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School Choice: The Black Middle-class Dilemma

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School Choice: The Black Middle-class Dilemma

A Thesis

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Alan M. Delery

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Abstract

This case study assesses the elementary school choice decision-making process of black middle-class families living in the Algiers community of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. The concept of community has been central to the success of blacks in America since Reconstruction. However, as the Civil Rights Movement helped eliminate some of the legal obstacles facing blacks and provided them with more access to opportunities, it also had the unfortunate consequence of redirecting the attention of blacks more inwardly to the success of their own families, thus diminishing some of the formerly needed sense of community responsibility.

These families are not oblivious to the racism that still exists. Yet, they go about a process of prioritizing their options within their choice sets in order to strike the best, if not optimal, balance of school characteristics, such as Catholic tradition, racial diversity and academic rigor, to ensure the success of their children.

Keywords: American South, Education Reform, Community, Parenting

Introduction

My research is not about identifying a theory that explains national education policies, nor about particular policies that try to address the question of black education. The average black family has never heard about, thought about or talked about what sociological theories explain where or how their children should be educated. While there have always been people who questioned the value of a formal education for blacks in America, my study tracks the evolution of the focus on equal education by black America and how it has met resistance from the dominant white culture.

This case study specifically explores the decision-making process of middle-class African American parents as it relates to school choice in post-Katrina New Orleans. After the devastating storm of 2005, New Orleans' public schools began to experience a transformation as public charter schools were added on a large scale to the slate of school choices for families.

The study examines the different ways middle-class African American parents perceive their personal choices for their children. I believe that this topic is important because as a black middle-class parent who has struggled with school choice, I know that I am not alone. On one hand I feel a responsibility to public education and do not believe that it can be its best if the entire community does not have a vested interest in it. If public education is abandoned to poor blacks, I question whether they will receive the best opportunity to succeed and contribute to a healthy city. On the other hand, I am afraid that in placing my own children in an educational environment that has struggled to provide high quality education, I will be putting them at a disadvantage as they pursue their dreams. A handful of progressive public

schools is not enough to make a difference for the tens of thousands of school age children in New Orleans.

As I embarked upon the study, I found it first relevant to chronicle the conflicting national strategies of the multiple parties involved in the topic of black education from a historical perspective. While the United States consists of immigrants from around the world, there has been a unique conflict between the dominant white culture and black America; composed largely of the descendants of slaves who were unwillingly transported into this country. These same blacks endured nearly a century of Jim Crow laws that limited their human rights and ensured only the educational level needed for menial labor roles. Therefore, my historical study chronicles the strategies of the dominant white culture to maintain educational privilege for their children through implementation of Jim Crow laws, national responses such as the various Civil Rights laws that influenced how blacks were able to be educated, and the independent actions taken by the black families to gain quality education.

Within the theoretical study, I first identified the rationale behind the liberal integration strategies that were used during the Civil Rights Movement and how these impacted options that were available to black families. Within the theoretical review, I assess the liberal influences present in the Post-Civil Rights era. Most importantly, I draw on elements of Critical Race Theory in order to explore aspects of the current education system that, as some would argue, perpetuate dominant and subordinate racial positions.

The role of government funded public education has been a lightning rod ever since 1776 when Adam Smith argued against government administration of education because it would likely be "arbitrary and discretionary" (Smith, 1776). Thomas Jefferson, while serving

as the Revolutionary Governor of Virginia in 1779, was quoted as saying, "If it is believed that these elementary schools will be better managed by the governor and council . . . than by the parents within each ward, it is a belief against all experiences" (Jefferson & Foley, 1900). John Stuart Mill (1869) would also argue decades later against a government-run education system because he opposed a one-size-fits-all approach to schooling. In modern days, parental choice in public education has also been controversial ever since economist Milton Friedman first proposed a system of public school vouchers in 1955 (Gillespie, 2005).

The choice for those with children enrolled in failing public schools has been problematic when you consider the options available to them. Numerous factors from geographic proximity of available schools to financing private school education keep many families in the public school system. However, even when given a legal choice, some studies such as Bell (2009) have found that a majority (up to 97%) of parents with children in "failing" public schools would choose to leave their children in those schools. Numerous factors may come into play in the decision process for parents such as social networks, habits or tradition, concerns about alienation and powerlessness, racial identity and solidarity, and even their understanding of their child's academic achievement.

Of particular interest is how middle-class black families choose between private and public schools. Theoretically, these families have the financial resources to select high-performing private schools, yet many remain in public schools—some successful schools and some failing schools (Bell, 2009).

Since the early 1900s, black educators and intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) have proposed the need for the most talented and successful blacks, the "talented tenth," to

take on a leadership role in uplifting the race and those blacks with less economic, educational and social opportunities. Whether or not the subtle or overt awareness of this social expectation exists and how it plays into the school decision-making process for middle-class blacks today is a primary concern for this study. Much like Du Bois and his contemporaries, modern day public intellectuals like Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates too question the role of the black middle class and its responsibility to the black lower and working class (Gates & West, 1996).

The participants for this case study are drawn from the population of black middle-class parents of children in the Algiers community, and particularly those parents of current and past students of Alice Harte Elementary, which is one of nine public schools within the Algiers Charter Schools Association that was formed in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The study researches how these middle-class parents make the school choice decision for their children and how they relate these choices with their views on social responsibility.

Literature Review

The educational landscape that exists in the U.S. today, which includes public, private, parochial and new public charter schools, is the result of more than a century of government, private entities and families exploring their role and responsibility in educating the masses. To understand the current educational climate for black students in New Orleans, I will analyze specifically the education of blacks in America from the historical perspective of the Reconstruction period of 1865 to 1877 and the overlapping Jim Crow era, which began as Reconstruction was coming to an end and lasted until roughly 1965, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s through 1970s, and the post-Civil Rights Movement resegregation efforts. Historically, black people and black parents displayed great determination to secure education despite formidable obstacles presented by a racist society that enslaved them, passed discriminatory Jim Crow legislation that either denied them access to education or demanded segregated schools that were separate but unequal, and then when school integration was realized, facilitated white flight and the resegregation of public schools. This history makes school choice a very important issue for black people who remain determined to successfully navigate a system that many believe is still deeply flawed by racism.

As I move into the 21st century educational reform movement, I will analyze the body of literature and social scientific research on issues impacting the family school selection decision for middle-class African Americans through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). This analysis will include a discussion of the liberal integration approach contrasted against CRT and other critical rejections of the liberal approach, such as Afrocentrism and nationalism. From the

perspective of CRT, I plan to further assess the pertinent issues impacting race, class and the black middle-class school selection decision today.

Historical Perspectives on Black Education

Before exploring the current decision-making process of middle-class African-American parents about where to place their elementary-aged children in school in New Orleans today, I must first take a look at the history of how blacks were educated, specifically in the South, the sources of the educational opportunities, and the role parents and the community played in providing education for black children.

Reconstruction Era: Private, Public and Independent Black Institutions

In the eyes of the black slave in the South, education was the sign of freedom. However, the pursuit of education was also very dangerous. During the period of U.S. slavery, teaching slaves to read and write was illegal and could result in jail for those providing the education, and physical punishment for the slave receiving the education. As told by Frederick Douglass (1845), the common thinking among slave-owners was that education would spoil a slave and cause him to be unmanageable as his eyes would be open to all the possibilities the world could offer him beyond the plantation. An uneducated slave was the best source of the free labor slave-owners would need to grow their personal wealth and the nation's wealth as well.

Early attempts at educating blacks, by abolitionists, missionaries and well-meaning slave-owners, were conducted in secret for fear of legal prosecution and social persecution. According to Bell (1978), prior to the Civil War, the only authorized education for slaves was focused on the menial labor they provided. Any education beyond the basic schooling needed to perform their duties was barred and any efforts to teach blacks to read or write took place

under guise of religious education. The basic religious education of slaves was important for slave-owners who often justified the slave-master relationship through misuse of biblical scriptures.

For Douglass (1845), the religious school experience offered slaves an opportunity to be "intellectual, moral and accountable human beings," and not the slave chattel the master desired (p. 120). Slaves understood that the only way they could improve their position in life would be through education, and they were willing to risk their lives to learn to read and write. According to Douglass (1845), those slaves attending his Sabbath school came because they desired knowledge because "Their minds had been starved by their cruel masters. They had been shut up in mental darkness. I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race" (Douglass, p. 121).

In contrast to the lack of education for black slaves in the South, in the North, the first free school for blacks opened in New York City in 1787. It would later be joined by six other schools for blacks that would receive public funding (Simkin, 2009). Even though these schools were legally sanctioned and received public funding, there was little desire to provide equitable, quality education for the black students. According to Bell (1978), "In the North, school officials evidenced little interest in educating black youth who were treated so badly in the public schools that black parents refused to enroll their children in them" (Bell, p. 115).

As the Civil War came to an end, the Reconstruction period provided a glimmer of hope that former slaves would gain legal access to the education they would need in order to be free and productive members of society. During the Reconstruction period, which lasted from 1865 to 1877, some of the laws preventing black education were relaxed as the nation attempted to

rebuild after the Civil War. White Christian missionary organizations, which had been vehement

abolitionists, used the Reconstruction opportunity to provide more education for formerly

enslaved blacks in the South. However, they soon discovered interestingly that in the absence

of legal or authorized educational opportunities, many blacks such as those referred to by

Douglass, had already established independent systems to educate young black children

(Anderson, 1988; Douglass, 1845). Additionally, in areas where formerly secret black

educational systems did not exist, the missionaries discovered that many former slaves, at great

risk to themselves and their families, had educated themselves (Bush, 2004) (Hurlbut, 1864).

Bush (2004) provides the history of these Independent Black Institutions, or IBIs, and

how these organizations provided access to education after slavery. He concludes that while

early IBIs played an important role in educating blacks, increasing focus on universal public

education in the South would be a major factor in the deterioration of IBIs during the latter part

of the 19th Century. The earlier ban on education for blacks made IBIs necessary since these

were the only sources of education. However, the IBIs did not have the political, financial or

human resources that would enable their students to compete and succeed in a society where

slavery did not exist. Freed slaves were almost like birds set free with anchors tied to their

backs. These anchors, including lack of political power, education and basic human rights,

would have to be addressed either by force, law or divine intervention.

While Reconstruction efforts were supposed to address removal of these anchors, they

instead came to an end as Northern interests became more focused on their own financial and

political issues instead of securing rights for recently freed slaves in the South and other former

free people of color throughout the U.S. Many of the laws passed during Reconstruction that

would have provided blacks a firm foundation from which to begin their free lives were either watered down or reversed. The final straw to break the back of Reconstruction was the Compromise of 1877 in which the Democrats (who had been opposed to many of the Reconstruction efforts in the South) allowed Republican Rutherford B. Hayes to become President of the U.S. through an electoral vote recount in exchange for the withdrawal of the northern troops from the South.

As the Reconstruction period came to an end, limited resources and waning public attention would make the fight for universal public education one battle that many blacks would have to wage on their own, especially in the South where "public education for white Americans was lacking and basically nonexistent for blacks" (Bush, 2004). While IBIs would go in and out of favor, the establishment of the early IBIs are evidence of the proactive nature of blacks in filling the education void and their existence demonstrates how black families have historically "sought and created options when public schools have failed them or when access to better public schools was limited" (Bush, 2004). Later, during the Civil Rights Movement, IBIs would again come into favor as blacks demanded greater control over their children's education and a more Afrocentric curricula (McCoy, 1970).

Despite their newfound freedom after the Civil War, blacks did not have the education they needed to thrive and succeed. In place of IBIs and secret schooling would come some forms of separate public education for blacks; however, schools for blacks were generally focused only on preparing them to provide menial labor. The government paid little attention to ensuring quality education or providing adequate funding for these schools. This lack of attention and investment would continue throughout the Reconstruction period, which was

supposed to bring former slaves new prosperity. Irons (2004) describes one former slave who had been told by his master that he would remain in slavery because he didn't have an education and education is what would make a man free. This slave became determined that each of his thirteen children would attend school, no matter how long or hard he would have to work. The slave would go on to say that "It was worth all the labor to make them free" (Irons, 2004, p. 11).

During Reconstruction, even though there had been some educational efforts targeting former slaves by white missionaries, and independent educational initiatives such as the formation of IBIs, the majority of black children, just as their parents, were illiterate. In the U.S. "by 1870, more than nine thousand teachers were instructing some two hundred thousand black children, about 12 percent of the school-age population. Northern missionary groups also sent teachers into southern states, and black churches set up schools for their children. All together, these public and private groups offered schooling to perhaps one of every five black children in the South" (Irons, p. 9).

The educational environment of New Orleans was specifically addressed by Major General S.A. Hurlbut in a report to the Board of Education for Freedmen in 1864. In the report, the Major describes the state of education for blacks in the city at the close of the war and the beginning of the Reconstruction effort. According to the report, there had been no public education for black children prior to 1862 when the city was transferred from Confederate to federal rule. Of the free men of color, Hurlbut (1864) wrote "Even that portion of the colored population, who, for generations, had been wealthy and free, were allowed no public school, although taxed to support the school-system of the city and State" (p. 3).

Many of those free people of color in New Orleans were Creoles, or racially mixed people of black and French or Spanish ancestry. Creoles were often educated abroad or in the North since they could pass for white due to their fair complexions. Others were educated at home or in private schools for Creoles. According to the General Hurlbut, the Creole private schools "although not contrary to law, were really the bane of opinion, but were tolerated, because of the freedom, wealth, respectability and light color of the parents, many of whom were nearly white, and by blood, sympathy, association, slaveholding, and other interests, were allied to the white rather than to the black" (Hurlbut, 1864, p. 3).

Unfortunately, for the poor blacks who were not of Creole descent, and possessed no financial wealth, there had been no legally authorized or tolerated public or private educational opportunity. During slavery these blacks had been forbidden access to any education. Once these blacks had been made free, whites prevented their education for fear they would become insubordinate. However, the General did find that a few of the newly freed blacks could read and write despite the circumstances. These newly freed black citizens had either educated themselves or found favor in the eyes of sympathetic slave masters or the wives of slave masters, who taught them to read and write out of compassion, human justice or convenience.

Jim Crow

From the Reconstruction period immediately following the abolishment of legal slavery through the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, the U.S. experienced a judicial system of Jim Crow laws. These laws made separate public systems for blacks and whites the legal norm for education, housing and business. Not only were the systems legally separate, but the

dominant white systems were better-funded, offered better services and ensured

discrimination against and subjugation of blacks.

Irons (2004) found that the segregated educational opportunities offered to blacks

during this period of time did not meet the needs of the black family as "these Jim Crow schools

were 'public' in name only, and often received so little funding from county school boards that

hard-strapped parents had to 'board' the teachers to supplement their meager salaries" (Irons,

p. 13). Hurlbut (1864) also discusses the challenges of finding teachers willing to teach in

schools for black children in New Orleans despite the minimal pay, limited resources and

contempt from the white community.

In New Orleans, the challenge to desegregate schools continued throughout

Reconstruction as blacks, with newfound freedom, sought meaningful participation in the

political process. There was essentially a tug of war between blacks and whites at the city and

state level to gain power. However, as federal focus on Reconstruction waned, so did any

power or influence blacks had previously gained. Devore & Logsdon (1991) provide an excellent

historical timeline of public education in New Orleans and focus a great deal of attention on the

black/white power struggles. The authors write that after Reconstruction, while "led by such

stalwarts as P.B.S. Pinchback and C.C. Antoine, the black community eventually lost the battle

for political influence and, with it, much of the educational initiative generated between 1868

and 1876" (Devore & Logsdon, 1991, p. 82).

As the federal troops left the city and Democrats regained political control of the

government, rights for blacks in Louisiana were slowly chipped away. In New Orleans, where

the black population had enjoyed a greater degree of power in comparison to their

counterparts in other parts of the states, the black community fought hard to retain the civil rights and privileges they had briefly enjoyed during the onset of Reconstruction, but by the close of the century, "Louisiana officials finally disenfranchised almost all black voters in the city and state" (Devore & Logsdon, 1991, p. 82).

By the 1870s, despite having four black representatives on the New Orleans school board, efforts to resegregate schools after Reconstruction were moving ahead as Francis Nicholls, the new Louisiana governor, and others in the Democratic Party sought to undo the effects of Reconstruction efforts. In exchange for political support by black community leaders such as Pinchback, Nicholls had allowed the appointment of the four blacks to the city school board. However, the four black board members were essentially powerless against the massive calls for a racially segregated school system. According to Devore & Logsdon (1991), the school board's "proposal to resegregate the schools passed by a vote of fifteen to three" (Devore & Logsdon, p. 87). The lone black vote in support of resegregation came from black board member Joseph Craig who, like contemporaries such as Booker T. Washington, "thought that accommodation to segregation would protect other civil rights, bring social peace, and perhaps even promote some advancement in black public education" (Devore & Logsdon, p. 87). Other blacks vehemently opposed this position and any efforts to codify separate systems. These leaders "fought against the very notion of racial caste and recognized, well before most other Americans, that legalized segregation in any form would promote total subordination of black Americans and inflict the whole community with unending social problems" (Devore & Logsdon, 1991, p. 88). These contrasting views on segregation represent a major conflict among black leaders throughout the close of the 1800s lasting to contemporary times.

There were a number of local and federal judicial decisions upholding Jim Crow schooling from 1849 to 1890, none of which reached the United States Supreme Court until the case of *Plessy versus Ferguson* in 1896. Originating in Louisiana, the focus of the case was equal access to railroad cars by blacks under the Thirteenth Amendment (protection against slavery) and the Fourteenth Amendment (equal protection for all people under the law). In this case the court would legally endorse the practice of "separate but equal" public facilities and institutions along with the practice of school segregation, in both the North and South, and would provide justification for legal segregation for decades to come (Devore & Logsdon, 1991, p. 87).

The public school system in New Orleans has always had its challenges and during this period of time lack of funding, underpaid faculty and minimal physical resources resulted in a public school system not capable of effectively educating the growing number of students, both black and white. There had also been previous efforts to undermine the goal of all public education in the city. For example, by the close of Reconstruction there had been widespread efforts to end secondary education, which was viewed by many as a waste of resources (Devore & Logsdon, 1991, p. 129). While there was waning support for public secondary education for any student regardless of race, there was even greater resistance to among whites to use tax dollars to educate blacks. Many whites in the city believed black residents only needed enough education to perform menial labor or work in the service industry. They thought that education beyond grade school would enable blacks to compete with whites for better jobs, more pay and a greater place in society. This threat could be abated by limiting blacks' access to education.

As white public schools fought to secure the resources they needed to improve education for their student population, black schools were essentially ignored. However, even

white public education was not without its controversy. Devore & Logsdon (1991) write that "Since the end of Reconstruction, politics in New Orleans had degenerated into a struggle between the city's Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite from prosperous uptown neighborhoods and the sons of Irish and German immigrants who lived close to wharves all along the river and in the old downtown Catholic neighborhoods" (Devore & Logsdon, p. 124). Issues of class and ethnicity would further divide the city's white power brokers and their attention to and investment in public education. As the Protestants created a private school system to meet their needs, white Catholics would invest their time and resources in developing a strong parochial school system. While some small private institutions continued to provide education to Creoles, the majority of the colored population—and poor whites as well—of New Orleans were left in an education void that forced them to depend on the floundering public education system.

By the early 1900s, the lack of focus and attention had become evident in statistical reports ranking New Orleans' white public schools poorly. In a report of public education throughout the U.S., New Orleans' white schools ranked fifty-ninth out of sixty-one urban school systems surveyed. The city's white public schools had poor attendance rates and one of the highest levels of students repeating a grade. "Unlike Northern cities, New Orleans could not blame its failure on a recent deluge of non-English speaking immigrant children" since more than 98 percent of the student population were native born (Devore & Logsdon, 1991, p. 141). Additionally, blacks could not bear the blame since only white schools were surveyed. Adding insult to injury, black schools in Richmond and Nashville ranked better than New Orleans' white public schools.

