Middle Class Motivations and Maneuvers: School Choice and School Assignment in Louisville, Jefferson County, KY

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Abstract

Meredith v. Jefferson County/Parents Involved v. Seattle ruled that K-12 public-school districts could no longer use the race of an individual student for placement in schools, which resulted in districts adopting new "race-neutral" assignment plans. This qualitative research study on school assignment and school choice analyzes the narratives of parents in Louisville, Kentucky during the advent of a new school assignment plan based on balancing schools with a "race-neutral" and class-sensitive assignment strategy. Specifically, the study focuses on how middle-class parents resist and/or replicate their social position in navigating race, class, and geography in choosing schools for their children. By focusing on middle-class parents, this study explores how privileged decision-making can undo education policy aims.

Keywords Desegregation · School choice · *Brown v. Board* · Busing

Since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) declared that separate schools are not equal, U.S. school districts have struggled with how to achieve racial integration. Districts under court order have re-drawn school zones, consolidated districts, and bused students to achieve racially integrated schools; and beginning in the 1970s, magnet schools utilized parental choice to attract white students to themed schools in urban areas. All these methods of school assignment used the self-identified race of students for school placement. The Supreme Court began moving away from active integration in the North in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), and in the South in the 1980′s when districts began to be released from desegregation orders (Grant

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2009; Lassiter 2006). These moves away from active integration created racially homogenous schools and increasing segregation in areas that had been previously desegregated (Clotfelter and Vigdor 2006; Orfield and Lee 2006). Some large cities prioritized integration and continued to integrate schools through busing; however, the 2007 Supreme Court decision in the consolidated cases of *Meredith v. Jefferson County and Parents Involved v. Seattle* (hereafter, referred to as *Meredith*) declared these plans unconstitutional, and thereby prevented school districts from using the race of an individual student for placement.

The defendant in the *Meredith* case, Jefferson County School District, is a large metropolitan district of over 300 square miles in Louisville, KY. Its school assignment plan, which was instituted in 1975, used busing and magnet schools of choice to achieve racially balanced student populations (K'Meyer 2009). The *Meredith* decision forced Jefferson County to abandon their previous plan and reconsider their goals for school assignment. Justice Kennedy's separate and concurrent opinion in *Meredith* (2007) stated that a policy that uses race in combination with other factors would pass his "narrowly tailored" test of constitutionality (Meredith 2007; Hines 2008). Citing a commitment to integrated schools and the third way sanctioned by Kennedy, Jefferson County adopted a new assignment plan in 2009–2010 that uses the average income, education level, and percentage minority of neighborhood zones to assign students to elementary schools (Jefferson County 2010a; Jefferson County Public Schools 2010b). Choices for students in JCPS include neighborhood schools, magnet schools, and traditional schools. Parents are asked to rank their top four choices of schools, and although parental preference is taken into account, all neighborhood schools are assigned a set percentage of students from the surrounding neighborhood and a set percentage of students from neighborhoods with disparate demographics.[1] Parents can choose the public schools within their pie-shaped section of the metropolitan area. The multiple pie-shape region gives every parent the choice of public schools in Area A (the urban core) and Area B (the outlying suburbs). Beyond neighborhood schools, students can also choose from a set of themed magnet schools (STEM, Performing Arts, Montessori, Visual Arts) or the Traditional schools. The traditional schools are public schools located that draw

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[1] JCPS divided their district into residential elementary zones in geographically contiguous areas around an elementary school. Then, each elementary school zone was classified as either an Area A reside, or an Area B reside based upon the data about its residents from the 2000 census. An *Area A* reside is an elementary school zone where the average household income is below $41,000, the average education levels are less than "a high school diploma with some college", and the minority population is more than 48%. Minority students are defined as all students who are nonwhite. *Area B* resides are those elementary zones that do not meet all three of the criteria of an Area A reside. Area A has been formed to note areas of the city that are marginalized by both race and class. All students living in Area A are defined as Area A students, regardless of their family income, education level, or race. All students living in Area B are defined as Area B students regardless of their individual family income, education level, or race. The school district has set a guideline that no school in the district will have more than 50% or less than 15% of students who reside in Area A. The purpose of this guideline is to ensure that no school will be predominantly comprised of students from a low income, high minority area, and that all schools will have some students who are from low income, high minority areas. Students are bused across residential zones to elementary schools in other areas. Students from both Area A and Area B are bused in order to achieve integrated schools in all areas of the city.

students from outside their neighborhood schools. They were formed in the 1970s to attract white suburban residents to enroll their students in schools in the urban core. The traditional schools require uniforms, strict behavior norms, and a focus on rote learning. For parents in Louisville who are not satisfied with JCPS, there are a number of options: private independent schools, private Catholic and Christian schools, public schools in geographically distant outlying counties, and one small wealthy independent district called Anchorage that was not combined with JCPS in the desegregation plan in the 1970s. Parents also have the legal right to homeschool their children in Kentucky. Neither vouchers nor transportation to private schools are available to families choosing private education. Private school students must pay tuition and provide their own transportation to school.

As parents make decisions about school placement for their children, issues of race, class and geography come to the forefront. This paper, based on a subset of qualitative data from a larger study examines the motivations and maneuvers of middle-class parents in response to the new assignment plan instituted in Louisville, KY. It investigates the motivations of middle-class parents in choosing particular schools and explores how middle-class parents maneuver inside and outside of the assignment plan.

Literature Review

Brown vs. the Board of Education (1954) first established that separate schools were not equal schools and were not in the best interest of individual children or society. Further Supreme Court rulings compelled districts to take a more active role in racially integrating schools (*Green v. County School Board of New Kent Count* 1968; *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* 1971). These decisions were based on social science evidence that racial segregation creates detrimental outcomes for society. The social experiment of desegregation by design has always had its detractors. These critics want proof that desegregation works, and what they often look for are quantifiable results that show that the education of students of color have improved as a result of desegregation. There is much research that demonstrates that the socioeconomic level and race of a school dictates the achievement levels of its students. This achievement data can be useful in making a case for desegregation, but it is not the only piece used to support the concept of diverse by design. Exploring the literature on the diversity rationale and how parents make choices about schools and aids in our understanding of how desegregation both works and does not work in a metropolitan school district. It also suggests how parents might navigate the system depending on their own social location.

