schools instead of the common convention of moving to the suburbs upon their children reaching school age. Similar to trends in other major cities, participation in a social network supported the selection of and enrollment into schools in an uncertain and bewildering school landscape (Lareau & Goyette, 2014). Participants in the network researched and ultimately selected and advocated for its aspiring and high performing public and charter school options. Participants' residency and school choices have emerged against the common convention of moving to the most affluent communities they are able to afford to secure enrollment in high achieving and well-resourced suburban public schools, as a response to failing or perceiving failing city schools. Among middle class families who have continued residency in the city, school choice trends include suburban private options or suburban schools of choice. Participants in the study endeavored to influence their select schools' implementation of innovative curricular practices,

within an era of accountability and the broader proliferation of school choice. Parents facilitated community-based, parent organizing school reform efforts in their selected schools in order to influence community-oriented schools. Participants' school choices were embedded in existing peer groups, playgroups, and activities in their city neighborhoods. The parents are known as innovator parents, on the basis of being the first cohort of families among their peers to enroll their children in schools in Detroit, during a context of a bewildering educational landscape.

Through the lens of Freire's (2000) concept of praxis, analysis of surveys and semi-structured interviews, this study documented parents' perspectives surrounding factors guiding their school choices embedded in knowledge of traits of successful schools and perspectives of racial integration at their select schools. Perspectives of reading curriculum, perceptions of parental participation and advocacy efforts, along with their children's experiences at their respective schools will also be examined. **Theoretical Framework**

Where people live influences one's educational trajectory, upward mobility and has historically been linked with school quality. Historically, white middle class families have moved to the most affluent suburbs their resources will allow, which has perpetuated residential and educational inequality (Lareau & Goyette, 2014). Moreover, middle class families across racial lines residing in cities have traditionally relocated to suburban communities upon their children reaching school age. As moderate and middle-class families are moving into gentrifying urban areas across the nation, the emerging trend is to pursue housing preferences without regard for the neighborhood school and to give urban, citywide public and charter schools a try. The participants in this study represent families in Detroit who have remained in the city and enrolled in citywide public and charter schools. As families continue to live in the city and seek school options, Lareau and Goyette (2014) have identified an integrative effect on city schools and neighborhoods. Thus, the increase of schooling options postulates a weakened connection between residency and school quality. Integrated schools and communities consequently have the potential to reduce educational inequality (Lareau and Goyette, 2014).

Parent network families' preference for racially integrated neighborhoods and schools aligns with long term benefits of cross-racial relationships and more integrated neighborhoods (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011). Social interaction with peers from other backgrounds supports prejudice reduction and increases comfort levels in interracial environments (Tropp, 2011; Holme et al., 2005). More than ever, the current climate of Black Lives Matter necessitates racially integrated schools that endeavor to facilitate anti-racist pedagogies and to facilitate prejudice reduction activities that pose long-term benefits in school and society.

The influx of middle-class families into cities necessitates social networks as a key source of information to guide school choice. School choice decisions in this study align with Hamlin's (2018) findings in Detroit, which revealed that middle class parents with high levels of education explore magnet and application schools with social networks. In the process of exploring schools, the participants in this study were informed about Allington & Cunningham's (2007) traits of successful schools to inform their school choice during their participation in the group to inform their school choices. Successful school traits include innovative reading curriculum, strong leadership, experienced staff, connection to the community, and parental involvement. Related to the study, innovative reading curriculum encompasses instruction that is informed by reading foundational skills and reading comprehension with authentic literature. Strong leadership related to this study embodies the administration's willingness to assume a shared responsibility with teachers and families to ensure a welcoming school atmosphere and maintain high expectations for all students. Experienced staff encompasses teachers in a school context with an average 10 years of experience. In addition, teachers have worked collaboratively for 10 years. The connection to the community related to this study underscores a school culture that knows the community and embraces parents and community stakeholders as resources to enhance a welcoming school atmosphere. Parental involvement related to this study embraces parents in the process of contributing time and resources to fulfill resource gaps. The conceptual framework guiding parents' advocacy is influenced by

