SOMETIMES IT TAKES A SCHOOL TO RAISE THE VILLAGE: STAKEHOLDERS' STUDENT ASSIGNMENT PERSPECTIVES IN A SHIFTING POLICY LANDSCAPE

by

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(Under the Direction of JoBeth Allen)

ABSTRACT

This study examined the discourses used by stakeholders, including parents, teachers, school administrators, and district leaders as they described their perspectives on and experiences with issues related to student assignment policy including school closures, school choice options, and parent engagement. This qualitative interview study of parents', teachers', administrators', and district stakeholders' perspectives on student assignment policy impacts in a district with a recent unitary status declaration used Foucault's (1978, 1984, 1990) notions of power and discourse as lenses for examining neoliberal discourses used by participants. It sheds light on what is known about the experiences and perspectives of these insiders, with the goal of enhancing community involvement, and ultimately, educational experiences and opportunities, in both student assignment policy planning in the aftermath of unitary status declarations.

INDEX WORDS: Education Policy; Neoliberalism; Discourse; Power; School Closures; Student Assignment Policy; Parent Involvement; Foucault; Unitary Status; Desegregation; Neighborhood Schools; Critical Race Theory

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Jason. Without his love and encouragement, I would never have had the courage and endurance to begin this journey, let alone finish it.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> When it comes to education, most of the parents of the children I know don't buy their affirmation cheaply… they recognize the outer limits of the opportunities that this society is giving to their children. They also know the limits of the opportunities that *they* can offer to their children; and they know these aren't the same as what another class of people in another section of the city are providing for their children. So they look at their sons and daughters with this secret piece of knowledge. They know how destinies are formed out of particulars. (Kozol, 2000, p. 4)
>
> "Everybody knows the saying "It takes a village to raise a child," but it also takes a school like ours to raise this village." – Springfield Primary School parent

Some of the "particulars" that form children's "destinies" can be found in our nation's public schools. Since the historic 1954 *Brown* decision, the establishment of public schools that provide all students with equal educational opportunities has been one of the ideals upon which the United States has defined itself as the "land of opportunity." In order to establish more equitable schools for students of all races and backgrounds, courts placed desegregation mandates on school districts that frequently included busing Black students to White suburban schools. And though it has been over a half-century since the Supreme Court declared segregated schools unconstitutional, public schools across the nation continue to face palpable segregation and disheartening inequalities. Indeed,

these are some of the "particulars" that have shaped the destinies of our nation's children in devastating ways.

The problem of segregated, unequal schools has only worsened in recent years: "The children in United States schools are much poorer than they were decades ago and more separated in highly unequal schools" (Orfield & Lee, 2007, p. 5). Black and Latino students are far more likely to be poor, and far more likely to attend socioeconomically isolated schools. Though the reasons for the persistent inequalities in the form of racial and socioeconomic isolation are varied, and have been impacted by phenomena such as rising residential segregation patterns and rising, the most culpable villain in the fight to create equitable schools has been the court system and the policy landscapes that surrounds them (Chemerinsky, 2005).

Though in many respects the spirit and purpose of *Brown* was never realized, over the last two decades courts have been granting unitary status, freeing schools from any mandates to implement desegregation plans. The beginnings of the acceleration of this trend can be found in key Supreme Court cases including the *Dowell* (1991) and *Freeman* (1992), which directed courts to end desegregation mandates (Welner, 2009). In order to gain unitary status, school districts do not need to demonstrate that they have achieved fully-integrated schools, but rather they can "point to their good faith efforts and contend that their current segregation [is] de facto… therefore sufficiently attenuated from past wrongdoing that it should not be considered a vestige of the former dual system" (Welner, 2009, p. 53). Many districts have returned to neighborhood schools following their attainment of unitary status. This trend has been a major contributor to the rapid resegregation of our nation's public schools.

School districts with assignment policies that are based on neighborhood zones determine which schools students attend based on the neighborhood in which they live. For a number of reasons, neighborhood schools are popular among citizens from both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. Moreover, neighborhood schools are politically convenient because they free policymakers from community pressure to devise student assignment plans in accordance with recent federal guidelines that restrict the use of individual students' race in desegregation plans (*PICS*, 2007). However, since residential segregation is ubiquitous, neighborhood schools tend to be racially and socioeconomically homogeneous, and pose a major obstacle to achieving either or both of the promises of *Brown* – that is, (1) racially integrated schools, (2) equality of educational opportunities for all children (Morris, 2008). Further, how and where the lines are drawn to comprise the zones of neighborhood-zoned schools are politically influenced.

There have been efforts on a number of fronts to provide schools in low-income areas with added resources in order to enhance the schooling experiences of children and families. For example, in order to counterbalance some of the punishing impacts of neighborhood schools in high-poverty, high-minority schools, compensatory programs are often put in place that offer a wide range of social and public services to support local families (Smrekar & Goldring, 2009). Researchers have found that these programs have not been effective in either supporting student learning or combating the long-term obstacles families in poverty face: "The penetrating and punishing effects of neighborhood poverty overwhelm these efforts… concentrated poverty leads to concentrated disadvantage in the social and geographical space shared between high-risk

neighborhoods and near-by schools" (p. 189). Compensatory programs have had negligible impacts because they do not address the underlying societal and structural injustices that leave non-white, non-middle-class students with disadvantaged educational opportunities. Berliner (2005) refers to this phenomenon as ignoring the 600 pound gorilla in the room:

> School reform, as opposed to other things we might do to improve achievement, really involves relatively little money and, perhaps more importantly, asks practically nothing of the non-poor, who often control society's resources… school reform is accompanied by the good feelings that come from our collective expression of faith in the capacity of the poor to overcome disadvantage on their own. Our myth of individualism fuels the school reform locomotive. (p. 7)

Indeed, we cannot fix schools without taking a look at societal injustices.

Besides compensatory programs such as Nashville's Enhanced-Option schools, other measures have been put in place in districts nationwide to "level the playing field," for students and families impacted by poverty by aiming to more equitably balance student populations. These measures usually take shape via one of four major strategies: attendance zone revisions, racial diversity transfers, socioeconomic status (SES) transfers, and magnet schools (Holley-Walker, 2010). Three of the four of these methods, all but the attendance zone revisions, have a tendency to rely on neoliberal discourses of choice and market-driven competition to accomplish the goal of high-quality, diverse schools (Mora & Christianakis, 2011).

To combat the worsening trend of isolated, inequitable neighborhood schools in districts with unitary status declarations, bold and innovative policy measures must be

taken that acknowledge the social and political contexts in which schools are located, and provide spaces for stakeholder engagement in the policymaking process. As Frankenberg (2007) explained, "educators must collaborate with officials in housing, regional planners and others in an effort to mitigate the well-established detrimental effects of racial and class stratification in American society" (p. 35). Therefore, there is a critical need to examine stakeholders' perspectives on the impact of student assignment strategies in post-unitary environments in order to move us closer to fulfilling both promises of the *Brown* decision.

Context of the Problem

The effects of a return to neighborhood schools in unitary school districts have been well-researched (E. Goldring, Cohen-Vogel, Smrekar, & Taylor, 2006; Holley-Walker, 2010; R. A. Mickelson, Smith, S. S., & Southworth, S., 2009). The school districts in Charlottte-Mecklenburg and Nashville provide two disconcerting examples of the unfavorable consequences a post-unitary return to neighborhood schools can mean, particularly for non-White, non-middle-class students and families.

Mickelson, Smith, and Southworth (2009) examined the resegregation of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), along with the ramifications resegregation has had on student achievement. For decades, CMS had one of the most successful school integration plans in the nation. The 1971 *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* case allowed for the use of busing and racial balancing in desegregation efforts.

When CMS was granted unitary status in the late 1990s, proponents of desegregation appealed the decision to the Supreme Court. The high court refused to

review the decision, and in 2002 CMS implemented a race-neutral student assignment policy that privileged neighborhood schools, causing overwhelming resegregation and damaging impacts on the performance of working-class and poor students. Simply, "since 2002, the school system has not been successful in educating children who attend schools characterized by high levels of concentrated poverty… and the students who attend schools with concentrated poverty are overwhelmingly low-income students of color" (R. A. Mickelson, 2005, pp. 151-152).

One of the most important lessons to be learned from the research conducted in CMS is that school-wide levels of poverty, as measured by the percentage of students who receive free or reduced-price lunch, has a direct negative correlation with the achievement of individual students. In other words, "controlling for students' own race and SES, those who attend a low-poverty school do better in math and reading than their peers of similar racial and SES backgrounds attending either a moderate- or high-poverty school" (p. 146). Therefore, students impacted by poverty who attended socioeconomically and racially balanced schools achieved higher on performance measures than their peers who attended socioeconomically- and racially-isolated schools.

The Metropolitan Nashville School District obtained unitary status in 1998 (E. Goldring, et al., 2006). Between the years 1971 and 1998, Nashville utilized cross-town busing that coupled urban Black schools with suburban area White schools. Once unitary, however, the bussing ended and was replaced with a student assignment plan that included neighborhood clusters designed to reduce the distance between students' homes and schools, along with other measures.

In Nashville, as a way to counteract the known challenges students and families from high-poverty neighborhoods face, a number of "Enhanced Option" schools were developed, with smaller class sizes, and offering a range of social, medical, and psychological services not offered at other schools. Smrekar and Goldring (2009) studied of educators' perspectives in two of Nashville's post-unitary high-risk neighborhood "Enhanced Option" schools. They found that neighborhood indeed played a powerful role on the educational experiences of students, teachers, and families in high-needs schools. And although Enhanced Option schools offered more support to students and families, Smrekar and Goldring (2009) emphasized the importance of social capital and social networks in determining the overall health of a neighborhood. They urged policymakers and leaders to consider expanding social and economic opportunities to families "who are locked in neighborhoods of corrosive, concentrated poverty" (p.190), maintaining that school inequalities cannot be ameliorated without attention to other structural inequalities such as housing and healthcare. As Berliner (2005) stated: "Although the power of schools and educators to influence individual students is never to be underestimated, the out-of-school factors associated with poverty play both a powerful and a limiting role in what can actually be achieved" (p. 2).

While Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Nashville are two examples of the potential adverse impacts of a post-unitary return to neighborhood schools, not all districts have taken that route after obtaining unitary status. Holley-Walker (2010) examined the post-unitary strategies of Southern school districts, and identified four major methods of student assignment policy development: attendance zones, racial diversity transfers, socioeconomic status transfers, and magnet schools. The school districts in Seminole

County, Florida and Lafayette Parrish, Louisiana provide examples of alternative student assignment plans crafted after unitary status declarations.

Seminole County, Florida was granted unitary status in 2006 and has avoided resegregation by implementing a student assignment plan that combines strategically created attendance zones with transfer options that maximize socioeconomic diversity, as well as a select number of magnet schools (Holley-Walker, 2010). Following their unitary status declaration, policymakers and school district leaders in Seminole County, crafted their Excellence and Equity Policy in order to "minimize overcrowding conditions, [and] promote and maintain a diverse student enrollment consistent with Constitutional requirements" (p. 336). Further, the policy's definition of diversity encompasses socioeconomic status, gender, race/ethnicity, English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and disability. Though not exclusively a neighborhood-zoned school district, the attendance zones were developed to "reflect the diversity of the community" (p. 900), and maintain an alignment between the percentage of students receiving free/reduced-priced lunch at a particular school with the percentage of students receiving free/reduced-priced lunch in the district.

Louisiana's Lafayette Parish provides another example of a school district strategically developing school attendance zones in ways that promote diversity (Holley-Walker, 2010). In Lafayette Parish, students are required to attend the school in their neighborhood's attendance zone. Additionally, Lafayette Parish contains a number of magnet schools that privilege low-income, low-performing students in order "to give students a more exciting and fulfilling educational experience and improve the ethnic diversity of the schools" (Holley-Walker, 2010, p. 336). Lafayette Parish, Louisiana and

Seminole County, Florida are two districts that have found ways to minimize socioeconomic and racial isolation in schools while still complying with the requirements of the 2007 *Parents Involved in Community Schools* decision, and incorporating the use of neighborhood schools to some degree. They recognized the essential importance of diversity in schools as a way to improve the educational experiences and achievement of all students (Chambers, 2008).

The process of designing and implementing student assignment policy is, no doubt, a complex matter. Diem (2010) studied the interaction between the design and implementation of three different integration plans that relied on voluntary choice and socioeconomic status (SES), and examined how the local and sociopolitical contexts of each site influenced school-level diversity outcomes. Though Diem's focus was on school districts' voluntary integration plans, her work is relevant to my study because it sheds light on policy planning and implementation processes, and captures the complexities of the transactions between the design, context, and implementation of student assignment plans.

The potentially dangerous repercussions that result from a return to neighborhood schools in districts that have unitary status was well-documented in Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Nashville. Fortunately, there are other unitary districts such as Seminole County, Florida and Lafayette Parrish, Louisianna that have taken other policy routes to avoid the perils of neighborhood school and have had hopeful outcomes. Additionally, Diem and others (Diem, 2010; Holley-Walker, 2010; Phillips, 2009) have researched the planning process that districts undergo in the aftermath of a unitary status declaration with an eye on the policy development and implementation. There are

studies that shed light on the perspectives of educators and other school personnel in post-unitary, newly-developed student assignment policies such as Nashville. However, little is known about the perspectives of parents, teachers, and school and district-level leaders who are affected by the student assignment policy decisions that come at the heels of unitary status declarations.

Purpose and Rationale of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders - including parents, teachers, school-level administrators, and district-level leaders - about the impacts of varied student assignment strategies in their post-unitary school district. This study is significant because we need to know more about the perspectives of these insiders in order to enhance community involvement in both policy decisions and school decisions in the aftermath of unitary status declarations.

Over the course of the last three years, I have reviewed much of the research on the impacts of unitary status declarations on large urban school districts. By and large, in these cases a return to neighborhood schools, or at least an abandonment of controlled choice or other desegregation plans follows. Holley-Walker (2010) examined the post-unitary strategies of Southern school districts, and identified four major methods of student assignment policy development: attendance zones, racial diversity transfers, socioeconomic status transfers, and magnet schools. Much of the reading and research I have done prior to work on my dissertation posited racial integration as an excellent policy objective that was in the best interests, both academically and socially, of both White and non-White students. Moreover, based on readings and reflection I asserted that the inverse was also true, that racially and socioeconomically isolated schools were

universally detrimental to all students and that policy should be crafted to eliminate them at all costs.

In 2010, Morgan County Public Schools (MCPS), among the largest school district in the nation, obtained unitary status as well as a Technical Assistance (TASAP) grant from the U.S. Department of Education to facilitate stakeholder engagement in the design of a student assignment plan Agreement. Part of the TASAP grant was the proposed closure of seven predominantly Black, small urban schools. Though the closures were touted as cost-saving measures, the community outcry against them was so strong that the Board of Education finally agreed to keep them open for at least the next five years. In the meantime, the School Board decided to postpone the creation and implementation of a new pupil assignment plan.

If MCPS had closed those seven predominantly Black, urban schools, the students who attended them would have been bused to larger, more cost-efficient, suburban schools. If this had happened, Morgan County would have emulated the widespread, and well-researched, paradigm that touts integrated, heterogeneous schools as universally favorable for all students. Community agency kept the schools open.