Positioning Brown as a solution to the achievement gap has been a successful tack in the U.S. court system. The negative impacts on achievement that result from high minority/low income schools have been widely documented in quantitative studies on achievement. Research suggests that segregated schools have negative externalities for society in the lowered achievement of the students produced by those schools. Racially isolated and low-income schools tend to produce students with lower achievement scores than similar peers in racially or economically

integrated schools (Coleman et al. 1966; Jencks and Mayer 1990; Rumberger and Palardy 2005). The achievement differences between students from wealthy schools and students from poor schools have persisted over time. In a reanalysis of the Coleman data, researchers found that blacks, in particular, had higher test scores when they attended a school with a higher mean socioeconomic composition (Jencks and Mayer 1990). This research suggests that the impact of the socioeconomic level on the students in a classroom is an important predictor of achievement.

Rumberger and Palardy (2005) conducted an analysis of the National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS) data set to determine the impact of school composition on student achievement. The researchers divided the schools in the sample into three tiers, high SES schools, middle SES schools and low SES schools. They then looked at average growth in achievement scores for students in each tier. They found that the most important predictor of increased achievement was the composition of the school—and in three areas: science, reading, and history—the socioeconomic status of a student's school had a greater impact on a student's achievement than their own socioeconomic level (Rumberger and Palardy 2005). Furthermore, they found that the SES of a school had a greater impact on African American students than it did on White students. In a simulation to predict achievement changes if attending a different school, the researchers found that an average African-American student moved from a low SES school to a high SES school would increase achievement by about one full year of learning than if they remained in their original school, and the average white student would gain about ¾ of a year of schooling. Rumberger and Palardy state that the school processes that occur in high SES schools, namely; high teacher expectations, hours of homework, number of college prep courses, and perceived safety of the school all contribute to the increased learning that occurs there.

Bifulco et al. looked at classmate characteristics to determine if peer effects had a significant impact on achievement. They found that an increase in the percentage of student's classmates with a college educated mother was associated with higher rates of college attendance and lower high school drop-out rates (Bifulco et al. 2009a, b). Peer effects based upon racial composition of the classroom were also explored by Hoxby in an analysis of administrative data from Texas elementary schools in the 1990s. She found that the intra-group effects on black students having more black students in their classroom depressed achievement by .67 points in reading and .40 points in math. This impact of greater numbers of black students in a class had the most detrimental effect for other black students (Hoxby 2000). Hoxby's research suggests that segregated black schools depress overall achievement for black students.

Segregation by race, education level, and economic class have all been shown to depress achievement for students placed in schools that are predominantly high minority, low income, and/or low education level. Increasing achievement and closing the achievement gap depends, in part, on desegregating schools to produce as few schools as possible that have a high minority and/or low-income student population. As a history of slavery, Jim Crow, and institutional racism has created and maintained poverty in black and brown communities, it is important to recognize that socioeconomic status and race are often, but not always, overlapping.

Achievement scores on state examinations and NAEP tests are often seen as the best rationale for desegregating schools. Yet achievement scores on tests that are highly suspect in their ability to measure cognitive ability may not be the outcome that is most important in desegregation. The opportunity increases as well as the access to cultural or social capital are also a benefit of desegregated schools. In Jean Yonemura Wing's article, "Integration Across Campus, Segregation Across Classrooms," the author stated that social capital gives advantage to students, because informal information networks teach students how to gain access to college and careers (2006, p. 117). Although her research showed how different students on the same campus could have different access to sources of knowledge, many students who have been bused have talked about how their experiences in county schools increased their expectations of themselves as well as knowledge about how to succeed in the dominant culture (Heaney and Uchitelle 2004; Wells et al. 2009). Derrick Brooks, a chemical engineering undergrad at Washington University, and a participant in the St. Louis desegregation program put it this way:

> At Kirkwood (county school), everybody was expected to go to college. In the city schools, if you go to college, you have done something amazing… So that whole atmosphere subconsciously is like just graduating is enough, so I don't necessarily have to go to college. I can just get a good job. When you go to a county school, you're expected to go to college… Now the only biggie is which college to choose…the counselors were right there willing to help. (Heaney and Uchitelle 2004, p. 139)

Brooks mentions that counselors care about students and are willing to assist them in achieving their dreams. Sonia Nieto talks about this twin approach to reducing bias when she looks as Nel Noddings ethics of care in combination with Stanton-Salazar's theory of social capital networks framework (Nieto 2005, p. 50). Nieto's combination of these two theories points to the fact that social networks are crucial but not sufficient without an ethic of care, meaning that if teachers and counselors are not aware of privilege and prejudice, and are not connected to undoing racism in their work, they may be reinforcing historical discrimination patterns. In Derrick Brook's case, he felt that his counselors were caring members of his social network, and that they had access to the cultural capital needed to help him apply to and get accepted by Washington University. But this evocation of Noddings concept of an ethics of care, notes how despite a policy's intention, there are actors on the ground who are tasked with enacting policy. Their resistance—or counter-movements—can undo the original intentions of a policy. Years of counter-movements can result in a gradual unraveling of social justice aims. Ferri and Connor (2006) describes this countermovement against *Brown* stating that it did not "adequately predict the multiple forms of resistance and reassertions of power that would emerge to keep general education and exclusive privilege for some, but not for all (12)." Counter-movements against desegregation included firing African American teachers, closing predominantly black schools, segregating black students into separate classrooms, and over-classifying African American students as mentally retarded (Heaney and Uchitelle 2004; Ferri and Connor 2006; Dingus 2006). But the counter-movements

against school desegregation cannot define the intention of *Brown v. the Board of Education*.