Many whites began to realize that their personal economic interests could be compromised since New Orleans would have to compete with other growing cities for business. Once whites considered the economic impact of the poor educational system on their personal well-being, many resolved to forget their class differences in order to improve the public schools in the city. Once Martin Behrman, a long-time proponent of public education, became mayor of New Orleans in 1904, he would begin a campaign to redirect funding and attention to the city's public education system. Behrman was so successful in securing additional funding for schools, which made him very popular among working-class voters in the city, that in 1908 he convinced then Louisiana Governor Newton Blanchard to relinquish almost all state control over New Orleans' schools to the city. Once in control, Behrman and the new school board concentrated on expanding elementary education for the primary benefit of the Irish and German immigrants (Devore & Logsdon, p. 126) while virtually ignoring the very present needs of the city's black population also enrolled in public schools. The local government continued to focus on public education only to the degree that it benefited white students. From 1900 to 1909 only four public schools for black students were built in the city, while 18 schools were erected for white students.

After Reconstruction, blatant and visible efforts to reinforce white power were acceptable again, but now they were focused not just on preventing black access to education, but rather on creating a "separate" and inferior system for blacks; a codified court-ordered dual system. The doctrine of separate access arose in the infamous Plessy case in which separate access to rail cars in Louisiana was the issue at hand; however, Plessy's "separate but equal" doctrine would be applied to numerous areas of black life allowing dual systems to exist for

blacks and whites as long as they were deemed "equal." Thankfully, the brief reprieve from the enforcement of discriminatory laws during the Reconstruction period allowed blacks to achieve just enough power to prevent the government from forbidding education or all access to public facilities and institutions for blacks after the Plessy decision. However, the limited access blacks had was inadequate. In 1900, the New Orleans school board ruled that it would prevent funding for black public schools beyond the fifth grade, thus preventing blacks from attaining a level of comparable educational standing and reinforcing white supremacy in the city (Devore & Logsdon, 1991).

Despite the results of the court's "separate but equal" doctrine, black community leaders and parents would continue throughout this period of time to improve black public education, even within the constraints of an unjust, unbalanced, separate and unequal system. Without legitimate political power or government support, blacks had to rely on the coalitions they had developed within the black community, including community, civic, religious and educational organizations (Devore & Logsdon, 1991). These coalitions usually had only enough power to support a particular school or neighborhood and relied heavily on parent-teacher organizations and parents clubs for financial support. These coalitions also acted as the educational advocacy arm for the black community; challenging the school board and other governmental bodies for greater allocation of funds to black schools, improved facilities and teacher pay raises. These groups opted to take a non-violent and more intellectual approach to getting their needs met. The black community understood that white benevolence would get them only so far and they would have to appeal to the self-interests of whites if black schools were to ever receive the resources they needed. Petitions were presented to the school board,

and the results of parent interviews and surveys were shared to show the needs of the black

schools and how the community would be impacted if these schools were neglected. While the

school board was cordial to the black petitioners, they did not buy their argument and they

provided little in the way of immediate relief. However, over time, small improvements were

made as a result of persistence of the black petitioners and support from some white

sympathizers on the board. It is possible that the blacks' arguments persuaded some since

"after the death of Warren Easton in 1910, all subsequent superintendents of the New Orleans

school system – Joseph Gwinn, Nicholas Bauer, August Tete, F. Gordon Eberle and Lionel

Bourgeois – made some effort to improve black education" (Devore & Logsdon, 1991, p. 182).

However, despite the cordiality and miniscule additional financial focus, black schools

under the separate but equal doctrine continued to suffer. Facilities were inadequate and

resources were scarce. Black students had to share books and desks in order to accommodate

overcrowding. From 1901 to 1940, black student enrollment increased at a fairly fast pace, from

5,509 to 27,787, and white student enrollment nearly doubled from 26,038 to 53,657 during

the same time frame (Devore & Logsdon, 1991, p. 185).

The Civil Rights Movement and Court-Ordered School Desegregation

Many blacks believed that what was needed was national attention to the issue of black

education and the power of federal enforcement to demand compliance. However, other black

leaders opposed the idea of blacks integrating, and therefore assimilating, into the white man's

world. These anti-integration sentiments ranged from the full-fledged separatist Black

Nationalist position to more independent Afrocentric ideals.

Soon, through the *Brown versus Board of Education* case in 1954, Plessy's "separate but equal doctrine" was challenged and overturned and for the first time the U.S. Supreme Court acknowledged that racially separate schools were "inherently unequal." The court indicated that the separate system could not provide equal educational opportunities to all students, and resulted in a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of equal protection (Bhargava, Frankenberg and Chinh, 2008).

The Brown case, litigated by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, launched a series of actions to provide equal educational opportunities for black children. The change over the following two decades included the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which empowered the Department of Justice to initiate desegregation lawsuits independent of private plaintiffs and authorized the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to deny federal funds to segregating school districts" (Bhargava et al, 2008, p. 6).

In New Orleans, young Ruby Bridges would be the first black student to integrate the formerly all-white William Frantz public school in 1960 (Devore & Logsdon, 1991, p. 246). However, the problems for black students in New Orleans' public schools were not ending. While the laws could change to mandate desegregation in the public schools, the hearts and minds of the white community still opposed the idea. There was widespread opposition to and outright defiance of the Supreme Court ruling and few black parents were willing to subject their children to the mental trauma and threat of physical harm that came with being the first black students to integrate the very hostile environment of formerly all white public schools. Within the black community, the debate continued between forcing integration into formerly

white schools, or focusing more on the creation of independent, well-financed, Afrocentric schools that provided students a safe haven for learning.

Displeased with the slow pace of desegregation, New Orleans NAACP attorneys went to court in 1964 and were able to alter the pace of desegregation by proactively moving from the one-grade-a year plan to desegregating roughly two grades per year, which would result in a totally desegregated school system beginning with the 1969-70 school year (Devore & Logsdon, 1991, p. 284).

Each year, as more black students entered what had formerly been all white schools, white flight to private schools, parochial schools and public schools in remote majority-white communities would take place. Desegregating the public school faculty population was also difficult as white teachers also opted to move to the same private, parochial and suburban white public schools that were attracting their former white public school students (Devore & Logsdon, 1991, p. 266). Additionally, as the black middle class continued to grow, these families had more academic choices available for their children. In discussing the cause of the white student flight, critical race theorist Derrick Bell (1978) wrote that "While we may differ with social scientists like James Coleman as to the cause of white withdrawal, it is foolish to ignore the reality that when school desegregation orders are implemented in large, urban districts with substantial non-white populations, compliance with such orders is soon undermined by the withdrawal of middle-class white (and black) students whose parents either move to the suburbs or enroll their children in private schools" (Bell, 1978, p. 117).

More federal dollars began to flow into the New Orleans public schools as a result of President Johnson's Great Society initiatives, and more blacks were asserting power as part of

the Orleans Parish School Board, signaling a shift in black political power in the city. However, New Orleans' public schools continued to struggle with poor facilities and low teacher salaries. Teacher pay in New Orleans not only lagged behind others in the nation, but even behind other smaller cities within the state, such as Shreveport (Devore & Logsdon, 1991, p. 271). The lagging pay structure would continue to persist in New Orleans schools through 2005. To address the teacher pay issues, black parents replicated the same coalition-building strategies that had been formerly used during the post-Reconstruction black education efforts including providing the school board with community surveys and petitions. Through various school-based parent-teacher organizations, parents went to the school board to voice their concerns face-to-face (Devore & Logsdon, 1991, p. 284). During the 1960s through 1980s, New Orleans public schools dealt less with issues of racially integrating schools and focused more on dealing with common issues that existed in managing large and growing urban school districts including lack of public support and dwindling resources (Devore & Logsdon, p. 286).

Although desegregation laws had been passed, schools within New Orleans never really achieved any significant level of racial balance among the student populations. Instead, public schools slowly but surely resegregated. As black student enrollment increased throughout New Orleans, white student enrollment continued to decline and by 1981, black student public school enrollment was 72,367, while white student enrollment had dropped to just 13,293 (Devore & Logsdon, 1991).

Support for meaningful school desegregation efforts from the federal executive branch of government also began to waver during the 1980s and the "Reagan administration adopted a new philosophy that focused on school choice" (Bhargava et al, 2008, p. 7). The Reagan

administration used economist Milton Friedman's concept of private school vouchers, which would allow parents of students in underperforming public schools to access government dollars that would be redirected to their choice of a private school or a better-performing public schools. This concept essentially injected economic principles and competition into the education arena.

Post-Civil Rights Resegregation

According to Bhargava et al (2008), despite the fact that the Supreme Court had declared segregated schools to be unconstitutional in 1954, the process of integrating white and minority students into unified school systems took many years. In addition, some schools never integrated due to white flight and the massive resistance that came immediately after the Brown decision. Bhargava et al (2008) also found that "the slow, decades-long process set in motion by the Brown ruling is now being rapidly undone" (Bhargava et al, p. 11). According to the study, over a ten-year period beginning in 1988, U.S. public schools were beginning to rapidly resegregate as a result of white flight from public education after the 1954 Brown decision and integration efforts. The end result is a white population in isolation; attending school with primarily other white students of similar socio-economic standing. Typically, conversations regarding integration and segregation focus on the minority; however, as white students fled to schools not within the reach of many minority students, they also created a high level of isolation for white students who have little opportunity to interact with other students who don't look like them. "The typical white public school student attends a school that is nearly 80% white" (Bhargava et al, p. 11).

In addition to the trend of fewer and fewer public school districts enrolling white students since the 1980s, minority families have also experienced increasing educational options through programs such as school vouchers and church-based schools. Black parents who are engaged in their children's education and demand more from their schools are increasingly choosing these other options over fighting for effective public schools. Bell (1978) found that past efforts to desegregate schools, demand more accountability, and lobby for greater financial investment in education were spearheaded by black religious organizations, churches and community groups. While I did not read any study that described whether these players became disenfranchised or worn down by the battle for greater accountability in public schools, there was a move for the creation of black church-based and community-operated schools in direct competition with public school options. Today, the same black churches that helped organize past desegregation litigation efforts offer their own academic programs. These new education options allowed black parents to combine religious and secular education in schools operated by their local church or mosque. Additionally, as more black families gained more wealth, or became more willing to sacrifice other needs in lieu of tuition, they enrolled their children in New Orleans' large Catholic school system. While New Orleans has a large Catholic population, Protestant families were also known to take the risk of proselytization in exchange for a good education for their kids (Bell, 1978, p. 116).

Despite the Brown decision, New Orleans public schools have continued to struggle well beyond the Civil Rights Movement due to the city's long history of private and parochial schools. These schools, while not always academically better than the public school options, reinforced New Orleans' social caste system for both the white and black communities (Lewis,

2003, p. 99). Due to the historically poor performance of New Orleans' public schools, many

Catholics had already established a robust Catholic school system, and affluent Protestants

opted for a system of private schools. Lewis (2003) found that "the departure of middle-income

white families with school-age children from Orleans Parish resembles a stampede" (Lewis, p.

99), and middle-income black families also had to decide whether they would too opt for the

grass on the other side of the fence in parochial schools that served the black community, such

as St. Mary's Academy, Xavier Prepatory High School and St. Augustine.

By 1974, when the population of blacks in New Orleans for the first time since 1830

exceeded that of whites, approximately 14% of blacks enrolled in school were in Catholic or

other private schools. At the same time, 53% of whites were enrolled in either Catholic or other

private schools (Lewis, 2003). These numbers would grow over time with ever-increasing white

enrollment in private and parochial schools in tandem with increasing black enrollment in

public schools. The increasing black student enrollment in public schools did not necessarily

mean that blacks were leaving private and parochial schools, but rather as the black population

in the city grew (including people of color from areas such as Cuba and Haiti) and white families

fled to other nearby cities, black students were increasingly filling the seats in the public

schools.

From a historical perspective, blacks gained many legal rights as a result of the Civil

Rights Movement; however, even today many struggle with the slow pace of meaningful and

lasting change in business, politics and education. Since the Civil Rights Movement numerous

reform efforts have focused on how to make its goals a reality, not just in the legal books but in

the daily lives of African Americans. However, the struggle to win hearts and minds of the

nation in support of the spirit of civil rights law, equal rights and opportunities for all has

proven more challenging than just winning the legal battles over the letter of the law.

Theoretical Perspectives on Black Education

I vividly recall the conversations my parents and older siblings had as my family

integrated some of the Catholic schools in New Orleans. This may seem odd since I am what

many New Orleanians would call Creole. In New Orleans' history many Creoles considered

themselves non-black. By doing so, historically they were able to secure a better position in

society. However, for our family, Creole was our "culture" and not our "race," and by

integrating schools, my siblings were viewed by their white schoolmates and teachers as black,

plain and simple. Being identified as black resulted in daily fights for respect and unkind, racially

charged words from students and faculty alike. The decision to subject their children to these

circumstances could not have been easy for my parents, but someone had to be the first to

pave the way for others.

Now, as I identify myself as a black middle-class parent of children growing up in the

city, I can't help but acknowledge the conflicts I have experienced in my own family school

choice decisions. I have the resources to provide a great academic environment for my children,

but what other factors play into the best educational experience? In reading past studies,

historical accounts and research, and considering some of the racial bias my older siblings faced

as they entered formerly all-white schools, I found a battle raging within my own conscience—

between the liberal approach of the Civil Rights Movement's integrationism and critical

rejections of integration in the form of Critical Race Theory (CRT).

After analyzing the liberal integration strategies of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the resulting assimilation efforts by many blacks and the development of the colorblind ideology, which seemingly ignores the real racial bias many blacks face today, I have ceased trying to find one universally applied theory to guide black middle-class families in making their decisions on where to place their children in school. Past experiences and current economic, geographic and social situations are too diverse. Some families may share the tenets of n race-conscious theories such as CRT, which focuses on identifying institutionalized racism and challenging the slow pace of meaningful change in the position of blacks despite the legal successes of the Civil Rights Movement. These families may seek out more Afrocentric learning environments for their children as they perceive most public institutions as inherently racist. Other families may allow more liberal perspectives to guide their decisions on where to place their children in school.

At the onset of my research, I positioned myself as a black middle-class male who was an advocate of personal responsibility as the key to success in life. If asked my political or social paradigm, I would have said that I was a social liberal with conservative values. I would have defined the path to success as developing what Sean Covey (1998), in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens,* called habit #1. In explaining habit #1, Covey says, "Be Proactive. It is the key to unlocking all the other habits and that's why it comes first. Habit 1 says, 'I am the force. I am the captain of my life. I can choose my attitude. I'm responsible for my own happiness or unhappiness. I am in the driver's seat of my destiny; not just a passenger'" (Covey, p. 48). Much like Covey, I also believe that while much is outside our personal control, such as systemic

racism, the one thing we can control is how we respond to what happens to us and make the most of our options.

As I began my research, I recognized the need to delve deeper into those external, or systemic, forces that black families selecting a school cannot control as well as personal experiences and perceptions of race, class and privilege that might impact their decision-making. From a liberal theory approach, I will explore civil rights integration, liberal racism and the post-Civil Rights Movement color-blind ideology, and rational choice, and how they relate to the school selection decision. I will then use CRT to assess the school selection decision by middle-class African Americans.

I have found that CRT, either embraced or critiqued, has played an integral role in most theoretical assessments and studies of race and school choice. I will therefore critique CRT as it relates to the school selection decision in the post-Katrina educational landscape of New Orleans that now includes not just public, private and parochial school options, but a new form of public schools managed by private organizations – public charter schools. Many public school advocates argue that the public charters now prevalent in New Orleans have expanded the available school choice sets for black families as they make their school choice decision, while others argue that the charters have simply added another layer of exclusion in a system already racked with educational "haves" and "have nots."

Liberal Theories

Civil Rights Movement Integrationism

Delgado and Stefancic (2000) define liberalism as the "system of civil rights litigation and activism characterized by incrementalism, faith in the legal system, and hope for progress" (p.

1). However, Bell (1976) argues that civil rights proponents of the past relied too heavily on "unconditional integration" policies. While proponents of the Civil Rights Movement used integration litigation as a strategy to eliminate inequality, critics argue that efforts became more centered on the elimination of racial segregation than the elimination of inequality. However, others would argue racial desegregation was, in fact, a necessary foundational step for the elimination of inequality. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People maintains its position even today in advocating for integrated schools and classrooms; however, the organization also recognizes the current trend of resegregation in schools throughout the U.S. In a study commissioned by the NAACP to help parents in their school selection decision, Bhargava et al (2008) state:

> In 2004, as the nation celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education decision, many wanted to presume that large-scale racial inequality was an artifact of the past and of little concern to us today. Yet, as seen in the previous chapter, it is clear that segregated or near segregated schools continues to exist, and that school resegregation has been on the rise since the 1980's. (p. 16).

From this position, it is apparent that the NAACP continues to associate segregated schools with inequality. It argues that the failures of public schools to provide quality education in a diverse student and faculty setting are associated with the resegregation trend. Bhargava et al (2008) state "Public school segregation has not increased because the desegregation effort failed or because Americans have turned against it. In fact, there is now more information about the benefits of diversity and integration than ever before, and public support for diverse, inclusive schools remains high" (Bhargava et al, 2008, p. 16).

Bhargava et al. (2008) provide several benefits of integration in education which are compelling to me. According to their research on economic integration, for example, students of all socio-economic backgrounds have higher academic achievement when they are in class with a large number of middle-class or higher income levels. In other words, when children are in concentrated poverty they are more likely to struggle academically themselves. I believe when it comes to school choice, middle-class parents, regardless of race, are concerned that their children would likewise struggle academically if in a school with concentrated poverty.

Their study indicates that new research reveals that white students likewise benefit from racially integrated schools and exhibit more racial tolerance than white students in segregated schools. Cross-racial friendships are more likely to occur in integrated environments; however, I've found very limited research on the views of the people involved in these types of friendships and whether they were structured in integrated schools. From my own experience, just being in a school that exposes me to white students does not guarantee friendship with them. I believe there must be intentional efforts to promote and monitor these interactions. Like Bhargava, I believe that unless opportunities for interracial ties are made, whether in school or some other setting, we are inevitably going to continue to see racial prejudice.

In addition to noting that all students in integrated schools tend to have more cross-racial friendships, Bhargava et al. (2008) point out that, "Students who attend more diverse schools have higher comfort levels with members of racial/ethnic groups different from their own, an increased sense of civic engagement, and a greater desire to live and work in multiracial settings compared to their segregated peers" (p. 18). I intend to see if these

attitudes and behaviors emerge in my own research. My preliminary impression is that if there are not intentional efforts to promote and monitor these interracial ties in integrated schools, there may be an opposite outcome from those in found by Bhargava.

One additional argument cited in Bhargava et al. (2008) that I believe could impact the decision of middle-class blacks on where to place their children in school is that even if students are academically successful in a racially isolated school, these same students could be disadvantaged when seeking jobs or college admission because of their school's reputation and lack of alumni or teacher networks that could assist them in their post-secondary endeavors. Middle-class parents are likely to choose to place their children in a school with a better reputation and alumni or teacher networks that would offer greater long-term opportunities.

Bhargava et al (2008) also address what they believe to be a common misconception that school segregation efforts are focused only on co-locating black and white students in the classroom in order to improve black student achievement. The authors point to the undeniable linkages between achievement and access to needed resources and argue that "In terms of academic achievement, if segregation were not so strongly associated with concentrated poverty and a lack of educational resources, perhaps it would not be of such great concern" (Bhargava et al, 2008, p. 20).

However, Johnson (1993) criticizes the liberal perspective of the Civil Rights Movement and its push for forced integration, and suggests that society must begin to focus on ways to promote voluntary integration that does not ignore the racial differences that exist. Many people believe that race can now be ignored since Civil Rights laws are in place and blacks now play a greater role in government and business. Some of the recent public statements by media

commentators and political figures regarding President Barack Obama transcending race offer

a perfect example of how some perceive his role as the first African American president as

signaling a new post-racial America. Just recently political commentator Chris Matthews

commented after a presidential speech that he had "forgotten the president was black" (NPR,

2010). However, Johnson (1993) challenges this idea. In reality, Johnson finds that social

policies built on the premise of integrationism have failed our society because "The courts are

embracing a social reality that does not exist: a society in which race is viewed as an irrelevant

characteristic" (Johnson, p. 405). However, race is relevant in America today and the idea that it

is not has lead many so called progressive thinkers into embracing the idea of a colorblind

America.