Freire's (2000) concept of praxis, in which knowledge raises awareness, reflection, learning, and prompts action, within the realm of making informed school choices and advocating for select schools. This framework aligns with parents' steadfast efforts to organize on-going meetings, information sharing during meetings and through social networking resources, and organizing school visits. Reflection among members is dialogic, as they question and engage in dialogue surrounding the changing educational landscape and realities of school offerings. Information sharing of school visits prompted awareness of school resources, organization and culture. Action emerges through a willingness to promote and/or sustain an integrative effect on selected schools by sending children with social groups. Moreover, acting as partners with the administration and with teachers provides resources, such as extra-curricular gaps, that may otherwise not be feasible. Action additionally emerges as parents insist upon teacher autonomy to implement innovative teaching practices, against the grain of high stakes testing pressures. The parent participants informed a willingness to contribute time and resources and a preference for racially integrated schools in findings from the first two years of the study, prior to enrolling their children in Detroit schools (Author, 2018, 2016). This study will build on previous research and examine participants' perspectives of their contributions and for racially integrated schools, on the basis of experiences at their selected schools.

According to Kimelberg (2014) and Posey-Maddox (2014), parents' willingness and ability to contribute time and resources fulfill resource gaps and promote educational equality. One study that documented the correlation between parent engagement and student achievement underscored a need for a common ground surrounding expectations for involvement to ensure successful parent-school relationships (Hoover-Demsey & Sandler, 1995). Achieving common ground demonstrated a positive influence on child-centered school culture and academic achievement (Eccles & Harold, 1993, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, Carter, 2007, Lewis, 1997 & Murnane & Levy, 1996). Parent and school relationships support school reform efforts (Giles, 1998).

Moderate and middle-class children enroll into gentrifying city schools, which corresponds with their families who assimilate into school community and culture, often in advocacy roles. Moreover, innovator parents demonstrate a willingness to be the first among their peers to network and enroll in a formerly segregated school. Early and late majority parents enroll their children after innovator parents have changed the school to reflect a middle-class culture. Consequently, Stillman (2011) documented an integrative effect on schools but difficulty with long-term retention due to segregated schools not sharing the attributes of progressive schools and parents' expectations ultimately not aligning with the integrating schools. Administrators experienced difficulty managing the cultural gap between longtime and newcomer families.

In addition, in a study of white middle-class parents contributing to urban schools in a gentrified community, Posey-Maddox (2014) revealed the consequences of volunteerism that unintentionally marginalized low-income families and privileged middle-income families. As more middle-class families sought home ownership in the community, fewer enrollment slots were available to low-income families. Thus, school gentrification emerged and shifted the culture of the school instead of the initial intention of cultivating sustainable integration. These trends are significant to the study, as participants will inform about their advocacy efforts in the school communities they have selected for the children and the extent to which newcomer parents have advocated *with* low-income families, rather than *for* them.

Methodology

Site and participants

This study was guided by the researcher's on-going participation, observations, and documentation of parent activism and organizing efforts in a parent network in Detroit. The researcher has fulfilled a dual obligation as a researcher, co-facilitator, and parent member.

The researcher is biracial, a daughter of Jamaican and German immigrants. She attended multiracial magnet schools of choice in Detroit in the 1980s, among families who chose to stay in the city and advocate for its schools, against the grain of many families who moved to the suburbs. All participants (N=10) are women. Of the 10 participants, 9 are white and 1 is biracial, of German and Mexican heritage.

The city has experienced residential flight to its neighboring suburbs, beginning with “white flight” in the 1960s, “black flight” in the 1980s, and consequently a shrinking tax base and racially charged history defined by tensions of race and class. Although the city population is currently 90 per cent African American, disproportionately poor and working class, the multiracial parent group members represent low income households, along with moderate to upper income households that contribute the city’s tax base. Members in the parent network have selected and advocated for Detroit schools, against the broader proliferation of low-quality charter schools and policies that compromise teacher quality and a succession of teacher sickouts as a consequence of poor work conditions and school closures throughout the district. During the time of the study, from 2016-2017, there was a shift from an emergency financial manager to an appointed superintendent and bankruptcy proceedings that called for the creation of two districts: Detroit Public Schools for the purpose of settling the debt, and Detroit Public Community School District (DPCSD), a new system with more adequate resources to improve the conditions in the schools and facilitate daily operations. The new superintendent initiated special Montessori programs in select schools throughout the district in the endeavor of attracting more families to Detroit Public Schools Community District. Focus areas among participants include downtown, midtown, and the northwest area of the city. Participants’ school choices were guided by their participation over a span of two years, including monthly meetings and coordinating school visits, in their endeavor of identifying the city’s top schools, within the broader scope of too many school choices in a bewildering school landscape. All school visits underwent an evaluation guided by the group’s school evaluation checklists that were used for information sharing purposes during meetings and through a private social networking site. The sample size from the third year is 10 participants (N=10), who selected public and charter school options. Participants’ school choices were informed by the knowledge acquired from participating in the parent network.