The original intent of the school assignment plan in Louisville–Jefferson County was to actively racially integrate schools. The goal of racial integration was based on the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown* that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal (Brown v. Board 1954)". Although *Brown* aimed to correct the unequal access that black students had to academic resources that would enable them to be as successful as their white counterparts, providing an equal education was and is not the only rationale accepted by the courts. The Supreme Court has accepted the diversity rationale as a compelling interest of the state (Grutter v. Bollinger 2003). This rationale is based upon the idea that first, we are a racially diverse nation, secondly we all need to have access to all places in society in order to realize our potential, and finally that exposure to multiple points of view and diverse peoples will serve to make our democracy stronger. The diversity rational has its philosophical roots in the writings of Aristotle, who believed that democracy operates at its optimal point when a diversity of interests is considered in political decision-making (Moses and Chang 2006). The diversity rationale complicates the intent of Brown and subsequent desegregation rulings that primarily sought to eliminate the vestiges of slavery and other discriminatory laws and goes further to suggest that diversity is a good that promotes the functioning of a sound democratic society.

The benefits of desegregation are not limited to African Americans, white students benefit from the ruling as well. Research shows that intergroup contact reduces bias in white students, enabling them to be more effective members of a diverse society. When students are exposed to diverse groups, they are less likely to generalize about groups, less likely to avoid other groups because of lack of knowledge, and more likely to recognize injustice based on group status (Dovidio et al. 2004, pp. 251–252). Specifically, friendship across races has been shown to reduce prejudice (Killen et al. 2006, p. 62). Furthermore, when groups have experiences where they are asked to cooperate such as in activities or being on a sports team together, they learn to trust people across lines of race, class, ability, and gender (Johnson and Johnson 2000, p. 244).

In Amy Stuart Wells*, Both Sides Now: The Story of Desegregation's Graduates*," the author sought to examine the social context of school desegregation and unearth "the ways in which the racial inequality of the schools so profoundly affected the daily experiences of students" (40). Wells and her team conducted in-depth interviews of over forty members of the class of 1980 from six sites: Austin, Texas; Englewood, NJ; Pasadena, CA; Shaker Heights, Ohio; Topeka, KS; Charlotte, NC. Wells study spanned 5 years of data collection and began with a first stage that looked at historical documents such as yearbooks, school board minutes, newspaper articles, legal documents. It also included interviews with policy makers, lawyers, and community members in the six districts. In the second stage, the researchers conducted in-depth semi structured interviews with forty to fifty students from a diversity of racial groups from each high school. In the third stage, second interviews were done with four to six of the graduates from each school. In total the researchers conducted 268 graduate interviews (44). The prevalent themes resulting from the study were first, "it is hard to live with white privilege and hard to live without it."

(112) which was highly supported by graduates of color, who saw attending white schools as giving them some access but taking away other comforts. Second, white students by in large valued their diverse school experience but believed that times had changed to focus on achievement, and they were the most interested in sending their children to schools with high test scores. Finally, sports and extra-curricular activities were also the places where the truest integration occurred, as students had a shared interest and goal that was best achieved by cooperation and teamwork. Wells study shows how parents have shifted their talk away from issues of race with their own children and on to issues of achievement. Wells does spend some time, but maybe not enough, unpacking how this language of achievement concerns are coded ways for parents to distance themselves from their own racism.

The desegregation plans experienced by Wells graduates and the subsequent magnet school reforms instituted in many large urban school districts have been weakened by the neoliberal models of school reform that focus on school choice and charter schools. The well-funded advocates for choice have argued that the market will produce the highest quality schools, and its strongest proponents favor the use of vouchers to pay for schooling.[2] Harry Brighouse (2000) interrogates the binary opposition in school choice debates—to have or not have school choice—by asserting that American middle-class families have long exercised school choice when they purchase a home. To Brighouse it is not whether we want school choice in America but rather if we want to extend school choice to those who cannot afford it with their real estate purchases. Research suggests that parents often choose to enter or exit a particular school based on the "perceived quality" of education their child is receiving (Bast and Walberg 2004; Hanushek et al. 2007). However, high income parents have more choices than low income parents. Research on residential decision-making suggests that white wealthy parents base their decisions about where to buy a house based upon the racial composition of the schools, rather than on a visit to the school or an examination of the test data (Holme 2002). Racially or economically marginalized parents not only act based upon their social location but also in response to how they are treated by the school and school officials in the choosing process (Bell 2008; Bulman 2004; Ndimande 2008). Furthermore, low income families are less likely to use interdistrict choice to transfer to high income districts than high income families (Holme 2009).

The literature suggests that school assignment and choice pay attention to race and class. Public policy makers, business developers, and families manipulate the compositions of schools through their individual and collective decisions. Ndimande's (2008) sociological study of the impact of the South African Schools Act, which gave vouchers to black families, reveals how difficult it is for choice to be equality driven when actors begin on an uneven playing field. His interviews with 122

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[2] Using the free market for public school was first advocated in a 1955 article by Milton Friedman entitled "The Role of Government in Public Education". Since this publication, using markets for public schooling has been a part of the platform of the Republican party, first in the form of vouchers, and more recently through the establishment of charter schools. For a critique of using markets to improve schooling see Diane Ravitch's *The Death and the Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic Books 2010).

black parents in South Africa aimed to understand the how and why of the choice process. Parents who sent their students to formerly white-only schools, and those who sent their children to black township schools were asked to speak about why they made the decision they did, and how they gathered information to make that decision. After discovering from these interviews that many poor parents were paying exorbitant school fees beyond the value of the voucher, Ndimande interviewed government officials to decipher the school fee policy. He learned that school fees should be waived for low-income families, but that white schools often neglected to tell black families about this policy in order to dissuade them from enrolling. Ndimande study details how the experiences of parents in a choice environment is often related to how those in power resist equity policies through the rationing of information, and outright deceit.