Colorblind America and Liberal Racism

In describing the colorblind perspective, Gallagher (2003) states, "the colorblind or race

neutral perspective holds that in an environment where institutional racism and discrimination

have been replaced by equal opportunity, one's qualifications, not one's color or ethnicity

should be the mechanism by which upward mobility is achieved" (Gallagher, p. 131). However,

this newfound focus on colorblindness both personally and within established institutions, can

overshadow the reality of continued racial inequality. On its face, the term colorblind seems

politically correct, but Gallagher examines how presenting the U.S. as a colorblind nation serves

only to promote the various political, ideological and social functions that favor the white status

quo.

Colorblindness is essentially a person's assertion that institutional racism and

discrimination on the basis of race no longer exist. Proponents assert that color does not

matter to them, that we are all equal, and that they don't even notice the differences in color when interacting with people. However, institutions and individuals who embrace this notion are oblivious to the reality of race in America. Challenges in securing what most Americans would call the "blessings of liberty" continue to plague blacks, while the majority of whites continue to benefit from past discrimination. According to the National Urban League (2009), African Americans are two times more likely than whites to be unemployed, three times more likely than whites to live in poverty, and six times more likely than whites to be incarcerated. Ignoring race ignores the very true and present challenges faced by minorities in America, as well as the inherent benefits that come with being white.

From extensive interviews, Gallagher (2003) concluded that the majority of white Americans have made colorblindness the dominant lens through which they understand contemporary race relations, which allows them to live in a "psychological space that is free of racial tension" (Gallagher, p. 137). He interprets the comment by one of his interviewees named Mary. "As Mary's comments make clear, embracing racial symbols that serve to socially isolate and challenge the racial status quo is a 'threat.' Implicit in this exchange is that it is not very pleasurable for Mary to interact with those who would use race to promote a political agenda" (Gallagher, 2003, p. 137).

In order to eliminate the discomfort with issues of race, many whites like Mary, who would call themselves liberals, have convinced themselves that they live in an era that is free of racism. This attitude allows them to ignore any sign that racism is real while at the same time viewing themselves as racially tolerant and progressive. This position also reinforces the idea that any agenda based on race is in turn "racist," even those agendas that legitimately seek to

eliminate racial bias or oppressive actions or practices. The danger in colorblindness is that is ignores the diversity of people and perpetuates attitudes and behaviors that reinforce racial inequality instead of the so-called desired utopian society colorblindness is supposed to support. The idea of colorblindness also assumes that all students are on a level playing field, with the same access to resources and opportunities. However, this position makes it all the more difficult for proponents of the colorblind ideology to consider that race and class privilege might impact the learning process in schools for black students.

This same ethos of colorblindness has allowed predominantly white schools to continue to alienate minority students by failing to recognize their different needs, especially for support systems that offer safe harbors, which "allows those who choose not to fully embrace the norms of white society to retain a place in an African-American community in which confrontation between African-American norms and conflicting white norms never takes place (Johnson, 1993, p. 410). These safe harbors also help protect African-American culture from the obliteration that usually occurs when blacks are expected to integrate, as opposed to merge, into the dominant white culture.

Johnson (1993) describes his own college experience from 1971-75 and identifies the three categories of African-American students he found prevalent at that time, "(1) nationalists, who wanted very little to do with white students; (2) desegregationists, who clearly 'identified' with the African-American community, but also felt comfortable interacting with white students; and (3) assimilationists, those African-American students who did not 'identify' with other African-Americans and made a conscious choice not to interact with other African-Americans, in favor of socializing exclusively with whites" (Johnson, 1993, p. 408). While his

focus was on the college experience and not the elementary experience, Johnson's study helps

lay a foundation for how many middle-class African American parents, many of whom would

have grown up at the same time and under similar circumstances, view race and education.

These views may in turn impact their decisions today on where to place their children in school.

Johnson (1993) argues that integration efforts would continue to fail because

environments such as predominantly white colleges, such as the one he attended, "mask norms

that create an environment in which African-Americans are considered 'them' or the 'other'"

(Johnson, p. 407). Johnson found that through an assimilationist version of integration, other

cultures are not embraced, but rather forced into abandoning their own culture in favor of the

dominant culture's norms (Johnson, p. 411). It is apparent that integrationism fails to directly

address the structural problems and systemic racism that still exists at all levels of public

education regardless of the existence of civil rights laws. Despite equality laws, unequal

outcomes still plague the black community in terms of academic and professional

opportunities.

While Bell (1976, 1978, 1980), Johnson (1993), Gallagher (2003) and Lacy (2004) all

provided critical perspectives of integrationism and the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement,

Sleeper (1997) provides a critique of separatism and other race-conscious efforts by African

Americans. While Sleeper (1997) views the post-Civil Rights liberalism as a failure, his

conclusion is based on his opposition to the strategies that many post-Civil Rights liberals have

taken in the fight against racial discrimination and injustice. Sleeper argues that while liberals

have the right to challenge a litany of racial injustices, "these truths do not offset the bitter

irony that many liberals who fought nobly to help this country rise above color have become so

blinded by color that they have leapt ahead of conservatives to draw new race lines in the civic sand" (Sleeper, 1997, p. 3).

From Sleeper's perspective, liberals have lost touch with the basic principles of classical liberalism and embraced what he calls liberal racism. Sleeper directly challenges those who argue that racism is an integral, permanent and indestructible component of society and finds that these liberals have resorted to charging racism for everything (Sleeper, 1997). Sleeper agrees with law professor Randall Kennedy, who opposes expressions of racial affinity and argues that difficulties that disproportionately afflict black Americans are not 'black problems' whose solutions are the special responsibility of black people, but are the responsibility of all people regardless of race. Sleeper also opposes color-coded kinships in favor of what he calls a clear moral duty, in which the only way to oppose racism is to renounce racial loyalty and promote a society in which everyone is activated by a moral obligation and race-transcendent ideals (Sleeper, 1997).

He proposes that liberals have become blinded by race and have abandoned the fight to create a "transracial belonging and civic faith for which Americans of all colors so obviously yearn" (Sleeper, 1997, p. 3) much like the ideals proposed in colorblind ideology. His position is in direct opposition to what has been traditionally viewed as the politically correct understanding of race, but it does remind Americans that everyone is primarily responsible for their own fate, which Sleeper finds is needed in order to correct what he views as unproductive, collectivist, race-based thinking.

Strategic Assimilation

Much like Johnson (1993), Lacy (2004) also examines assimilation paths for blacks; however, this study focused on assimilation paths of middle-class blacks into American society in an effort to understand how middle-class blacks concentrate on their own integration into American society and in turn the integration of their children into society as well. Lacy used a variation of the segmented assimilation model to understand middle-class blacks' concerns about nurturing black racial identities and proposed a strategic assimilation model whereby many middle-class blacks who have access to majority white colleges, workplaces and neighborhoods continue to consciously retain their connections to the black world as well. Through their interactions with other blacks, middle-class blacks construct and maintain their black racial identity (Lacy, 2004, p. 908). The term strategic assimilation "suggests that this population of middle-class blacks does not perceive itself as permanently constrained to the bottom rung of a racial hierarchy" (Lacy, 2004, p. 908).

In the study, Lacy collected data in 1997 and 1998 through in-depth interviews and participant observation in two middle-class suburban communities in Washington, D.C. The Riverton subdivision was 65 percent black and the Lakeview subdivision was 4 percent black. The mean individual income for the sample was about $72,000. The black respondents in this research defined themselves as "middle-class." Both groups reported that an undercurrent of racial discrimination impacts blacks' interaction with whites. While they perceived that certain forms of integration were important steps toward a path of economic success, they also reported that they wanted their children to marry blacks and to socialize with blacks. One parent from Riverton stated, "I can tell black people that didn't grow up around other black

people, 'cause they act different...They missed something" (Lacy, 2004, p. 913). I believe this acknowledgement of the economic benefits of integration balanced against the need for racial awareness would undoubtedly impact a middle-class African American family's school choice decision.

In openly embracing race, the Riverton blacks argued that issues of race could be set aside in their heavily black suburb because everyone understood its impact; however, on the other hand, "Lakeview blacks admonished their children to identify with their black identity in part because they believed their children would eventually confront racial discrimination" (Lacy, 2004, p. 922). This study highlights the struggle that many black parents face as they try to find ways to prepare their children for the real world. It is a challenge that I also face in deciding how and when my three blacks sons will need to know about the challenges they will face and how to best navigate the system. Participants in Lacy's study found that the blacks who lived in majority black communities focused less on racial identity, which they thought would come naturally just from living in close proximity to other black people. However, the "Lakeview blacks, whose children spend more time negotiating interactions with whites, stress identification by others, whites in particular" (Lacy, 2004, p. 922).

While these two groups may have differed in the type of suburban community they chose to live in, this study reveals how respondents from both communities wanted to prepare their children to live in a white world while retaining their connections to the black world. Unlike the description of assimilation provided by Johnson (1993), Lacy (2004) described the more strategic assimilation, whereby blacks found pleasure in being black and sought out other blacks to form community with.

Regardless of the socio-economic position of the black family or their perspective on issues impacting race and education such as assimilationism, colorblindness or liberal racism, black families must make choices on what actions they will take, what paths they will follow and how they will act in the face of these systemic obstacles. From this position, I assess Rational Choice Theory to gain a better understanding of how middle-class black parents make school choice decisions within the constraints of certain choice sets; many of which possibly reinforce continued racism and resegregation.

Rational Choice Theory

From an economic perspective, Green (2002) defines Rational Choice Theory as being "based on the fundamental premise that the choices made by buyers and sellers are the choices that best help them achieve their objectives, given all relevant factors that are beyond their control" (Green, p. 4). The basic idea behind rational choice theory is that people make what they perceive to be the best choice out of their options and under the current circumstances. However, "Another important element of the choice process is the presence of constraints. The presence of constraints makes choice necessary, and one virtue of rational choice theory is that it makes the trade-offs between alternative choices very explicit" (Green, 2002, p. 7).

While influenced primarily by economic theory, Rational Choice Theory in application to sociology was popularized by James Coleman in the 1960s while working on various public choice studies. Coleman proposed that "actors choosing those actions that will maximize utility or the satisfaction of their needs and wants" even if the choices appear irrational to outsiders looking in (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004, p. 429).

Blumer (1958) also assess rational choice by looking to the group position that creates the opportunity for an individual to have feelings of superiority and entitlement in the first place. Blumer's focus is more on the dominant racial group that people belong to and how membership in that group helps form their racial prejudice and feelings of superiority toward the members of another racial group. Blumer (1958) looks at how feelings, such as entitlement, are formed in the individual and sustained by their dominant group membership. He then focuses on how these feelings impact relationships between racial groups and looks at the big picture of racial groups that facilitate institutional racism. I do not believe that racism is merely the result of irrational thinking. I believe it is fundamentally the result of personal self-interest and the desire for material gain through the subjugation of others. It is in coordination with the collective image of the dominant racial group that individuals act. Some of the same concepts used in economics, such as the presence of constraints, the consequences of rational self-interests, and the benefits of informal networks in expanding options can also be applied to the family school choice decision. Using RCT, C. Bell (2009) provides an examination of the fundamental claims of school reformers who advocate school choice policies to improve equity in education for poor children and children of color who are trapped in inferior, failing schools. C. Bell (2009) questions a key assumption of school choice theory which, "rests on the idea that the set of schools from which parents select – their choice sets – must have at least some good schools" (C. Bell, p. 191). Drawing on rational choice theory Bell asks the following questions to better understand parent's choice sets:

1. What schools are in parents' choice sets?

2. What processes do parent use to construct those choice sets?

3. What factors shape choice set construction?

C. Bell (2009) points out that the majority of the literature on parent choice only looks at the factors that parents take into account when making their decisions but don't explore the process parents use to choose schools. Utilizing RCT in school choice, researchers generally explain the use of costs and benefits, the availability of information and the choices available.

However, Bell utilizes Herbert Simon's work on bounded rationality, which suggests that human beings cannot take account of all possibilities when they choose. Applying bounded rationality, C. Bell (2009) argues that parents do not consider every school in their district nor do they necessarily choose the best school. She states, "We would expect, however, parents will select reasonable schools given their expectations of what is reasonable" (C. Bell, p. 192). C. Bell (2009) notes that "choice set" by its definition is subjective and parents create shortcuts to simplify the decision-making process. In exploring this process, Bell uses three categories to study parents' search behavior (predisposition and search), the resources they draw on during the search (search), and the reasons they give for their final decisions (choice).

C. Bell conducted a nine-month longitudinal comparative case study of 48 parents in a Midwest city. Among the 48 parents, 33 conducted a search and 15 did not; with the majority of those reporting that no other schools offered what they wanted. Bell coded the reasons parents gave for choosing their child's school into six categories: holistic, academic, social, logistic, administrative and other. C. Bell (2009) states, "Many parents said they wanted more diverse schools, but the lack of variation in the racial composition of choice set schools and the cities in which parents reside suggest race issues played out in more subtle ways" (C. Bell, p. 199). This lack of variation in the racial composition in the choice sets available to parents

made it difficult to study obvious racial criteria in the construction of these choice sets. Suburban parents were predominantly white and urban parents were predominantly people of color. As in the case of New Orleans where the majority of public school students are black, black parents would have a difficult time locating a public school with white students that would be in their choice sets. This seems to hold true in the communities studied in this research.

Even though parents of different social class backgrounds used similar strategies for constructing their choice sets with a majority citing academic and holistic reasons, C. Bell found that class-based differences in the resources available for this construction. When looking at the parents' choice sets, "Middle-class parents' choice set contained, on average, a greater percentage of nonfailing, selective and tuition-based schools than did poor and working–class parents' choice sets. Because comparative data was not available, Bell could not determine if middle-class parents chose schools of better quality; however, she states, "…these data only support the claim they chose different schools" (C. Bell, 2009, p. 201).

C. Bell (2009) argues, "It seems relatively innocuous to note that parents' choices are bounded. But when you consider how existing social inequalities shaped those bounds through the almost invisible influence of resources, the significance of that bounding becomes clearer. The structural inequalities in social networks, enrollment patterns, and academic histories are compelling and under-documented factors in parents' decision making" (C. Bell, 2009, p. 206). Even when policies are implemented that are intended to enhance equity, such as school choice, the research demonstrates that poor and working-class parents continue to have less opportunity than middle-class parents and middle-class parents' differing choice sets inherently

alienate poor black families. It may not always be with racist intent but the outcome remains the same for most minorities in which failing schools continue to remain in their available choice set.

However, in a critique of RCT, Holme (2002) provides an excellent study illuminating how the "unofficial" choice market works for many blacks and describes how unofficial choice market differs for high-income parents who have the ability to move into neighborhoods that give them access to good public schools. While Holme doesn't utilize the term bounded choice like C. Bell (2009), the principles addressed in the study fit appropriately into the bounded choice theory and the formulation of choice sets as described by C. Bell (2009). Holme not only studied how parents approached school choice but assessed also how their beliefs about which schools were "good" and which were not impacted their decisions.

In the study, Holme interviewed forty-two parents who used their financial resources to buy a home in what they believed was the best school district they could afford. The majority of the participants were white, middle- to upper-middle income families, which Holme calls "high-status parents" (Holme, 2002, p. 179). The researcher used two school districts and two schools as case study sites. The two districts were known for their excellent schools systems and were located on opposite edges of a unified school district that served mostly low-income African American and Latino students.

Most parents in the study stated that they based their judgments about the school quality primarily on information from individuals in their social networks rather than actually examining test scores or even visiting the school before choosing to move into the community and place their children in the public school. The biggest factor cited by many of the parents for

determining if a school was good or bad was the feedback received from high-status parents. As

Holme states, "the reputations of "good" schools were not simply passed through the social

networks of high-status parents, but were actually constructed through such networks" (Holme,

2002, p. 180).

Holme (2002) points out that embracing the ideology of the culture of poverty, which

attributes low status to people of color and their supposed deficiencies in cultural values,

rather than a long history of racial discrimination, allowed these parents to ignore the material

advantages they gleaned through their choices. Holme criticizes studies that implicitly

conceptualize parental choice as a rational process where parents discern and rank the factors

that are important to them and then set out to find the school that objectively matches their

criteria. Instead, Holme (2002) argues that the criteria such as academic quality, school

atmosphere and discipline are socially constructed and are not as measurable as believed. For

this reason, the author is more interested in how parents make meaning of their school

choices.

Race-Conscious Theories

Critical Race Theory

Chief among the critics of integration efforts are critical race theorists who believe that

racism is "ordinary, not aberrational – 'normal science,' the usual way society does business,

the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country" (Delgado &

Stefancic, 2000, p. 7). With origins in critical legal studies, CRT scholars argue that blacks should

spend less time taking their grievances about unjust practices to the court system and instead

mobilize to enact social, political and economic change by becoming more engaged in social

movements, holding legislators accountable and being more discriminating in where they spend

their money. While anti-discrimination laws and the efforts of the integration movement might

address the most extreme cases of racism, they do little to address the daily prejudices and

institutional barriers face in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000).

CRT identifies and analyzes all aspects of the education system that perpetuate dominant

and subordinate racial positions. Smith and Stovall (2008) define five key elements of CRT

analysis in the education arena including:

> (1) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of
> subordination in education, (2) the challenge to dominant ideology around school
> failure, (3) the commitment to social justice in education, (4) the centrality of
> experiential knowledge, and (5) the transdisciplinary perspective (Smith & Stovall,
> 2008, p. 137).

In applying CRT to public education, Bell (1978) found that more school choice options,

such as church-based schools, have resulted from parents' realization of the degree to which

they are marginalized in the administration and decision-making process in many public school

systems. Bell describes the systemic subordination of non-whites by whites within the public

school system and he lists certain manifestations of racism in the public school system,

including:

1. The exclusion of blacks from meaningful involvement in school policy-making;
2. The exclusion of black parents from active participation in their children's schooling; and
3. The inability of black parents to hold school personnel responsible for the quality of education provided their children (Bell, 1978, p. 116).

These manifestations of racism in the public school system will also be explored in my

research.

Bell (1980) charges that the school desegregation efforts of the Civil Rights Movement failed to bring about meaningful change in the daily lives of most blacks. He outlines the rationale for his position through a critique of legal scholar Herbert Wechsler's critical view of the Brown decision. While Wechsler was a proponent of civil rights, he found the Brown decision to be principally flawed. Wechsler proposed that the Brown decision was not about discrimination against blacks, but rather the legal right to associate with who you want to associate that "impinges in the same way on any groups or race that may be involved" (Bell, p.521).

Wechsler position was that integration would force association with blacks upon whites, therefore impinging on their right to freely associate with whomever they desired. This argument would hold true conversely for blacks or any other minority forced to associate with any other group with which they had no desire to associate. Wechsler's position supports separate, but truly equal, systems for blacks, whites or any minority group to freely associate with whomever they pleased. Bell (1980) explains that for the dominant white majority, exceptions could be made to the argument of freedom from association with blacks or other minority groups when it benefits their self-interest. On the idea of interest convergence, Bell states that "The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites. However, the Fourteenth Amendment, standing alone, will not authorize a judicial remedy providing effective racial equality for blacks where the remedy sought threatens the superior societal status of middle- and upper-class whites" (Bell, 1980, p.523).

Critical race theorists question the Supreme Court's shift in 1954 away from the separate but equal doctrine and toward a commitment to desegregation and propose that the decision had less to do with equality for blacks than a realization of how perceptions of U.S. bigotry might have negative economic and political impact on whites. While Bell believes that many whites would have supported school desegregation from a moral stance, they were not a large enough population to move the court to change its long-standing position on separate but equal.