As education budgets continue to shrink, and increasing costs trickle down from state to local levels, a discourse of economic efficiency permeates our conversations on education reform. Currently, the Chicago Public School system has made national headlines with its most recent round of proposed school closures, which will impact more than 2,600 students. In that school system, Black students make up 72% of the total student population, however, 93% of the students who have been affected by school closures since 2008 have been Black (Duke, 2013).

The purpose of my study is to understand the perspectives of stakeholders at this critical juncture, i.e. parents, teachers, school administrators, and district leaders who were so supportive of their schools, in order to better understand these largely unrepresented viewpoints in the discourse on student assignment policy. As a teacher and researcher, I want to understand these perspectives because they add complexity to what I was previously certain of – that when it came to student assignment, diversity as a policy objective was in the best interest, both academically and socially, of all students.

My rationale for conducting this inquiry relates directly back to my experiences teaching first and second grades in an urban southern school district. While I was teaching, the district underwent a dramatic student assignment policy shift, ending more than a decade of a failed Controlled Choice plan in favor of neighborhood-zoned schools. School district leaders touted the policy shift as tremendous cost-saving measures. However, as a teacher in a school that stood to become even more racially and socioeconomically isolated than it already was, I was concerned about what neighborhood-zoned schools would mean for not only the students in my class, but also in my community as a whole.

The fact that MCPS is currently a "no man's land" regarding their student assignment policy made them the ideal site for this study. In nearby southern school districts such as Nashville, Louisville, Charlotte, and Tampa, comprehensive pupil assignment strategies were put in place following their unitary status declarations, consistent with articulated policy objectives. On the other hand, MCPS has remained in a policy stasis of piecemeal strategies since obtaining unitary status. For this reason, I suggest that MCPS is currently at a critical point. During the data collection for this research, district officials reported

that their student assignment policies would be revised in the next few years. My study aims to give voice to those who have been left largely out of the conversation about how to ensure the equity of education for all students, which is as much as part of *Brown* as the elimination of legalized segregation.

Research Questions

My study will begin to fill the void in what we know about the perspectives of parents, teachers, and school- and district-level stakeholders on student assignment policies that impact them in school districts with recent unitary status declarations. Specifically, I plan to investigate the following research questions:

- How do stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and school and district leaders, describe their perspectives on student assignment policy issues within the context of school closure considerations? What are the discourses that inform their perspectives?
- What qualities of schools and school experiences related to student assignment policy do stakeholders describe as most important to them?
- How do stakeholders in a school district that has recently been declared unitary describe the initial school- and community-level effects of the student assignment strategies impacting them?

By examining the perspectives of parents, teachers, school administrators, and district leaders on how issues related to student assignment policy impact their community and their own lives, my study has the potential to provide lessons learned about how student assignment policies are understood by those who are most closely

affected by them, as well as implications and recommendations for future student assignment policy planning discussions.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation follows a traditional, five-chapter format. In chapter two, I will review relevant literature and describe my theoretical frame. My study's theoretical framework draws on Foucault's notions of discourse and power as essential tools for deconstructing how stakeholders describe their experiences and perspectives on issues related to student assignment policy, including school closures, choice options, and parent and community involvement. The literature review contextualizes the study by reviewing key court cases that directly impact the current student assignment policy environment. Additionally, I review important research on family engagement to understand its impacts on school culture and student learning.

The third chapter describes the methodology of the study, including data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter four presents my findings, which are organized into three themes. In chapter four, I will directly address my research questions by presenting a summary of the findings. I present the findings via three themes, which I state as values, then show the disconnections between those values and policies and practices. In this section I will draw upon the underpinnings of my theoretical frame to discuss each category, as well as the relationship of these findings to previous research reviewed in the second chapter. In the fifth and final chapter, I will summarize my findings, provide policy recommendations, and discuss implications for future research.

CHAPTER 2:

THEORETICAL FRAME AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Issues concerning school choice, school closures, and student assignment policies have been among the most hotly contested in recent years because they cause us to consider what our priorities are for public education, and how we believe schools should be reformed to best meet the needs of students. Individuals' perspectives on these issues are often informed by their own sociopolitical vantage points, which have been shaped by their own experiences and beliefs. Tensions arise when what we, as a nation, and as individuals, say we believe and what we are willing to do don't match up. Jennifer Hochschild (2001) explained:

> Most Americans believe that everyone has the right to pursue success but that only some deserve to win, based on their talents, energy, or ambition. The American dream is egalitarian at the starting point in the "race of life" but not at the end… one generation's finish is the next generation's start. (p. 37)

These tensions are only exacerbated when political and financial costs take priority over opportunity costs, particularly for non-White, non-middle-class children and families.

In the following chapter, I outline my theoretical and ideological frameworks in order to situate my analysis of previous research, as well as the data collected in this study, within my own sociopolitical and theoretical perspectives. My theoretical framework, which is nested in Michel Foucault's (1978) notions of discourse and power,

builds on the work of scholars such as Stephen Ball (2003) and Jean Anyon (2006; 2006) in applying critical frameworks to their research on school choice and education policy. Next, I provide a brief overview of neoliberalism as a sociopolitical and economic framework, in order to contextualize the perspectives described by stakeholders on the student assignment and school choice issues .

After presenting my theoretical and ideological frameworks, I review key issues and events in our national landscape that shaped, and were shaped by, student assignment policies and legislation over the last sixty years. I analyze the role of a select number of Supreme Court decisions on influencing the current policy landscape. Next, I review the research on what has happened when school districts have returned to neighborhood-zoned assignment policies after unitary status declarations.

Since my study gives voice to the perspectives of stakeholders impacted in some way by student assignment policy, it was important for me to situate the sociopolitical contexts of my study by providing an overview of the current student assignment policy landscape. I review the literature on the impact of student assignment policies in key districts with unitary status declarations. These cases highlight the need to further examine the perspectives of school, family, and community members in post-unitary environments in order to enhance community involvement and educational opportunities for all students in both policy- and school-level decisions.

Four overarching assumptions about the role of public schools guide my inquiry. First, I believe that government has a responsibility to ensure public schools provide the best education possible to all students (Braddock, 2009, pp. 151-152). Though schools may vary widely on a number of measures, they must be consistent in their abilities to

furnish equal educational opportunities to all, with the larger goal of reducing the structural hierarchies and constraints that exist because of racial and class-based inequalities (Powell, 2005). Second, I understood that the *PICS* decision has made the design and implementation of student assignment plans increasingly complicated (Munter, 2008). School districts must be deliberate in crafting desegregation plans that can stand up to *PICS*, with especially keen attention to diversity policies. As ruled by the Supreme Court, school integration is no longer a simple Black-White issue: "the Court has signaled that school boards must describe the particular harms they seek to avoid, using research – and not the district's demographics – to identify when racial isolation occurs" (Chambers, 2008, p. 2).

Third, public schools today are more racially and socioeconomically isolated than they were in 1954 when the *Brown* decision was made (Kahlenberg, 2009; S. F. Reardon, & Yun, J.T., 2005). There is inarguable evidence that these segregated, or resegregated, schools are far from equal compared to their suburban counterparts: "the growing concentration of low-performing and poor children in racially isolated minority schools reminds us of a bitter historical truth: Jim Crow education is America's most spectacularly failed social experiment" (Mickelson, 2005, p. 105). This makes the need for research on the perspectives of parent, community, and school stakeholders about their views on the impacts of various student assignment policies in the post-*PICS* era even more pressing. The final assumption is that parent and/or community engagement in schools enhances student learning and educational opportunities, and that policy-makers should involve parents, families, and community leaders in policy development

and implementation (Allen, 2007; Franklin, 2005; Hero & Sidney, 2009; Marschall & Shah, 2005; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001).

These four overarching understandings provided the starting point from which I made meaning of the data via my theoretical and ideological frames. In the literature review, I examine the historical and political contexts of the current policy landscape on school integration in order to shed light on the complexities of policy design and implementation in post-unitary school districts. The research highlighted provides an overview of what is known about the potential disadvantages of neighborhood schools after decades of court-mandated integration measures. Throughout the literature review, I call attention to how neoliberal discourses shaped select court cases and research designs. Lois André- Bechely (2005) urges that "research must not lose sight of how material positions, racial privilege, and dominance still matter in our social institutions" (p. 23). This review reveals that although much is known about past negative outcomes of student assignment policies in post-unitary districts, not much is known about the perspectives of parents, school-level leaders, and community stakeholders about how these policies and their impacts are understood by those affected by them.

Theoretical and Ideological Frameworks

In order to examine the underlying discourses embedded in how stakeholders' described their experiences and perspectives on issues of school choice, school closures, and student assignment policy, I draw on the work of Michel Foucault (1969, 1978, 1984, 1990, 1995). I begin by unpacking Foucault's notions of discourse and power, and explore the work of select researchers who have taken similar theoretical stances in education policy research (Ball, 2003; Reay, 2001, 2008b). Another arm of the

theoretical frameworks I draw from in this study is critical race theory (CRT). I bring in CRT because I would argue that any inquiry into perspectives around student assignment policies should name the racist practices that have shaped our national history and identity. Choice discourses that characterized the Civil Rights desegregation policies in the 1960's have been taken up by neoliberals to undermine social support systems such as public schools. These theoretical lenses helped uncover the neoliberal discourses used by some participants.

Since my inquiry seeks to describe the perspectives of parents and community members and/or school-level leaders on issues related to school choice, school closures, and student assignment policies, examining social, historical, cultural, and political context is crucial for determining "how power shapes those constructs and processes that in turn inform how we understand what is, what should be, and what is possible" (Dumas & Anyon, 2006, p. 151). To that end, I examine neoliberalism to shed light on some of the larger contexts situated within the discursive practices of the stakeholders in this study. I provide an overview of neoliberalism as a political and economic ideology, and explore its implications in education and education policy.

Discourse and Power

Discourse is a body of ideas, concepts, or beliefs that have become established as knowledge, as an accepted way of looking at the world (Doherty, 2006). As central component of the work of post-structural thinker Michel Foucault, he explained, "The term discourse can be defined as the group of statements that belong to a system of formation; thus I shall be able to speak of clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse" (Foucault, 1969, p. 121).

Individuals use discourse to construct their social world. Discourse "does not just refer to the 'texts' of conversation and their production alone, but also the active ways in which people attend to, name and interpret their own and others' doings in relationship to them" (Griffith & Smith, 2004, p. 40). Foucault's notion of discourse is akin to the concept of ideology, which can be thought of as a "coherent system of ideas shared by a particular group [in an attempt to] establish and maintain the normalization, the naturalization, of the values, assumptions and prescriptions for action shred by its adherents and sponsors" (Doherty, 2006, p. 194).

Foucault was interested in how certain statements, or "truth claims," as opposed to others emerged, operated, and came to comprise discursive systems (Foucault, 1969). Truths do not exist outside of discourse: "We understand, speak, learn, and think within a certain discourse, and this discourse dictates what truths we will uncover; this is our 'will to truth'… these truths do not exist outside of the discourse that has constructed them" (Humphreys, 2010, p. 40).

Power is intimately linked to discourse. Foucault explained that power "is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault, 1990,p. 93). This notion of power can be perceived of as the effect of attempting to act in the world, to use discourse, and to express thoughts (Levitt, 2008). Foucault (1980) explained power as "a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised" (p. 156). In Foucault's (1990) words: "Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (p. 93.). Power operates through discourse, which "takes

words from their state as simple utterances and embodies them with effect" (Dumas & Anyon, 2006, p. 154). Power and knowledge are joined together and exist in discourse because "knowledge represents the values of those who are powerful enough to create and circulate them" (Levitt, 2008, p. 48).

Foucault argued that "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable, materiality" (Foucault, 1984, p. 109). According to Foucault, governing is possible only through "the development, harnessing, incorporation and active employment of discourse" (Doherty, 2006, p. 195). Institutions of power, such as the state or legislature, "routinely rely on the sciences and experts to examine, measure, explain, and predict populations in order to create knowledge that would make their practice more efficient" (Suspitsyna, 2012, p. 52).

Foucault (1995) described "disciplinary power," which operates invisibly over others to force "compulsory visibility" on them (p. 187). Foucault (1995) explained: "In discipline it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being always able to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection" (p. 187). Schools, and the roles they play in society, provide a multitude of examples of how power is enacted through discourse. Foucault viewed schools as institutions that subjected students to disciplinary power. He asked, "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" (Foucault, 1995, p. 228).

Policy can be thought of as a "statement of government intentions. It is purposeful, directed toward a problem, need or aspiration, specifying principles and actions designed to bring about desired goals" (Doherty, 2006, p. 198). Policy texts are formed from dominant, complimentary, persuasive, legitimating, contrasting, and discordant discourses (Doherty, 2006). Since power is intricately linked to action, critical perspectives in education policy implementation encourage actors to see beyond what happens in courtrooms and board meetings, and to engage people through various media to highlight the connections between education policies and their everyday lives.

Stephen Ball (1994) was one of the first to apply Foucault's theory of discourse to his research on parents' school choice practices in the U.K. Ball argued that "educational sites are not only subject to discourse but are also centrally involved in the propagation and the selective dissemination of discourses, controlling access of individuals to various kinds of discourse" (Andre-Bechely, 2005, p. 15).

For this study, I am interested in the discourses used by participants to describe their perspectives on school choice, school closings, and student assignment policies. Examining these discourses, embedded in multiple stakeholders' perspectives, allowed me to uncover what Foucault termed "regimes of truth… the types of discourse which [society] accepts and makes function as true… the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). There are many examples of how "regimes of truth play out in education policy implementation, but social conditions persist (and resist policy and other efforts to change them) when people are convinced that present economic exploitation is a natural, unavoidable fact, rather than a product of

history" (Dumas & Anyon, 2006, p. 153). This helped me deconstruct the possible underlying aims and objectives embedded in their experiences and perspectives.

Foucault (1990) asserted, "We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance, and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; reinforces it; but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (p. 101)

These theoretical understandings allowed me the opportunity to see how power is used by schools and school districts to impose "compulsory visibility" (Foucault, 1995), in the form of test scores, on students, and that these are leveraged in ways that privilege some over others.

In analyzing the data from interviews with parents, teachers, administrators, and school district leaders, I found that neoliberal discourses played a lead role in how these stakeholders constructed their experiences with, and perspectives on, school choice, school closures, student assignment policies, and parent engagement in schools. In the following section, I provide a brief overview of critical race theory (CRT), providing another layer to my theoretical lenses. Finally, I examine neoliberalism as a political and economic ideology, describe how neoliberal principles have emerged in the discourse on educational reform, and how they apply specifically to my inquiry.

Critical Race Theory

Never accused of viewing society through 'rose-colored glasses,' critical race theory (CRT) accepts racism as a permanent, normal fixture of American life and culture: "The characterization of Black women as 'nappy-headed hos' by college basketball

players is not out of character in a society that is wholly racialized. It is also not a huge leap to see how such characterizations make their way into the White psyche" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 97). The aims of CRT scholars are first to understand the underlying societal structures that have subordinated people of color in America, and second, to dismantle the laws that privilege whites over other races (Morris, 2001; Stovall, 2013).