Courtney Bell attended to the task of describing the experiences of parents in education decision-making in her article, "Social Class Differences in School Choice: The Role of Preferences". The results of her parental interviews in a Midwestern city with charter and magnet schools reveals that parents often made choices based upon how they were treated in schools. Working class parents who were treated negatively by their schools began to narrow their expectations and were less likely to try to find a good fit for their child. Middle class parents were more likely to challenge rejections or use connections to get their child into a school that fit his/her needs. Working class parents were more likely to treat a rejection as a final answer. Her sample largely consisted of people of color and poor and working-class parents. These parents revealed that choice was not a one-time decision, but rather an ongoing negotiation that often relied on how schools were reacting to the parents and the students. By recognizing that decision-making about schools is not an exogenous event but rather is closely aligned to what goes on within a school, Bell points to the "on-the-ground" issues that policy makers often gloss over.

As Ndimande and Bell tried to focus on raced aspects of school choice in how parents were treated in their educational decision-making, Robert Bulman (2004) tried to divorce his study from racial implications of school decision-making saying he sought to explore decision-making for families who occupy the middle socio-economic strata, and who live in school districts with average to good reputations (495)". His interviews with the parents of 88 ninth graders reveal that parents largely make decisions about schooling based upon their past experiences with education and by their religious faith.

The body of literature on desegregation, diversity, and parental decision-making do not point to clear answers about how to design a school assignment plan, or how parents will move with or against any given plan. The particularities of each location, and its history with segregation, and desegregation matter in the ultimate choices of parents. Yet we know that these decisions do not happen in a vacuum; each parent comes to choices in schooling and housing from a particular place and a particular goal for their child. The literature on the benefits of racial diversity in schools does not necessarily impact the decisions of parents, meaning that they may not result in the outcomes most beneficial to society. Economic and racial integration has been shown to increase mutual understanding and academic achievement, but parents often choose against these goods and isolate their children from diverse

environments. What they perceive as the best choice for their individual child causes the whole to suffer.

Research Design

Significance

Jefferson County's assignment plan was one of the first "race-neutral" plans to be attempted since the *Meredith* case.[3] The political landscape in Kentucky was rife with debate about the new school plan. In October of 2010 Williams introduced a bill in the Kentucky State Senate to permit parents to enroll their child in the public school nearest their home despite the assignment given by the school district. The bill would have given authority to the State Board of Education to dissolve a unified school district if a controversy arises over school assignment. This would then give neighborhoods or municipalities the authority to establish small independent school districts.

Although many legal experts have stated that the bill as it was introduced violated the jurisdiction of the state and interceded in the school district's authority, it nonetheless captivated the attention of Kentucky voters. The bill assumed that parents are eager to enroll their children in the school nearest their home, and that smaller local areas are better at managing the educational needs of children. The bill was premised on a model of parental choice and went even further than the Meredith decision to undo the progress made by *Brown v. Board*. If it had passed and was accepted as law, parents in wealthy communities in the suburbs of Louisville could secede from the Jefferson County District and form their own school district. This would dismantle the metropolitan school district that was specifically created in 1975 to equalize resources, teachers, and student bodies across the Louisville Metro area.[4]

The magnet schools in Louisville offer a managed choice element to the public-school system. This strong system of public choice has curtailed the demand for a charter school law in Kentucky, and as such, it is only one of two states that had no

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[3] The first large urban school district to move away from a race-based assignment plan to an income-based assignment plan was Raleigh-Wake County, North Carolina in 1999. For a detailed look at Raleigh see Gerald Grant's *Hope and Despair in the American city: Why there are no bad schools in Raleigh* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[4] The first desegregation of schools in Jefferson County occurred in 1954, when Brown v. Board, trumped the Day Law, a 1904 Kentucky state law, which prohibited whites and blacks from being educated in the same school (Carmichael and James 1957). When, in the early 1970s, schools became segregated again through housing shifts, The Kentucky Civil Liberties Union, Legal Aid Society and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People filed suit to gain the right to integrate schools (Courier Journal 2005). Ultimately, the 6th circuit court of appeals ruled that the district must desegregate by busing students across district lines. The Louisville City district was dissolved by action of the school board, and the default, outlying Jefferson County district took over the education of the residents of the city by establishing a metropolitan school system (K'Meyer 2009). The Jefferson County School District implemented a desegregation plan using busing that was mandated by order of the federal district court. Over the years, this plan was modified in various ways, but the central racial guidelines persisted; a target of 15–50% African American students in each school building.

provision for the establishment of charter schools until 2017 when the new Republican governor began campaigning for a charter school law. Although magnet schools remain the largest enroller of public choice in the US, the Obama Administration focused its school choice funds on charter schools, and established narrow priorities in the Blueprint for the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Frankenberg 2008). Kentucky's bid for Arne Duncan's Race to the Top funds for education failed in part because the state lacks charter schools. The criteria for selection of the Race to the Top funds included 40 points for "ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools. Although "other innovative schools" would include the magnet schools that exist in Louisville, states only received eight points out of a possible forty for their magnet program. The other 32 points in this category were given for having charter schools. Had Kentucky received these 32 points, it would have surpassed both Ohio and North Carolina, finalists who did receive funding. Frankenberg (2008) describe how the attention to magnet schools has suffered in this new era of choice in *Forgotten Choice? Rethinking Magnet Schools in a Changing Landscape*. Their report, a comparative look at the students in magnet and charter schools, examines how magnet schools can provide a balance between individualism (in choosing one's school) and community (in promoting diversity). Despite the lack of support from the Obama administration, the Jefferson County School District maintained their robust and popular magnet school offerings as a choice for parents throughout the district, and these schools in fact were the only ones who consistently received middle-class enrollment from families who lived in Area B.

Exploring the motivations of middle-class parents and how they maneuver in response to school assignment helps us to understand how to create better school assignment policies. As the media heralds a "post-racial" era, school districts are left wondering whether "race-neutral" school assignment policies can be equality-driven and achievement producing. The positive impacts of integration by both race and class demonstrated by both quantitative and qualitative studies indicate the importance of discovering how "race-neutral[5]" school assignment policies both work and do not work. Choice in the public system, in the private sector, and through real estate decisions is a reality of educating children in Louisville. Understanding how parents respond to the options available is crucial given the current funding and political will to expand public school choice.

Because "race-neutral" assignment plans utilizing busing are a recent development in school assignment, the data on its impacts are thin. Furthermore, the need to understand how "race-neutral" policies impact education and the public-school system as a whole is necessary in order to understand if our policy interventions are moving us toward or away from the outcomes that justice requires.