This scenario seems a likely explanation of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. The transit system in that city was not desegregated until the full financial impact of the black citizens boycotting buses for a year caused the whites in power to acknowledge their own self-interest in associating with blacks in that arena. A question that arises out of the interest convergence is how to address the interests of whites who fear losing their race privilege? When these interests don't converge, civil rights activists rely on litigation to enforce the law, but history has shown that there are multiple forms of resistance that make law enforcement difficult. White flight from public schools in response to the passage of desegregation laws is but one example of how resistance may be demonstrated. Some civil rights activists have sought ways that demonstrate how situations beneficial to blacks can also be viewed as beneficial to their white racist counterparts in hopes that appeals to white self-interest may generate support for their cause. In the absence of interest convergence, Bell refers to Professor Charles Black's view of racial equality as the neutral principle that underlay the Brown opinion. Black uses a syllogism to explain:

> Black's major premise is that 'the equal protection clause of the fourteenth amendment should be read as saying that the Negro race, as such, is not to be significantly

disadvantaged by the laws of the states.' His minor premise is that 'segregation is a massive intentional disadvantaging of the Negro race, as such, by state law.' The conclusion then, is that the equal protection clause clearly bars racial segregation because segregation harms blacks and benefits whites in ways too numerous and obvious to require citation. (Bell, 1980, p. 522).

When moral concern alone is not enough to convince middle- and upper-class whites in social and political power to support equal protection for blacks, Bell (1980) argues that plans must be put in place that focus on "educational components" such as the development of "model" all-black schools. In districts such as New Orleans where public schools have a majority black enrollment and desegregation litigation has not produced meaningful racial balance, the commitment to educational components may be necessary.

Immersion Schools and Afrocentrism

One strategy to address the issue of black family subordination and black student achievement proposed by Brown (1993) is the establishment of black immersion schools. In these types of schools, administrators use the desegregated community in which the school geographically exists to provide an educational environment immersed in black cultural heritage. Brown (1993) finds that strategies such as immersion schools, in contrast to integration efforts, help black students "overcome society's presumption that blacks are incompetent" through a greater appreciation for black culture (Brown, p. 416). These schools can help black students understand the social environment, navigate the racial bias they may experience, and have a greater appreciation for black history and culture. Additionally, the geographic location of these schools within the black community enables a greater degree of parental involvement and provides an environment that really prepares students for the realities of life for involuntary minorities.

In making a comparison between voluntary immigrants and involuntary minorities,

Brown emphasizes the lack of a homeland, as well as no sense of power or control in choosing

their current situation, would cause involuntary minorities to have very negative perceptions of

themselves in comparison to the dominant culture around them. "Unlike voluntary immigrants,

involuntary minorities cannot refer to a native homeland to generate positive comparative

framework for their condition. Instead, they compare themselves to the dominant group. Since

the dominant group is generally better off, the comparative framework of involuntary

minorities produces a negative interpretation of their condition" (Brown, 1993, p. 417).

Brown (1993) also describes the difference between the Afrocentric and Anglocentric

perspectives and how

"An Afrocentric curriculum teaches basic courses by using Africa and the socio-historical experience of Africans and African-Americans as its reference points. An Afrocentric story places Africans and African-Americans at the center of the analysis. It treats them as the subject rather than the object of the discussion" (Brown, p. 422).

Brown continues:

"Presenting the story of slavery from an Afrocentric point of view shows African-Americans that they are descendants of over seventeen generations of people who struggled against racial subordination in America. It demonstrates graphically to African-American youth that they must take charge of their own liberation. It is only when blacks commit themselves to this task that their conditions will improve" (Brown, p. 424).

Policies of Displacement and Containment

Smith & Stovall (2008) conducted a study of the Kenwood-Oakland community within

Chicago's Southside that was experiencing many challenges similar to New Orleans in terms of

poor housing and poor public schools and found that because of converging policies, school

improvement initiatives were often coupled with housing redevelopment efforts targeting the

city's working-class African-American and Latino/a populations. While building new public schools and redeveloping public housing would benefit current residents, the goal of the Chicago initiative was also to attract middle-income families who might otherwise move to the suburbs (Smith & Stovall, 2008, p. 136). The belief was that removing the concentration of poverty by attracting middle-class residents would benefit the poorer blacks within the community, possibly by expanding their networks with successful blacks and providing them with an image of what could be possible for them and their children.

However, Smith & Stovall (2008) argue "that strategies to redevelop poorly performing 'inner city' schools and the poor neighborhoods where they are usually located has real potential to do more harm than good for the families the policy is supposed to benefit" (Smith & Stovall, p. 136). Using the tenets of CRT and secondary discrimination, Smith & Stovall found that within these model communities, the injection of the middle-class had the opposite effect. Poorer blacks were left feeling alienated and without a voice, as the middle-income blacks and whites reaped the primary benefits of the new housing and better public charter schools that were constructed. Stringent admission requirements blocked long-standing community residents from enrolling their children in the new charter schools. Many of the poor were eventually pushed out of the community, and the schools, that were supposedly built for their mutual benefit along with their middle-class neighbors and the authors concluded that what was racism was hidden by class claims that allowed the interests of middle class to supersede the educational opportunities of the poor blacks in the community (Smith & Stovall, 2008, p. 135). In the Chicago study, the interests of poor blacks were subjugated to the interests of both black and white middle-class residents. However, in this case study, since the "in" and "out"

groups were both black, racism may have been masked with the veil of class or socio-economic status.

Another concept that appears to be evident in desegregation efforts is that of tipping. Essentially tipping refers to integration efforts that limit the number of blacks or minorities in order to maintain a white majority. Smith & Stovall (2008) also describe efforts aimed at limiting black residents in certain communities in order to ensure they retain a minority status and alleviate any fears whites might have that their communities will 'tip' or quickly become all black (p. 136). In application to the school setting, I expect that tipping may also come into play in certain white communities that are striving to maintain a white majority in schools in order to avoid white flight.

Educational Reform and Black School Choice

The public school education reform of post-Katrina New Orleans has many critics such as Arena (2006) who argues that there are middle-class black alliances with white capitalist interests that continue to take educational equality out of the reach of poor blacks. Bell (1980) also points out that educationally oriented remedies could not be easily developed or adopted without resistance and that "policies necessary to obtain effective schools threaten the self-interest of teacher unions and others with vested interests in the status quo" (Bell, p. 532). All of these challenges complicate the quest for effective, quality education and are highly visible in the reconstruction of public education in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Charter Schools

Since their inception in the U.S. more than a decade ago, charter schools have been touted as innovative institutions that can do many things for many people. For instance,

observers such as Stamback & Becker (2007) have noted that "charter schools provide new opportunities for local governance, highlight contested meanings of democracy, freedom and competition, create more educational options for students, parents, teachers and administrators, and provide examples of how a market-oriented system of education can operate in a more efficient manner" (Stamback & Becker, 2007, p. 159).

On the surface, the process of charter school formation is defined through state laws and federal and local guidelines; however, in reality, the process involves political negotiation among community members with differential access to private and local resources. Those with privilege and connections are more likely to have the ability to mobilize a network of politically organized parents to start an Academic Charter School even though their goals may be at odds with broader public ideas of equality and diversity. In contrast, poor families, often of color, will lack the resources and political organization needed to start a charter school. According to Stamback & Becker (2007), these parents will more likely pursue the politically 'less risky' path of trying to bring students of color into an established Academic Charter School, (Stamback & Becker, p. 160).

Charter schools are not alternative public schools in the traditional sense. Unlike alternative programs established in the wake of the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court Ruling in *Brown versus Board of Education*, charter schools are modeled on a neoliberal principle of consumer demand. They are sponsored by a designated organization, which may or may not be the public school district (Stamback & Becker, 2007, p. 162), or aligned to the specific needs or desires of the community.

According to Renzulli (2006), "Charter schools are one form of a larger set of school-choice options available in some states and in some school districts. Since their inception in the early 1990s they have enrolled a small percentage of students (approximately one percent of all public school enrollees, but a much larger percent in individual districts such as the District of Columbia, in which about 25 percent of students attend charter schools). They are, however, one of the fastest growing educational innovations" (p. 619). This is especially true for New Orleans after the entire public school system was destroyed pre-Katrina by political corruption and post-Katrina by the effects of the storm damage.

In assessing earlier studies, Renzulli (2006) found that "the percent of white students in local charter schools is higher if white students in the district previously attended public schools with black students than if white and black students attended separate schools and the "findings imply that 'integration' pushes whites into charter schools just as integration or the threat of integration increased white flight in the 1970s" (Renzulli, p. 619). These findings seem to imply that the public charter schools of today offer the same oasis from traditional public education that flight to suburbs may have offered in the past.

Black Middle-Class Choice

Middle-class black families may have an expanded choice set, either due to their professional or social networks, financial capabilities or general proximity to better schools, including public, private and parochial options. However, despite our individual choices and responsibilities, many of the selections made by the middle class continue to perpetuate alienation of poor blacks and limit their school choices.

To understand the dilemma between class and race, an intersectional analysis is beneficial. As blacks seek upward economic mobility in white mainstream society they often feel pressured to disassociate themselves from lower class blacks, who are perceived to have normative behavior that is mediocre or substandard to the dominant culture. In addition, this inferiority is viewed as representative of some fault of their own and not the result of an institutionalized racist system that subordinates them. Since each person's identity has many overlapping layers, there is increasing conflict with various loyalties (Bell, 1976).

This intersectionality of race and class plays an important role in the black middle-class dilemma that is explored in this study. There are black families who have the means to place their children in private schools even without the use of any type of voucher system but struggle with the choice to do so because of their belief in public education. On one hand they seek a better life for their families than what has historically been available, and on the other hand they recognize close experiences of poverty within their own families and the tradition of coalition-building among upper and lower class blacks in order to gain rights.

Middle-class blacks, as well as poor and working class blacks, live within a society where institutionalized racism is real. How the awareness of this fact impacts the decision-making process of middle-class African American parents and how they make their everyday decisions makes Critical Race Theory a relevant theoretical base from which to launch my research.

The following case study examines the numerous criteria by which middle class black families make choices for schools for their children. I believe these parents are challenged daily in weighing these many options in an attempt to provide the best education for their children. They recognize that racism is real and have undoubtedly encountered it in their own

educational and professional experiences. However, I believe these parents also realize that society is changing. No longer is there a deep chasm that divides the races, but rather blacks and whites are interacting more and more each day in both their professional and personal lives.

This study seeks to determine how middle-class black parents perceive their school choice decision as supporting their desire to provide their children with the social skills and education they will need to thrive and be successful. This study also seeks to determine whether ensuring the same educational opportunities for the working class or poor black community trapped in New Orleans underperforming schools impacts the school choice decision of the middle-class black parents.

Methodology

In reviewing the current body of literature on the numerous issues related to school integration and the African American middle class, I believe there is a void of research on the various issues that actually impact the school choice decision for families. I have used a qualitative research design to explore this decision-making process and qualitative research allows me to explore and understand the meaning these individuals place on the issue of selecting a school for their children given their perspective of their responsibility to the black community and their responsibility to their individual families. A key of this qualitative research design is the collection of data in the field. Through an inductive data analysis process I have used multiple data sources such as focus groups and an individual interview, as well as observation and secondary information from various types of documents that allow for overriding themes to be identified and categorized.

The main focus of this research is to learn the meaning that the participants hold about the school selection issue. By getting an in-depth perspective from multiple participants, I believe I will be able to get a holistic account that would allow a larger picture of the possible middle-class school selection dilemma to emerge (Creswell, 2007).

Case Study Research Approach

I have used a case study approach, focused on how a set of black middle-class parents in one New Orleans community, Algiers, have weighed the qualities of their ideal school against any other possible factors in order to make school selection decisions. The three focus groups were comprised of parents from Alice Harte Charter, St. Andrew the Apostle (both located in

Algiers) and Lusher Charter Elementary, located on the Eastbank of New Orleans in the community known as Uptown.

In addition to the available schools in New Orleans' Algiers community, parents may also choose from public and private schools throughout the city. Additionally, those parents selecting private schools may also expand their choice set to encompass surrounding parishes that do not have residency requirements. In this study, I examine how Alice Harte was either selected or rejected as part of the choice sets of the parents selected for my study. When considering public schools in New Orleans, Alice Harte could be considered an oddity when compared to other New Orleans public schools in that the school had a fairly diverse, middle-class and high-performing student population prior to Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

It is important to note that since the storm there are two bodies that have oversight for public schools in New Orleans—the New Orleans Public School Board and the Louisiana Recovery School District. NOPS maintained oversight of all schools that were not failing before the storm, while all academically failing schools were placed under the responsibility of the RSD. These two bodies can choose either to directly manage the schools for which they have oversight or contract that responsibility out to a charter school organization. In the case of Algiers, all public schools except Harte and Edna Karr High School were made part of the Recovery School District. Harte, therefore, is the only public "elementary" school in Algiers that was not transferred to the Recovery School District due to academic failure. NOPS, which ultimately has oversight for Harte and Karr, and the RSD, which has oversight for all other schools in Algiers, then contracted management of all but three schools in Algiers with Algiers Charter Schools Association (ACSA).

Bounding the Study

Alice M. Harte

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, Alice Harte was one of the top performing public elementary schools in New Orleans. While the school district had struggled for years with school performance, Alice Harte stood out both academically and demographically, offering more student and faculty diversity than was the norm.

According to the Louisiana Department of Education (2008), Alice Harte enrolled 630 students during the 2007 – 2008 school year compared to 784 in 2004 – 2005 (Louisiana Department of Education, Alice Harte, 2005). Of this student population, 64 students (10%) had special needs during the 2007-2008 school year compared to 71 (9%) in 2004 – 2005 prior to the school becoming a charter.

In terms of the racial and economic diversity of the student population, Alice Harte's racial profile, as provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (2010) as well as the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch, was as follows for the 2007 – 2008 school year:

Alice Harte 2007 - 2008		
Ethnicity	This School	State Average
■Black, not Hispanic	86%	46%
■White, not Hispanic	8%	49%
■Hispanic	3%	3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	3%	1%
■American Indian/Alaskan Native	<1%	<1%

	This School	State Average
Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch program	76%	63%

During the 2004 – 2005 school year, 33% of the student population was eligible for free or reduced price lunch, less than half of what it was by 2007. No reliable demographic information regarding the school's racial diversity prior to 2007 could be located; however, an analysis of the student yearbook for the 2004 school year reveals a far more diverse population among black, white, Asian and Latino students than what exists today.

According to Harte's Louisiana school report card, the percent of core courses taught by teachers who designated by the No Child Left Behind legislation as "highly qualified" was 57% in the 2007 – 2008 school year, compared to 99% in the 2004 – 2005 school year.

Following the devastating storm of 2005, the Algiers Charter School Association was formed in order to quickly reopen schools for the returning New Orleans population on the Westbank, which had not experienced the widespread flooding. Alice Harte Elementary, along with all but three of the Westbank public schools, became part of the ACSA. Through the charter model, the New Orleans Public School Board provided the facilities and the state

provided the MFP funding to non-profit and private organizations that could quickly mobilize to

open and manage the schools.

Today, Alice Harte is one of six elementary schools and three high schools that comprise

the ACSA. The remaining two public elementary schools in Algiers, and the single public high

school—L.B. Landry—are currently administered by the State's Recovery School District.

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                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │  Algiers Public     │
                    │      Schools        │
                    └─────────────────────┘
           ┌───────────────────┴───────────────────┐
┌────────────────────────────┐        ┌────────────────────────────┐
│  New Orleans Public Schools │        │  Recovery School District   │
│ (formerly academically      │        │ (formerly academically      │
│  successful schools)        │        │  failing schools)           │
└────────────────────────────┘        └────────────────────────────┘
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ACSA Schools:
- Alice Harte Elementary
- Edna Karr Elementary

NOPS-Managed Schools in Algiers:
- None

ACSA Schools:
- Martin Behrman Elementary
- Dwight Eisenhower Elementary
- Harriet Tubman Elementary
- William Fischer Elementary
- John McDonogh #32 Elementary
- O.P Walker High School
- Algiers Technology High School* (newly created after 2005)

RSD-Managed Schools:
- Murray Henderson Elementary
- Paul Habans Elementary
- L. B. Landry High School

St. Andrew the Apostle

Within Algiers, there are two non-public elementary schools in Algiers – Calvary Baptist

and St. Andrew the Apostle. St. Andrew is located within one block of Alice Harte and I thought

it would make an interesting contrast to research the perspectives of parents at that school.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2007), St. Andrew the Apostle had a student enrollment of 766 students during the 2007 - 2008 timeframe, which is the latest available data. Of this student population, the racial mix is as follows:

St. Andrew's 2007 - 2008	
Ethnicity	This School
White, not Hispanic	75%
Black, not Hispanic	16%
Asian/Pacific Islander	5%
Hispanic	4%

There was no data available regarding the number of special needs students or the students who would be eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

Lusher Elementary

Finally, I also included the perspective of parents who live in Algiers but have left Alice Harte since the post-Katrina charter transition to enroll their children at Lusher Charter. Much like Alice Harte, Lusher was one of the top-performing public schools in New Orleans before the storm. In addition to its high academic ratings, this school also offered a degree of racial diversity not common in other largely all-black public schools.

While Lusher is located on the Eastbank of the Mississippi River in New Orleans proper, parents of all races and economic standing have tried to enroll their children. However, unlike Alice Harte, prior to the storm, Lusher had very strenuous entrance requirements.

During the same 2007 – 2008 time frame, the Louisiana Department of Education (2008) reported 1,432 total students at Lusher Charter compared to 1,157 during the 2004 – 2005 school year (Louisiana Department of Education, Lusher Elementary School, 2005). During the

2007 – 2008 school year, 53 (4%) students were identified as being special needs compared to 44 (4%) in 2004 – 2005.

The racial and economic profile of the school provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (2010) is as follows:

Lusher Elementary 2007 - 2008		
Ethnicity	This School	State Average
White, not Hispanic	50%	49%
Black, not Hispanic	41%	46%
Hispanic	5%	3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4%	1%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	<1%	<1%
	This School	State Average
Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch program	42%	63%

During the 2004 – 2005 school year, 24% of the student population was eligible for free or reduced price lunch. No reliable demographic information regarding the school's racial diversity prior to 2007 could be located.

According to Lusher's Louisiana school report card, the percent of core courses taught by teachers who designated by the No Child Left Behind legislation as "highly qualified" was 70% in the 2007 – 2008 school year, compared to 74% in the 2004 – 2005 school year.

As the school became a charter after the storm, the administrators utilized the Type IV model, which allowed for selective admissions policies. This charter type also allowed Lusher to give entrance preference to their former students, unlike Harte, which was a city-wide open access charter. I make this point to highlight that Harte had been a community school, but post-Katrina, parents throughout the city had equal access for admissions. I believe this point has

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had an impact on the number of Algiers families that no longer attend Harte either because they could not enroll their children in a timely manner after the storm as enrollment reached capacity or they no longer feel connected as the school admitted families with no ties to Algiers.

Ethical Considerations

When designing a qualitative study Creswell (2007) emphasized the importance of being sensitive to ethical considerations. The following safeguards have been employed to protect the participants' rights[1]: (1) To protect confidentiality of individuals, I have asked participants to create aliases or pseudonyms for themselves, (2) participants were informed that they could choose not to proceed with the study at any time, (3) because I may know the participants on a personal level, participants were assured that the information has been used for research purposes only and would not be used any time after the interview and focus group process unless agreed upon by the participant, (4) if a participant decided to opt out of the study, all information linking them back to the study would be destroyed, (5) all contact information for participants was recorded in the co-investigator's research journal (6) verbatim transcription and written interpretations and reports have been made available to the participants, (7) the final decision regarding participant confidentiality will rest with the participant.

Data Collection Strategies

Primary data for this study was collected through focus groups with parents, individual interviews and observation of school-related events for parents. Secondary data was derived from newspaper articles, photographs from the school yearbooks, planning reports,

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[1] Consent form in Appendix A of paper

demographic data, common core data from the National Center for Education Statistics and school report cards from the Louisiana Department of Education.

Since my study examines the school choices of middle-class parents, in order to determine middle-class status, I have included the child's ineligibility for the school free/reduced lunch program as an eligibility requirement for the parents in the focus group. Parents participating in the focus groups were given the opportunity to ask questions prior to participation in the study and were made aware that they could opt out of answering any questions or withdraw from the study at any time.

I conducted focus groups with African American parents of children enrolled in either public or private schools in New Orleans. There were 15 parents in all:

- Group 1: Parents of current Alice Harte students. This group was specifically comprised of men who are active members of the Alice Harte Men's Club. This all-male group was comprised of five Harte fathers/guardians.