CRT uses storytelling as a primary means of sense-making through which the lived experiences of others can be understood. These narratives "add necessary contextual contours to the seeming 'objectivity' of positivist perspectives" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). Drawing from qualitative research traditions (Peshkin, 1988) that honor the social constructions of reality and truth, as well as Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory that honors the exchange between text and reader, CRT scholars believe that stories are the organizational structures through which individuals make meaning of often oppressive experiences.

CRT represents a pointed critique of liberalism, whose policies, according to scholars, have impeded the progress of people of color to gain equal rights (Giroux, 2005). Further, CRT argues that Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights reforms. One example of this can be found in higher education. Although 24,721 doctoral degrees were awarded in the United States in 1991 to both citizens and non-citizens, only 993 or 3.8% of them went to African American men and women (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Beyond simply excusing underperforming students of color as "at-risk," CRT calls into question the oppressive *structural* components of our schooling systems that have maintained widespread inequities. With influences from a number of

disciplines, including law, philosophy, history, and psychology, CRT is an important framework for uncovering and understanding the complex grip racism has on our society.

Neoliberalism

In his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey (2005) explained that neoliberalism grew out of embedded classical liberalism, which resulted in the sweeping economic boom of the 1950's and 1960's. As an economic ideology, liberalism has its roots in the late 19th century. Liberalism is centered on the notion that the role of government is to maintain an environment in which the market and civil society can operate and thrive (Doherty, 2006). In this form of capitalism, liberal markets operate within strong regulatory frameworks of the state. Strong regulatory structures were in place that provided for labor unions, unemployment insurance, corporate financial regulations. A liberal government assumes that citizens are responsible and socially conscious, and that given individual freedoms, will act in ways that serve the well-being of society. Foucault proposed that the materialization of "society" could be traced back to the emergence of liberalism and the establishment of the culture of government.

Obviously, individuals who could be considered among the "economic elites" gravitated toward liberal ideas in order to amass capital, regaining class power. But part of the reasons for neoliberalism's ubiquity is its flexibility to insert itself into competing economic, political, and social ideologies by utilizing discourses of freedom, individualism, and liberty.

Neoliberal sociopolitical and economic practices gained momentum in the United States in the 1960's in the post-Civil Rights era under President Nixon. Nixon's policies favored the creation of "good business climate" (Harvey, 2005, p. 47), where corporate

welfare came to be valued above people welfare. Neoliberalism's hold was only strengthened by the oil crises of the 1970's. Throughout the 1980's, President Reagan's appointments set the stage for neoliberal policies to garner momentum. Within six months in 1983, more than 40% of the National Labor Relations Board's regulations were overturned. Jobs formerly performed by unionized workers, e.g. air traffic controllers, were outsourced to southern states or internationally. Without social support systems in place, poorer citizens fell victim to crime, drug abuse, and disease (AIDS). Harvey (2005) explained that in New York City, "The victims were blamed, and Giuliani was to claim fame by taking revenge" (p. 48).

Neoliberal practices can be characterized by the absence of public critical consciousness working for social justice and equity: "Politics becomes empty as it is reduced to following orders, shaming those who make power accountable, and shutting down legitimate forms of dissent" (Giroux, 2005, p. 4). In terms of government, the state's role is solely to provide basic infrastructure and maintain civil order, not advance social policy in the interest of the common good. In other words, neoliberals believe the government should play a decreased role in economic regulation, allowing the free market to prevail – unless, of course, the welfare of the economic elites is at stake, which was the case in 2001 when President Bush approved a bailout for the airline industry (Harvey, 2005). In that case, government may be called in to intervene when it will benefit the economic elites.

Neoliberalism promotes the idea that infrastructure's purpose is capital accumulation, and therefore, leadership becomes equated with efficient management (Lipman, 2011, p. 15). As a result, social solidarity in the form of groups such as labor

unions and political parties is discouraged. Government planning and control, in forms such as social supports and market regulations, provide citizens with a false sense of freedom that are actually "a camouflage of slavery" (p. 37). This staunch individualism can be seen in all aspects of society, where ""personal responsibility" saps energy from the idea of common and communal good by lending credence to the idea that what is good for the individual must also be good for the community" (Wallis, 2007, p. 3).

Neoliberals equate freedom with free enterprise and private ownership, and concepts of freedom, choice, autonomy, and rationality are redefined in market terms (Harvey, 2005, p. 37). Therefore, the more someone owns, the more freedom he/she has, and that freedom is enacted through choice in consumption; autonomy is characterized by survival and success in the economy. Capital, in all its forms, is garnered via a process Harvey (2005) terms "accumulation by dispossession," which is based on the Marxian principle of "primitive accumulation."

Used by economic elites as distractions from the economic and social policies that neoliberal policies created, the real danger of neoliberal ideologies is that individuals become robbed of their rights to think critically about their leaders, their liberties, their lives, all to deepen the pockets of a select few. In a society governed by neoliberal practices, poor, working-, and many middle-class voices and interests go unheard because access to courts limited to those with economic means/capital. These principles embody a self-important individualism that centers notions of American supremacy, and "fosters the notion that certain groups simply have themselves to blame" (Dumas & Anyon, 2006, p. 153).

Neoliberal policies have gained much support from conservative religious groups. The anti-state/anti-government social policies favored by Christian conservatives align with anti-state/anti-government neoliberal economic policies. Neoliberal notions of meritocracy and entitlement appeal to many Americans' sense of patriotism until "the landscape and soundscape become increasingly homogenized through the spectacle of flags waving from every flower box, car, truck, and house, encouraged and supplemented by jingoistic bravado being broadcast by Fox Television News and Clear Channel radio stations" (Giroux, 2005). The result is a culture of fear based on moral absolutes that depend on an obedient citizenry. Harvey (2005) suggests that neoliberals, particularly those who situate themselves with the Christian Right, assume a false consciousness whereby their religious convictions blind them to the unjust economic practices they become subjected to.

Considering education through a neoliberal lens reframes learning as a commodity. In order to improve education, neoliberal policymakers advance the notion that schools should compete for "market share," i.e. students. The argument is that competition between schools will result in enhanced quality of all schools (Lipman, 2011; Shiller, 2011; Suspitsyna, 2012). With a pervasive "free market" discourse in our everyday lives, it is easier to imagine how to apply these principles to schools and students, without any evidence that doing so will enhance the quality of education for students.

Consistent with neoliberal discourses that equate freedom with choice in the marketplace, moralizing the very notion of choice as a fundamental right, neoliberal school reform measures also come packaged in a discourse of choice, e.g. vouchers,

charters, and magnets. With regard to education reform, both Republican and Democratic leaders share a "free-market perspective adopted from the business world that [bases] decisions on "objective data" gathered through testing and competitive ratings to weed out "bad" teachers and schools" (Bryant, 2013). All of these types of reform measures divert funding away from traditional community schools, as students and parents exercise their choices to attend these alternative types of schools.

Applying Foucault's notion of discourse to student assignment policy implementation reveals that:

> discourses normalizing property owners' right to a better education inform how power operates in shaping policy implementation. In taking as natural that those who live in communities with larger tax bases deserve a higher quality of education… state leaders fetishize education as a commodity. (Dumas & Anyon, 2006, pp. 163-164)

Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, access to these schools and programs is limited, and consistent with other neoliberal practices, tends to privilege the economic elites. Application materials and procedures, as well as lack of transportation and other resources, limit access to choice-based schools for poor and working-class families (André-Bechely, 2004). Therefore, "education and educational opportunity are commodities purchased by middle-class property owners" (Dumas & Anyon, 2006, p. 163). Ironically, neoliberal principles of freedom and choice actually work to limit the freedoms and choices of the non-elite.

Neoliberal capitalists see public education as one of the remaining un-exploited "markets" that could be exploited for capital accumulation. Overwhelmingly, these

schools are run by political and business elites, using market-driven principles of efficiency and productivity. Examples of these private management organizations include the New Century Schools Initiative (NCSI), Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), and Edison Learning. Though they are for-profit, they receive public funds.

Reformed, "choice-based" schools and districts in poor communities often focus on test prep: "In the end, poor communities do not have schools that prepare young people for much more than passing exams" (Shiller, 2011, p. 162). Bechely, 2004; Lipman, 2011; Shiller, 2011). Learning is commodified by high-stakes tests, which are created by private, for-profit corporations that aim to measure student learning. Curriculum materials designed to help students prepare for the tests are published/created by the same private for-profit corporations that created the tests themselves. Students' tests scores are commodities used in part to determine the effectiveness of teachers. Pressure to improve outcome data, i.e. tests scores, results in quality educational experiences being sacrificed for a narrowed curriculum centered on test prep (Shiller, 2011). Foucault's (1995) notion of disciplinary power, compulsory visibility, is evident here not only in the test scores themselves, but also in the algorithms, comprised mainly of test scores, that calculate grades for schools that are made public. As a result, outcome data may improve, but educational quality, as determined by other measures, suffers.

Neoliberal education reforms also impact teachers and the teaching profession in negative ways: "Neoliberalism in education is produced on the ground through the actions of teachers and parents who are recruited to, or align themselves with, education markets and privatization" (Lipman, 2011, p. 218). Alternative teacher certification programs like Teach For America serve to create a disposable workforce of educators,

and it is no coincidence that these new teachers are heavily recruited to teach in school districts with these market-based reform measures. From a neoliberal, market-centered perspective, these new inexperienced teachers are the perfect candidates for these reformed schools because they will earn smaller salaries than more experienced teachers, which helps the schools minimize expenses and maximize profitability.

In this study, I use Foucault's (1969, 1984, 1990, 1995) notions of discourse and power as the foundation of my theoretical framework for examining how stakeholders, including parents, teachers, administrators, and school district leaders use neoliberal discourses to describe their experiences and perspectives around issues concerning school choice, school closures, and student assignment policy, as well as their views on parent engagement. I also draw from critical race theory in my analysis, since its defining principles concerning how liberal policies have served to benefit Whites, who are more likely to be part of the economic elite, were described by participants.

Neoliberalism is of particular importance to this study because neoliberal economic and political practices created the under-enrollment that put the two schools that were my research sites in danger of closing to begin with. Speculative development was occurring in the surrounding areas of both Springfield Primary and Riverside Middle Schools, that was the result of widespread inner-city gentrification. Additionally, parents at Springfield that I spoke with were part of workfare programs connected to the service industry in the area.

With regard to school reform measures, stakeholders at Riverside described their school's magnet program as a means for competing with other schools for students. Consistent with neoliberal reform measures, Riverside's magnet program was accessible

only to students who met test score and achievement criteria, creating a school-within-school mentality.

At both Springfield and Riverside, like with all schools in Morgan County, learning was commodified by test scores and grades, which created an environment where schools were set up to compete for market share, i.e. students with high test scores, in order to remain financially viable within the district and avoid closure debates. Although district leaders that I spoke with claimed that the proposal to close the schools was based solely on economics, I suggest that larger neoliberal practices and ideologies created the conditions that made these small neighborhood schools unsustainable.

Literature Review

In this section, I review relevant literature in order to contextualize my study. I review key court cases that have directly impacted the current student assignment policy environment. Additionally, I review select research on family engagement in order to shed light on what is known about its impacts on school culture and student learning.

Federal Role *Brown* to *PICS*

An examination of the role of key Supreme Court decisions in impacting the current policy landscape for school integration reveals three important trends. The first trend, which began with *Miliken v. Bradley* (1974) set the stage for what is commonly known as White flight, with overwhelmingly White suburbs surrounding racially and socioeconomically diverse urban areas. The second trend was spurred by *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* (1973), the court ruling sanctioned the inequitable practice of funding public schools in large part based on local property taxes, thus accelerating the divide between the haves and have-nots with regard to educational

opportunity. The third trend in current education policy that can be traced back to key Supreme Court decisions is the shift toward unitary status declarations. In the 1990s, the decisions in *Dowell, Freeman,* and *Jenkins* provided a fertile environment for unitary status declarations to follow. All three of these trends are examples of the neoliberal political discourses that began to gain momentum in the 1970's. They illustrate the point made earlier by Dumas and Anyon (2006): "In taking as natural that those who live in communities with larger tax bases deserve a higher quality of education… state leaders fetishize education as a commodity" (p. 163).

The case of *Miliken v. Bradley* (1974) concerned Detroit-area schools, which were characterized by urban schools with mostly African American students surrounded by suburban schools with mostly white students. Though the *Swann* decision declared busing an "important tool for desegregation" (Chemerinsky, 2005, p. 34), it referred exclusively to within-district busing. Desegregating Detroit's schools effectively would require inter-district busing to and from the neighboring suburbs, which the Supreme Court found impermissible in the *Miliken* case. The significance of *Miliken* in precluding interdistrict remedies for segregated schools cannot be overstated. In fact, many believe that *Miliken*, in effect, makes school desegregation impossible given the widespread residential segregation.

Another Supreme Court decision that has contributed in significant ways to not only the resegregation of public schools nationwide, but more importantly to the funding inequities that exist between middle-class and working/poor schools is *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* (1973). Because in many states, a substantial amount of local school funding comes from property taxes, it follows sensibly that

schools located in areas with smaller tax bases would receive less funding. Therefore, the state of Texas was spending significantly less per pupil on it students in poorer schools, than its students in wealthier schools. The plaintiffs in this case charged that this disparity constituted wealth discrimination, but the Court rejected this argument, concluding that education is not a fundamental right guaranteed by the Equal Protection Clause of the Consitution (Chemerinsky, 2005). The verdict in this case validates one aspect of the neoliberal principle of what Harvey (2005) termed "accumulation by dispossession," one of the hallmarks of which is state redistribution of capital. By its decision that education was not a fundamental right under the Equal Protection Clause, the Court was, for all intents and purposes, redistributing capital away from poor and working-class families by siphoning much needed funds away from their schools.

Three Supreme Court cases in the 1990s that signaled the beginning of the unitary status trend were *Board of Education of Oklahoma City Public Schools v. Dowell* (1991), *Freeman v. Pitts* (1992), and *Missouri v. Jenkins* (1995). In all three of these cases, the Court ended their desegregation orders and granted them unitary status. Considered together, the significance of *Dowell, Freeman, and Jenkins* lie in the pressure these decisions put on lower courts to end desegregation efforts, even when the consequences would mean resegregation.

Parents Involved in Community Schools (PICS)

No review of the federal role on current student assignment plans is complete without a discussion of the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Parents Involved in Community Schools (PICS)*. The *PICS* decision combined two important cases, one in Seattle and one in Jefferson County, Kentucky, and ruled that the assignment of

individual students to a particular school based on race alone in order to achieve racial integration was not a compelling state interest. The background and specifics of the *PICS* case are significant for understanding the current political landscape, as well as for understanding what policy options still exist for designing student assignment plans that are aimed at increasing school diversity.

Since 1978, Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) had utilized a complex voluntary integration program. Despite being released from court-ordered desegregation, JCPS continued to provide balanced educational opportunities via their student assignment policy. Through various measures, the district sought to maintain Black student enrollment between fifteen and fifty percent at all non-magnet schools, allowing students to transfer schools within clusters in order to preserve this target.