Data collection and analysis

The researcher proctored a Qualtrics survey during the spring of 2017 to document the perspectives of the first cohort of participants (N=10) in the parent network who selected public and charter school options. The surveys were conducted to inform parents ‘participation in the parent network that informed their knowledge of successful school traits and their school selection. The survey additionally informed perspectives about school traits at their selected schools, including reading curriculum, strong leadership, experienced staff, connection to the community, and perceptions of parental participation at their respective schools. The surveys were additionally facilitated to identify students’ experiences at school, parents’ willingness to contribute resources to new parents and to participate in semi-structured interviews.

The researcher audio recorded two interviews with parents who agreed to participate from the survey during the summer of 2017 (N=2). Participants were additionally selected for interviews because of their parental involvement roles at their respective schools. Julia represented the perspective of families who enrolled her child in a high performing citywide public school, located in her neighborhood. Sharon represented the perspectives of families who enrolled their children in newly established citywide, community-centered charter schools, in which high performance status was not yet determined. The interviews were conducted, intended to provide a deeper and nuanced understanding of parents’ perspectives surrounding their perspectives of their selected school, reading curriculum, sustainable integration, their children’s experiences, and parents’ perceptions and participation in parental involvement at their select schools. Both parents enrolled their children in Kindergarten during the 2015-2016 school years.

Qualitative methods were employed to guide analysis of transcripts from the parent interviews. Interview transcripts were read and manually coded, line-by-line. Reduction of excerpted interview data and open survey questions were guided by affective coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), in the endeavor of capturing salient emerging themes related to participants' beliefs, within the scope of a deeper and nuanced understanding of perspectives of successful school traits, factors leading participants to select their schools, reading curriculum, sustainable integration, perceptions and parental participation in the school context. Another emerging theme included the children's experiences at their selected school.

Research questions guiding the study: How did participation in the social network inform parents' knowledge of successful school traits? How did successful school traits guide the selection of schools? How do successful school traits inform parent satisfaction with their school? What are parents' perspectives about the reading curriculum offered at their select schools? What are parents' perspectives about parental involvement and contributing resources? What are parents' perspectives about racially integrated schools? What are students' experiences at school?

Findings

Participation in the social network supported knowledge of school traits, influenced selection of schools, and perspectives of successful school traits at selected schools:

Participants (N=10) reported attending parent network activities prior to enrolling their children in their respective schools that supported deeper knowledge of successful school traits, evidenced in Figure 1:

Formal parent meetings	10
Attending school visits	10
Social media	10
Kindergarten information session	4
Montessori meetings	3
Informal playground meetings	5

Figure 1

All respondents attended formal parent meetings. Formal parent meetings provided a space for prioritizing school visits, discuss enrollment procedures, to report findings and impressions of school visits, and for school personnel to contribute resources and information about programs in the endeavor of attracting parents. All respondents attended daytime school visits to observe the school atmosphere, including interactions between teachers and students, parental involvement, and interactions with the administration. All respondents contributed to the social networking site, implemented for announcing a variety of activities, including school visits, group meetings, enrollment fairs, and for posting inquiries about schools and programs. The Kindergarten information session, attended by 4 respondents, provided resources to families about enrollment procedures and to inform characteristics of high-quality Kindergarten classrooms. Montessori meetings, attended by 3 respondents were organized during the summer of 2016 to inform about the Montessori philosophy for interested families and about enrollment procedures for select schools that adopted Montessori programming for the 2016-17 school year. Informal playground meetings were attended by 5 respondents. The informal playground meetings provided a space for longtime families to meet new cohort families and share experiences about the process of selecting a school in Detroit and offering feedback about their select schools.