- Group 2: Parents living in Algiers whose children were enrolled in Alice Harte in the past, but have recently moved to Lusher Elementary Charter School. This group was comprised of six parents (three male and three female).

- Group 3: Parents living in Algiers whose children are enrolled at St. Andrew the Apostle School. I selected St. Andrews because it is located directly next door to Alice Harte and geographically can be included in parents' choice sets when they are considering non-public schools in the community. Since free and reduced price lunch data was not available I allowed parents within the focus group to self-select whether they identified themselves as "middle class." I did not limit participation to those with children formerly enrolled at Harte. This group was comprised of four parents (two male and two female).

The objective of these focus groups is to better understand what parents desired in their ideal school, what they liked and disliked about their current school and what factors most influenced their school selection decision, including their individual perceptions of public, private and charter schools. Participants in the focus groups were recruited primarily through

convenience sampling. First, I e-mailed the members of the Men's Club, which consists of approximately 40 men, asking for their participation. Second, by using snowball sampling, I contacted both current as well as former parents of Harte students and solicited their participation as well as referrals of other parents who they believed would be willing to participate in the study. Finally, I asked the school administration for names of families who would be interested in participating in the study.

In addition to the focus groups, I conducted one interview with a Harte faculty member who is also the parent of a Harte student. The interview participant, a single mother, joined the Harte faculty after Hurricane Katrina when the school joined the ACSA. She has worked in education for more than 10 years and has experience as both a faculty member and parent at numerous other New Orleans Public Schools.

Data Analysis Procedures

Creswell (2007) describes several general procedures for qualitative data analysis as well as provides detailed analysis procedures for qualitative research. The core elements of qualitative data analysis consist of the central steps of coding the data that include reducing the data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments, combining the codes into broader categories or themes, and displaying and making comparisons in the data graphs, tables and charts. Recorded focus groups and interviews were transcribed verbatim. Consistent themes were then categorized. Under each category I looked for multiple perspectives and documented the source for further analysis. I also looked for multiple forms of evidence for each category from secondary data sources.

Role of the Researcher

Prior to conducting this research, I was an active parent at Alice Harte. My oldest son was enrolled at Harte in the 2003-04 school year after my wife and I decided not to return him to a private school. My twin sons were subsequently enrolled the following year after completing pre-kindergarten at another public school in Algiers. We were very pleased with the school as it was located within five minutes of our home in Algiers, offered a robust academic and creative arts program, and had a racially diverse student population.

My family temporarily lived in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Although we completed what we thought were the proper registration forms that would allow our children to return to their school, we soon discovered that in all the confusion after the storm, the New Orleans Public Schools had not transferred the student registrations to the organization that received the charter to run the school going forward. We were unsuccessful in re-enrolling our children at Harte the same year when it reopened as a charter school in December 2005. Unlike Type IV charters, which gave priority enrollment to their former students, no provisions had been made for prior students at Harte. We, like many Harte families that we had come to know in Algiers, had to either find new schools or wait until the following year to see if any openings were available. While we were successful in eventually re-enrolling our three sons, many other families that lived in the community became frustrated with the process they viewed as shutting them out of their neighborhood school. Many either remained at the schools they thought would be temporary or chose other private schools in the community. Once our kids were finally able to return to the school, in the Fall of 2006 I had become part of the very vocal

parent group that strived to rebuild the school's reputation to what it had been prior to Katrina—one of the best public elementary schools in New Orleans.

Professionally, I was also involved with Harte prior to Katrina, as the Louisiana School Improvement Grant Coordinator with New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS). Alice Harte was one of 17 New Orleans public schools that voluntarily participated in the grant. However, my job, along with those of more than 700 other NOPS employees, was terminated after the storm. The state could no longer afford to keep the NOPS employee population on board with almost every school in the city closed as a result of the storm. The state soon determined that the only way to reopen school in the city was to move towards the charter model in which non-profit and private organizations would receive charters from NOPS and the State Board of Education to manage certain schools. These were still public schools, but they would be privately operated.

I was hired by one of the private operators, the Algiers Charter Schools Association, in 2006 as the Positive Behavior Support Coordinator. My role was to work with the initial nine schools they managed, including Alice Harte, to ensure the schools met the state's discipline mandate under the 2003 Juvenile Justice Reform Act. As an employee and a parent, I was fully engaged in the success of the school. My wife served as the Parent-Teacher Organization president and I started the Harte Men's Club, which consisted of the fathers and male guardians of students enrolled at the school.

After a few years of continually blurring lines between my professional role as an employee of ACSA and my private role as a parent, I made the choice to enroll my children in a private school; however, I continue to work for ACSA professionally and with the Harte Men's

Club, which has been renamed the Algiers Men's Club to include men whose children no longer attend Harte.

Due to my experience with the school both professionally and personally, I bring certain biases to this study. Although every effort will be made to ensure objectivity, I recognize that these biases may shape the way I view and understand the data I collect and the way I interpret my experiences. As an employee, I hope to see more and more parents choosing public school options. In particular, I hope to see Harte become a model public charter school. As a resident of Algiers, I also know the benefits that good school options can make in a community. However, as a parent, like many of the parents in this study, I struggled with my school choice options and eventually moved my kids into a private school outside of New Orleans in a nearby community. My personal dilemma causes me to be personally invested in understanding the process in order to help other families through this process.

Validity/Reliability

To ensure qualitative validity, the following strategies were incorporated:

1. Triangulation – Multiple data sources were used to build themes that include focus groups, an interview, observation and secondary data such as newspaper articles and meeting minutes. I used these sources to identify various perspectives from the participants.
2. Member Checking – The focus group and interview transcripts were shared with participants in order to determine if the information was accurate.
3. Description – I utilized thorough, rich description to convey the findings. The purpose of the description is to transport the readers of this study to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences. I looked for multiple perspectives about emerging themes to add to the validity of the findings.
4. External Auditor – I chose a thesis committee member outside the sociology department to provide an additional objective assessment throughout the process. I also had this independent reader review the various aspects of the research in order to examine the accuracy of my transcription, the relationship between my research questions and the data, and the level of data analysis from the raw data through interpretation.

To ensure qualitative reliability I documented the case study procedures in detail. Also, as I completed the coding process, I ensured that the meanings of the codes did not shift or drift away from their original definition. My wife, who holds a minor in sociology as well as two master's degrees, assisted by independently cross-checking the codes to determine the inter-coder reliability of the data.

Reporting the Findings

Creswell (2007) states that the basic procedures in reporting the results of a qualitative study are to develop descriptions and themes from the data, present the descriptions and themes that convey multiple perspectives from participants, and detail descriptions of the setting or individuals. Utilizing the case study approach, I have primarily provided an in-depth analysis of the case from the different perspectives of parents at Harte, St. Andrews and Lusher. In addition, there is an element of phenomenology that makes it appropriate to provide some detailed description of the participant's own past school experiences in public and private schools, and during and after the Civil Rights Movement. This will allow the reader to vicariously experience the challenges black middle-class parents experience when choosing schools for their children.

Data

I facilitated three focus groups, as well as one individual interview, in order to delve into the issues impacting the school selection decision of black middle-class families. While the individual interview will be used as supporting data for this study, the three focus groups provide the primary data used to develop the overarching themes. The following seven key themes emerged from the three focus groups:

- **Characteristics of Good Schools in the Choice Set** – reputation, proximity, relationship with community
- **Decision Process** – conducting research, making joint decisions and the role of referrals
- **Reasons for Leaving Harte** – accountability, discipline and parent burn-out
- **Reasons for Staying at Harte** – support of public education, satisfaction with school and benefit of community
- **Generational Comparisons/Personal Experience that Impact Racial Attitudes and Choices** – interracial friendships, ideas of separatism
- **Racial Attitudes and Beliefs** – need for black role models, nurturing environments for black students and increased diversity
- **Views of Civil Rights/Integration Outcomes** – benefits of integration, white flight and the race/class shift

In order to understand why these themes are meaningful in the school selection decision process, I will share how they were selected and identified during the focus groups.

Themes

Characteristics of a Good School in the Choice Set

To begin the process of exploring the qualities that parents considered representative of a good school, I asked each focus group to describe the "ideal school" for their child. My assumption was that the participating parents would also use these qualities in the construction of their school choice. As I reviewed the transcripts from each focus group, I identified twenty-seven distinct responses to this specific question. The responses were then

placed into eight sub-categories based on the frequency they were mentioned. In addition, I considered the weight responses carried based on whether the parents also identified them later when conveying their personal satisfaction with their current school choice. Through this process, the following categories were formed: academic standards, community school/proximity, diversity, qualified teachers and safe schools with effective discipline, parental involvement, Catholic school and accountability.

Academic Standards

Six parents mentioned high academic standards as one of the most important qualities of a good school. All four Lusher parents and two Harte parents stated that they wanted a school that was intellectually and academically challenging for their children. Joseph, a parent from Harte, and Peggy, a parent from Lusher, were the only two parents who specifically stated that they also wanted an environment that nurtured creativity and critical thinking. To clarify, Peggy discussed how her son's Social Studies teacher makes things so interesting for him that he can't wait to get to his class. She pointed out that her son loves to do different things that hold his interest. Jessie also expressed that the best teachers tend to "think outside the normal box of instruction" and find new and creative ways to engage their students. This point of distinction seems to convey that some parents look beyond just the school's stated academic standards, test scores, etc. and specifically assess the individual teaching style of educators when defining what high academic standards mean to them personally.

Community School

In defining the qualities they wanted in a school, five of the parents expressed that they wanted a school in close proximity to their home. Proximity was important to both of the

families who enrolled their children in St. Andrews. For proximity purposes, they transferred

their children from other Catholic schools when they moved to Algiers. In describing the

importance of going to a neighborhood school Matilda stated, "But we chose St. Andrews

because it was in our neighborhood, all of the kids in our neighborhood went to that school and

we thought we eventually would regret it if he was going to school in another section of the city

that was pretty far so it was going to get complicated with sports and parties and the rest of it,

so we thought." Her husband Craig continued by saying, "In reference of the proximity of all the

other kids in the neighborhood, we didn't want to estrange him from his friends and he would

go to school with the people in the neighborhood as opposed to him going with people way on

the other side of town. I just think that it helped us make the decision." Proximity appeared

important not just for the sake of convenience, with respect to transportation for school and

extracurricular activities, but it was also considered a meaningful aspect of community building.

As indicated by Matilda and Craig, they desire their child to develop strong relationships with

other children that live nearby.

Diversity

Five parents participating in the focus groups specifically mentioned diversity as a

quality they wanted in a school. In defining what diversity meant, Jim, a parent at Harte, stated

that the diversity of the student body is a factor. He wanted his kids to interact with students

from different backgrounds, yet he did not specifically cite racial diversity. Matilda, from St.

Andrews, on the other hand said, "An ideal school in my mind would be diversity of student

body as well as the teaching staff and I guess that would be my ideal because I think that is hard

to find in New Orleans." I asked her what she meant by diversity and she said that she was

specifically referring to racial diversity and not necessarily economic, religious or gender diversity. Her husband Craig included economic diversity, but she said, "I guess I don't worry about economic diversity as much." In addition, Matilda clarified her concept of diversity as being more meaningful than just miniscule diverse representation. She added, "My idea of diversity is not two black children in a class of 30." To elaborate, she addressed her husband's statement that the school he attended in Virginia had representation from 40 different countries. However, according to Matilda, "You might have had 42 countries, but if you had one from each one, that's not diverse to me. Diverse is a total mixture of black, white, Asian, Hispanic and a total mix but there is not necessary majority in your class."

As I considered her perception of diversity I believe her point was that mere representation does not equal diversity. For example, forty-two people from different countries wouldn't create diversity in a pool of a thousand otherwise homogeneous people. When there is only minor or token representation, black students risk losing their identity, cultural awareness and pride, and the comfort of belonging that may come in their association with a community of other black students. The end result may be the assimilation of these black students into the dominant white culture (Johnson, 1993).

During the focus groups, I did not ask the participants to define what they meant by "diversity" when listed as a quality of their ideal school. Since we did not specifically address the black/white binary during this section of the focus group, I cannot assume this meant more blacks or more whites; however, when discussing the context of the integration movement in the South, particularly in New Orleans culture, all of the focus group participants were clearly referring to the black/white binary, as conveyed by their verbal descriptions and comparisons

of black and white perspectives, challenges and experiences; with only minor references to

other races, gender or class.

All seven parents who stated they went to predominantly black schools referred to the

remaining student population as white and did not mention other racial or cultural groups. It is

important to note that these parents were enrolled in school during the late 1970s and 1980s

as schools were in the midst of voluntary resegregation due in large part to white flight (Devore

& Logsdon, 1991). When these parents were enrolled in school, the option of diversity and the

benefits it might offer in expanding racial awareness, tolerance and acceptance, did not exist

since schools were largely all black (with only minor white representation) or all white (with

only minor black representation). Matilda stated that she wished there was more diversity in

the student body and the staff because she thought, "This is a diverse world and the earlier you

are exposed to that kind of diversity the better it is all around." Once again, I believe Matilda

was operating out of the black/white paradigm in her assessment of school diversity. While this

statement is referencing a diverse world, later in the discussion with Matilda she revealed that

she was leaning on her own experience in a predominantly white school with very little black

representation. The course of the dialogue regarding diversity within the focus groups seems to

convey that the parents recognize that they may have been disadvantaged in some way by not

experiencing diversity or interacting more with white students in their own schools. These

disadvantages ranged from not having the best resources, which parents acknowledged would

be available in greater quantity with a larger white student population, to not having a greater

insight into the dominant white culture. As the American landscape now becomes more

diverse, even though these parents did not specifically state what that diversity would look like,

it was apparent that they wanted to avoid disadvantaging their children by isolating them in racially homogenous schools.

Qualified teachers

Only two of the five parents from the Alice Harte focus group included qualified teachers as an important quality of their ideal school; however, this characteristic was discussed throughout the conversations with both the Harte and Lusher parents. In addressing qualified teachers, the parents all vocalized the benefits of having a teacher with both the academic and disciplinary skills to develop their children. Warren conveyed that quality teachers were the first thing he would consider in identifying his ideal school. He noted that the second thing would be to make sure that those qualified teachers as well as their management were held accountable for their performance. As Peggy described the factors that went into her decision to move her son from Harte to Lusher, she mentioned her concern with the ability of the middle school teachers to effectively teach their students. She did not use the terms qualified or good but she did infer that past teachers had not been as effective at teaching, which contributed to her decision to move her son to another school for the middle school grades.

Safe schools with effective discipline

While only one parent across all of the focus groups mentioned safety as a quality of their ideal school, I believe this is a salient quality to include because, as will be described later, effective discipline became a major issue of concern for many current parents, as well as a reason parents cited for deciding to leave Harte and moving to Lusher. However, as cited by Holme (2002), criteria such as school atmosphere and discipline are socially constructed and

may be difficult for parents to proactively measure. While safety and discipline might cause a

parent to leave a particular school, these may be difficult qualities for parents to proactively

assess as they select a school with which they have no history or firsthand experience. The issue

of safety or discipline was not a factor discussed within the St. Andrews focus group.

Parental Involvement

Only the interview participant, who is both a parent and a certified teacher, identified

parental involvement as being a quality of an ideal school. While this quality was not revealed

during the focus group discussions, I found it particularly pertinent to the decision process. As

indicated by Holme (2002), parental involvement appears to be a factor that parents would

research and utilize in making a rational school selection decision; however, no focus group

participant cited it as an ideal quality. In the individual interview with Shelly, the idea of

parental involvement was identified as an important quality and she indicated that she believed

the high level of parental involvement was a quality that distinguished Harte from many other

schools. According to Shelly, "There is also a lot of parental involvement. At the other school,

there wasn't as much parental involvement and here, parents seem to care, they seem to come

in for report card conferences, and different things of that sort. I think that's a big difference

from the one school that I taught at."

Interestingly, the parents in the Harte focus group viewed parental involvement as one

of their concerns about the school, but did not cite it as an ideal quality. This may reveal the

difference between the perspectives of those parents investigating school options from the

outside and those parents who have children enrolled in a school and have experience with the

school's benefits and challenges. This may also show the difference from a teacher's

perspective rather from that of a parent only. In addition, the parent focus group consisted of parents who were actively involved in volunteerism at the school, including work day projects, classroom and office assistance, and coordination of fundraisers and special events. As a teacher, Shelly was using a different scale to measure involvement and she was comparing it to other schools that she previously taught in that had a much lower participation of parents.

According to the parents within the focus group, they had higher expectations for parent involvement from their peers. Based on the focus group discussions from both the Harte and Lusher group, their perception was that in comparison to previous years at Harte, the school post-Katrina had a higher percentage of working class parents who may not have had the time to volunteer. However, it is also possible that many of these parents may not have had the expectation of greater involvement from their former schools. Further research could examine the validity of the perceived class differences in parental involvement in schools. Milton, another Harte parent who presented himself as the strongest advocate for public schools and continually expressed that he was thoroughly satisfied with Harte stated, "When you have a school that's not performing, that's not challenging your child, I guarantee, you have a group of parents that's not active in that school, that's not in the classroom, that's not holding the teacher and the principle accountable. I believe when you do that, you get results."

Catholic School

All of the St. Andrew's focus group participants stated that their search was limited to Catholic schools. In the case of Tom, whether or not to place his child in a Catholic school didn't really make a difference to him; however, it was a factor that was important to his wife. The combination or her strong support of Catholic education and his poor opinion of public

education helped inform his school placement decision. Tom's primary concern was that the school his family selected offered a structured environment with good academic standards. He also stated that he and his wife were in agreement that they didn't want to send their child to a public school because in his words, "I couldn't find a good public school around here." Tom was very concerned about public schools' ability to provide a good academic foundation. He said, "As far as the public schools are concerned, they [the public schools] are here and are still academically unacceptable and I wanted to give my son a chance." He concluded by saying, "Now if he gets stupid and starts screwing up then he will go to public school." Matilda, another parent from the non-public school focus group, also expressed that she specifically wanted a Catholic school for her child and was willing to travel a great distance in order to keep him enrolled in this type of school. She commented, "I think we both wanted a Catholic school, but I thought about not moving Charlie from his prior Catholic school and commuting quite a distance to keep him at another Catholic school, and not for the diversity necessarily. Although, I think that school had a little bit more diversity." While some of the parents from the public school focus groups for Harte and Lusher may have attended Catholic schools or other faith-based schools in their past, they did not cite religion as an ideal quality for their children's elementary school. Five of the parents from public schools considered Catholic schools but they opted for public schools for various reasons, from proximity to cost.

Parents also expressed that their public school options were better for elementary school and they perceived the quality of public schools to diminish in the middle-school and high-school years. Two of the Harte parents sent their older children to Catholic high schools and another, Joseph, stated that he has every intention of sending his son to a Catholic high

school. Jim, who currently has two of his children enrolled at Harte and one in a local public high school, had previously enrolled his children at St. Andrews, but moved them for economic reasons.

Accountability

There was discussion throughout the Harte focus group on the issue of accountability; however, this topic was not mentioned within the Lusher or St. Andrews focus group, or in the individual interview. From the Harte discussion, it was apparent that the parents wanted the faculty and staff to take responsibility for effectively teaching all required content standards. However, accountability also extended to the administration ensuring a certain level of professionalism and expertise among the faculty. Milton, a participant in the Harte Men's Club focus group, stressed the need for accountability and said, "I think the ideal school also is a school that evaluates its teachers periodically during the school year." Warren, another participant in this focus group, wanted to know that the administration was held accountable if they didn't ensure that teachers were being properly evaluated.

By way of concluding this theme, I turn to a comment made by one of the Harte fathers who said that he didn't believe that there was such a thing as a perfect school. Although my question was on the ideal school and not the perfect school, this is a significant point to make because in recognizing that there isn't a perfect school parents fully appreciate that they have to weigh various factors in making the best decision. Once the parent makes a decision, there are always going to be things that could be better or different in their child's school experience. Parents then must reconcile whether they can live with those less than satisfactory aspects of

their school choice. This is the dilemma that I found expressed most by parents participating in this study.