Although JCPS's student assignment policies were lauded by many, they eventually came under intense scrutiny and opposition (Phillips, 2009). In 2002, Crystal Meredith tried to enroll her son Joshua McDonald in their nearby neighborhood school, even though the school was not in their cluster. The school district denied Ms. Meredith's request because Joshua's attendance at the neighborhood school would have upset the targeted racial balance. Ms. Meredith filed a lawsuit against JCPS over their use of an individuals' race in determining acceptance to schools. Combined with a similar situation in Seattle, this case was ultimately brought to the Supreme Court as *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1 (PICS)*. In 2007, the Court ruled that JCPS's efforts were unconstitutional in that they violated the constitutional guarantees of equal protection (Phillips, 2009).

In deciding the *PICS* case, the court prohibited the assignment of students to a public school in order to achieve racial balance, and failed to acknowledge that actualizing a racial balance in schools was a compelling state interest. Justice Kennedy, in his concurrence of the Court's decision, based his opinion on the principle that "a governmental determination about an individual student should not hinge on that student's race" (Welner, 2009, p. 57). The term 'individual student' is key. School districts, encouraged by Kennedy, can still devise race-conscious measures to promote diversity in schools as long as they "address the problem in a general way without treating each student in a different fashion solely on the basis of a systematic, individual typing by race" (Kennedy, as cited in Welner, 2009, p. 57). For example, school districts might consider the racial make-up of neighborhood zones, rather than individuals' races, in determining their student assignment plans. However, if these non-individualized efforts fail to achieve meaningful desegregation, districts can examine individualized measures as a last resort, but "race" needs to be one factor in a broader overall diversity plan.

In his concurring opinion, Justice Kennedy offered a number of race-conscious measures that were still permissible under *PICS* for designing student assignment policies. These permissible race-conscious methods included strategic site selection for the construction of new schools, modification of neighborhood attendance zones with attention toward balancing school enrollments, the allocation of resources for special programs, recruitment of students in a 'targeted fashion,' and the tracking of demographic and achievement statistics by race (Carey, 2007). These suggestions would

require school district leaders to be steadfast, deliberate, and dedicated to achieving integrated schools.

The Post-*PICS* Resurgence of Neighborhood Schools

In response to the *PICS* decision, the trend in school districts nationwide has been to return to neighborhood-zoned schools. Most parents favor neighborhood schools – at least in theory. In fact, polls of both Black and White parents reveal that a vast majority, more than eighty percent, desire for their children to attend schools closer to their homes, even if they are more segregated (E. Goldring, et al., 2006). Because most parents place importance on their children attending school close to home, policymakers can view a return to neighborhood schools as a win-win. Neighborhood schools are politically popular and convenient, freeing policymakers from community pressure to devise student assignment policies in accordance with the *PICS ruling*.

The national trend of the return of neighborhood-zoned schools can be understood through a neoliberal lens in that, by returning to neighborhood schools, citizens were asserting the neoliberal notion of "personal responsibility," that was is good for individuals must also be good for the community. However, within a sociopolitical perspective, the "return to neighborhood schools is embedded in widespread assumptions about the power of the neighborhood as a potential source of school improvement and school quality… many assume that neighborhood schools can drive community development and revitalization" (E. Goldring, et al., 2006, p. 359). Neighborhoods, families, and schools are assumed to be interdependent systems that harmoniously and equitably groom youngsters for success in school and beyond. However, a "school's ability to improve by leveraging community inputs and supports will be affected by the

number and nature of the assets and liabilities that encircle it" (E. Goldring, et al., 2006, p. 359). Obviously, community resources, taking many forms of social capital, and residents' access to them are far from equitably distributed, so there are clearly winners and losers when districts shift toward traditional models of neighborhood-zoned schools.

The tension between the political landscape and social science research with regard to neighborhood schools is best understood by considering *which community resources* most directly relate to school improvement, and *which communities* are most likely to possess them. Schooling closer to home, in and of itself, will have little impact on school improvement. In fact, "There is little evidence about whether a return to neighborhood schooling under unitary status provides benefits to students and whether those benefits are equally distributed among all students" (E. Goldring, et al., 2006, p. 337). The social capital (Smylie & Evans, 2006; Weininger & Lareau) and community resources cultivated by neighborhood communities impact the quality of neighborhood schools. Vital elements of social capital including shared values and attitudes that foster trust, open communication, and shared responsibility are necessary for school improvement. Thus, the neighborhood community, in this new political arena, is viewed as a potential asset for leveraging school improvement efforts (E. Goldring, et al., 2006).

Residential segregation, presents one of the most serious implications for the current movement of school districts returning to neighborhood assignment systems. The return of neighborhood schooling has accelerated the resegregation of public schools around the nation, but most seriously in the South. This trend started with the 1991 Supreme Court decision in *Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell*, which granted permission for federal courts to reverse desegregation orders, claiming,

"Desegregation was a temporary rather than permanent goal for schools and that courts could… permit the restoration of segregated neighborhood schools as long as the school districts said that they made these changes for educational rather than racial reasons" (Orfield, 2005, p. 11). Complicating the impacts of this trend is the increased number of children and families who are impacted by poverty (Berliner, 2005). As a result, "The children in United States schools are much poorer than they were decades ago and more separated in highly unequal schools" (Orfield & Lee, 2007). Isolated schools in high-risk neighborhoods work as virtual lifetime guarantees that students will never access social capital and networks needed to achieve their full academic potential. Anyon (2005) reported on the long-term impacts of this trend:

> Currently, relatively few urban poor students go past ninth grade: The graduation rates in large comprehensive inner-city high schools are abysmally low. In fourteen such New York City schools, for example, only 10 percent to 20 percent of ninth graders in 1996 graduated four years later. Despite the fact that low-income individuals desperately need a college degree to find decent employment, only 7 percent obtain a bachelors degree by age twenty-six. So, in relation to the needs of low-income students, urban districts fail their students with more egregious consequences now than in the early twentieth century. (p. 69)

Anticipating the inevitable problems and disadvantages associated with schools with high concentrations of poverty among students, some school districts have attempted to level the playing field through various measures. In efforts to enhance community capital and resources in "high-risk" neighborhoods, high-poverty districts have employed compensatory programs. In Nashville, "Enhanced Option" schools have been created in

high-poverty areas to support students who are returning to their neighborhood, high-poverty school after a period of busing. Enhanced Option schools, such as those in Nashville, "provide resources beyond those offered at other public schools… in order to help schools in areas of concentrated poverty meet the needs of their students more effectively – psychologically, socially, and academically" (p. 164).

In their case studies of two of Nashville's Enhanced Option schools, Smrekar and Goldring (2009) found that the "penetrating and punishing effects of neighborhood poverty overwhelm" schools, and that "in the absence of any socioeconomic diversity among families, educators focus on survival" (p. 189). Neighborhood schools located in high-poverty neighborhoods need support systems that reach beyond the school walls, nurturing the overall social health of a neighborhood. Enhancing educational opportunities for students from neighborhoods stricken with concentrated levels of poverty will require policies for housing, and social reform as well.

Scholars such as Jean Anyon (2006) and David Berliner (2005) advocate for a more comprehensive perspectives and policies regarding education reform. They challenge lawmakers and leaders to think beyond school walls for solutions to improve the lives of students and their families both in and out of school, and offer that true education reform will not be effective unless it is coupled with other social and political policy changes:

> In order to create policies that meet the needs of urban communities, then, we need not only better schools, but the reform of the public policies that support family and neighborhood economic, and social opportunity. Rules and regulations regarding teaching, curriculum, and assessment are certainly important; but

> policies to eliminate poverty wage work and create decent jobs (for example) should be part of the educational policy panoply as well—for these have consequences for urban education at least as profound as curriculum, pedagogy and testing. (Anyon, 2006, p. 55)

In other words, quality educational experiences cannot fully be achieved without comprehensive social and economic reforms that are focused on the needs of families in high-poverty urban areas. Berliner (2005) echoed this sentiment: "I am tired of acting like the schools, all alone, can do what is needed to help more people achieve higher levels of academic performance in our society" (p. 50).

Leading up to the *PICS* case, school districts nationwide were being released from court-mandated desegregation orders by obtaining unitary status, as a result of the *Dowell* (1991) and *Freeman* (1992) decisions, which established guidelines for courts to end desegregation orders (Welner, 2009). In order to be declared unitary, school districts *did not* need to demonstrate that they had achieved fully-integrated schools. Rather, districts could "point to their good faith efforts and contend that their current segregation was de facto… therefore sufficiently attenuated from past wrongdoing that it should not be considered a vestige of the former dual system" (Welner, 2009, p. 53). And while some districts, particularly in the South, were granted unitary status, releasing them from court-supervised desegregation, other districts developed voluntary student assignment plans to ameliorate racial isolation. In the following section, I examine the post-unitary political and policy environments in key school districts nationwide. This analysis sheds light on the importance of race- and/or SES-conscious measures when designing student assignment plans in this post-*PICS* era.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), once the embodiment of a successfully integrated school district, now serves as an example of the potential dangers of a post-unitary return to neighborhood schools. In *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971), the court sanctioned the use of busing in order to achieve racial balance among all schools. In addition to racial integration, many credit the mandatory busing to the initial improvement in student performance experienced by the students in CMS: "The plan obtained high levels of racial balance, improved both Black and White academic performance, contributed to a local political climate often praised for its tranquil and progressive race relations, and was a source of great civic pride" (R. A. Mickelson, Smith, S. S., & Southworth, S., 2009, p. 132). Indeed, the mandatory busing plan in CMS following *Swann* provides an important illustrations of the benefits of integrated schools.

Beginning in the late 1990s, a group of White parents challenged the *Swann* decision, increasing of the integration plan used in Charlotte. In 2002 CMS was declared unitary, and was thus freed from any obligations to maintain the desegregation plans. Though some resegregation began to occur in CMS prior to their unitary status declaration, as a unitary school district, CMS established a neighborhood school assignment plan that has resulted in increasingly segregated schools since the 2002-2003 school year.

In recent years, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System (CMS) has experienced rapid resegregation and racial and socioeconomic isolation as a result of their race-neutral Family Choice Plan (FCP), later known as the Student Assignment Plan, because it guaranteed a seat to all in their neighborhood school. Neoliberal discourses of

"choice" embody the libertarian individualism were embedded in these plans. It was easy for families who lived in the suburbs to favor neighborhood schools because their neighborhoods already possessed the social and community capital necessary to support a quality schooling experience for their children. The current political landscape in CMS has not put a priority on counteracting the impacts of resegregation. The rapid resegregation and declining student achievement that has marked the recent years in CMS provides compelling evidence for the need for race- and/or SES-conscious measures in the design of student assignment plans. Currently, there are more schools in CMS that are marked by concentrations of poor, low-performing, and non-White students than it had before it was declared unitary (R. A. Mickelson, 2005).

Like CMS, Denver Public Schools is another key district to consider in gaining a better understanding of the current national political landscape with regard to student assignment policy. The 1973 *Keyes vs. Denver School District* Supreme Court decision determined that Latino and Black students should be considered together as "minority" and could not desegregate one another. Additionally, the *Keyes* decision signified that if a substantial area in a district was segregated, then it could be assumed that the entire district was similarly segregated. Thus the burden of proof was on the school district to demonstrate desegregation efforts. However, *Keyes* dealt solely with Denver's in-town schools, leaving out the surrounding suburbs. The exclusion of the surrounding suburban districts from the *Keyes* decision had a crippling effect on desegregation efforts.

Though school segregation was allowed to continue via the Poundstone Amendment, the loophole that allowed surrounding suburbs to be exempt from *Keyes*, the resegregation of Denver's Public Schools was accelerated dramatically in 1995 when the

busing mandate was lifted. Judge Matsch determined that "The Denver now before this court is very different from what it was when this lawsuit began… the vestiges of past discrimination by the defendants have been eliminated to the extent practicable" (Horn, 2009, p. 227). Shortly thereafter, the school board returned the district to neighborhood student assignment zones. Immediately, one-third of Denver's seventy-eight elementary schools and half of the eighteen middle schools became predominantly black or Latino. Five years later, *all* (one hundred percent) Latino students and more than half of the black students attend a DPS school that is "majority minority."

Horn and Kurlaender (2009) considered the impact of resegregation trends on student achievement in Denver Public Schools post-*Keyes*. Their study included a descriptive statistical of the racial and ethnic composition of Denver Public Schools since the 1960's, alongside aggregate achievement data. The authors described the standardized tests administered by Denver Public Schools, and provide a descriptive longitudinal analysis of school-level math performance by race/ethnicity for elementary schools. Simply, they found that White student enrollment and student achievement were positively correlated, while White student enrollment and free or reduced priced lunch populations were inversely correlated. Therefore, in post-*Keyes* years in Denver (1995-1998) White students, by and large, did not participate in the free or reduced price lunch programs (i.e., were not poor) and performed better on achievement tests.

Though it may be beyond the scope of the study conducted by Horn and Kurlaender (2009) to determine the extent to which a school's racial and socioeconomic compositions influence overall student achievement, it provides convincing evidence of the persistent achievement gaps exist between students who attend schools with

predominantly White and/or middle-class student populations, and those who attend schools with predominantly non-White and/or poor student populations: "we note a consistent and substantial association between White enrollment in a school and average achievement scores" (p. 238). The researchers emphasize that the correlation between White enrollment and achievement cannot be considered causal, the study provides important descriptive findings about resegregation and achievement trends in post-unitary Denver.

Other Student Assignment Policy Strategies in Post-Unitary districts

Though the return of neighborhood-zoned schools is by far the most common post-unitary student assignment strategy, there are other options that districts might consider. In the following sections, I explore some of the alternatives to neighborhood schools that are allowable under *PICS*, including socio-economically based student assignment plans, permissible race-conscious plans, and choice-based options such as magnets.

Socioeconomically-based integration strategies. The first socioeconomic based integration plan began in the late 1970's in La Crosse, Wisconsin (Kahlenberg, 2009). Currently, there are more than 3.5 million students in sixty districts nationwide who are affected by school assignment policies that consider socioeconomic status.

In their research in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Mickelson, Smith, and Southworth (2009) found that school-wide level of poverty, as measured by free/reduced lunch eligibility, had a more powerful negative effect on student achievement than the socioeconomic status (SES) of individual students. In other words, "controlling for students' own race and SES, those who attend a low-poverty school do better in math and

reading than their peers of similar racial and SES backgrounds attending either a moderate- or high-poverty school" (p. 146).

Assignment policies based on socioeconomic balancing may provide many advantages over other types of student assignment plans. These policies are founded on the notion that socioeconomic integration of schools will lead to racial integration since race and class are tightly coupled in the United States (S. F. Reardon, & Rhodes, L.). Their goal is to attain the same socioeconomic diversity found in the district as a whole in each school.

Wake County, North Carolina, the largest district in the state and the eighteenth largest district in the nation, was granted unitary status in 1982, and thus has a dynamic history of student assignment policies. Between 1982 and 1999, Wake County implemented a voluntary desegregation plan in which each school was required to have a minority enrollment between 15% and 45%. By many accounts, Wake County's plan was a success: whereas 70% of the nation's Black students attended schools that were predominately Black in 1999, only 21% of Wake County's Black students attended predominantly Black schools.