Respondents indicated factors informing the selection of their school in open ended survey responses, while demonstrating knowledge of successful school traits. One respondent reported on the support of the parent network, school leadership, and welcoming school atmosphere:

Feedback from parents, feeling a sense that something bigger was happening than at other schools while on a school tour, leadership acknowledging that test scores are not everything, the way I saw students and

staff interact in a respectful way. How younger and older students seemed to know one another. Also, because it was a small school I felt like I could have impact on anything that I didn't like

Another respondent additionally indicated the benefits of a small school, affordability, and close proximity to home:

We could not afford private tuition and were looking for a public or charter option. The school we chose is very small and has a very warm and friendly atmosphere. The school was also very close to our house, we could walk our son to school.

Successful school traits embedded in the open survey responses include strong leadership that informed teaching beyond the test and including parents in decision-making processes, particularly in a small school. Moreover, a small school atmosphere was conducive to cultivating a connection to the school community.

Closed survey responses indicated that participation in the parent network influenced their school choices. Of 10 respondents, 8 indicated that participation in the parent network significantly influenced the selection of their school, while 2 respondents informed that participation in the parent network posed some influence on the selection of their school.

The survey data informed parents' perspectives about the following successful school traits upon arrival at their selected schools, which reflects perspectives

about public and charter schools, evidenced in Figure 2

Reading Curriculum (4 somewhat satisfied, 6 extremely satisfied)

Strong leadership 10 (extremely satisfied)

Experienced staff 6 (presence)

Connection to community (8 extremely satisfied, 2 satisfied)

Parental involvement (4 somewhat involved, 6 involved)

Figure 2

The outcomes from survey responses in Figure 2 reflects parents' deeper knowledge of successful school traits outlined by Allington & Cunningham (2007), in conjunction with Freire's concept of praxis, as a result of their participation in the parent network prior to enrolling their children in school.

All participants reported strong school leadership informing the selection of their school, which was enhanced upon arrival by their participation and interaction and collaboration with administrators in the endeavor of providing time and resources to their selected schools, along with the administrator's endeavor of cultivating a sense of community and prioritizing more than test scores. Strong school leadership will be embedded in the sections informing about racial integration and parental involvement.

According to Figure 2, knowledge of successful school traits was additionally evidenced by all respondents reporting extreme satisfaction with school leadership, while 6 respondents indicated the presence of experienced teaching staff. Four respondents were satisfied with the reading curriculum, while 6 respondents were extremely satisfied. Connection to the community was another successful school trait that informed parent satisfaction, as 8 respondents were extremely satisfied with their school community while 2 were satisfied. Parental involvement was evidenced among all participants, as 4 respondents indicated parents were somewhat involved, while 6 reported that parents were involved at their select schools.

Fewer parents reported the presence of experienced staff, likely a consequence of newer charter schools that were formed within 1-3 years during the time of the study, with newer personnel. Thus, overall

responses aligned with charter school personnel that were not as established as the more experienced teachers in longstanding public schools. Teachers at Canton Elementary School, more specifically, averaged 20 years of teaching experience, and teachers, on average, worked together at Canton for 10 years.

Four respondents were somewhat satisfied with reading curricular practices and six respondents were extremely satisfied. Their familiarity with the reading curriculum was due to their classroom involvement and observing curricular practices, which will be elaborated upon in the next section.

Perspectives of the reading curriculum

Julia's son attended Kindergarten at Canton Elementary School, a public school. In the following interview excerpt, she revealed the following reading foundational skills practices:

Julia: The beginning of the year was focused on practicing letters, practicing numbers and then kind of moved to spelling, and trying to sound out words and all that stuff. And then now, they've got this like series of books and the kids like put them together and it's got like these characters like Sad Sam's a Dog and then like Todd and Tam and stuff like that. It's some part of some sort of system, you know? So like each book comes, the book from the week before is like related to the book the next week. And then everyday they have these little like things--the parent reads it to them and then the next night, the kid is supposed to read it with them. The kindergarten teacher sent a note home explaining what it was.

Interviewer: Okay, so the parents are getting instructions

Julia: Yeah.

Interviewer: On how to read the materials to support the developmental process.

Julia: Different kids are going to be coming in at different levels, but that it's sort of like supporting the process of reading, you know?

Interviewer: Okay.

Julia: So, they read it every day in school too

Although Julia did not co-construct curriculum with her son's teacher, as recommended by Giles (1998), her perspective reflects Hoover-Demsey & Sandler's (1995) discussion of a common ground surrounding expectations for involvement to ensure successful parent-school relationships (Hoover-Demsey & Sandler, 1995).