Decision Process

In my research, I decided to go beyond merely looking at the qualities that parents looked for in a "good" school and explore the decision process itself. For the purpose of this research, the term "decision process" does not necessarily convey a sequential step-by-step process, but rather the various considerations and decision strategies in a family's school selection. Once each focus group member identified the characteristics of a good school, I then explored how they created their choice sets and used them to narrow down their options. Parents described a combination of various strategies to develop their choice sets including conducting school research on neighborhood and denominational schools, weighing the financial costs, making comparisons to other options, making co-decisions between the father and mother, and using referrals from family members and friends. It is important to note that while some participants listed community schools/proximity as important quality in their ideal school, they were willing to waive this criterion and explore schools throughout the city in order to find the best match.

I believe that understanding how parents weighted the importance of various criteria once they made a school decision is highly relevant in this study. In certain circumstances, such as proximity, parents made trade-offs among a variety of stated qualities in order to come to a final decision. I was also interested in the role that race might have played in the school selection decision or the parent's ultimate satisfaction with the school choice.

Each of the parents from St. Andrews, for example placed high importance on finding a Catholic school for their children. Public school was not even presented as a consideration among three of these participants, primarily because of what they perceived to be the reputation of the New Orleans Public School system, which included administrative corruption, lack of resources, lack of discipline and lower academic standards. There was no discussion regarding research into the quality of available public schools, which would seem a logical or rational step to take before making a decision, because the reputation of the public school system trumped any measure of quality. In both families, the wives were products of New Orleans' Catholic school educational system, while both husbands were products of public education systems located outside New Orleans. In one sense, the wives may have limited their search to Catholic school because of family tradition. In another sense, they seem to conceptualize their choice in a rational manner based on their perception that Catholic schools offer better quality because of media reports of the general condition of public schools.

The prevailing factor was not whether a particular public school was more diverse, or offered more academic rigor, but rather that it was a public school and all public schools were generally perceived negatively. Matilda stated that she chose St. Andrews because it was the Catholic school in the neighborhood where they moved after Hurricane Katrina. She indicated that the school had a good reputation based on conversations with neighbors and friends. She did acknowledge that she had to weigh these factors against some of the things she believed the school lacked, including a greater degree of racial diversity.

Matilda pointed to the confusion among many parents in New Orleans after the storm when widespread public charters were introduced. On her decision to select St. Andrews, she

said, "It does not have the diversity that I would want, but at the time I didn't want to risk dealing with the charter schools or the public schools because I hadn't been that involved in it before and it seemed that it was going to be another job to figure out where am I going to find a good one and how am I going to travel there to do that?" In this case, her perception of the quality of a Catholic over public education, at least temporarily, trumped her interest in a racially diverse school. Tom stated that he and his wife did not consider public schools either, but their decision had little to do with the confusion after the storm. He indicated that public schools, especially those catering to the black community "always get the shaft." I did not ask if they chose St. Andrews, which is predominantly white, over a black Catholic school for proximity purposes.

Craig, another St. Andrews' parent echoed Tom's concerns with the New Orleans public schools and stated, "Because of my exposure there [in public schools], that was one of the reasons why I was more apt to have Charlie go to a Catholic School early on. I didn't want him to go to a public school if I could help it because of what I was exposed to." In weighing other options among non-Catholic schools, Matilda added that Catholic schools were her first option because she didn't think she would consider another religious denomination, such as Calvary Baptist, the only other non-public school in the Algiers community. She attributed her Catholic upbringing as the reason. As the focus group progressed, Matilda stated, "I'm good where we are but I probably wish that we looked outside of the Catholic issue and maybe looked at Lusher and not worried about distance and being in the neighborhood because I sometimes think Lusher might be a better school. I guess I shouldn't say that, but I think Lusher has the

diversity and the parent base that is so involved in – If Charlie was not at Catholic school and he was at Lusher, that would be O.K. and it wouldn't bother me."

This parent, with a child enrolled in a Catholic school, initially stated racial diversity as her first quality of an ideal school. While she acknowledges the diversity present at Lusher, she still chose a nearby Catholic school over diversity. She also seemed to consider Lusher, a public school, to be more academically challenging, yet the Catholic school nearby trumped the perceived quality of a public school.

Matilda acknowledged that Lusher may provide a more diverse student population and she would consider moving her child to that school, which is located across town, but not to Harte, which is located in her neighborhood, or even Behrman, which is a Recovery School District public school in an area called Old Algiers. Interestingly, Behrman has some of the highest student achievement scores on the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program test, or LEAP. The school also has a variety of creative arts and music programs, yet none of the parents within any of the focus groups mentioned it as an option. In this case, the absence of Behrman may be directly correlated to the reputation of public schools in general, and RSD school in particular, and have very little to do with the actual qualities of the school.

Conducting Research

The parents whose children were currently enrolled in public schools described their search process in greater detail than those at St. Andrews, who seemed to default to the local Catholic school because of perceived advantages over public school. I recalled the St. Andrews focus group in which Matilda indicated it would have become another job for her to figure out where she was going to find a good school if she had chosen a public or charter school. The

Harte parents communicated extensive care in conducting research to help in their decision-making. However, as noted earlier, none mentioned Behrman or any RSD school. It is important to note that Behrman, like all RSD schools in New Orleans, has a predominantly black student population.

In addition to using the characteristics of their ideal school, the parents of children in public schools attended parent information meetings, talked to other families, looked at the school performance scores and observed children who attended different schools. These steps were taken in order to form some sort of impression of the quality of the school. In addition, all of the public school parents participating in both the focus groups and individual interview expressed that they were always looking for better options.

Comparisons

Even after making a selection, parents primarily within the public schools continued to assess their child's placement and make comparisons to ensure they were continuing to give their children the best opportunity to compete. After visiting an open house at Lusher, Joseph stated, "And I was thinking when I went there that it was a snooty school that had all this hype about it, and when I got in there and I saw what was happening, I said, 'I think I'm neglecting my son' when I got there." When questioned by another parent he said, "They are so far advanced to Alice Harte it's almost criminal… I'm looking at where I want to get my child to, the level I want him to be at, I thought we were being negligent as parents not trying our very best to get him there."

Don also made similar comparisons of Harte to St. Andrews and Lusher. In referring to two children in his neighborhood who left Harte after first grade and went to St. Andrews, he

points out, "Now, my son is in the same grade with this girl and a boy. They're in the same grade, and when we get together I can see the difference in their growth versus my son." All but one of the parents from Harte expressed that they were always looking for a better school, and the two families currently enrolled at Lusher had moved their children multiple times in their search for the best public education. Public schools were discussed throughout the focus group as if they were all placed on a scale to be measured against Lusher at the top. Don referenced a student from Lusher who is now enrolled at Harte and said, "Now, if you go in that class, he outshines every kid in that class."

With the exception of Milton, all of the Harte parents made similar comparisons with St. Andrews or Lusher. Milton on the other hand makes his comparison with other public school options and indicated that he is thoroughly pleased with his decision to put his son at Harte. He also stated that he adopted two of his brother's children and enrolled them at Harte. "The eight-year-old could not read, period, and since in Alice Harte this boy is on the honor roll. The child that couldn't read is now reading," he added. Comparisons are inevitable. However, the parents differed on the basis of the comparison. Milton compared Harte to what he had previously, which apparently was not a quality public school. However, all of the other parents made their comparison of Harte to what they viewed as their ideal, which in many cases was either Harte before the storm or Lusher today. The pre-Katrina Harte and Lusher were both schools with high academic achievement, a variety of creative arts programs and extra-curricular activities, high engaged parent-teacher organizations, and greater diversity in terms of race and economics.

Within these groups, it is evident that comparisons take place; however, the difference is in whether the parents are comparing their school choice to one perceived to be better or worse. Warren expresses this sentiment when he says, "You take a kid at Alice Harte that has been at Alice Harte from day one and he's an honor roll student, take him to Lusher and see how much his grade point drops." Warren's statement supports his idea that Lusher's academic standards exceed those of Harte and although a child is on the honor roll he questions whether he has a false sense of security in the academic rigor of the school. As my wife always says, "Am I above average, or just above average in a below-average school?"

Numerous informal conversations after parents relocated to other states and cities after the storm seem to reveal that this is a very real fear. Children who were thought to be gifted in New Orleans struggled in their temporary schools in cities like Atlanta, Houston or Dallas. The parents within the Harte and Lusher focus group seemed very determined to make sure their children would be able to compete not just within New Orleans, but where ever they may choose to move after high school or in college.

This fear was also expressed by two other Harte parents; ironically however, it did not prove to be the case for the two families who moved their children to Lusher from Harte. While they agreed their children had to work harder, they expressed that the transition was easier than they thought it would be. Pam expressed, "I thought that it was going to be more of a challenge and it surprised me that he still picked up."

Financial Considerations

The cost of tuition was an issue that was addressed in all of the focus groups except the St. Andrews group where parents were actually paying tuition. Jim had his children enrolled at

St. Andrews before Hurricane Katrina, but for financial reasons decided to enroll them at Harte after the storm. He refers to the co-decision process among spouses and says, "My wife is the type of person who says, 'We need to send them to private school no matter what they would cost.'" However, Jim is more concerned with the cost. Joseph believes, as a tax payer, it is "outrageous" to have to consider paying for private school especially for elementary school.

The issue of finances also was revealed in the Lusher focus group by Peggy, who moved her child from Harte to Lusher in the last year. She indicated that "One reason we chose [Lusher] was economics. We were between Holy Cross and Lusher you know and—$6,000 a year, or 7 or 8, whatever amount Holy Cross wanted to charge versus like $1,000 had something to do with it."

Housing Considerations

Two families said that they made their decision to move into their specific Algiers neighborhood based on its inclusion in the Harte school district (Harte was formerly a district public school prior to Katrina). Warren said that the reason they bought their house years ago was because it fell within Harte's district and "Alice Harte was the first choice because I heard Alice Harte was the best school." Corey added that he and his wife actually bought another house just so they could enroll their son at Harte. However, he added "We signed the contract to get him into Harte. Katrina voided that contract and messed up the house. When we came back we didn't have to move to get them there since school admission was no longer bound by the school's geographic district as a charter. Jim pointed out that he wanted to get his kids in Alice Harte before Katrina, but it was a challenge because they were also living outside the

school's district. He said that you had to test into the school if you were out of the district at that time. However, as the school became a charter, he was also able to enroll his children.

Joint Decision-Making

Several of the parents described which spouse had the greatest influence in the decision. In the case of the two couples from St. Andrews, it was the wives who were more adamant about choosing a Catholic school. In both of these cases, the wives had attended Catholic schools while the husbands attended public schools. As mentioned, Jim said that his wife also preferred private schools, but he put greater weight on the financial factors. Milton said, "When it comes down to things like that, I kind of let my wife just take the lead on that, do the research and I just trust her judgment on that."

One parent in the group of former Harte parents, now at Lusher, moved her child several times to ensure that their child got what she and her husband perceived to be the best public education they could find in terms of academic rigor, proximity and diversity. In this case, the parent considered where the teachers at the school enrolled their own children. This family indicated that their decision to move their child from one public school in Algiers to Alice Harte was the result of a discussion they had with a teacher at the school. The teacher, who also lived in Algiers, revealed that her own child was enrolled in Harte while she taught at this school that was less than a mile away from Harte. This conversation caused the family to expand their choice set to include Harte.

Reasons for Leaving/Reasons for Staying

Once the choice has been made, parents participating in the focus groups revealed that they continue to reassess their decisions to ensure that their child is getting the best education.

Because my primary interest is in public school choice in New Orleans, the data that I present in this section will be limited to what was obtained from the parents currently at Harte as well as those who are now attending Lusher. In both groups I asked participants about their satisfaction with their decision and to list any concerns they had. Both couples in the Lusher group had just recently moved their kids from Harte to Lusher this year. I was interested in their current satisfaction level with Lusher as well as the main reasons they decided to switch schools. The parents expressed a range of responses from wanting the best for their children, to being burned out from the level of parental involvement they thought was needed at their child's school to ensure a quality educational environment, to just wanting a disciplined environment.

Want the Best for their Children

According to both the Harte and Lusher focus group participants, parents with children in public school are always looking for the best public school for their children. If they are going to be in public school they want the best. When I reviewed the comments by the Lusher parents both families had moved their children several times in an attempt to find the best school. According to Corey, "We felt it was taking the right steps at the right time. Same as now, you know, we moved from Alice Harte to Lusher. This was the next step."

After listing the qualities of the ideal school Joseph stated that he did not think he was getting these qualities at Harte and was not satisfied. However, later in the session he acknowledged that Harte is a good school, but he's seen better. According to Joseph, there is essentially a competing goal between wanting the best for your child against what's best for

society. He says, "The problem is, you got one time to educate your kid right. You try to think about the entire society, but you know you can't lose your kid in the shuffle."

Burnout

The issue of parent burnout was pervasive in both the Lusher and Harte focus groups, but not the St. Andrews group. Joseph expressed his frustration with his perception that only a small number of parents were actively engaged in helping improve the school environment through school cleanup efforts, volunteerism and fundraising. According to Joseph, *"It's that our group is working our butts off, you know, a lot parents, and then you got other people that really don't care, they're just sending their kids to school. So that's what you get tired of. You get tired of carrying the load. And when the load becomes too much, then you get frustrated and you find somewhere else to send your child."* This "frustration" was expressed by two other Harte parents. When Milton interjected that "You can't do that" Joseph responded "Why you think our schools are in the condition they're in now? The brain has left. Parents in our same economic group have decided to take their kids out." Milton agreed but said, "If you take your kid out and you take your kid out, the groups get smaller."

Milton, the most vocal advocate of public schools, indicated that he believed even just a small number of parents actively involved make a difference in improving the school environment. All parents in the Harte group expressed their expectations of what a small number of parents could accomplish, but they acknowledged that they needed to guard against getting burned out in the process.

One parent, who left Harte, expressed that she was mentally drained from doing so much volunteer work at Harte and just needed some time off. Three additional Lusher parents

expressed that they felt the same way. All of these parents had become active leaders in the

school's PTO after Hurricane Katrina and they all expressed frustration with trying to keep the

group going with waning memberships and a general lack of interest by many of the new

parents in the school. The Lusher participants firmly believed that if they could have maintained

a strong PTO they could have helped retain Harte as a good school.

Corey considered his current experience at Lusher and said, "The parent involvement is

so strong that certain positions are done in shift work. I mean they have parents set up for this

section and that section." Peggy chimed in saying, "You didn't get that at Harte... You had to do

all the sessions."

Discipline

Discipline was a primary concern that was presented by all of the parents in the Harte

focus group. Most of them didn't have major concerns with their children enrolled in grades K-

5, but all but one were not comfortable leaving their children at Harte for their middle school

education. Two of the Harte focus group participants already had older children complete

middle school at Harte; however, all of the participants acknowledged they were concerned

about how the middle school students (grades 6 – 8) were managed. These students attended

classes primarily in an area of the campus known as The Village.

The Village consists of a series of portable buildings that are somewhat removed from

the main campus buildings. The parents had concerns about the lack of sufficient space in the

classrooms, the fact that the walkways flood in heavy rain, but more importantly the overall

sense of disorder in that area of the campus. In particular the parents worried about the

classroom management of the predominantly African American middle-school students by

mostly white teachers. Even though their major concern was with the behavior management style of the white teachers of the middle-school students, this concern appears to permeate down into the lower grades as well. Warren expressed that he didn't believe the white teachers knew how to deal with the black students. Elaborating on this concern as well, Don added, "I'm not saying you gotta talk to them harsh. You gotta be firm."

Don gives an example of a second grade class he visited at Harte. He said, "They had two little [black] kids in the class and she said 'This is why I can't teach this class because of them two kids.' She couldn't even control those two kids. This is second grade. I told them to sit down and they sat down. She said, 'I've been trying to do that for the last three months. From August to October." Don said that he stood in amazement that the teacher couldn't manage two kids.

Cultural differences with white teachers and black students

As the topic of discipline was discussed, it became apparent that the black parents viewed themselves and other black teachers as more firm in their child discipline methods than the white teachers. For the middle-class parents, concepts of discipline ranged from physical correction (spanking), to verbal punishment, to loss of privileges. They acknowledged that their counterparts in poorer families with fewer resources and more stress may default to physical correction more often than the norm in a middle-class home.

Parents within the Harte focus group expressed that many of the white teachers either didn't know how to manage black students or struggled with being perceived as politically incorrect as they tried to discipline black students. While many parents echoed this sentiment and felt that the white teachers had to be more sensitive about what they said and did and how

it was perceived by others, their expectation of firm discipline was not diminished. Warren stated, "They don't know how to deal with our kids." Another parent expressed, "You can't deal with it or you don't want to deal with them, or you are there for a paycheck. I really think that most of the Caucasian teachers are there for a paycheck." This was an interesting statement since the parents identified the issue as more cultural than racial.

To get an additional perspective, I also asked Shelly, who is a parent and a teacher at Harte, to describe her perception of the interaction of white teachers with the student population and how she thought it affected discipline and learning. Her response was, "It definitely, definitely, definitely has an impact on the kids and in a negative way." She said that when the white teachers would tell her what they did in particular circumstances she knew immediately that some of their strategies probably didn't help. She said culturally and economically, she understands a lot of the issues that some of the students and their parents are facing. However, she feels that when she tries to explain possible student situations to many of the white teachers they can't see it or understand it. She said,

> Culturally they can't see it. I've found culturally, and this is just my opinion – African Americans would handle it [discipline] better. They would more or less just handle it in class and they can approach a kid. I can tell a kid what a Caucasian co-worker can't, and now the kids this year, it's really hurting them. I've had kids, and I think part of it is because I'm the same skin color as them and a part of it is because they know I understand, come to me when a certain situation happened. With me, I may overlook it, but kids are running to our classrooms crying. I mean literally shaking. 'She's going to call my mom.'

Shelly discusses how she often has to go to her co-workers to explain student cultural issues. She frequently finds the teachers wanting to call child protection authorities on what she considers normal child discipline that may be taking place at home. "I tell them culturally as

the income scale goes up in my opinion they are not as hard on their kids per se. It's more

punishment, but in lower-class families you're stressed with 'I can't pay my light bill or my

boyfriend has left me.' So when the teacher calls home and starts talking that makes it hard for

the child. They [teachers] get really mad and culturally they can't understand when I tell them.

They say 'Well, they were talking. 'But you have to realize what goes on at home. So that's a

problem that we're facing on grade level. It's just the resistance."

Shelly gave another example of an interaction with one of her white co-workers that

reveals what she believes to be a cultural disconnect. The teacher shared that she told a

student that they were a good student but she needed them to sit down and stop acting like a

thug. The teacher clarified and said, "I'm not saying you are a thug but I don't think you should

be acting that way." Shelly shared that the teacher was afraid that a parent was going to come

in. Shelly concluded by saying, "I could say that and not get a reaction, but culturally when they

don't understand the culture or don't want to understand the culture, it affects the kids. The

kids are crying and can't focus."

The Harte group also expressed concern that there was not a sufficient racial balance

with teachers in the middle school grades. While the majority of students are African American

in the middle school, it concerned them that there was only one black teacher assigned to the

middle school. Because of the various cultural differences between the white teachers and the

black students these parents felt that this was one of the reasons that student behavior was not

effectively being managed. One parent expressed concern about the lack of African American

authority figures at the school and stressed that there should be more of a racial balance in the

faculty and administration. According to this parent, "The issue is when you have 90% black and

you don't even have enough black teachers, that they can see back there, that are trying to

help them. Not saying that those white teachers are not trying to help them."

Accountability

One topic that continued to come up with the current Harte parents that didn't come

into play with the focus groups with the current Lusher parents or the St. Andrews parents was

the issue of accountability. I think it is relevant to note that all of the Lusher parents only

recently started sending their children to the school so their experience is somewhat limited.

This concern was focused on who was accountable for the education of the children. Whenever

this issue came up during the focus group, it was usually out of a concern about who should

take the responsibility. Warren said, "But, we're going that extra step. So shouldn't he [an

administrator] be held accountable to do what he's supposed to do?" Joseph said, "It's not

about making his job harder, it's about making him do his job." It seemed to me to be an issue

of who to blame for perceived shortcomings. Just about every group was mentioned at one

point or another: teachers, parents, administrators, school board. However, when concerns

were raised with the current Harte parents, there was extensive discussion about who to target

and hold accountable.