In 2000, the voluntary integration plan was replaced with a socioeconomically-centered school assignment policy that served as one of the nation's most successful examples of the vital importance of diversity in schools (Kahlenberg, 2009). For over ten years, Wake County implemented a diversity policy that required each school to have a maximum of forty percent of students be eligible for free/reduced meals and no more than one-quarter of students reading below grade level (Kahlenberg, 2009). Additionally when measuring economic disadvantage, the district did not consider the free/reduced

status of individual students, but rather, the median income of the neighborhood as a whole. In other words, any individual student's school assignment was not impacted by his/her own free/reduced lunch status, but rather by the free/reduced status of the other children in the neighborhood.

Because of Wake County's expansive size and student population, most students did not have far to travel to school every day, however, others spent up to two hours on their daily bus commute. As a result of this innovative assignment policy, the achievement gap in reading for third- through eighth-graders decreased from a 35.2 percentage-point difference in 1998 to 20.6 percentage points in 2003 (Flinspach, 2005). Similar reductions in achievement gaps in math were also experienced by Wake County third- through eighth-graders during this period. In 2010, however, four new members to Wake County's school board created a majority that overturned a number of policies that had benefited working-class and poor families, most notably, ending year-round schools and busing for socioeconomic diversity. On March 23, 2010, in a five to four vote, the school board passed a resolution returned the Wake County school district back to a neighborhood system a period of three years.

By returning to student assignment policy based on neighborhood attendance zones, Wake County's already segregated neighborhoods will return to having segregated schools. Debra Goldman, one of Wake County's newly-elected school board members, has called the diversity policy "social engineering," which she stands decidedly against. It was certain that already socioeconomically and racially-isolated neighborhoods would re-create socioeconomically and racially-isolated schools. As Justice Harry A. Blackburn concluded, "Many families are concerned about the racial composition of a prospective

school and will make residential decisions accordingly. Thus, schools that are demonstrably black or white provide a signal to these families, perpetuating and intensifying the residential movement" (Frankenberg, 2005, p. 167).

Most parents in Wake County who spoke out in favor of overturning the diversity policy did so in the name of "families" and "choice." As one parent stated, "I'm completely in favor of neighborhood and community schools. It will allow me to volunteer in a school that's not twenty miles away" ("Wake school board passes neighborhood school resolution," 2010). While this may be true for this individual parent, the more pressing issue is what impact neighborhood schools will have on the entire community.

Cambridge, Massachusetts provides another example of socioeconomic-based student assignment policy implemented in a large urban school district. Nearly one-half, 44.9 percent, of racially and culturally diverse students in Cambridge's schools qualify for free/reduced lunch. The goal of Cambridge's SES-based plan was to ensure that each school's population reflected the SES distribution of the entire district within ten percent (Frankenberg, 2007). As in Wake County, the transition from a race-conscious to a socioeconomic based plan has been accompanied by a great deal of resistance from parents and community leaders.

Despite these examples, there is limited empirical evidence that school assignment policies based on the socioeconomic status of students and their families create racially diverse schools (Frankenberg, 2007). There are three basic blueprints for socioeconomic-based student assignment (SBSA) plans, each with its own relative strengths and weaknesses for achieving particular goals. Difficulties arise, however, in

determining how to measure socioeconomic status. SBSA plans based on the education levels and family income have been shown to created greater levels of socioeconomic integration within schools than those that rely only on free/reduced lunch status, but precise measures of household income are difficult to attain because questions about family wealth would most likely be considered to be too invasive (S. F. Reardon, & Rhodes, L.). On the other hand, the measure that is most often used to measure poverty, free/reduced lunch eligibility, is problematic if not unreliable because it is self-reported data that categories continuous family income (S. F. Reardon, & Rhodes, L.).

In many large urban school districts, where there are members of different races in all social classes, plans based on SES are unlikely to impact racial diversity in schools. This is because of differential patterns of private school enrollment and use of school transfer options (S. F. Reardon, & Rhodes, L.). Additionally, there is often little public or political support for integration plans based on socio-economic status because there is little public awareness for class-based inequalities. In speaking out against SES-based integration, a Boston-suburb citizen (2007) declared, "We don't need more white children… Not that they're not deserving of a quality education, but it's not desegregation" (as cited in Frankenberg, 2007, p. 22).

Race-conscious strategies. Choice-based policies offer yet another race-conscious approach to school desegregation. Student assignment plans that incorporate some element of parental choice are often the most popular, particularly among the middle-class. The Berkeley Unified School District designed a plan to promote diversity within elementary schools, while still providing parent choice (Kahlenberg, 2009). The district assigned a "diversity index value" to each family based on race, parental income,

and parental education level. As was the case in the district where I taught, historically, school choice programs have served to strengthen school segregation by alienating non-white families from the creation and enactment of choice options "claiming to offer parents a natural and neutral choice… while masking the fact that parental choices will be skewed because of residential segregation" (Powell, 2005, p. 290). In fact, Reardon and Rhodes documented that relatively few low-income students take advantage of transfer options because of transportation and other logistical and structural barriers.

Magnet programs. The term "magnet," as in magnet schools, emerged in the 1970's when these voluntary programs gained popularity (Smrekar, 2009). First conceived of as alternatives to court-mandated cross-town bussing, magnet schools provided incentives to students and their families to attend these non-neighborhood schools with their curricular themes and/or innovative instructional practices. As districts nationwide obtained unitary status, choice options such as magnet schools and programs replaced the focus of the previous era, which was on racial balancing (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2012). The implementation of magnet programs has been coupled with improved student achievement. However, access to magnet schools and programs is restricted, so the relationship between magnets and achievement is more likely to be correlational than causal.

Smrekar's (2009) study of Nashville's post-unitary magnet school enrollment examined the factors that contributed to racial imbalances within the districts magnet schools. After Nashville was deemed unitary, magnet school enrollment surpassed "the tipping point" (p. 222) of 40% or greater non-White enrollment, and "produced a "White flight" exit from the school(s), exacerbating the intent of magnet schools as a voluntary

choice mechanism for racial diversity." In her interviews with both Black and White parents, Smrekar found a variety of perspectives on the value of racial diversity in schools, with some parents favoring schooling "closer to home," while others favored the perceived enhanced quality of magnets. This study captured "the ways in which choice and equity compete and coalesce against the background of new district priorities and policies on race and racial balance" (p. 224). It shows the tensions between the pursuit of diversity as a policy objective and the current political climate favoring school choice.

André-Bechely (2004) studied parents' experiences with the magnet program informational brochures and application procedures. She found that though the magnet program was designed with the intended purpose of promoting racial diversity, the documents produced to inform parents about these opportunities actually served to perpetuate patterns of privileging and excluding. André-Bechely (2004) concluded:

> More attention must be paid to what the magnet application text, and the polices and practices that put it in place, which were intended to increase access, ostensibly did—limit access… and assess how the magnet program brochure works for (or against) the families in racially and economically subordinated communities" (p. 314).

School Choice and Family-School Engagement

Reay (2008b) interviewed White middle-class parents who had chosen to send their children to diverse urban public schools in order to understand their perspectives on social class issues and identities. Reay found that these parents were thus engaged in contradictory ways of being, and had dual self-perceptions.

While all parents "want the best" for their children, the parents in Reay's (2008a) study balanced their desire for their children's school achievement with commitments to social justice and equity: "these parents' ability to mobilize resources of cultural, social, and economic capital, unavailable to the majority of families whose children attend their schools, jostle uncomfortably alongside political and moral commitments to comprehensivization and more equitable ways of being and interacting" (Reay, 2008, p. 90).

Reay (2008) constructed parents' complex social class identities through a dual focus on their "inner conflicts as well as the outer rationalizations" (p. 1073). The tension between these two sometimes-opposing forces can be a useful lens for understanding social class perspectives and identities. For the parents in the study, there was "a difficult dialectic between openness and protectionism, respect and disdain, acceptance and condescension in play for most of these middle-class families" (p. 1075). As I analyzed my data, I used these notions of outer rationalization and inner conflict to characterize the complexities of stakeholders' perspectives on student assignment policies that impacted them.

Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel (2001) studied low-income parents' ideas and attitudes about schooling. Their goal was to understand parents' attitudes and ideas in order to get at their perceptions of parent involvement. The researchers begin by taking the basic stance that parent involvement in schooling is fundamentally a "good idea" (p.79), therefore, time and attention should be paid to the ways in which that involvement may be improved or enhanced. The study's methodology consisted of semi-structured interviews with ten families that revolved around parents' ideas and attitudes about

school and the impact of them on school involvement. Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel used a pattern coding method to analyze the data, allowing them to expose opposing or inconsistent viewpoints within the themes they uncovered.

Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2001) found that low-income parents' lack of parent involvement, as defined by school staff, in their children's school was not a result of lack of interest. They discovered that parent-school interactions are governed by socially-constructed scripts. At times, these scripts contained false negative assumptions about low-income parents. Teachers and school personnel warned researchers that they would be unwelcomed by participants:

> These officials suggested that most of the parents in the school were lazy, irresponsible, and apathetic when it came to school involvement and that these attitudes were inextricably linked to the low performance of their children. More striking than the tenor of these remarks, however, was the certainty with which they were delivered. (p. 85)

Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel (2001, p. 595) not only found this to be untrue, since all but one of their selected families participated in the study, but reported that they would like to be more involved with their children's schooling if they knew what sort of involvement was desired by the school.

The Goals 2000 legislation, as part of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), required that schools increase their parent involvement initiatives, as a means through which to achieve improved student achievement. The onus is on schools to create roles and programs through which parents may "get involved," but little attention is paid to parents' voices and perspectives: "when the opinions of the very population whose

involvement is desired are ignored, a precedent may be set that may directly impact the nature of family-school interactions" (p. 76).

Cooper (2007) conducted an interview study of fourteen Black mothers, seeking to understand their perspectives on school choice and parental involvement. Consistent with the findings of Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel, Cooper found that the mothers in her study consistently faced conflict, judgment, and bias in their interactions with their children's schools, despite their convictions to remain active participants in their children's educations: "Data indicate that low-income and working-class African-American mothers become frustrated and at times angered—not because they are irrational or enjoy confrontation but because they perceive educators as disrespecting and devaluing their families" (p. 508). One of the mothers in Cooper's (2007) summarized her perspective on steering her son's educational path: "I'm not letting anybody tell me I can't do it – I'll be damned!" (p. 508).

Cooper's (2007) work informed my study by shedding light on the complexities of school choice decisions, and the shape of their parental involvement in schools, and how race, class, and gendered identities impact these interactions.

Reflections

The research on the negative impacts on both outcomes and opportunities of racially socioeconomically isolated schools in schools is incontrovertible. As reported in MDC's *State of the South 2004*: "Substantial evidence shows that students from low-income families score higher on tests when they go to school with students from affluent families. Middle-income students do worse than their peers when they go to high-poverty schools" (Chambers, 2008).

On the flip side, in classrooms where the majority of children are affected by poverty, the academic achievement of all students, including any middle-class children in the class, declines. Chambers et al. (2008) reported, "Diversity as an educational strategy works to offset the well-documented distressed learning environment created when high concentrations of at-risk students are placed in the same classrooms" (p. 3). At the same time, I am reminded of the words of W.E.B. DuBois (1935): "The Negro needs neither segregated nor mixed schools; what he needs is education." Diversity in and of itself as a policy objective is of no benefit, and tension arises when scoring higher on tests comes at the expense of family engagement and community responsiveness in schools.

Voluntary integration strategies such as magnets, transfer policies, and socio-economic balancing, often remove non-White, non-middle-class students from their neighborhood and community schools in order to pursue diversity objectives at the expense of family and student engagement. I believe that it is crucial that school districts take painstaking efforts to design and implement school assignment plans that comply with federal guidelines while at the same time pursuing diversity goals, and respecting parents and communities. Therefore, more research is needed about the perspectives of stakeholders impacted by student assignment policies at the home, school, and district levels. In the following chapter, I outline the research methods and methodologies I used in this stud

Conclusion

The intent of this chapter was to present my theoretical and ideological frameworks, and examine the research on post-unitary status student assignment policies in school districts nationwide since the early 1980's. This research provided convincing

evidence that without race- or SES-conscious measures, resegregation is likely to occur at a rapid rate and that resegregation led to decreased student learning outcomes and opportunities. While the research on the potential problems associated with post-unitary return to neighborhood schools is unquestionable, little is known about the perspectives of stakeholders about how these various policy measures impact their lives and the schooling experiences of their children. This study is an attempt to fill that void.

CHAPTER 3:

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my study is to examine the discourses used by stakeholders, including parents, teachers, school administrators, and district leaders as they describe their perspectives on and experiences with issues related to student assignment policy including school closures, school choice options, and parent engagement. It contributes to the research by enhancing what is known about the experiences and perspectives of these insiders, with the goal of enhancing community involvement, and ultimately the educational experiences and opportunities, in both student assignment policy planning in the aftermath of unitary status declarations. This study is a qualitative interview study of parents', teachers', administrators', and district stakeholders' perspectives on student assignment policy impacts in a district with a recent unitary status declaration.

The research questions that direct my inquiry are

- How do stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and school and district leaders, describe their perspectives on student assignment policy issues within the context of school closure considerations? What are the discourses that inform their perspectives?
- What qualities of schools and school experiences related to student assignment policy do stakeholders describe as most important to them?

- How do stakeholders in a school district that has recently been declared unitary describe the initial school- and community-level effects of the student assignment strategies impacting them?

Research Design

In order to explore the research questions I posed in this study, I gathered data via qualitative semistructured interviews. Qualitative research seeks to understand or describe social phenomena through the point of view of those experiencing it (Kvale, 1996). It "assumes that there are multiple realities – that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception. It is a highly subjective phenomenon in need of interpreting rather than measuring" (Merriam, 1988, p. 17). In the qualitative research tradition, "reality" is socially constructed by participants in their particular contexts (Bogdan & Biken, 2003; Heck, 2004). Researchers use qualitative case studies to "to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result" (Yin, 2003). In that regard, case studies are uniquely suited to policy studies that are concerned with how a policy is developed and implemented in a particular setting.

Because I am interested in understanding and interpreting an educational phenomenon, stakeholders' perspectives on the impacts of student assignment policies, I used a qualitative case study methodology. Specifically, Merriam's (1988) qualitative, naturalistic paradigm for defining case study is appropriate because "research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education" (p. 3).

According to Merriam (1988), there are four characteristics that are essential properties of a qualitative case study: particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive. The particularistic refers to a case study's focus on a specific situation, event, program, or phenomenon: "Case studies concentrate attention on the way particular groups of people confront specific problems, taking a holistic view of the situation. They are problem centered, small scale, entrepreneurial endeavors" (Shaw, 1978, p. 2). A case study's particularistic nature can have an ironic impact in that it helps readers make connections between it and other similar situations. Within the context of my research, the school closing discussions, which began as a component of Morgan County's TASAP Grant proposal, served as the particularlistic event that ignited the interest of the participants in the impacts of student assignment policies.

The descriptive nature is significant because, in a case study, prose and literary techniques are used to describe events, elicit images, and analyze situations. It can include vivid quotations, interviews, or observations to illustrate the complexities of a situations and wide-ranging perspectives. In my data gathering, interviews helped elicit participants' perspectives by providing collaborative, conversational space where they could describe their experiences and viewpoints. The interviews can be characterized as having a conversational and semi-structured style (Kvale, 2007). My goal was "to elicit from the interviewee rich, detailed materials that [could] be used in qualitative analysis" (deMarrais, 2004, p. 54). Although I created interview protocols for varied participants, it was altered during the interviews to adjust to the nature of the conversations.