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[5] Race-neutral and color-blind are contested terms in sociological literature. My analysis of this concept is informed by Eduardo Bonilla Silva's, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2006), Omi and Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Brown et al. *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2003).

Louisville–Jefferson County has long been a place of educational innovation in school design, yet it has been vastly understudied. Most studies, qualitative and quantitative, that have looked at desegregation, segregation and magnet schools have been done on school districts in North Carolina, California, Cleveland, and Milwaukee. Specifically studying parents with young children allows the researcher to examine how the children of busing, now parents, navigate the educational choices for their own children.

Research Questions

How do middle class parents in Louisville, Jefferson County choose schools for their children? How do they navigate the selection process? How do parents access information about schooling for their child? How do middle class parents resist and/or replicate their social position in navigating race, class, and geography in their decision-making?

Methods

Qualitative case-study attempts to do an in-depth analysis of a particular social phenomena in order to increase human understanding. There are different ideas about the nature of case study, but the first defining feature that most researchers agree on is that case studies are projects that describe bounded systems (Bogdan and Biklen 2007; Merriam 1998; Ragin and Becker 1992; Stake 1995; Stake 2006; Yin 2009). Eisenhardt (1989) describes case study as "understanding the dynamics present in a single setting" (p. 534).

Qualitative case study then is flexible and inductive. It hopes to find a way to learn from the experiences of subjects, and it aims to come closer to real life experiences because it is not an abstraction of experience but rather a dynamic portrait of experience. Case studies rely on the logic of contextual experience, that subjects live in their social world in a particular time and location and through a particular identity. Intense focus on a bounded system of experiences allows the researcher to uncover meanings, histories, and cultures that are specific to region and place.

Site of Research

Louisville is considered a border or gateway city, partially because of its position in the U.S. Civil War as an uncommitted state and neutral headquarters for both the Union and Confederate Army (K'Meyer 2009). Often referred to as the Gateway to the South, Metro Louisville, a recently consolidated city and county metropolitan zone, has a population of approximately 700,000 people: 73% of whom are white, 21% African American, 3% Hispanic, and 2% Asian.

Data Generation

This paper is based upon a subset of a larger qualitative data set. One to three-hour interviews were conducted with fifteen middle class mothers in Louisville, Kentucky. The participants included eleven white Christian women, two Jewish women, and two African American Christian women. Interviews were conducted in the homes and workplaces of participants as well as in coffee-shops and restaurants in Louisville. All interviews were conducted in person with the same researcher. Interview participants were notified that their participation was voluntary and confidential, and that no identifying information would be connected to their comments in any publication or materials used in connection with the study. In addition, the researcher conducted observations at events open to the public, including the JCPS Showcase of Schools event as well as at open houses at three magnet schools in Louisville.

Participant Selection

Parent participants in this paper had a child in pre-kindergarten or elementary school and lived in the Greater Louisville Metro Area. Parents were recruited in the area through postings on the internet, blogs, Facebook, flyers in coffee-houses, parks and churches. Flyers were also handed out at the Showcase of Schools event where parents come to learn about the school choices available in Jefferson County. Principals at area schools, the PTA, and researcher contacts were asked to send out email invitations to their contact lists. Participants contacted the researcher through a gmail account set up for the research and through a Facebook page.

Data Analysis

Because the study is designed to better understand how parents navigate educational choices across race, class, and geography, emergent coding was used to categorize the data into the most prevalent themes. NVivo coding software was used to identify and classify the data strands. The most consistent themes were identified in the first half of the data and then applied to the remaining qualitative data.

Findings

The middle-class parents in the study were consistently motivated by their perception of their children's academic and emotional needs, data about achievement, and practical and emotional concerns about sibling equity and feasible transportation. Middle class parents maneuvered the JCPS assignment system in a similar manner;

simultaneously negotiating with JCPS protocol and preparing an exit strategy from the assignment plan.

Where all the Children are Above Average

As parents navigated school assignment and school choice, their eyes were focused on achievement as measured by state test scores and reported with great excitement in local newspapers and on websites. Interestingly, most middle-class parents took test scores, unquestionably, as true and accurate measures of academic achievement. Middle-class parents did not critique test composition, scoring methods, or test bias but rather looked at standardized test scores as absolute truth about the quality of a school. One parent described her experience as such:

> "The district keeps telling people to not pay attention to the test scores, but test scores are an indicator of performance… and that matters".—Barbara

Achievement, then, became an important aspect of middle-class parents research on schools, and almost every participant explained how they had gathered information about the test scores for the public schools in their cluster to determine which schools to choose on their Jefferson County school district forms. Often this work of score comparison was quite laborious.

> "I looked at the test scores – I did my homework…. I downloaded all of them, I built spreadsheets of all of the attributes of each school, I graphed all of the test scores… to see if the schools seemed to be getting better or worse over time"—Marcy

Many of the interview participants brought extensive spreadsheets, published achievement reports about the schools, and newspaper and online articles about schools to our interview session. One parent, Barbara, brought a binder that contained extensive data and a ranking system for schools that weighted each attribute of the school and resulted in a point system to rank the schools based upon her predetermined criteria. Many parents also mentioned the Great Schools website as a source of information that was easier to navigate then the school report cards on the JCPS web site. The parents' comments section of this site was particularly important to interview participants who were trying to decide which schools to include on their "Choices" application.

> "I started researching the schools in our cluster online when she was three years old. I looked at a pdf of all of the test scores for the schools in our cluster. I also looked at the parent comments…"—Rosie

Considering information about parental involvement and parent comments came up in many interviews as parents talked about what they were looking for in schools.

> "We just didn't feel comfortable with the test scores at Waterson – they were really low… so before we bought our next house we looked at the JCPS web site and looked at the test scores and how active the PTAs were in terms of

awards for parent involvement for the schools in different neighborhoods".—Susan

The fact that schools in Area A had lower test scores did not escape the attention of the parents, although no one linked the achievement gap to structural or institutional inequalities.