Sharon's daughter attended Bigler, a community-based charter school. According to the following interview excerpt: I mean they do a lot, you know, beyond just like learning sight words. They did a lot about learning about fiction and non-fiction and author and illustrator and you know

Interviewer: Okay, so, so story elements

Sharon: Yeah. You know, she wanted the story to have a problem and then a solution, you know.

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewer: So, so getting the story structure

Sharon: Yeah. I mean they were doing all those things. It wasn't, you know. I think it was all, everything that I observed looked good and they, and they do a newsletter. Miss Christina sent these letters home every Friday which was great. That was, I loved that because she told us exactly what they were working on and she gave questions to ask your student. Um, you know, she listed books they, that they were reading together, you know, special projects and both you know, a lot of would highlight their reading and math

Interviewer: Oh. Good. So you're always tuned in

Sharon: Yeah.

Interviewer: and I understand they didn't have a prescribed reading program and used real books

Sharon: Uh-huh

Interviewer: to teach these concepts. So the list of books were generally, like, real childrens' books

Sandy: Oh yes

Interviewer: Literature

Two respondents in open ended surveys informed the following about the reading curriculum. According to parents with children enrolled in charter schools:

Respondent 1: Fountas and Pinnell. Small guided reading groups while the rest do independent reading. 4 teachers for 17 Kids means most children have an adult nearby if support in sustaining focus.

Respondent 2: Small reading groups, leveled reading, foundations

One respondent with a child in public school informed the following:

The children were broken up into different groups based on their reading level. My son read at a lower level level and went with his group to another classroom.

He received additional attention from the reading teacher. The children used a series of reading primers that worked with their reading level. The same series, they were thin paper books, was used during kindergarten and 1st grade. Each child kept their collection of books. The books worked first on simple words and then as they got more advanced concentrated on putting sounds together. I kept the books because I found them helpful.

Parents interviewed and surveyed overwhelmingly informed satisfaction with reading curriculum, which, regardless of public or charter school, was guided by what they perceived to be appropriate to their children's reading development, as developing decoding and comprehension skills aligned with gradually increasing leveled texts, with the support of guided reading groups. Of all respondents, Sharon represented the perspective that reading instruction was integrated with broader, related projects.

Perspectives of parental involvement

Julia was a staffer with a non-profit organization that brought a poetry program to select public schools in Detroit—including Canton, after she collaborated with the principal and acquired funding:

Julia: We actually had an intern who lives in our neighborhood that went to Canton. She just started at Yale.

Interviewer: Wow.

Julia: She went to Canton and she had Inside out at Canton and then she interned for us and we like found the book where she was in. I think that was another thing to is that we're like Oh, we need to get back to Canton

Interviewer: Wow. Just imagine what that means for future generations to continue that legacy.

She additionally invited the organizer of the poetry program to address parents at a parent network meeting that was hosted by district officials who informed about Detroit Public School's enrichment programs:

Julia: One of the reasons I wanted Ellen to come and speak is that I do feel like parents should be going into schools and asking like what are the enrichment programs? What are the arts programs that you have, you know? What do you like because the schools can have, they have title one discretionary funding that

they can allocate towards these kinds of programs. Or if they reach out to us, we might be able to find uh, grant and fund support.

Sharon reported about Bigler's endeavor of including parents in parental involvement initiatives, beginning by surveying families. According to the following Interview excerpt:

I mean, there's a lot there. They give a form to every parent in the beginning, really going off of your gift sets. Like, what do you have to offer that would benefit the kids and you know, are you willing to offer it. There are definitely other parents who are really excited about food and nutrition and do that for their career and so they in the school, you know, hand out green smoothies at lunch.

Sharon additionally commented about school community building involving families:

Interviewer: So you find that successful in terms of involving the family community at large. Are there any forms of organizing that you see? Um, I imagine that other parents do the same volunteering that you do.

Sharon: I know they do different things like, they invited the community to come to a big event that celebrated the 100th birthday of Grace Lee Boggs. There was another project that we did with the community where there's a house that's a few doors from the school that's abandoned so they partnered with the HUD and the Heidelberg Project. They had the community come and parents. We all volunteered to just clean up the property. So we did that. Then Tyree Guyton worked with the students to make these stars and they put the stars like all over the house because it's slated to be torn down. They did a beautification project until it does get torn down.