A case study's heuristic nature refers to the potential for theorizing and meaning-making: "Previously unknown relationships and variables can be expected to emerge

from case studies leading to a rethinking of the phenomena being studied. Insights into how things get to be the way they are can be expected to result from case studies" (Stake, 1981, p. 47). Finally, the inductive nature of case studies refers to their potential for discovering new relationships, concepts, connections, and understandings. The heuristic and inductive natures of this study emerged during my data analysis. I used an inductive approach throughout my analysis to code the interview transcripts, sort those codes into categories, look for themes across those categories, and finally, reflect on those themes to create theme statements.

Unit of Analysis

According to Patton (1980), defining the unit of analysis in case study research is about determining "what it is you want to be able to say something about at the end of the study" (p. 100). Naming the unit of analysis creates a "bounded system," placing parameters around what the researcher hopes to understand, and providing guidelines that sift out what is not relevant to the case (Merriam, 1988).

Depending on the research problem, the unit of analysis could be an individual or group, a program, technique, institution, location, or phenomena. In the end, my goal was to be able to say something about how the ways in which stakeholders describe their perspectives on the impact of student assignment policies are shaped by their sociopolitical contexts and experiences. I explored my unit of analysis, stakeholders' perspectives via qualitative interviews.

Site Selection

I gained access to my research site, two schools within the Morgan County School District, via one of my committee members who was conducting research on the impacts

of the TASAP grant Morgan County had received. Initially, my research interests centered on stakeholders' engagement in the District-Wide Rezoning Plan described in the TASAP proposal. However, during our first trip to Morgan County, I learned that the plan was never carried out because the School Board had decided instead to use the grant funds for attorneys' fees to iron out the unitary status agreement. During one of my first interviews with a district-level director in Morgan County, I also learned that although the District-Wide Rezoning Plan, as described in the TASAP grant, had not been put in place, the Morgan County School Board would be considering changes to their student assignment policy strategy in the coming months. At that point my research interest shifted to studying how stakeholders describe their perspectives of relevant stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and administrators, on the impacts of the current student assignment policy landscape in Morgan County.

Morgan County, one of the largest school districts in the nation, was granted unitary status in August 2010, freeing it from court-sanctioned desegregation policies. In this large district in the Southeastern United States, student assignment policies returned to local control after decades of court regulation. The Superintendent explained that unitary status, "means that every child, regardless of race, receives a quality education in our district, no matter which school they attend" (Blocker, 2010). Indeed, this is a lofty ideal.

Like many districts nationwide, today's Morgan County Public School System (MCPS) looks very different than it did in the early 1960's. During the 1960-61 school year, eighty-three percent of students in Morgan County were White, while the remaining seventeen percent were Black. Today, sixty-four percent of students are White, twenty-

eight percent are Black, and thirty-two percent are Latino (Postal, 2010). Understanding the perspectives of MCPS school- and district-level stakeholders who are impacted by student assignment policies is a timely and politically significant issue.

MCPS serves more than 168,000 students in 180 schools, not including charter schools (The School Board of Orange County, 2009), and is among the last largest school districts to be granted unitary status. The court orders under which MCPS operated prior to the unitary status declaration targeted lessening school segregation, but also contributed to the creation of several urban small schools that proved to be both cost inefficient and low-performing.

A look back at the desegregation of Morgan County Public Schools is helpful for understanding the significance of the school closure considerations that came about along with their TASAP proposal. Though the *Brown* decision came about in 1954, no changes to student assignment were made for more than eight years. During that time, school district leaders maintained that there was no need to pursue school desegregation, espousing that Black citizens were satisfied with the segregated system. In 1962, a local newspaper, *The Corner Cupboard*, reported, "Orange County's Negro families are too well pleased with the schools and attendant facilities now available for them to be concerned with sending their children to White schools, even though they may be nearer" (Bernstein, 2005, p. 49).

This assertion about Black citizens' satisfaction with segregated proved false when on April 6, 1962, eight Black families sued the school district, demanding school integration. Though it would be more than two years before any court orders were made from this case, it set in motion more than a decade of reform measures, beginning the

following year when the School Board adopted a plan to integrate one grade level per year, admitting that Black students were given old books, desks, and materials, and that double sessions were more prevalent in all-Black schools (Bernstein, 2005). However, when Black parents attempted to send their children to White schools, the School Board "attempted to talk parents out of their demands on the grounds that [the county's] schools for Negroes [were] far and away better than any elsewhere; that they would be unwise to leave them for the far more overcrowded White schools" (Bernstein, 2005, p. 50). During the 1964-65 school year, only 1.75 percent of the county's 11,309 Black students attend predominantly White schools.

Another court case that had great impact on the desegregation of MCPS came from the Fifth Circuit Count of Appeals with *United States vs. Jefferson County Board of Education* of Alabama of 1967, which found "The only adequate redress for a previously overt system-wide policy of segregation against Negroes as a collective entity is a system-wide policy of integration" (Bernstein, 2005, p. 52). There were three significant mandates in MCPS that came about because of the *Jefferson* case. The first was a district-wide busing plan to achieve integration. The order stated, "Where transportation is generally provided, buses must be routed to the maximum extent feasible in light of the geographic distribution of students, so as to serve each student choosing any school in the system" (Bernstein, 2005, p. 52). The second was a plan to improve all previously all-Black school facilities, including instructional materials, courses of instruction, and equipment. The third mandate in MCPS that resulted from Jefferson was that remediation should be offered to any student who attended a segregated school in order to "overcome past inadequacies in their education" (Bernstein, 2005, p. 52). Over the

course of the next three years, the Board attempts to enact three separate desegregation plans, and closes several all-Black and all-White schools. It wasn't until January 15, 1970 that the first comprehensive desegregation plan, known as Plan I, was put in place. Plan I gave Black students priority to attend the nearest predominantly White school, and guaranteed transportation to and from the chosen schools.

Another significant event in the desegregation of MCPS is now known as "the fishbowl incident," which was also part of Plan I (Bernstein, 2005). This event came about as a result of another case in the Fifth Circuit Court, which established faculty ratios for desegregated schools. The order required that the ratio of Black and White teachers at all schools had to reflect the same ratio found throughout the entire school system. What this meant in Morgan County was that twenty percent of the faculty at each school had to be comprised of Black teachers, which meant that more than 500 needed to be transferred. Although more than 200 teachers volunteered to transfer, it was determined that the remaining teachers would be selected by a televised drawing of names. "The fish bowl incident" got its name because the names were drawn from a row of glass pickle jars. Later in 1970, the district obtains unitary status, but it is revoked less than a year later when the Fifth Circuit Court finds a number of predominantly Black schools still in existence.

Over the next two decades, MCPS used district-wide bussing to eliminate most of its all-Black schools. More than 4,000 elementary-aged students are bussed each day away from their neighborhood schools. That number grew to almost 7,000 students by 1991. In 1996, the School Board asked federal courts to be relieved of busing mandates, citing that residential areas had become more racially integrated over the years. The

court granted approval of the request, which stopped more than 3,700 students from being bused, but also created four all-Black high schools again. By 2003, nearly 23 percent of the district's schools had predominantly Black student populations. MCPS obtained unitary status for the second time in 2010, and as stated previously the funds provided by their TASAP grant allowed the unitary status declaration to be carried out.

The lack of a comprehensive plan for pursuing true school integration is, at least in part, what lead to the under-utilization and enrollment of a number of urban, predominantly Black schools. Prior to receiving stimulus funds as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) in 2009, MCPS considered closing sixteen of small urban schools. Citizens, teachers, and public officials strongly opposed this proposition, citing that these schools were vital community centers in the neighborhoods in which they were located. Seven of the sixteen schools that were under consideration of closing were located in Black communities, and historically operated as segregated all-Black schools. Their potential closings would have unduly impacted Morgan County's Black neighborhoods by taking away these shared facilities. Fortunately, the federal stimulus funds received under ARRA enabled MCPS to keep all sixteen of the schools open. The sites at which data were collected for this study were two of those sixteen schools.

I gained access to the school sites by emailing principals. During my initial interviews at the district office, I asked the Director of Pupil Assignment about which parents, teachers, and administrators were particularly active or outspoken during the school closure discussions. She named six schools. I emailed the principals of those six schools in June of 2011, asking if I could meet with them to discuss my research. Three

principals replied to my initial request, and I met with two of them a few weeks later. These two schools, one primary school and one middle school, became my research sites.

Participant Selection

In all, twenty stakeholders in Morgan County participated in this study. At the district level, I interviewed one Board Member, one attorney, and two district-level directors. At each of the two schools, I interviewed the principals and counselors. Between the two schools, I interviewed a total of six teachers and six parents or grandparents.

The participants were recruited via purposeful snowball sampling (deMarrais, 2004). At each school site, I met first with the principal during the summer. These initial meetings were not considered interviews, per say, just informal conversations about my research interests and their schools. However, during subsequent trips to Morgan County, I did conduct interviews with each principal. The principals identified a liaison to help me get in contact with teachers and family members. At the primary school, the liaison was the school counselor, and at the middle school, it was the assistant principal. From there, teachers and parents were recruited via the liaisons. More nuanced descriptions of key participants can be found in the next chapter.

Demographic Table of Participants

Name	Affiliation	Position	Race	Other Information
Betty Hocking	Board of Education	Board Member	White	Opposed small school closures
Katrina Stewart	Board of Education	Board Member	Black	Springfield Primary's representative; in favor of small school closures; declined to be interviewed for this study

Phillip Price	Board of Education	Director	White	TASAP author; does not reside in MCPS
Adam Rogers	Riverside Middle	Principal	White	Eighth year as principal of Riverside
Carol Winters	Riverside Middle	Special Education Teacher	White	Eleven years at Riverside; came to teaching after a business career; attended school in MCPS
Dorothy Vaughn	Riverside Middle	Parent	White	Two sons have attended Riverside; has served as PTA President and Mentoring Coordinator
Janet McQueen	Riverside Middle	Parent and Teacher	Black	Son attends Riverside, teaches physical education
Tara Ferguson	Riverside Middle	Teacher, Student Support Program Coordinator	Latina	Grew up in MCPS; seventh year teaching, all at Riverside Middle
Allison Tolbert	Springfield Primary	Counselor	White	Holds a doctoral degree in philosophy; worked in MCPS for eighteen years; seven years at Springfield
Barbara Jones	Springfield Primary	Grandparent	Black	Is raising her granddaughter since her daughter's death
Catherine Brown	Springfield Primary	Guardian	White	
Donna Allen	Springfield Primary	Parent	Black	Works as a medical assistant; moved to the neighborhood because of Springfield
Elizabeth Freeman	Springfield Primary	First Grade Teacher	White	Has taught at Springfield since 1985
George Watson	Springfield Primary	Parent	Black	Volunteers weekly in Springfield cafeteria and after school program
Lauren Fielding	Springfield Primary	Kindergarten Teacher	White	Has taught at Springfield four years, since graduating from college; serves as team leader

Leslie Ragsdale	Springfield Primary	Music Teacher	White	Has taught at Springfield for twenty-five years; son attended school at Springfield; was the district's Teacher of the Year
Marie Corbett	Springfield Primary	Second Grade Teacher	White	Seventh year teaching at Springfield; tutors students in nearby homeless shelter after school
Megan Gates	Springfield Primary	Resource Teacher	White	Instructor at nearby university
Ricky Cevallos	Springfield Primary	Principal	Latino	Eighth year as principal of Springfield; twenty-first year as a principal; began working in MCPS in 1984
Roberta	Springfield Primary	Parent	Black	Has three sons, and is pregnant with fourth; in nursing school; works part-time at a theme park

Table 1: DEMOGRAPHIC TABLE OF PARTICIPANTS

Data Collection: Interviews

Interviews comprised the sole data source in my study. Seidman (2006) explained the significance of interviews in qualitative research: "at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). Interviews reveal the context of people's behavior and experiences and allow researchers to make meaning of those behavior and experiences. It is based on the assumption that the meanings people make of their experiences impact the ways in which they carry out those experiences.

Seidman (2006) explained that interviewing "is a powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues" (p. 14). I engaged in a total of twenty-six interviews with a total of twenty participants. Each interview ranged in length

between thirty and 120 minutes. One or two interviews were conducted with each participant. The interviews were audio-recorded, and were conducted face-to-face.

The purpose of qualitative interviewing in this study was to capture accounts of stakeholders' experiences with, and perspectives on the impacts of student assignment policies (deMarrais, 2004). The interviews can be characterized as phenomenological in nature, because participants were asked to give accounts of their everyday experiences as they relate to student assignment policy and/or the policy's impacts on their lives. Although I call this an qualitative interview study, I use the term "phenomenological" here because phenomenological inquiry seeks to reveal the underlying theoretical frameworks and taken-for-granted assumptions that govern the ways individuals make meaning of their experiences, the ways they make sense of their lives (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Ideally with phenomenological interviews, the participants are considered experts and it is the purpose of the researcher to elicit retellings of those experiences. The goal in this study is to discover common features, or shared understandings, across stakeholders' experiences and perspectives on the impacts of student assignment policies in this post-unitary school district in the Southeast.

All of the interviews were characterized by a conversational and semi-structured format (Kvale, 2007). In situating this type of data collection historically, Kvale (2007) stated, "Conversations are an old way of obtaining systematic knowledge" (p. 5). I began with a set of consistent interview protocol for the first round of interviews with parents, teachers, and school administrators. After the first interviews were transcribed and I conducted a first round of analysis, I created individualized interview protocols for the second round of interviews in order to follow-up on topics, ideas, and events that were

discussed in the first conversation. The aim was to gain an in-depth, contextualized understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives.

Seidman (2006) cautioned that, "interviewers who propose to explore their topic by arranging a one-shot meeting with an interviewee who they have never met tread on thin contextual ice" (p. 17). Although it would have been ideal, three interviews with each of participant was not possible given time and travel restraints. Since my purpose was to understand stakeholders' perspectives on the impact of student assignment policies in their newly unified school district, I believe that one or two longer interviews were sufficient time to get a sense of their understandings.

During the first interview with each participant, I asked her or him to tell as much as possible about herself/himself and their experiences with Morgan County Schools. In compacting Seidman's (2006) structure, the intent of the second interview was to reconstruct the details of the experiences they described during the first conversation. Seidman recommended that the interviews be spaced three days to one week apart, but that timeline was not possible for this study. My first round of interviews occurred during August, October, and November of 2011, and my second round were approximately five months later in March of 2012.

Data Collection: Documents

Documents comprised another form of data in my study. My approach to this document analysis was heavily informed by John Codd (McCulloch, 2004). Codd's work on the construction and deconstruction of education policy documents argued that efforts of positivistic policymakers to relate the aims of education policy to "factual information arising from research" (p. 46) are inherently flawed. Alternatively, Codd's approach to

education policy highlighted the relationship between language and power, deconstructing "the official discourse as "cultural and ideological artefacts to be interpreted in terms of their implicit patterns of signification, underlying symbolic structures, and contextual determinants of meaning"" (as cited in McCulloch, 2004, p. 46).