> "There were no good schools in Area A so we didn't have any on our list because we were using test scores but the school officials say you have to put one of these low performing schools on your list, and we ended up getting into our fourth choice – a low performing school downtown. We were surprised because we thought we could always get into our home school".—Marcy

The motivation for high achieving schools was linked to the parent's perception of their child's ability and need to be challenged in school. Parents didn't feel as if all the schools would motivate their child in the same way. Many parents were interested in magnet schools and private schools because of their curricular or pedagogical approach.

> "She's smart as a whip at 3 – she is with older kids in a pre-k program and part of our challenge is that our kids have been challenged in an excellent early childhood program so we are worried about where they are going to fit in their next education placement".—Susan

Parents consistently ranked achievement above all other aspects of a school. It was the one data piece that they could consistently name about schools, and the one data piece that they privileged over all other data pieces. Although many parents talked about liking diversity and thinking that diversity was good for schools, they did not rank diversity as the most important piece in a good education. Barbara spoke in detail about how she viewed the importance of achievement in contrast to diversity in her son's school: She said,

> "When he applies to college, they are not going to ask him how many black kids were in his class or how many Vietnamese friends he had, they are going to look at his test scores and his involvement but mostly they are going to look at his test scores – what did he get on his SAT and ACT… It is going to come into play at some point how well can you get along with a variety of people but to me that is my responsibility as a parent to shape his world view and to help him to understand the intrinsic worth and value of every person he meets. That's a lot of pressure to put on his kindergarten teacher".—Barbara

Barbara's comment brings up an important issue to note in this self-reporting of parents around achievement. The racial composition of the schools from which parents are choosing is not a mystery. The Great Schools website that many parents mention as well as the school district data lists the percentage of students in each racial group. Therefore, when parents are looking at data about schools, they are seeing more than test scores and achievement levels. It is possible that race data about schools was also a factor in choosing schools, but this was not the data that parents reported as being important to them. Furthermore, middle-class parents were

particularly invested in demonstrating to themselves and to the researcher the depth of knowledge they had about the achievement levels in each school they put on their list.

Upward Mobility: The Intersections and Divergences of Race and Class

Middle class participants simultaneously dismissed and noticed race and class in their negotiations of the school system but were much more comfortable speaking about decisions based upon social class composition.

Lower middle-class participants and those who had grown up with parents who were working class spoke at length about class identity. Barbara, a college-educated white professional who lives in the predominately white working-class part of town said of the assignment system,

> "Honestly in our cluster, in our part of town on the southwest side - getting into our schools is not a problem – nobody is banging on the doors trying to get in - that's a problem for east end folks. We are the red-headed stepchildren of Louisville".—Barbara

She went on to speak about the precarious position of south Louisville, lamenting the fact that they could not attract major department stores to their area of town. She seemed resigned to her situation, stating that because of the recession they could not move to a nicer area of town or outside of the JCPS system.

Kagan, a professional with a high income and a husband with a working class job spoke at length about why she decided to get out of the south end, stating that she was fine living on the south end until she had children then she knew she had to go. When she was questioned about which experiences made her want to move, she said,

> "several times we would go to baseball games and I know parents act an ass everywhere, but baby mama drama shows up and they are fighting over another girlfriend and I don't want my kids to be involved in that sort of white trash redneck crap".—Kagan

In response to the scenes she witnesses in the south end, Kagan, an attorney first rents and then buys a home in the east end to be closer to schools with families who reflect the upwardly mobile middle-class values she wants to instill in her children. The advent of the new assignment plan causes her great stress and anxiety because it unravels her carefully orchestrated "real estate purchase for schooling" plan. Near the end of the interview she gets frustrated and says,

> "If I wanted my kids to hang out with gang bangers I would have moved to an area that was predominately gang banger but because of the busing system they are going to be on the bus with kids that you know are just one felony away from prison If I wanted them around those people I would bring them to work … if I wanted my kids to go to a worst-case school in the West End, I would have paid for $30,000 for a freaking house and lived in the

West End… so that for me that is what is so frustrating - I am kind of a control freak and I have no control and that is not okay!"
—Kagan

Kagan's comments could at first glance could be easily classified as patently racist, yet they are complicated by the fact that her first choice school for her twin sons is Brandeis, a math and science magnet program in an impoverished neighborhood in the West End of town. The majority of students at Brandeis are students of color, and Kagan witnessed the student composition and neighborhood on her tour of the school, yet it remained her first choice. For Kagan excellent behavior and achievement, along with a middle-class sensibility, are the indicators of a good school. On my tour of Brandeis, the guide told us that there were zero discipline problems at Brandeis. The children of color at Brandeis were not the "gang bangers" that Kagan was trying to avoid. Brandeis is far below the state and district average for percentage of students on free and reduced lunch; it is a middle-class school, a racially diverse middle-class school. For Kagan, class was her concern. She clearly did not have a one-dimensional prejudiced view of people of color, but instead was choosing schools based upon a class bias. Her analysis was not complicated by an understanding of institutional racism.

Rosie, a white professional woman who grew up in the working class white south end and bought her first house there, moved out specifically to get away from the schools. She had attended a local private college, and her experience there confirmed that students from other schools were better prepared and she wanted to give that opportunity to her children. She moved to the east end when her eldest child was in pre-kindergarten so that she could send her child to an east end elementary school, but she did not close on her new house until after the application deadline on March 1. When she applied to JCPS in April from her east end address, she was assigned to her fourth-choice school, a low performing school downtown. She kept her child at her private nursery school for kindergarten to avoid sending her child to a downtown school. Rosie recognized both class and race in her decision to move and in choosing schools. She took the JCPS application process seriously and visited multiple schools, including some magnet schools downtown. Yet when confronted with the racial reality of the magnet schools she hesitated in both her explanation and her choice.