While the issue of accountability requires further research, I believe the concern is

greatest in schools where parents perceive that there are quality problems, either with

adequate resources, student and faculty diversity, academic achievement, or with teacher

quality. Others within the Harte focus group pointed to the need for higher standards they

perceived came with increased diversity. Donald expressed that, "When it all becomes

predominately black, it tends to start to slow down."

The issue of correlating quality with increased racial diversity by one of the participants caused two of the parents to disagree by pointing out the various successful "all-black" schools. While Joseph and Warren disagreed with Donald's statement regarding all-black schools, both acknowledged looking into schools that included greater white enrollment. This tells me that while they acknowledge that there are good all black schools, none were currently available in their school choice set.

Donald then shifted from talking about the number of blacks in the school to the high number of special education students. The argument often made by parents, teachers and administrators alike is that Type IV schools, which are allowed to have selective admissions requirements, cherry-pick the best and brightest students, thus creating a more challenging academic environment for children. These schools are more likely to become a factor in a middle-class parent's choice set; resulting in these same parents being drawn away from other schools within their community. While the argument has been made that Type IV schools are necessary because they keep parents in the public school system that otherwise would not stay, the question then becomes whether these Type IV schools become the prompt that draws middle-class parents away from the non-selective admission schools like Harte and further create isolation and segregation for poorer black students.

Speaking on accountability and parental involvement, Milton adds "I'm just a firm believer that our school system is what the parents make it. When you have a school that's not performing, that's not challenging your child, I guarantee you, you have a group of parents that's not active in that school, that's not in the classroom, that's not holding the teacher and the principle accountable. I believe when you do that, you get results." This parent relates a

school's performance to involved parents who, even in small numbers, can hold the administration accountable.

This parent proceeds to argue that it just takes a nucleus. He says, "If we just had us five in the schools every week, we'd turn the school around, man. We'd turn it around." As the discussion continues he clarifies that his argument is that parents can change the school, not that they as active parents can change the less engaged parents. "Not everyone can get their kids to Lusher. Likewise, everyone can't get their kids into Alice Harte either." This parent is satisfied that Harte is one of the finer schools that are available and pointed out the progress that his children are having there.

Lowered Standards

Joey, a parent in the Lusher group, contrasted Harte pre- and post-Katrina and believed that the standards were lowered in recent years. He stated, "I was disappointed and I had two meetings with the assistant principal about my concerns about the curriculum being lowered. I didn't like the direction of the school. This is an example of what happens when parents are not satisfied that their concerns are being addressed by the administration.

Generational Comparisons/Personal Experiences that Impact Racial Attitudes and Choices

By conducting a qualitative study I believed I could do a more in-depth assessment of how a parent's personal experience and racial attitudes influence actual decisions. Among all of the focus group participants, four attended predominantly white elementary schools, four attended predominantly black elementary schools and three attended what they called racially mixed schools. One of the parents within the Harte focus group attended elementary school in

Africa and shared his experience within ethnically mixed schools, which he said was more complicated than integrated schools here in New Orleans.

Each of their experiences was slightly different, but all recalled dealing with racial issues. Those who went to predominantly black schools said that they didn't have to deal with racism from other students but rather dealt with other types of community problems such as crime. Corey recalled, "I didn't have any racial problems, but I came up in the Uptown area and the schools were fine but it was just a bad area and you always had to worry about survival. Being attacked or something like that. You had to be ready."

In relating their past experiences to those of their children, the participants pointed to perceived differences in the nurturing students received, the changing norms of behavior and a general level of suspicion of whites that many were still dealing with despite their recognition that times had changed.

Nurturing Experience

In comparing the experiences of those who attended integrated or predominantly white schools, to those who attended black elementary, high schools or universities, the men in the Harte Men's focus group all believed that the black schools provided a more nurturing experience. Joseph described his experience by saying, "The one thing I tell by going to a black school, especially high school, is that you get a different experience. You get a different experience because of the fact that you're amongst your peers and everybody there is focused on…Black history." Don said that it was because of the lack of a nurturing experience in a predominantly white elementary school that caused him to choose to go to a University that is listed as a Historically Black College and University. He also referred to his early high school

experience at St. Augustine which is known in the city for its nurturing environment for black students.

Different Times

Recognizing that all of the Harte participants believed the environment of black schools were more nurturing caused me to ask Joseph why he would pursue an integrated school. He had described his educational experience very positively and definitely as being more nurturing within the all-black school. His response was, "I think what you're dealing with is generational. I feel that way because of my generation. And so my child doesn't feel that way. I don't I think he sees color. He doesn't see black and white."

As the oldest of the parents in the Men's Club group, both Joseph and Milton felt that their personal experiences and attitudes were related to the fact that they are products of the New Orleans educational system of the 1950s and 60s. Growing up in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement seemed to cause them to feel more united as a black community in ensuring the educational success of the children. There seemed to be a consensus among the Harte Men's Group that despite the challenges of the Civil Rights Movement, they don't teach their children to treat others differently because of race or gender, regardless of their experiences in school were positive or negative.

Two other parents from Harte expressed this same belief. According to Warren, racism is taught and not innate. "We teach our kids to treat others like a human and it doesn't matter what color you are or what your gender is. Period," he added. Don agreed, but stated that his son is starting to learn and ask questions about black and white issues. When another parent

said that this can be taught without generating hate Don also agreed, but said that it does

generate curiosity.

Matilda, one of the St. Andrews parents, attended a predominantly white Catholic high

in New Orleans during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and said,

> Well I think my prejudice, and what I grew up with, is affecting my thought processes on
> that. I never slept over at anybody other than a black person's house and no white
> person came over to sleep at my house. But with my child, he has sleepovers and his
> friends are white and he goes over to their house and they come to mine. So he's
> experiencing much more of a mixture I guess in a way than I ever did, but I'm worried
> and suspicious wondering if these boys are going to continue to want to still be his
> friend as years go on. That's my prejudice. It's not theirs.

Her husband Craig agreed and said, "Racial barriers are coming down. They are breaking

down racial barriers."

The topic of generational differences did not come with the Lusher group as it had in the

other two groups, but as the participants grew up in the early stages of integration they had a

lot of examples of how they saw that "Separate was not always equal." Peggy, from Lusher,

who started school in 1961 stated,

> During my experience, there were racial issues. I went to, basically, an all white Catholic
> school and when I got there they didn't have too many blacks there and even though I
> may look that way, they knew what I was. I went to St. Gabriel and we used to sit in
> church and they used to say that there was a white side of the church and a black side of
> the church. They had school fairs and even though I went to that church I wasn't
> allowed to participate in the fair.

Referring to the diminished resources of black public schools during that time, she told

of her sister who was two years older and said, "She was at the black public school and I was at

the white Catholic school and we had the same text books. That's when my parents pulled

them out of the black public school and sent them over to where I was."

Unlike Matilda, Peggy reported that she had a lot of white friends when she was growing up. She stated, "You know on the whole, I would spend the night by some of the white children's house. Children don't know what color you are. We bring that to the table." However, despite these friendships she acknowledged that she did experience racism. She said, "This is back in the 60's and racism was out there."

Don, from Harte, who went to a predominantly white school (80%), stated that because of this early experience he chose to go to a black university, but despite his experience, he believes that an integrated elementary school experience is best for his son.

Two parents from Harte stated that they went to predominantly white Catholic elementary schools until they got expelled for fighting. To give context to this school experience, Joseph stated that there was a riot at the church that was connected to the school. The riot started when his cousin tried to sit in the front of church and at that time blacks had to sit in the back. This discussion caused me to reflect on the experience my older two brothers had as they integrated some of the city's Catholic schools during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Both indicated that there wasn't a day that passed when they weren't forced to fight for one reason or another, but always tied to some racial tension at the school.

Despite being in agreement that this generation of children sees things differently, Donald acknowledged that racial issues do come up in his son's life, but that they can be discussed without generating hate. All of the participants in the Harte Men's group felt that being in a racially diverse school allowed for more exploration of differences and was beneficial for their children's development in modern society. And while the black educational

environment was thought to be beneficial for the parents from the Civil Rights era, they believed that times had changed.

Perception of Racism

The perception of overt and covert racism among faculty and staff also came into play during the Harte focus group. While acknowledging that everyone has some bias or prejudice, two parents expressed concern about several statements by white faculty that caused them to conclude that they were racists. However, I found it an interesting contrast that, for whatever reason, the issue of overt racist actions by teachers was not raised by the families at Lusher or St. Andrews. Additionally, neither of these groups of parents raised the issue of discipline as a major concern at their schools. Both of these schools had a smaller percentage of poor black students and expressed that their schools had high academic standards. I considered the possibility that these parents rationalized away the presence of racist actions by teachers because of their satisfaction with the school overall or their perception that they were in the best available school for their child.

In discussing her perception of racism at St. Andrews, Matilda stated, "He's not experiencing anything that I can tell. Now if he started to experience something or I felt he wasn't being given the benefit of the doubt then I probably look to move him. I'm not going to leave him there if that starts to happen."

Desire for Diversity

While neither family from the St. Andrews focus group cited problems with racism in their children's current school experience, Matilda stated, "I think the reason I want the diversity is because my memory of Dominican. The only memory of the black adults I saw was

the cafeteria workers and the maintenance people. So I wanted Charlie to see the black teachers, male and female, as opposed to just somebody working in the cafeteria."

Currently, at his school there are only two black teachers, "and that's not nearly enough and that bothers me, but not enough to where I'm going to move him. He's not experiencing anything that I can tell. Now if he started to experience something or I felt he wasn't being given the benefit of the doubt, then I probably look to move him. I'm not going to leave him there if that starts to happen." In terms of diversity in the student population, Matilda expressed that she wished there was also more diversity because in a diverse world, the earlier a child is exposed to the differences in people, the better.

In listening to the focus group participants discuss their views about diversity; I heard the echo of the Civil Rights Movement era integration values, and their more recent expression in the language of diversity. Craig expressed, "Once you are exposed to different race, creeds and colors of people you realize that one is no better than the other. You'll learn that different doesn't mean better. They are just different. You can learn from her, from him or from one gender or from one race to the other. It's just different. And that is where I think unity kicks in. You realize that 'I'm not better or worse off than they are.'"

Craig believed that the exposure to that diversity would help his son in relationships in general, and in the educational setting, "Because it eliminates and steps over a lot of the stereotypes." He added that these experiences could help his child form his own opinions when he hears things about other people groups.

Views of Civil Rights/Integration Outcomes

Depletion of Resources with White Flight

The issue of resources was not discussed with the Lusher focus group or the St. Andrews group. However, it was a very pertinent issue within the Harte focus group. Four of the five parents in the Harte Men's Club focus group discussed the depletion of resources in public schools as an outcome of the Civil Rights Movement. Don recalled enrolling at Alcee Fortier High School (which was transformed after Hurricane Katrina into the Lusher Charter High School campus) in 1980 and being amazed with the facility and resources. He said, "When we went up to the band room, they had pianos in each room, so everybody could have private piano lessons. And the band room was large because they wanted to make sure you could go in there and have violin lessons and everything. Every year we went back and there were less and less pianos. By my senior year everything was gone."

Don also recounted a visit to the campus in 1993 when he discovered that everything he had been so proud of was gone. By this time, the school was predominantly black. In describing the change, he said, "They didn't have anything in there. They had cameras in the hallway monitoring me. They had metal bars on all the doors. I used to see this in Special Education, but all the doors had that." His perception was that things changed from a school rich in resources and enrichment programs to one of control and limited opportunities that almost simulated a detention center as opposed to a center for academic enrichment and learning.

Upon hearing Don's story, Joseph added that he was describing every school across what he called "Black America." He pointed out that the reason for the deterioration in the schools was limited funding, stymied by fewer property taxes collected and dedicated to public

education. Joseph added, "The reason why those schools end up like that is because of white flight. They took their tax base out of the city into areas like the Northshore," a predominantly white middle and upper middle class enclave across Lake Pontchartrain north of New Orleans.

Four of the five parents from the Harte focus group agreed with this assessment, but Milton interjected that there are more dynamics to the situation. While he acknowledged white flight as a factor in the demise of public schools in New Orleans, he put part of the blame on those who were in city leadership. He says, "Nobody is talking about the corruption, how we [blacks in leadership] pilfered us, you know. When we put 'us' in place what happens is we begin to steal the dollars. That corruption affects us. Who are they stealing from? They're stealing from us." Milton's comments echoed back to the earlier discussion on assigning accountability and responsibility and the focus group members all agreed. Milton continued, adding that "This is the most corrupt city. It's [corruption] in Section 8, it's in food stamps, it's in -- everywhere you go corrupt. Everybody is stealing, man. And who's getting hurt? We're getting hurt. That's our money….and they're lining their pockets."

Joseph added more on what he viewed as a culture of corruption in almost all aspects of life in New Orleans and said "For the past 20 years this city has been run by people that look like us. That's been the biggest reason why I go in the voting booth right now and I do not look at color."

Joseph expressed that he felt "We did a better job educating our kids when they were in the black community." He expressed that blacks took greater responsibility before the Civil Rights Movement. Milton said that it was more of a community effort and the black community educated its kids. Joseph stated that pre-Civil Rights, communities did a better job educating

their black children despite the limited resources. They believed that the community took greater responsibility for raising its own children, and this level of responsibility had been diminishing continually since the Civil Rights Movement.

Responsibility Shift and the Breakdown of the Family Structure

As the conversation with the Harte focus group continued it moved into a discussion on responsibility. This was the only focus group that brought up the idea of a responsibility shift in education. Milton, who was the greatest proponent of public education among the Harte Men's Club focus group participants, presented what became a continuing theme throughout the meeting: that the breakdown of family structure is a direct outcome of Civil Rights Movement. While the direct causal relationship seemed to be clear to Milton, it was not clear whether the other focus group participants blamed the Civil Rights Movement directly for the breakdown within the black family, or whether the viewed the Civil Rights Movement as more of a time stamp, after which people's attitudes about family and other social issues began to change.

Discipline Shift

The Harte group also communicated what they believed to be a breakdown in discipline as well. When it came to discipline, Joseph stated, "Before the Civil Rights, you act up and teachers yank your chain." Another parent, at Harte, pointed out that prior to the Civil Rights Movement, if you did something wrong by a neighbor's house, they would whip you and then you got another whipping when you got home. Likewise Joseph stated, "When we were in our black schools, our black teachers could beat our behinds. But with Civil Rights the black kids started going to the white schools, and the black teachers started going to white schools. The white folks didn't want your black behind beating their children. So that's when the laws

changed about you beating your children in school. That's when that changed because those white folks didn't want those black teachers beating their children." The implication from this discussion was less about the actual act of spanking children, or those extreme cases in which abuse took place, but more on the partnership in disciplining African American students, which included the parents, the teachers, neighbors, etc.

Race/Class Shift

In describing the unintended consequences of the Civil Rights Movement for the black community, the argument presented by many participants within the Harte focus group was that there was a shift from black and white race issues to issues of class. Milton stated, "Back then, we're talking about when we had the community, we didn't have the material wealth. Do you understand? Where that's all blacks had, was each other. Do you understand what I'm saying? Once we threw in materialism then, you know, that started to just separate us more and more and more." The idea that the Civil Rights struggle built the community during that generation became more and more pervasive within the Harte focus group. Interestingly, the men viewed the Civil Rights Movement as a struggle that unified the black community and black families. However, with the success of the Movement in securing various legal rights, the group believed that the black community became less focused on "community" and more focused on "self," there was a shift to a more individualistic society where people became divided by class and material acquisition instead of race.

"They did the boycott on the bus ride. You think you could pull off something like that right now? Not in a million years, we couldn't. And, unfortunately, we got that mindset that the white folks water is 'wetter,'" Joseph said. Upon hearing this statement, I asked how did

integration do that and the response from Joseph was, "That's what integration is. It moved to classes and levels."

Destruction of the Black Community of Support

The Harte Men's group seemed to agree that the Civil Rights Movement had some negative effects on education despite recognizing the inherent inequality of the duo racial education systems that existed before the Movement. After the Harte focus group listed a variety of negative outcomes of the Civil Rights Movement I expressed my confusion with what I was hearing. This group more than any other expressed the need for integration and diversity in education, so I asked them in light all of the negative outcomes that they attributed to the Civil Rights Movement why they would still pursue integrated schools. This is when they again referred to the "generational difference" and the need for the next generation to be comfortable engaging with those who are different from them. Joseph, Milton and Warren agreed. While Don did not verbally give agreement he acknowledged that he was looking for diversity for his son.

As I explored the views of the parents from St. Andrews and Lusher on the impact of the Civil Rights movement I found a similar contradiction. Matilda stated, "Well honestly the impact on education of public schools, I guess that [The Civil Rights Movement] ruined them. In a way I think, because we are in the Deep South, people left the city and we created Metairie, Kenner and St. Tammany and that was that. They want to say that businesses left for other reasons, but that's not why they left. I think that [Civil Rights Movement] started the exodus from the city and hurt the tax base and without the tax base and tax dollars you can't fully fund the public schools so I think that started it going downhill."

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It is important to note that as we discussed the impact of the Civil Rights Movement with the St. Andrews group, Craig expressed that he believed it had a different impact on Virginia than it did in New Orleans partly because of what he called the transient population in Virginia. "You have people coming from all parts of the Unites States. They go there and get government jobs and I think that it actually ultimately helped the whole entire school system overall. It forced everybody up the ante. If the school was not up to par, if they gave them a lil trial and error. Two or three years and they would close you down." I questioned his argument as I considered the fact that he attended T.C. Williams in Alexandria, Virginia, which provided the setting for the movie *Remember the Titans*. T.C. Williams has also been in the news recently because it has been listed as one of the area's persistently failing schools. Race and class have been cited as issues of concern at the school and while senators are reported to have sent their kids there in the past, it does not appear that this continues to be the case. Craig, who grew up in Virginia and went to public school during forced integration, had a different assessment. He expressed the benefits of exposure that he would otherwise not have experienced. Referring to his own bussing experience he stated, "I think in the long run, because with the exposure, I realized that what I was exposed to before wasn't giving me the full picture. The fact that it was a different environment and it was teaching me that things were being done differently on the other side of town so, therefore, through that difference it could be another thing in another part of the state or another state."

This dialogue about whether or not the Civil Rights Movement impacted different parts of the country differently warrants further research, but this couple agreed that it had a

negative impact on public schools in New Orleans resulting in their overall lack of trust in placing their child in a public school.

As a follow-up with the Lusher parents, I also asked them if they believed the Civil Rights Movement had an overall positive or negative impact on the black community, education and society as a whole. Two parents indicated they were not sure. While one said that she was still trying to make an overall conclusion, the other said that it had both negative and positive outcomes. She noted that one positive outcome was that it exposed a lot of prejudices that she says were hidden, but she didn't know what alternative strategies would have had any better outcomes for the nation.

Alternatives to Integration

On the issue of alternatives to integration, there was a vibrant discussion during the Lusher focus group. One of the participants indicated her frustration with the failure of black leaders and she openly wondered if other strategies would have worked. She said, "As you look at when I would have been starting my life in school. That's basically when you would have started seeing blacks in charge of public schools. And I find it really disheartening and discouraging that on their watch, schools went down the drain. I would have expected better." All members of the Lusher group agreed with this position, but some expressed that there may have been mitigating factors such as inexperience or corruption beyond the control of the school's black leaders. One parent added, "I think they had good intentions but I think like we discussed earlier. The finances were funneled elsewhere," and another said "maybe it was because the people were in charge didn't know how to manage money." However, one mom

wouldn't let the administrators off the hook of responsibility that easily and added, "The road

to hell is paved with good intentions."

One parent within the Lusher group openly questioned "what would have happened

had—instead of fighting for schools to be integrating we fought for equal funding instead and

made our schools top notch would we be in a better position?" This comment seemed to

provoke a great deal of thought within the group. While one parent questioned whether the

outcome would have been better had blacks fought for truly equal funding and resources

instead of fighting "just to sit next to whites," the others within this focus group seemed more

concerned about what would have been lost in this scenario—the opportunity to interact with

other races. Corey said, "I think it would have hurt in the long run." Pam also was concerned

about the long-term effects of that type of strategy and added "It would have hurt the

relationship. My relationship with a white person or Spanish."