I used both official and unofficial documents as data in my study. The official documents included Morgan County's official TASAP grant application, Board of Education meeting minutes, Morgan County's Unitary Status presentation to the Board, and the magnet program informational brochure and application. These documents represent the official discourse. The unofficial documents that were used as data in my study included newspaper articles. These articles were written about the history of Morgan County's school desegregation, as well as the debated school closures and unitary status agreement.

Data Analysis

My data analysis process was informed by the constant comparative method (Boeije, 2002). First described by Glaser and Strauss (Anfara Jr., Brown, & Mangione, 2002) in its role in the creation of grounded theory, the constant comparative method allowed me to draw connections and understandings from data through the formation of codes and categories. Using this method, my analysis was constantly ongoing, aiming "to bring meaning, structure, and order to data" (Anfara Jr., et al., 2002, p. 31).

Using a process that resembled the constant comparative method, my analysis moved from "coarse-grained," where data were read and placed into broad categories, to "fine-grained," where the broad categories are refined (Butler-Kisber, 2010) and

relationships between and among them were discovered: “The goal is to construct a plausible and persuasive explanation of what is transpiring from the emergent themes, recognizing again that all explanations are partial by nature, and there are always multiple ways that experiences and/or phenomena can be explained” (p. 31). As the analytic process moved from descriptive (coarse-grained) to analytic and interpretive (fine-grained), rules of inclusion guided the coding, comparing, and contrasting bits of text, making decisions about the parameters of each of the categories. The end result was a more nuanced conceptual understanding of the data as I identified code names and categories along with their accompanying rules of inclusion.

I used this form of constant comparative analysis as a process of both fragmenting and connecting the data. My first step consisted of coding the data in the interview transcript (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Charmaz (2006) explained, “Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data. Coding is the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in data to making analytic interpretations” (p. 43). I used descriptive codes to clarify what was revealed in each bit of data, and kept track of the codes, and the frequencies with which each was used, in a spreadsheet. The use of a spreadsheet as a code table proved extremely helpful in my analysis because it enabled me to quickly retrieve quotes in the data, as well as sort and filter, both the data and the codes, in order to help me construct categories and their parameters.

The constant comparative method is based on the assumption that the purpose of research is to explain or interpret relationships or connections between or among experiences or cases. As the primary method of analysis in case studies as well as the

construction of grounded theory, it assumes that experiences or phenomena *have* some unifying theoretical framework underlying them. These assumptions, depending on the theoretical orientation of the researcher, can be understood as either strengths or weaknesses. In the sense that the analysis is logical, systematic, and "durable" over time, the constant comparative method is a rigorous methodology. These same qualities, however, can be viewed as a weakness in that they can be formulaic, breaking analysis down into discreet steps with the goal of creating a theory to explain the phenomena.

After the entire set of data was coded, I began placing the codes into categories. This was an inductive and time-intensive process. By formulating these categories, I was able to manage large amounts of data, interpreting them through a process which "entail[ed] considering all possible theoretical explanations for the data, forming hypotheses for each possible explanation, checking them empirically by examining data, and pursuing the most plausible explanation" (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 103-104). As Hood explains, "You…go back and forth between data collection and analysis and as your theory develops through the constant comparative method…in order to refine your theory" (as cited in Charmaz, 2006, p. 104). The goal is to provide a logical interpretation of what the data reveals.

My first step in analyzing data was to examine the interview data asking myself, "***What*** are the participants talking about?" The answers to this initial guiding question lead me to identify general descriptive categories. I sorted through the data and chunked segments of the narratives into these initial categories. This preliminary round of coding helped me connect and compare stakeholders' experiences. Examples of my initial categories included, "student needs," "parent involvement," "teacher commitment," and

"school-community connections." Charmaz (2006) stated, "Through coding, you *define* what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means" (p. 46). I kept track of these categories, as well as the codes within each transcript, in a table.

After my first round of analysis, I identified three overarching themes that cut across the categories. I thought of these themes as values, based on the participants' narratives about student assignment policy, and sensed a disconnection or tension between those values and the student assignment policies they were impacted by. The notion that connected the themes was the tension between participants' values and policy. The three themes within that were: (1) difficulties with pursuing racial diversity as a policy objective, (2) the shape of parent involvement in schools, and (3) the nature of school-community connections. Once I identified these themes, my first step was to create theme statements that captured the tension participants' expressed between their values and experiences and the student assignment policies that were in place in their school district. These themes provide the organizational structure for my discussion of the data in the next chapter.

Memo-writing played a key role in my theme development, and helped me bridge my data collection and analysis. Quite literally, these memos provided roadmaps of my interpretations of the data. I used them to capture my impressions throughout the data collection and analysis processes. I used memos for a number of reasons: to flesh out categories or codes, to think through connections and disconnection in the data, to clarify theoretical perspectives, and to elicit feedback from my committee members (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Charmaz, 2006). My memo-writing often took shape as a table or concept map, used to organize my sense-making of big ideas as I pored through the data. These

memos also helped me understand how I fit into this work, and how my beliefs shape and are shaped by the inquiry. Charmaz (2006) urged, "What's important is to get things down on paper and stored in your computer files. Keep writing memos however you write and in whatever way advances your thinking" (p. 80).

Limitations

My study was limited by a number of factors. Chief among them was my limited access to participant stakeholders. At the district level, I was able to interview key district leaders, including department directors and attorneys, who had been involved in pupil assignment policymaking, MCPS's TASAP application, as well as their unitary status declaration. There was one key stakeholder serving in a district leadership position who repeatedly declined to be interviewed – Katrina Stewart. Unfortunately, Ms. Stewart is the Board Representative for Springfield Primary, and her perspectives would have undoubtedly added richness to the data.

Besides Ms. Stewart, my access to relevant stakeholders, namely teachers and parents, was also limited at the school levels. Once I received approval from the MCPS review board to begin collecting data for my research, I contacted the principals at Springfield Primary and Riverside Middle Schools to arrange my first visit and round of interviews. The principal at each school assigned a contact person to act as liaison between myself and teachers and parents. At Springfield Primary, I was able to make contact with a wider variety of teachers and parents than I was at Riverside Middle. One of the factors that allowed me greater access to parents at Springfield was their weekly Great Starts Breakfasts. Moreover, because Riverside was in the midst of their recruitment process for their magnet program, and the administrators understandably

wanted to “put their best foot forward” with regard to their district reputation, I am confident that that pressure impacted which parents and teachers they suggested I talk to.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION OF DATA

"Savage inequalities persist because a lot of well-meaning people are doing the best they can, but they simply do not understand the mechanisms that stack the cards against so many children" (Finn, 2009, p. 94).

Overview of Findings

The quote above, taken from Patrick Finn's seminal work, *Literacy with an Attitude*, captures the complex transactional relationship between people, places, and policies (Honig, 2006) that I found in the data. In my study of stakeholders' perspectives of issues surrounding student assignment policies and implementation, I uncovered an underlying thread. The message I heard over and over again from parents and school-level stakeholders was that connectedness was more important than diversity or student performance. Taken one step further, pursuing the former without an accompanying pursuit of the latter two was meaningless. Therefore, in considering future policy agendas, attention should be paid to enhancing family and community input as well as equitable educational opportunities for all students, which is the second promise of the *Brown* decision (Morris, 2009a).

These threads emerged as stakeholders and I engaged in conversations about student assignment policies and issues that were relevant in their lives, as well as the lives of their children. Our conversations were clustered around three major categories. The first category consisted of two sets of policy measures aimed at increasing racial diversity

and school enrollment, namely voluntary magnet programs and transfer provisions such as Opportunity Scholarships. The second category included family engagement and the nature of home-school relationships at each of the study's sites. The third category includes the sense of community between the schools and the communities they serve as well as the sense of community within each school. In the following chapter, I explore how my overarching theme, that connectedness was valued over "diversity" and "performance," via the conversations I had with my participants about their perspectives on the student assignment policies and issues that impacted them and their children.

The Pursuit of Racial Diversity

District-level stakeholders claimed to value racial diversity. They have a stated objective in "avoiding re-segregation of schools and ensuring appropriate racial balance in school enrollment district-wide." Though policy-makers and district-level stakeholders reported diversity, specifically racial diversity, as a key policy objective, other stakeholders at the school level, teachers and parents, described engagement and connectedness with neighborhood schools as important factors in improving educational quality and opportunity.

Magnets. Magnet schools are one choice-based student assignment policy strategy that offers the potential for increasing schools' racial diversity (Arcia, 2006). They are public non-charter schools that provide parental choice by offering specialized, thematic curricula and/or innovative, nontraditional teaching methods (Berends, 2009; Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2012; Smrekar, 2009). Historically, magnet schools have been used by districts nationwide as part of court-mandated desegregation orders, usually containing some guidelines to ensure some measure of racial diversity, and providing

transportation for students (Frankenberg, 2007). Unfortunately, time and time again, voluntary integration measures such as magnets have resulted in perpetuating racially isolated schools more often than they have ameliorated them. This happens in part because magnet programs come with complicated registration procedures, academic requirements, and transportation restrictions (André-Bechely, 2004; E. B. Goldring & Hausman, 1999; Smrekar, 2009).

André-Bechely (2004) noted that even brochures promoting magnet programs are problematic when it comes to promoting equal access: "The efforts to alleviate segregated schooling became increasingly text-based, were mediated by many managerial and technical practices, and required a sophisticated parent reader, thus further privileging the material, social, cultural, and linguistic capital of some families over others" (p. 314). All of these add up to much more restricted access to non-white, non-middle-class students.

Magnet schools have gained favor from both neoliberals and conservatives as an essential component of public school reform in the current policy landscape (Mora & Christianakis, 2011). In the following section, I present the perspectives of various stakeholders about the implementation of a magnet program at Riverside Middle School. Consistent with previous research on magnets in post-unitary school districts (E. B. Goldring & Hausman, 1999; Smrekar, 2009), it appears that the magnet program at Riverside will serve to increase the school's overall enrollment by attracting mostly middle-class students and families from throughout the district, but will do little to promote racial diversity especially at the classroom level because of conflicting state and

district policies which significantly limit access to magnets of non-White, non-middle-class students and families.

In Morgan County, on the heels of serious school closure discussions, the most urgent need at Riverside Middle School was to increase the school's overall enrollment, and the implementation of a magnet program was viewed as an effective means for accomplishing that. Riverside Middle School was one of several small urban schools in Morgan County that was in danger of closing because of their declining student population.

The social and political underpinnings of the school closure discussions cannot be overlooked: "School underutilization then is a product of housing policies that force working-class people out of their neighborhoods, and, in turn, underutilization furnishes a rationale to close schools which further pushes people out and clears space for new selective schools favored by gentrifiers" (Lipman, 2011, p. 224). Carol Winters has been a special education resource teacher at Riverside Middle for more than ten years. She explained the urgent need to increase student enrollment: "We needed to become something to boost the numbers. Whether this [the magnet program] is the answer or not, I think it is our best shot at what I consider the Eye of Mordor from coming back in this direction and saying we've got a large building, costs money to open and we only have seven hundred kids".

In order to promote student enrollment, and increase its economic viability, in the fall of 2011, Riverside Middle School obtained permission to begin a performing and visual arts magnet program the following school year. Dr. Adam Rogers, the principal of

Riverside, believed that the magnet program would provide a much-needed boost to teacher morale following the proposed school closing, but more importantly, would be a surefire way to secure the school's viability against future school closing discussions. Dorothy Vaughn, a White mother of two who lives in the Riverside attendance zone, and whose son is enrolled in the magnet program explained:

> Dr. Rogers told us…we need more students because in this economic environment, this budget, it's not good to have a small school, a half empty school and we can hold a thousand ninety-five students and we have six fifty to six seventy so…if we can bring in more students, I think it will be much harder to make a case to close it. And it's very popular, we're the only one and the parents seem to be real excited about it.

The magnet program at Riverside is centered on the performing and visual arts, and had already increased student enrollment for the following year by hundreds of students even before its first year of implementation.

While magnet programs have been effective in Morgan County for raising select schools' overall enrollment, they have not been an effective way to promote racial diversity. In fact, magnet programs have historically created more racial segregation in schools at both the school and classroom levels (Lipman, 2011; Mora & Christianakis, 2011; Smrekar, 2009). School Board representative Betty Hocking explained the public's perception of magnets in Morgan County, "In the old days it was a way of avoiding going to a school you didn't want to go to… they were formed to avoid just going to some school… there's just no other way to say it".

This sentiment is consistent with current neoliberal discourses of "options," and "choice," that market magnet schools to parents by offering the opportunity for their children to attend a distinct, or special, school, and was echoed by Riverside parent Dorothy Vaughn: "…it's a school choice, you know, it's giving parents more choices…like "I'm not really happy with my home school" and this gives them an avenue to go to another public school without having to go private, charter, home school." As Lipman (2011) pointed out, "There is powerful good sense in this logic given the deeply stratified and inequitable system of public education in the USA and the ability of the wealthy and privileged to opt out" (p. 230). What these neoliberal perspectives ignore is that access to these "choices" does not come on an equal playing field. Hoschschild (2001) explained that although "most Americans believe that everyone has the right to pursue success but that only some deserve to win, based on their talents, energy, or ambition… The paradox lies in the fact that one generation's finish is the next generation's start" (p. 37).

In an effort to counteract this trend in Morgan County, the district strategically placed magnet programs at select high schools in predominantly Black neighborhoods. This had little impact on enrollment at these schools. Phillip Price, a district-level leader explained: "Well, we have magnets in a lot of various places. Morgan Hills and Central High Schools are minority schools that have magnets there. Morgan Hills also has an international baccalaureate program there and they're working well. And the thought was that it would attract… problem is that it hasn't attracted enough kids into that

program." Smrekar (2009) confirmed this in her findings. She asserted, "Patterns of resegregation in magnet schools are clear and compelling" (Smrekar, 2009, p. 210). When magnet programs are placed within traditionally-zoned schools, the result is often a worsening of within-school racial isolation (Diem, 2010).

The hope is that the magnet program at Riverside will have a somewhat different impact, since the students who reside in the school's attendance zone live in less-affluent neighborhoods and the magnet program has attracted more middle-class students and families, the overall student population will become more racially and socioeconomically diverse. However, this increased school-level diversity will likely have little impact on true integration because there will still be de facto classroom-level segregation. Ms. Vaughn explained how the magnet program impacts students' schedules:

> The magnet students and the students who are zoned for Riverside who want to be a part of the academy/magnet, they have to apply as well. And we look at their GPA, their [standardized test] scores and their behavior and if they meet the academic requirements and the good citizenship, which is the behavior, then they're all in. And they all have a chance to take the same electives, we don't separate the magnet students from the non-magnet students. They'll all have classes together.

Ms. Vaughn's description of the magnet application process reveals examples of the neoliberal discourses I found in the data. On the surface, any student can choose to apply for the magnet program, however, certain forms of capital, e.g. test scores, grades, and

transportation, are required to access those choices. These are some "mechanisms that stack the cards against so many children" (p. 94) that Finn (2009) talked about.

Welner and Spindler (2009) had similar findings in their survey of post-*PICS* policy environments. They found that when special magnet programs were created in schools with a high percentage of non-White neighborhood-zoned students, like Riverside Middle School, significant attention was paid to attracting White students to that school. They concluded, "An "integrated" school serves no purpose if mostly White students are enrolled in special programs while primarily non-White students are enrolled in the school's general programs" (Welner, 2009, p. 60).