In addition to community-building strategies on behalf of the school that involved the parents and students, parental involvement on behalf of the parents was inclusive, but not without economic issues. Bigler's population was economically diverse and she voiced the presence of parental involvement among families with resources that could potentially marginalize parents with fewer resources:

Sharon: I do feel like there's a great mix there. I'm sure it is a challenge to try and maintain that. But I do think the staff really is aware of that and I think that they try and create that balance, but it is hard because I think, obviously, parents with more resources or like, for instance, me. I'm a stay at home mom. And then I think there's other parents who, you know, are just having a hard time and just want to get their kids to school and don't want to be involved. But I do think, socioeconomically, you see more parents who have more resources involved.

Interviewer: In spite of challenges there is an attempt to have a can do attitude

Sharon: One way we were able to include parents was for teacher appreciation week when we encouraged everybody to just bring one dollar and to send the teachers to lunch and then the parents volunteered. We took over recess so that teachers could go to go out to lunch on their recess. Not every contributed, but a lot did.

According to Sharon, parents facilitated parental involvement efforts that attempted to be inclusive for all families, not just the students of parents with resources.

Open-ended surveys revealed additional types of parental involvement:

Volunteer in classroom, attend curriculum days/nights Weekly/biweekly I stay for an hour or two to help out. I led two rounds of the journalism special, volunteer for field trips and activities. Read to the class, helped during the Scholastic Book Fair, helped Inside Out poets who worked in my son's classroom. Attended meeting during the time of the 2015/16 DPS teacher walk outs fundraising, contributing to events

Closed survey responses additionally informed participants' willingness to sustain the efforts of the parent network in the endeavor of supporting new families, as 5 respondents indicated they would likely support

new families, while 5 respondents indicated they would not support new families. Of the respondents willing to support new families, 5 indicated a willingness to share resources about their school with parents, while 5 informed they would share their experience at a meeting with new parents.

Julia, Sharon, and survey respondents demonstrated evidence of parental involvement and represented Kimelberg's (2014) claims about parents' willingness to contribute reform efforts by giving time and resources to fulfill resource gaps and promote educational parity at their select schools. They demonstrated the potential to positively influence a child-centered school culture and academic achievement (Eccles & Harold, 1993, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, Carter, 2007, Lewis, 1997 & Murnane & Levy, 1996). Although five respondents indicated they would not be willing to support new families, all respondents supported school reform efforts at their select schools, situated in relationship building between local stakeholders, parents, teachers, and local community organizations (Giles, 1998). In addition, respondents acknowledged the school's willingness to identify resources families could contribute, which invited parental involvement strategies recommended by Compton-Lily (2011) and Edwards (2016).

Perspectives of racially integrated schools

The population at Bigler was racially and economically diverse. According to Sharon, the school attempted to facilitate community-building across racial boundaries:

Sharon: They do try and create community among the parents. You know, they're trying to do different things, whether it's like a barbecue or block party like they do different things to try and create that community as well and I think that's important and I mean there's seen and unseen divisions, socioeconomic, racial, you know, there's all these different seen and unseen tensions that are there.

Furthermore, she informed about the importance of cultivating trust across boundaries:

Sharon: Just trust. I feel like for me personally, like, I think that has happened. Not with everyone, but I do feel like as I was present there and as our kids from different backgrounds got to know each other, like, you know, and participated in different things—volunteering and community activities-- like people get to know you and there's more of alike, okay, like she's okay.

Although she was aware of what she regarded as seen and unseen tensions between dimensions of race and class, her response demonstrates her awareness of the school's attempt to cultivate a school and community partnership, which was needed for cultivating sustainable integration.

Julia lived behind her child's school in a racially integrated community. When asked about integration at her son's school, she informed that Canton school's predominantly affluent African American student body was gradually becoming more racially diverse, but its population did not reflect the community's diversity:

Julia: After he had been going there for a few weeks, my friend came by and she had her two boys there and she's like oh, how's it going? I'm like yeah, it's going really well. Everything's you know, everyone's super nice and all this stuff and she was like, I just like I totally envy your commute--you just have to walk right here and we have to get in the car and drive and in my head I'm like, no you don't Interviewer: You don't have to commute

Julia: You live next to me. Like you should go here, nobody's stopping you, you know and I'm like have some self-awareness.