> "We toured the Montessori magnet in the west end. I really liked the Montessori approach…The diversity there…it was almost…. to me – I don't know how to say this…it was almost, I don't know how to say this but…. well, I thought my daughter would be the minority, for sure, I guess that is the best way to say it. That seemed to me a little bit unusual, like it wasn't balanced. It was like the white population was very minimal".—Rosie

For Rosie, race was a salient feature of the school, and although she was hesitant to discuss it, she did admit that having her white daughter be a racial minority in the school setting was not a desirable option for her. She chose away from a school with a philosophy and curriculum she liked because of the high minority population of the school. She was the only white middle class participant who

was able to name race as an important factor in choosing or not choosing a particular school.

All Together Now

Every single parent interviewed spoke at length about the need for sibling preference in the assignment plan. Parents felt this was crucial because of the practicalities of transportation to school as well as the lack of time to be an involved parent in more than one school. Of all the topics we discussed, sibling placement was the most emotional topic with many parents tearing up over the possibility that their children would be separated.

> "I am making a decision for all three kids with this first one – because you want to keep things as simple as possible to make it work for your family".—Barbara

She went on to speak of the practicality of crossing town in two different directions to pick up children. Because JCPS does not offer bus transportation to students in after school care, all the middle-class parents in this study would have to rely on private transportation for their child at the end of the workday at 5 or 6 PM. For Barbara this meant not applying to any of the magnet schools or the traditional program that she liked because on her visits to those schools, the competitiveness of the admission process was stressed. She learned how hard it was to get accepted to the magnet schools and although she was impressed with the offerings, she did not even fill out the magnet application. She ultimately decided that having all three of her boys at a mediocre school was better than having one or two at one of the fabulous magnet schools. She could not justify offering an unequal experience to her children. Her explanation of this reasoning was rooted in her own experience as a child where she had received a private primary and secondary school education and had attended college while her elder siblings had attended the local public school and not gone to college. She knew that she received a better education and she did not feel that this was fair to her siblings.

Keeping siblings together was a motivating factor in paying private school tuition. Parents reported using private school as a place holder until they could ensure that their children would be enrolled in the same school. Themes of being left out and practical concerns come up as parents talk about sibling placement.

> "The only school I am really interested in is the Brown school… The only reason I didn't try for it when my daughter was going into kindergarten was that there is no sibling preference, so I just couldn't do it. I had to wait until I could apply for both of them in the same year. I just could not imagine having my one child at this awesome school and then just leaving my other child out. I won't consider any school unless they are both accepted to it. I filled out their applications exactly the sam6e. The first consideration is placing them together. I won't do it any other way. It is just not practical".—Sage

All the parents in the study worked at least part-time and wanted to be a part of their child's school experience. Because the school assignment plan did not guarantee sibling placement, parents decided to be very strategic in their school choices to keep their children together. For almost all the parents in the study, the logistics of going to two different choir concerts, athletic games, or parent nights was overwhelming. They were willing to give up a "better" school in exchange for the family being together in one school community.

The Direction of Our Lives

Balancing after school, younger siblings in day care, and the employment of two parents was central in parents' negotiation of school assignment and choice. When the original assignment plan was constructed in 1975, the assumption was that at least one parent would be close to their children during the day because the majority or workplaces and the University of Louisville were located in the urban core of Louisville, and in separate interviews I conducted about the original desegregation plan that did work out for many parents. However, this same calculus was not applicable to Louisville today, as the geographic landscape of Louisville has changed. Industrial parks, office buildings, and hospital complexes have been built in the east end suburbs and many parents are commuting from one suburban area to another for work. The urban core is not the universal direction for workplaces and all the Area A schools and magnet schools are in the urban core. As parents discussed choosing schools, many of them cited the long commutes and traffic involved in attending an Area A school. This is also complicated by the fact that all of the families in the study had two working parents, a departure from the employment realities of working families in the 1970s. With two working parents, a commute to a school outside of the direction of work or home was not considered feasible for attendance in the school day or for outside school events. Certainly, the choice of housing in Louisville in various neighborhoods is both a raced and classed decision. Participants indicated that their choice of home was influenced by schools, but their workplaces involved less choice in terms of location. In the subset of middle-class parents, the transportation of students to extra-curricular activities fell largely on mothers who were working. These mothers expressed a sense of exhaustion at the prospect of commuting 35 min in the opposite directions of their homes, churches, and workplaces to attend school events. The only parents who were willing to make the commitment to transporting students to the schools in Area A (the urban core) were parents who were choosing the specialized magnet or traditional schools in these areas, and those parents also worked in the urban core as well.

Movin' on Up: Middle-Class Maneuvers

As middle-class parents contended with the decision to choose schools across the public school JCPS plan, private schools in Jefferson County, and public schools in distant suburbs, particular maneuvers emerged to gain access to privileged schools. These middle-class maneuvers were instigated by parents and

encouraged by employees of the Jefferson County School District and private schools. Maneuvers included big decisions about changing homes and religions.

Rejoining the Catholic Church, tithing for the first time, converting to Catholicism were all employed to get a space in the Catholic Schools. Parents also switched parishes or churches in order to have a better chance to get into a school with room. Redshirting was common: holding a child in pre-kindergarten an extra year to avoid a placement or to satisfy the requirements of the private school. The Catholic schools encouraged every parent I spoke with to hold students back a year—they were all told that their child was not ready for kindergarten and had not passed the entrance test. One parent described it as a shocking choice, but something she did because of the requirements of a school leader. "Redshirting—where I come from in Oregon—redshirting does not happen, so I was against it for my child, but the Catholic schools said he had to wait".—Marcy

Parents also moved to the independent school district, Anchorage, to avoid JCPS as well as to distant outlying counties with separate school districts. Most people in this sample used private school as their back-up plan because they either enjoyed the amenities of living in Louisville or could not afford a home in Anchorage or did not feel Anchorage was a good social fit for their family because of it extreme affluence. Other parents chose Anchorage for its highly regarded school and inclusive educational philosophy. One parent who did buy a house in Anchorage said of her decision,

> "My child is very bright so even though he has deficiencies in reading he still needs to be challenged educationally while we caught up in this one area…In Anchorage you are guaranteed placement. I don't have to worry about him not testing into a good program. In Anchorage, he will be in that school, he doesn't have to pass a test to be in there. If I live there and I pay the taxes, I am in and that is it".—Elizabeth

Elizabeth went on to explain that the biggest problem for her and JCPS was the extensive tracking in the system. Her son had a reading disability but was above grade level in Math. She contended that the academic requirements for attending the magnet schools or being placed in the advanced program would keep her son out of all the good programs in JCPS. She liked the inclusive approach in Anchorage and the guaranteed placement.