It was apparent from this dialogue that the majority of the group thought the

Movement was worth all of the potential downfalls because it allowed the races to interact

more, but Michelle responded that "If you think about it. The white folks ran anyway,"

acknowledging the lack of diversity and resources that still exist in schools.

Joey added another dimension to the conversation by including the effect of integration

on black business. He also pointed to the premise that in trying to have equality, many blacks

abandoned black businesses much like many who are leaving the public schools. He said, "I've

heard certain guys say that integration was the worst thing that happened to the black race.

They are basing it on business. Before integration, blacks owned a lot of businesses and blacks

were in charge of black-owned businesses because they could not go to white businesses

because whites didn't want their business. I was told that there was a time that blacks couldn't go shopping on Canal Street but they could go shopping on Dryades Street, which is now Oretha Castle Haley. They said that once integration happened it just tore all that down. Some of the blacks who were shopping at the black shops now could shop at the white shops. And they felt like they abandoned the black shop thinking the white people had better goods than the black folks. Despite their belief in the negative impact of the Civil Rights Movement regarding the subsequent white flight and the draining of resources from the public schools, members from all three focus groups and the individual interview seemed to agree with the overall premise that there were inherent benefits in racial diversity in schools for the students. However, in today's environment, diversity is a matter of choice as opposed to forced integration.

Discussion

While various sociological theories can be used to assert a position about school choice, I use theory instead to help make sense of parents' positions as they seek to educate their children. I also draw on theory as I examine the implications of family choices on the quality of education for the black community in general and the poor black community in particular.

Four key points were revealed from the three parent focus groups and interview that demonstrate liberal ideology at play in their thoughts regarding their concepts of an ideal school:

- The belief that segregation equals inequality.

- The belief in the benefits of integration.

- The use of strategic assimilation in order to cope with racism.

- The use of bounded rationality to prioritize criteria and develop school choice sets.

However, Critical Race Theory (CRT) may be used to explain some of their positions on colorblind ideology and the inherent tension between their very strongly stated liberal tendencies and their organic analysis of racism.

Liberal Ideology

Segregation = Inequality

The parents within this study all grew up during or immediately after the Civil Rights Movement and experienced segregation in their schools and communities. For those in predominantly black schools, during the Civil Rights Movement, they recognized the lack of resources, which continued to dwindle as white students left for the suburbs and

predominantly white private and parochial schools. For those in predominantly white schools, they observed the level of resources available to white students and the greater academic expectations not available in predominantly black schools.

For those parents who grew up during the post-Civil Rights era, they found the gradual depletion of resources as whites left the schools and their observation was that as the schools became more black, the enrichment programs were gradually taken away and the school environment became more focused control of the students. A perfect example was the parent from Harte who described how his predominantly black public high school diminished in quality over time as a result of white flight and eventually bore more resemblance to a prison with bars on classroom doors and windows.

These parents made comparisons not only to the facilities and resources, but also to the academic level of the students who attended white schools and they believed they could see a difference. They believed that the faculty and staff had higher expectations of the children in these white schools, and the result was that the students were more academically advanced than their counterparts in the predominantly black schools. This was particularly the case among the Harte parents as they compared their children to their counterparts in St. Andrews and Lusher. However, rather than blame the discrepancy in their academic skill level on the students, the parents believed the circumstances were a reflection of the overall quality of the schools.

I believe these experiences cause the parents to equate segregation with inequality. When you have separate schools for blacks and whites there is a discrepancy in the quality of

the education that is afforded to the two different racial groups. When describing their ideal schools, the parents allow this perception to influence their opinions.

Benefits of Integration

Taking their perception of segregation and inequality a step further, these parents witnessed the benefits that came with integration in terms of academic rigor, better textbooks, cleaner facilities and more resources. To the degree that the schools were whiter, all students within the school could expect to reap greater benefits.

These parents didn't analyze all of the factors that could explain the differences in black and white student achievement; they were just aware that they existed. From this point they drew the conclusion that something was better, or as one parent said, "their [white schools] water was wetter," with schools with a greater percentage of white student enrollments. They felt that children were more challenged at these schools and the end result was a child who was more advanced and better prepared to compete as an adult.

These positions support the fundamental tenet of the Civil Rights Movement that separate was not equal but from school integration both black and white students would reap benefits. As I conducted my research I found the language of integration now focuses more on the importance of diversity in the school setting. For all intents and purpose, diversity means more white than what New Orleans Public Schools are today – less than 5 percent white.

Strategic Assimilation

The parents within this study believed that integration, or racial diversity in the school, would bring more resources and benefits to their children. They communicated an overall belief in the concept that America was truly focused on being a melting pot. However, they believed

that the dominant white culture desired for blacks and other minorities to assimilate to their culture rather than seeking to understand or embrace other cultures.

While these parents recognized the white dominant culture's pressure on blacks to assimilate to their ways, they have utilized strategic assimilation in which they continue to identify with their black identity while they concentrate on their own integration into American society.

As these parents want to prepare their children to succeed in a white-dominant society, they do not seem to be interested in pursuing the development of model all-black schools. Rather, their desire is for interracial communities. The strategy they have employed is to enroll their children in schools that are not all black in order to expose them to other races and cultures at an early age.

Utilizing strategic assimilation, these parents are seeking racially diverse schools; however, they articulate a belief in the benefits of having their children maintain a strong black heritage and affinity towards the black community. In order to accomplish this goal, the parents have sought to balance their children being placed in whiter school with involvement in Afrocentric culture and development of strong racial ties to the black community through music, entertainment, the black church, recreational activities and other black community institutions. In the end, they believed they would reap the best of both worlds in that their children would not lose their racial identity, but also benefit from the educational resources that would be available to them in schools that had a larger white student enrollment.

Bounded Rationality

Bounded rationality recognizes that these families limited their choice sets to a smaller number of schools from which to choose. They by no means considered the 70+ school options that existed in the city. For some within the study, they limited their choices to just Catholic schools ether due to their religious beliefs, the history of Catholic education in New Orleans or their personal or family tradition. This was the case for the parents in the study who selected St. Andrews.

For those parents who were not bounded by Catholic schools, there were other factors that affected their ultimate choice sets. One major influence was the reputation of the school as failing – either prior to or after Hurricane Katrina. While many of the public schools that struggled before the storm have been able to make substantial improvements, these parents did not recognize these changes. To a certain degree, the reputation of the school was more important than the reality of its academic success today.

For the Harte and Lusher parents—those open to public school education—their choice set was basically bounded to those two schools, along with a couple of private schools. They acknowledged their preferences were for the two public schools, but that they would be willing to forgo other things if needed in order to pay for a private school education if they had to.

Their focus was on the quality of education and they only considered a very limited number of public schools which are known to have a greater percentage of white students. When you consider the liberal ideology of maximizing resources, these middle-class black families create choice sets composed only of what they view as successful schools – public or private. These families have greater resources in terms of finances, research ability via the

Internet and social networks, ability to commute longer distances, etc. in order to select better schools for their children. Poor blacks, however, have greater restraints and often must choose a school from among a list of substandard or failing institutions.

Critique from the Critical Race Theory Perspective

While these parents embraced many of the liberal ideas of integration they also conducted their own organic analysis of racism, deeply rooted in their own experiences with personal and systemic racism. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a foundation, I was interested in how these parents managed the tension between their desire for a truly integrated educational experience for their children and their opinions of matters of race.

Colorblind Ideology

In particular, I was interested in determining what attitudes parents had on colorblind ideology, which takes a race neutral perspective on society and holds that institutional racism and discrimination have been replaced by equal opportunity. I found that these parents were highly aware of race and racism, and they were consciously making comparisons of schools in order to get their children the best education they could. The parents in this study did not reveal any personal tendency towards supporting colorblind ideology; however, many acknowledged that their children and many children within this generation do not consider race. They attribute this as a positive outcome of the Civil Rights Movement.

Despite their view that their children don't see race, the parents very clearly discussed their own challenges with race and racism. Many attributed their discomfort and suspicion of whites to their own generation's experiences during the Civil Rights Movement and its aftermath.

As the parents discussed the various reasons for wanting to leave Harte, the issue of classroom management was a common topic. They attributed some of the issues with poor classroom management to white teachers' inability to effectively manage black children. Some cited racism and a lack of caring, while others believed these teachers had greater pressure on them to not appear racially motivated. In either case, the end result was classrooms in chaos and children not learning. None of these parents wanted their children to be casualties in these types of circumstances and they were constantly on guard for both overt and covert racism within their children's schools.

However, I believe that the root cause of many of the discipline problems being experienced at Harte is the fact that many of the white teachers may support colorblind ideology, but approach it from the foundation of their own white norms and values, which seek the assimilation, and not necessarily integration, of black culture. In their attempts to be colorblind, these teachers negatively interpret racial and cultural differences among black students with different norms and values. Even further, they fail to effectively address real discipline problems among black students for fear of appearing racist. The end result is poor academic standards and pervasive discipline problems in the classroom that prevent effective learning.

One challenge in the integration effort that I have observed is the rejection by whites of any attempt by blacks, regardless of whether they are school administrators, faculty members or parents, to take a race-conscious position. Blacks with any race-conscious agenda are undoubtedly viewed as racist by whites who primarily subscribe to the colorblind ideology. As I found in my study, the parents believed that sometimes it is necessary to take race into account

when trying to create an environment that meets the needs of their children. The danger in colorblindness is that it ignores the diversity of people in an integrated setting and perpetuates attitudes and behaviors that reinforce racial inequality instead of the so-called desired utopian society it is supposed to support.

However, one very interesting point is that while the parents within this study did not verbally convey personal support of colorblind ideology, because of their assimilation tactics, they often become unintentional proponents of some of its views as they fall into the position of accepting middle-class white norms and values. In doing so, they seek out schools with less poor black student enrollment and more white student enrollment.

Impact of Personal Experiences

In terms of their own experiences with racism in education and how it influenced their attitudes, I found that Critical Race Theory helps expose the tension between the parents' liberal tendencies for goals such as racially diverse schools, and their organic analysis of racism, which is grounded in their own personal experiences. As the parents conducted their own race analysis regarding their school choice, four general critiques were made.

First, the parents at Harte reported that certain comments and actions by some of the white teachers, particularly in the middle-school, revealed racism. They felt these comments from teachers exposed their mistrust of black students. There was a perception that these teachers were stereotyping the black students as having deviant tendencies, and made blanket generalization regarding their ability to academically excel.

Secondly, some of the parents expressed concern with the effect a majority white faculty, without a reasonable number of black role models in lead teaching positions, would

have on their children. This was the general position of many of the study participants regardless of which school their children attended; however, the concern was most pronounced at St. Andrews where the parents felt there was a lack of black teachers who could identify with the specific needs of black children and relate to them culturally. This was also the perspective of Harte parents regarding the school's upper grade faculty.

While the parents believed in the benefits of integrated schools, both in terms of student and faculty populations, they wanted to see their children around more black teachers and authority figures rather than only black employees working in custodial or para-professional positions. This desire for more racial balance in the faculty demonstrates that the parents were not colorblind and recognized racial needs in the education of their children.

In the case of Alice Harte, the parents felt like the white teachers lowered their standards for black students in the post-Katrina environment resulting in a negative impact on their children's ability to compete with students from other schools. They believed the lowered academic and behavioral expectations created a self-fulfilling prophesy on student success. When teachers do not effectively teach their students, whether it is related to discipline problems or simply the lowering of academic standards, students do not get the best education and cannot compete with other students as they move through high school and college.

Thirdly, they felt that their voices weren't being heard and schools were not being held accountable for doing what they were supposed to do. Many of the parents felt marginalized by the school administration at Harte in particular and stated a belief that this would not be the case for white parents in majority white schools. Interestingly, while the principal at Harte is black, the parents still had this assessment.

Finally, these parents were concerned with whether or not their children were being educated in a nurturing environment. As parents reflected on their own school experiences, they recognized the importance of being taught in a nurturing environment that gave them pride in their racial identities. They acknowledged that there were nurturing all-black schools that could help motivate and encourage black students, but these were all high schools and their concerned were for the present needs of their elementary-aged children.

Each of these critiques cause tension for these parents as they weigh their options in order to arrive at final school choice decisions. While parents from Lusher and St. Andrews expressed concerns about these racial issues, the tension was greatest among the Harte parents as they considered whether or not to keep their children at the school. While they didn't specifically reference racial diversity as a reason for initially choosing Harte, they did cite its previous reputation as a good school and they recognized that it had been more diverse with a greater percentage of white students in the past.

However, their attempt at a securing a racially diverse public school once again slipped out of their grasp as the school experienced the tipping point after Katrina. Their experience resembled that of many black families following the Civil Rights Movement. As schools were racially integrated and blacks started to enroll, white families transferred to schools that were out of the black families' reach – private schools and majority white schools in distant suburbs. As they moved away, the schools were left to the black student population. As the schools then tipped economically to more poor than middle-class, the more affluent blacks followed whites in search of more racial integration. Then white flight begins again and the cycle continues.

Black parents at Harte, who believed in the benefits of an integrated school, found that their ideal had yet again escaped and they were now faced with the decision about whether they should pursue yet another predominantly white school that had a better reputation or try to stay and fight to make Harte a model school – regardless of the racial composition.

Conclusion

Through this case study I assessed the elementary school choice decision-making process of black middle-class families living in the Algiers community of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. In addition I explored parents' perceived responsibility to the poorer black community that make up the majority of the student population within New Orleans public schools.

Of the nine categories that emerged in the study – academic standards, community school/proximity, diversity, qualified teachers, safe schools and effective discipline, parental involvement, Catholic tradition, and accountability – some were found to have greater weight in the selection process than others.

Despite what parent's identified as their ideal, when it came to making decisions, other criteria sometimes had greater weight. As important as diversity seemed to be for parents like Matilda, other issues ultimately proved more influential. For example, Matilda was willing to forgo diversity in order to have her child in a private school in close proximity to her home. The prevailing factor was not whether a particular public school was more diverse, or offered more academic rigor, but rather that it was a public school and all public schools were generally perceived negatively.

I did not find the parents' school choices were based on any sense of social responsibility, but rather on their personal interest for their own children. As one parent put it, "The problem is you got one time to educate your kid right. You try to think about the entire society, but you know you can't lose your kid in the shuffle."

For these parents, the tension was not between their responsibility to their children weighed against their responsibility to the larger black community, but rather between idealized views of integrated and racially diverse schools weighed against their own race consciousness. For example, Matilda talked of her child playing with white kids in the neighborhood and going over for sleepovers. She recognized this as a good thing but could not help but wonder if the dynamics would change as her son got older. This discomfort is directly tied to her experiences as a child, in which there was little if any interaction with white children. Peggy on the other hand did have friendly relationships with white children as she grew up; however, she indicated her white friends eventually began to alienate her as they got older and became more conscious of the racial differences.

As middle-class blacks working in various professional positions, these parents are fully aware of the skills their children will need in order to succeed – skills that may make the difference between their children attaining the American dream, or continuing to languish in mediocrity. These parents recognize that times are changing, and they are willing to act in less race-conscious ways, forgoing certain ideal qualities, in order to give their children the best options available within their means.

While all of the parents used bounded choice sets to conduct their school research, it was not a quantitatively rational process in which they discerned and ranked the qualities that were important to them and then set out to find a school that objectively matched these criteria. Instead they used the school's reputation as the primary research strategy in the creation of their choice sets. In addition, for those who were open to including public schools in their choice sets, they leaned toward finding an integrated school with the assumption that

they offered better resources and opportunities than predominantly black schools. This assessment was based on their past experience that all-black public schools had fewer resources and were less academically challenging.

For those parents who were unable to enroll their children in one of the limited number of racially diverse public schools, they expanded their search to include private schools. As these middle-class black parents excluded predominantly black public schools from their choice sets, some of which with exceptional academic standing, they increased the probability that the city's poor black students would remain segregated from white and middle-class black America.

Once again, due to this dynamic, the desegregation goal of the Civil Rights Movement remains unattained and leaves one questioning whether separate continues to remain unequal. As a result, I agree with Bell (1980) that national focus should be on educational effectiveness and not necessarily desegregation alone; and on inclusion and not just diverse representation. While some families may choose integrated schools, others may choose all-black schools that have created a culture of Afrocentric learning that provides the necessary tools for students to compete in society. We can find examples of both integrated schools and nonintegrated schools in both private and public institutions that produce students who are well prepared to lead productive lives.

While I am in favor of the current NAACP strategy of voluntary school integration, which has the potential of bringing the strengths of all races and cultures into one learning environment, I also support the creation of model black schools. Ultimately, we must allow for

a diversity of strategies to promote inclusive integration whereby differences are valued and appreciated, but also leveraged for the success of all students.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this research was focused primarily on the choice process and perceptions of responsibility of middle-class black families, there are numerous areas that warrant further research. Similar qualitative research on the perspectives of poor and working-class black families regarding school choice options, as well as the perspectives of the white community, may provide a more complete assessment of the challenges facing public schools in post-Katrina New Orleans.

While there has been a great deal of research into the benefits of effective parental involvement on student performance and school discipline, further research into the obstacles that prevent or limit parent involvement would help school strategize more effective solutions.

As New Orleans continues to reform its public school system through the expansion of charter schools, greater focus needs to be placed on the impact of the various types of charters on those residents living in the school communities and neighborhoods. It would be interesting to actually assess the demographics of the Type IV selective admission charters to determine if they are providing better educational opportunities in their communities or adding yet another layer of exclusion for poor and working-class blacks in their attempt to access quality public education.

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Appendix A
LETTER OF CONSENT FOR PARENTS

Dear _____:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Rachel Luft in the Department of Sociology/College of Liberal Arts at the University of New Orleans. I am conducting a research study to explore the decision-making process of African American parents as it relates to school choice. In this post-Katrina environment of public school privatization, public charter schools add an additional dimension to school choice. I will examine the different ways African American parents perceive their personal choices for their children.

I am requesting your participation, which will involve a focus group session lasting approximately 90 minutes, with approximately 3 other participants. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used.

Although there may be no direct benefit to you, the possible benefit of your participation is greater understanding of your school choice.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at (504) 343-3432 or Dr. Rachel Luft at (504) 280-6301.

Sincerely,

Alan Delery

By signing below you are giving consent to participate in the above study.

_____   _____   _____
Signature   Printed Name   Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, please contact Dr. Ann O'Hanlon at the University of New Orleans (504) 280-3990.

Appendix B

*University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research
University of New Orleans*

Campus Correspondence

Principal Investigator: Rachel Luft

Co-Investigator: Alan Delery

Date: December 3, 2009

Protocol Title: "Rethinking public education: Parental choice in a post-Katrina education environment"

IRB#:   24Dec09

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures described in this protocol application are exempt from federal regulations under 45 CFR 46.101 category 2 due to fact that any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation. However, we also recommend addressing confidentiality issues at the beginning of the focus group meeting. There are limits to the confidentiality because other focus group members may reveal information. Some investigators ask focus group participants to sign a confidentiality statement, however, this is not a requirement for your study because the nature of the topic indicates that risks are minimal.

Please correct the contact number for Ann O'Hanlon on your consent forms. The correct number is 504-280-3990.

Exempt protocols do not have an expiration date; however, if there are any changes made to this protocol that may cause it to be no longer exempt from CFR 46, the IRB requires another standard application from the investigator(s) which should provide the same information that is in this application with changes that may have changed the exempt status.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best wishes on your project.
Sincerely,

Robert D. Laird, Chair
UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

Vita

The author was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. He obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in Criminal Justice from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, in 1988 and then attended Rhema Bible Training Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Upon returning to New Orleans in 1993, he worked as an Eligibility Determinations Examiner for the Department of Social Services and then moved to the Department of Youth Services, where he worked as a juvenile probation officer. In 1999, he joined New Orleans Public Schools and worked in numerous areas including Safe and Drug Free Schools, Louisiana State Improvement Grant and Positive Behavior Support. Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, he joined the Algiers Charter Schools Association as the Positive Behavior Support coordinator. He recently was named the Manager of Student Support Services for ACSA.

He joined the graduate studies program at the University of New Orleans in 2004 to pursue a master's degree in sociology.