Interviewer: Wow.

Julia: I know. I know.

Interviewer: It's like don't complain about it if you can do something about it

Julia: a lot of the parents because they just were not comfortable or felt like they didn't want to be the only, you know, white kid or it's just something new. Then that became their reason for sending them to another school because my kid learns in a different way or my kid needs this or, you know? For us this experience has taught us about learning from others and learning from the people that live near and all this stuff and then now that he's at Canton, I realize now that we're showing him the importance in community by being in the community.

Canton's racial composition was gradually becoming more racially integrated, which coincided with respondents from the broader survey who reported "limited" and "somewhat diverse" populations at their public schools. Five respondents from charter schools reported racially diverse school populations, reflected at Bigler. Two respondents from private schools reported racially diverse school populations. All closed survey respondents indicated that racial integration was important, as five survey respondents indicated that a diverse school population was very important, while the remaining five specified that a diverse school population was extremely important.

Open survey responses indicated that diversity informed their school choice, including: Commitment to diversity

The degree that the student population reflects the Detroit population

Another open survey response demonstrated the complexity of racial integration and problematized the intentions of her peers, as she knew that very few participants were willing to choose into Canton on the basis of its predominantly African American population:

I found the social network an imperfect social exercise and concerning. It was uncomfortable to spend time in a room with often only white parents discussing DPS and the state of schools in Detroit. I quickly realized, after attending meetings, that many people who were liberal minded in their views would in the end never consider sending their child to a predominantly African-American school. It was disappointing and a disappointing lesson to learn about close friends.

As school options are sought, Lareau and Goyette (2014) have determined that an integrative effect on city schools and neighborhoods is gradually emerging. The Detroit context is unique and complex because although Canton is located in a diverse community, its gradual increase of diversity does not reflect the diversity of the neighborhood. According to Julia and other families who chose public schools, the reasoning among their peers for not enrolling in public options was due to a preference for a more racially integrated student body. According to Julia, racial integration could be achieved if the families in her racially diverse neighborhood choiced into Canton.

Additionally significant was the matter of the parent group at Sharon's school who attempted to include all families on community building and inclusive parental involvement strategies at Bigler, in the endeavor of attempting to address the income divide between middle class and low income families. The endeavors reported by Sharon presented a contrast with Posey-Maddox (2014) who documented affluent families whose involvement marginalized low income families.

Students' experiences

Findings on behalf of Julia and Sharon and the survey responses indicate overall satisfaction with their children's experiences at their respective schools. The following open survey questions inform the perspective of the broader group about what their children like about school:

Experiential learning

Passions—once a week the students get to pick what they want to learn about. "Farm to school"—the students learn how to cook food from all over the world once a month they cut/cook/prepare food in every grade. Recess. Visiting neighborhood veggie gardens to learn about their neighbors and gardens

Friendships, library, specials

Friends and playing, feeling comfortable in the classroom and the schools. Feeling like he is being seen and appreciated

Hands-on learning, caring/committed/engaged teachers and staff

He loves the teachers he has had, the after school activities, and in his words, “I love to learn”

Thus, open survey responses demonstrate traits of successful schools, as the students formed friendships and experienced belonging in their respective welcoming school communities. The students were taught by caring and committed teachers who exposed them to hands-on learning experiences who nurtured their desire to learn.

Conclusion

Although Detroit schools are among the lowest performing school districts in the nation, the social network families identified hidden pockets of excellence, on the basis of high performing and aspiring schools that sustained innovative practices against the grain of a broader struggling system. Survey and interview data informed about families willing to give Detroit schools a try. Julia reported a strong administrative leadership and a school culture of high expectations, volunteerism, strong extra-curricular offerings, experienced teachers, and a caring atmosphere. She was additionally pleased with the curriculum in her son’s Kindergarten classroom and informed that teachers had flexibility to inform their teaching decisions, which was significant, given that many Detroit Public Schools are constrained by paced curriculum. She was a white resident in a close-knit, multiracial neighboring affluent community and was particularly happy about being able to walk to school. However, she claimed that other families in her neighborhood bypassed the school in favor of private schools because they were not comfortable with the predominantly African American racial composition of the school. As an advocate for Canton, she was hopeful to attract more families to the school to nurture more of a neighborhood school atmosphere and integrative effect on the school. However, she was sensitive about the trend of racial integration shifting the culture of the school, and instead preferring the perspective of racial integration the sustained the school culture.