Middle class parents also maneuvered to gain access for other middle-class parents. One mother explained how this works at the district wide school fair where individual schools in the district operate booths to inform parents about their programs. She explained that this school fair was not actually an open market for schools where everyone was interested in promoting their schools.

> "My friend is on the PTA at an east end school and they make a point when they go to the Showcase of Schools to do a really crappy job, so nobody wants to go there because they want to get all reside kids".—Winona

Her explanation of this tactic was consistent with my observations at the JCPS Showcase of Schools. Many of the high-performing schools in the east end had

lackluster displays and people staffing the booths who were not engaged with the public. The displays from the schools in Area A (in the urban core) were markedly different. They had elaborate booths, candy, educational displays, and engaged and energetic faculty and parents. The Area A schools were selling their product while most of the Area B schools seemed to be just fulfilling an attendance requirement.

Parents also used formal and informal networks to increase their chances of getting into their school of choice and to gain knowledge of the system. Those parents who relied solely on the materials supplied by the district were often confused and ended up not getting their first choice. Marcy who was new to Louisville and did not have friendship networks to help her understand the system said,

> "Right at the start we made a fundamental error – we believed that if you did not get into your choices, we would have the home school as a backup… we were wrong".—Marcy

Parents who had more success with getting the school they wanted relied on formal and informal networks to manipulate the system to their advantage.

> "My husband pulled the secretary aside and said what can we do to get into this school and the secretary said don't tell anybody I told you this but do a hardship transfer now in the middle of the year and then she will be more likely to get in – don't wait until the next school year starts".—Winona

Kagan, who wants her twin sons to attend the math and science magnet school must fill out an extensive application about her children's academic and social development in order to get admitted. Because she has researched her options a full year in advance, she is able to enlist the assistance of her children's nursery schoolteacher:

> "I already gave (the magnet application) to the director (of their nursery school) and I said - my children need all 5′s - Make it Happen… She is confident. She is not going to fudge it. She is not going to lie about it. But what is on the application is the curriculum that she is going to work through with them".—Kagan

Middle class parents were also given instructions about how to handle the application process to increase the likelihood of gaining admission.

> "At the showcase, we met the girl there and she said make sure you talk to the principal when you are on you tour, make sure she knows who you are because they will accept people that they want because they want involved parents. And so, we went on the tour at the magnet school the principal said that after the tour if you are interested in this school email me so I can make sure that I personally select you. That stuck out in my mind"

The interactions with school officials and the choosing process at JCPS, reflects the research done by Ndimande in South Africa. Choice does not impact all players equally, and the mechanism of choice itself can be a way that class and race privilege resists egalitarian aims. In South Africa, Ndimande indicated that withholding

information about vouchers for school fees was a common tactic. In Louisville, class bias is reproduced by gaming the system through particular maneuvers that increase the chance of middle-class families gaining their first-choice schools.

Conclusion

Considering middle-class buy-in as an aspect of public-school choice schemes is inherently troubling in that it places the needs and desires of middle-class people above that of the working class or overall societal aims. Yet JCPS is operating within an education system that allows middle-class people to opt out, a choice that is not available to low-income families. Ignoring middle-class buy-in can only be successful in a country like Finland that does not allow private schools. Yet, as long as private schools and homeschooling are legal in the state of Kentucky, catering to the needs and desires of middle-class people will be necessary to gain their enrollment in public schools. If integration by race/class are the desired goals, then absent a policy of compulsion, middle-class buy-in is necessary to achieve the aims of the policy.

It is also crucial to trouble this work in one of its underlying assumptions, that achievement on standardized test scores and racial integration are the most important measures of success. There is certainly power in segregated spaces for marginalized communities. Developing leadership skills, a strong sense of self, and a grounded sense of one's community are all important aspects of chosen segregated spaces. Certainly, a weakness of this study and the policy it examines is its emphasis on integrated spaces as the sole measure of a successful academic community.

This study also demonstrates the inherent problems of segregated housing. There seems to be an imperative here for the Jefferson County School system to increase its coordination with city officials, the housing authority, and real estate developers. Integrated schools are best achieved through integrated neighborhoods and by tackling housing segregation, many of the challenges of transportation and middle-class buy-in could be solved.

As parents make decisions in the school marketplace, it is impossible to deny that both race and class weigh heavily on both decisions and access to information. Every middle-class parent in the study, regardless of race or religion would not enroll their child in a non-magnet school in Area A (the urban core). Some had already avoided being assigned to low-income schools and others had made plans in case they were assigned. When I interviewed the principals of non-magnet, non-traditional Area A schools and asked about the students commuting into their schools from Area B, they told me, "those buses are practically empty." The thick description provided by participants points to the ways the assignment plan is being manipulated and reveals how the reality of the plan does not result in its goal of having economically and racially balanced schools. The descriptions of the parents also illustrate ways in which the plan could be modified to ensure more middle class buy-in, specifically considering opening more spaces in the popular magnet and traditional schools in Area A and offering a sibling placement guarantee. Middle-class parents across the sample were attracted to the magnet and traditional schools. The challenge in

scaling up these options is that one of the reasons they are popular is because they are difficult to get accepted to, and the admissions process is an application rather than a strict lottery. This process produces a certain kind of student, one who has engaged parents and is willing to put time into that process. It would be impossible to completely scale up to 100% magnet and traditional schools because the schools would then lose the elite status and committed student body that is attractive to middle-class parents. The sibling guarantee would be an easier change to the assignment process because it could be applied to all schools and all families evenly. The burden of navigating multiple school communities is overwhelming to many parents, and this small policy change could make a difference in attracting more middle-class parents into the JCPS system.

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