Sharon informed that child-centered practices and literature-based instruction were also present, situated in balanced literacy pedagogy and grounded in thematic units of study. The school nurtured a strong school and community connection, as the teachers facilitated student and parent participation in blight reduction with a local agency. Moreover, community building was evident, as the administration attempted to include all families in community building activities and more involved parents attempted to include lower income families in parental involvement activities.

Participants in the study reflect the broader group who became more knowledgeable about successful traits of good schools to inform their school choices, and contribute reform efforts with the school population. Members participated in organized reform efforts to promote educational parity in the city, not only for themselves, but for all students who attend the selected public and charter schools. Reform, one school at a time, has the potential for transforming the landscape of the city’s public schools. Reclaiming quality and trust in schools will contribute culturally and socially, and to overall economic stability and cultivating racially integrated schools. As parents continue to select schools and advocate for them, more families will become educated about them and make considerations for Detroit schools.

Implications for future research

The following open survey response informs a participant’s awareness of the research required to make an informed school choice and willingness to take chances in a struggling school system:

Finding the right school for my family took a lot of research including visits, talking with other parents, decoding school marketing, and willingness to take chances. Each family’s needs for their student are so different, and there are A LOT of great education opportunities in Detroit, despite what people are led to believe.

The 2016-17 school years were significant because of a newly appointed superintendent in DPSCD, while control had been restored with a newly appointed school board. By the 2018-19 school years, families in the social network enrolled their children in 15 schools across public, charter, and private entities, while sustaining residency in Detroit. Innovator parents' recommendations and experiences have made the school selection process easier for early and late majority families.

Some of the schools selected included Montessori programming. Emerging Kindergarten families began to organize meetings and school visits in preparation for the 2020 school year. The innovator families did not participate in meetings and school visits after they choiced into their schools, due to involvement in their children's schools, but attended informal meetings and contributed information to the group's social networking site to inform experiences at their children's schools for new families.

The students of the innovator families are matriculating into the upper elementary grades, while early and late majority families are joining forces to learn about the landscape of schools in the city and enrolling their children in Detroit schools. Unlike findings documented by Stillman (2011), innovator families have promoted an integrative effect on the selected schools without changing the school culture. Instead, innovator families have contributed time and resources and advocated with existing families at select schools. They have influenced early and late majority families to sustain the school culture. Future research will encompass documenting the perspectives of innovator families as they inform about their K-5 experiences and make decisions about middle school, while documenting the perspectives and preferences of emerging Kindergarten families. Workshops, school visits, and meetings will be facilitated for families in the process of choosing Kindergarten and middle school, and their perspectives of their participation in those activities will be documented.

While activities have centered around school quality and curriculum, Julia and Sharon's perspectives and concerns about dimensions of race and class in their school contexts necessitate documenting conversations about the realities and consequences of race and inequality in Detroit and its influence on school choice. Conversations will be inspired by school of choice articles and book chapters that address these issues. Participants' school choices have demonstrated a weakened connection between residency and school choice and sustains community sustainability and educational equality. The matter of advocating for schools with the school population, across boundaries of race and class is significant to this study and warrants continued discussion as the parent network progresses.

While this study informed about literature-based instructional practices at charter and public options during the 2015-16 academic year, the reading curriculum during the 2018-2019 school year changed to a reading foundations focus to accommodate the Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress (M-STEP). Moreover, the imminent 3rd grade reading law during the fall of 2019, requiring 3rd graders to score proficient on the reading and writing portions of the M-STEP to enter into 4th grade informed reading instructional practices. Thus, future research encompasses documenting parent's satisfaction with reading instructional practices and any ways in which they have advocated for innovative reading practices in spite of curricular constraints. Future research additionally encompasses documenting the experiences of families who choiced into the public Montessori schools, as families began enrolling in the Montessori options after the study was conducted. Moreover, students' voices will be documented to inform their experiences as the study continues.

The perspectives of innovator families, their overall satisfaction with Detroit schools, and the on-going support for early and late majority families aim to contribute a narrative that must be shared. Future research aims to share these narratives in the endeavor of informing about hidden pockets of excellence, along with community sustainability and educational equality, against the broader narrative of underperforming schools in Detroit.

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