It is important to consider both macro- and micro-level reasons why the magnet programs in Morgan County have further perpetuated segregation in schools. At the macro-level, the application process represents the first barrier to providing equitable access to magnet programs for all students (Andr√©-Bechely, 2004). In order for their child to be considered for the magnet at Riverside or any other Morgan County school, parents must submit an online application between November and February and be able to provide daily transportation for their child to and from the school. Students who reside within the school's attendance zone who wish to be part of the magnet program must complete the same application, though transportation would be provided. Once enrollment is at capacity, eligibility for the magnet program will then determined by a lottery. The lack of transportation services, along with the complicated application process, has historically limited the participation of families in magnet programs in Morgan County primarily to those from middle-class backgrounds.

Another way in which macro-level policies restrict the potential for magnet programs to promote racial diversity are the academic criteria for eligibility. Special Education teacher Carol Winters explained: "There are criteria for FCAT levels, the parent has to provide the transportation, so you are looking at typically a more… studious person with parental support at home which is not always who we have had in the past here." Compounding this phenomenon further are state mandates that limit access to magnets to students who meet high testing, GPA, and behavioral requirements. So as a matter of policy, the magnet and non-magnet students are not segregated from one another. As Ms. Winters explained, "…the currently zoned students who are here and that will be here next year, yeah, some of those who will be coming to Howard anyway, they all have a chance to take the same electives".

However, in practice, the state and district policies that govern access to magnets do result in stark classroom-level segregation within the school. Ms. Winters explained, "If you're a level one reader, you have two hours of intensive reading a day…And so, the kid who is the low [scoring] kid doesn't get to access it not because of any other reason other than state rule". As a result of these policies, classroom-level segregation is intensified because magnet and non-magnet students do not have classes together.

This phenomenon is consistent with Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspectives on education policy that assert that school desegregation strategies, like intradistrict magnet programs, are promoted only in ways that advantage White students. Ms. Vaughn shared her perspective of how this was happening at Riverside because of their magnet program:

> We have some who are zoned for Riverside but maybe their parents weren't excited about sending them here who are bringing them because we're a magnet

now. There are a few of those and I think that's going to grow in the future, I think the surrounding neighborhood when they really catch on to what we're doing…that we're getting full, I think they will start sending their kids back. That's what we predict, we predict an increase in zoned students.

Ladson Billings (1998) explained, "The dominant logic is that a model desegregation program is one that insures that Whites are happy (and do not leave the system altogether)" (p. 21).

The macro-level policies in place that create barriers to the benefits of school diversity set the stage for the micro-level interactions that stakeholders described in their interviews. Teachers at Riverside Middle School repeatedly mentioned how this classroom-level segregation impacted the school climate. They used the term "school-within-a-school" to describe the lack of opportunities students have to work with and learn from their diverse peers. Classroom-level segregation becomes a reality because magnet and non-magnet students do not have classes together because of scheduling constraints. This finding is consistent with Diem's (2010) claim that magnet programs found within neighborhood-zoned schools are not effective in achieving desegregation objectives, and that they "can produce racially isolated classrooms even if the school is considered diverse at the building level" (p. 37).

At Riverside, most non-magnet, neighborhood students will not have elective classes and have fewer opportunities to interact with students involved in the magnet program. Janet McQueen, a Riverside parent who also works at the school explained the misgivings some teachers had about the potential for the magnet program to further segregate the student body:

> I think there were people who were concerned that it might detract from some of our socio-economic… there were some teachers who might have been concerned that some of the kids who wouldn't be able to be in the magnet might get left out but we tried to include them in all of the different opportunities, that's why we're not separating segregating magnet students from the rest of the student body. They're all going to be in classes together. Now, of course, the magnet students will be in all honor classes as part of the requirement.

This also illustrates how the visual and performing arts magnet program will further segregate students because only students who would otherwise qualify for honors classes are eligible to participate.

Teachers' perceived tensions about how parent involvement and family-school engagement opportunities will change once the magnet program is in place at Riverside Middle School provide additional examples of micro-level disconnections between policies that have the potential to increase school diversity and their implementation, which seems to further entrench segregation within the school. Teachers at Riverside were aware that many of the parents of incoming magnet students have misgivings about the neighborhood students who attend school there. Ms. Vaughn explained, "We have some who are zoned for Riverside but maybe their parents weren't excited about sending them here who are bringing them because we're a magnet now… they're afraid because of our reputation to send their children here. So, the magnet is helping with that segment".

Repeatedly in interviews, teachers at Riverside Middle referred to incoming

parents of magnet students as "helicopter parents," who are feared to be overbearing and distrustful of the school.

> The ones that we've met are very involved, they have to be, especially if they're willing to drive their child across the county… They will probably be definitely be more communicative with the teachers on their children's progress and their grades, a lot of them want to make sure that their child is still going to be challenged because some of them are coming because they don't feel like their child is being challenged… is the curriculum rigorous enough on top of, they want to be involved in all of these cool visual and performing arts electives.

Further, since the school's future in large part depends on sustaining increased student enrollment, teachers feared that the administration would feel pressured to cater to the parents of magnet students, and might ignore the needs of the rest of the school. Ms. Winters explained, "I think that administration, at least the top level of the administration is going to be focused on keeping a segment of our population happy".

Two of the intended goals of the magnet programs in Morgan County Schools and at Riverside Middle relate specifically to promoting diversity and equitable educational opportunities. They state, "Magnet programs will promote student diversity through choice," and "Magnet programs will enhance equitable access for all students to high quality education" (Services, 2012). However, neoliberal policies such as high standardized test score qualifications and limited transportation offerings governing access to magnets serve to limit the actualization of these goals. The end result is that

magnet programs like the one at Riverside have resulted in further-entrenched racial and socioeconomic isolation at both the school and classroom levels.

Transfer policies

In addition to magnet programs, Morgan County Public Schools has a multitude of transfer policies that allow students to transfer to more racially diverse schools and out of smaller urban, predominantly Black schools. In our first interview, Riverside special education teacher Carol Winters candidly explained, "People in the world can yap about it all they want… but the races do not live near each other. So you're either going to force it or you're going to have White schools, Black schools, and Hispanic schools". Opportunity (AYP) Scholarships and A-B Transfers are two examples of policy measures that could potentially support increased racial diversity in schools by allowing students to transfer out of small, urban, poor-performing schools.

However, in order to take advantage of these transfer policies, students must travel further away from their own neighborhoods in order to attend schools that are less racially and socioeconomically isolated. In and of itself, simply attending a more diverse school further from home does not improve the educational opportunities of students who transfer out of their neighborhood schools, and in fact, the data reflected that it created new problems including emotional and behavioral difficulties, and less-connected parents.

Considering stakeholders' descriptions of their experiences through a critical lens reveals neoliberal discourses of choice that commodify learning in the form of outcome data. While past research has shown the academic benefits to students from high-poverty

neighborhoods attending less racially- and socioeconomically-isolated schools, stakeholders' perspectives reveal other costs when students aren't able to attend their neighborhood schools (Clotfelter, 2005; Rumberger, 2005). In the following section, I describe stakeholders' perspectives on the impact of these transfer policies, as well as other circumstances that take students away from their neighborhood school, on the overall educational experiences and opportunities of students and families, in the hope of shedding light on the tensions between the pursuit of racial balancing as a policy objective, while providing supportive educational opportunities to all students and families.

Opportunity, or Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), transfers are offered to those students and families who are zoned to "failing" public schools to attend higher-performing schools in the district. The schools in Morgan County that most often earn failing grades are located in high-crime neighborhoods with mostly Black, Caribbean, or Caribbean-American residents. Tara Ferguson, a Riverside teacher, described how the impact of Opportunity Scholarships on a handful of low-performing high schools, "there has been a lot of movement with the…family schools and the high school. You see a lot more racial balancing in high school because due to failing [school] grades and they will provide transportation for some people, I think…you see a lot more kids moving into Oak Grove, Boulevard Heights [more affluent neighborhood schools]…" .

Majority-to-minority, or A-B, transfers are another policy strategy in place in Morgan County that can be used to increase racial balancing in schools. With this type of transfer, non-White students who are assigned to schools with high non-White student populations may transfer to schools with student populations that are greater than 40%

White. Stakeholders reported that these were getting more difficult to obtain since only a handful of schools were chosen by non-White students, and those schools were operating beyond their capacities. As Tara Ferguson explained, "those [A-B transfers] are getting harder to get all the time. Okay, because it's pretty full if you're wanting to go to Boulevard Heights or Idyllwild or Oak Grove, and frankly, you're not going to find many White kids who want to go to Apple Valley or Morgan Hills".

Once students leave their urban neighborhood to attend schools higher-performing schools in more suburban neighborhoods, they often feel isolated at their new schools. Allison Tolbert, the Springfield Primary Counselor, explained, "when they leave this neighborhood they are stigmatized and stereotyped. 'Oh, you come from the inner city, you come from Springfield'". Leslie Ragsdale, the music teacher at Springfield, described how the bus drivers talk about the kids that come from the Springfield zone, "there have been a few that have been less than welcoming you hear them talk about 'those Springfield kids,' but they're not 'those Springfield kids" they're your kids now."

Ms. Ragsdale's words are echoed by Roberta and her husband Michael, who I met one afternoon during one of Springfield's weekly parent events. They have three sons, and a fourth on the way. After the event I offer to help by serving juice and graham crackers to the children while parents and teachers chat. Roberta's and Michael's second son, Andrew, is a first grader at Springfield, and their oldest son, Charlie, is a third grader at a nearby elementary school. He is one of the children who eats breakfast and catches the bus every morning from Springfield. After I pour him some juice, Charlie asks me to look over the math homework he's just completed. As I sit down beside him, he

confesses, “I wish there were no such thing as the [standardized test]. I am so anxious about it.” All I can manage to say back is, “I know *exactly* how you feel.”

A little while later, I had the chance to talk with Roberta, so I asked her about how she’s been involved at the boys’ schools. Roberta explained that she attends the events at Springfield when she can, but that it is difficult since she is in nursing school and works weekends at a nearby theme park. She hadn’t been able to make it to Charlie’s new school yet because “it’s not so easy to get across town here.” She goes on, “Mr. Cevallos gave me his cell phone number at Open House. He gave it to all the parents, said we should call him any time about anything. At [Charlie’s school], when I did go one day to talk to the teacher, they told me to fill out an application, and that one of the assistant principals would call me to make an appointment with the teacher. It was ridiculous.”

Once students leave their neighborhood school, either because of a transfer, or as is the case at Springfield, students graduated from the primary grades, the teachers voiced their concerns about an increased potential for behavioral and academic difficulties, as well as a decrease in these students’ family engagement at the new schools. They also described what they perceived as the isolation and alienation some students experience when they move on to older grades. Megan Gates, a teacher at Springfield, recounted:

> It was said by an administrator to one of our faculty members, ‘You know, your kids cause us a lot of trouble here’ and so I still think that there is a prevailing attitude out there that our kids are the reason that school grades may be lower in some of the partner schools, there is a perception that our kids are trouble makers and that’s pretty pervasive.

Other Springfield teachers, staff, and parents expressed similar concerns, and make an effort to stay connected to students in order to provide support and stability.

Ricky Cevallos, Springfield's principal, alluded to this tension between Springfield and the surrounding elementary schools during our second conversation. He explained that one of his priorities for the school as a whole was to "strengthen our relationships and bonds with our sister schools… in helping them meet the needs of our students and our families." Hearing this from both teachers and administrators at Springfield caused me to reflect on previous studies of outcome data from racially diverse elementary schools (R. A. Mickelson, 2005). Although research has shown that both Black and White students tend to obtain higher standardized tests scores in racially and socioeconomically diverse classrooms, these outcomes may have a social and emotional cost.

Morris (2008) emphasized the tensions faced by Black students who transfer to predominantly White schools "where many of them are academically tracked into low-level classes, marginalized, deculturalized, and disproportionately disciplined" (p. 726), and asserted that policy measures should focus on improving the quality of schools that serve predominantly non-White students, rather than focusing solely on increasing school-level racial diversity.

One of the main reasons why students from small, urban schools like Springfield face tension at their new schools is because of their academic needs. Lauren Fielding, who teaches kindergarten at Springfield, explained, "They see our kids coming to their school as, 'Wow, they're going to drive our [standardized test] scores down'… and they

just see the number on the kids' foreheads, they don't see the potential of the kids and what they can do for those kids".

Ironically, when I spoke to Springfield parents after one of their Great Starts Breakfasts, they described concern about whether their children would get as high-quality an education at their next schools. Donna Allen explained,

> When she is done with second grade she leaves. But see, she could have gone to Broad Street Elementary one day of the week to a gifted program and I'm like "No way"…I told Ms. Freeman… There ain't even no thinking about it, she's staying here. You've got a teacher now who is got the masters degree and the documentation to do the gifted program. We'll work it out. She's staying here.

Board Member Betty Hocking also expressed confidence in the ability of small urban schools like Springfield to meet the needs of the families it served, but for different reasons. She said,

> There is that perception you're going to get this better education over there. If you're a struggling child, the resources you need are in the struggling schools, when you go to the high performing school, the resources you've come to expect at your home school are not going to be over there.

Donna Allen and the other Springfield parents I spoke with expressed no doubt that their children were receiving a top-quality education at their school. Similarly, Betty Hocking described the impact of support services available at small urban schools like Springfield. So the sentiment is the same - Springfield is a school that meets the needs of the children and families it serves, but the underlying discourses are very different. This is just one

example of how neoliberal discourses permeate the language used by individuals on all of the rungs of the socioeconomic ladder.

Compounding this problem is the reality that many of the schools students transfer in to do not have the resources and programs that are available in smaller, urban, neighborhood schools. As a result, students find it that much harder to be successful, and parents find it that much harder to stay connected once they leave their neighborhood schools. Ms. Hocking described this issue:

> And what also happens is, unless the parents have a way to transport children, the bus goes over there once in the morning and comes over once in the afternoon so there's no opportunity to get immersed in the social activities at the school.

Stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and Board Members, all raised similar concerns about how they felt that families' physical proximity to the school had a direct impact on parent involvement, and therefore, on the overall quality of students' education.

Summary

In their Unitary Status Agreement, Morgan County Public Schools stated that one of its objectives is to "avoid re-segregation of schools and ensuring appropriate racial balance in school enrollment district-wide". Two policy measures in place to help meet this objective are magnet programs and transfer options. The data regarding stakeholders' perspectives on these policies created to mitigate racial segregation revealed that although participants saw some value in avoiding racial segregation, the most important factors in maximizing educational opportunities for all students are schools that are close to students homes and neighborhoods, and small enough so that meaningful relationships can be maintained between school staff and students' families.

The data reflected a strongly-held belief by stakeholders that small, urban, neighborhood schools were better able to meet the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students and families impacted by poverty. Further, the data made clear that participants valued that sense of connectedness and engagement over the overall diversity of the school.

This finding complicates the findings of Smrekar and Goldring (2009) in their study of enhanced-option, high poverty schools in Nashville. They found that school-level stakeholders were frustrated that the support structures available in their schools did little to enhance student learning or improve economic opportunities for families: "…despite smaller class size and an array of social and health support services on site, the penetrating and punishing effects of neighborhood poverty overwhelm these efforts" (p. 189).

These differences in findings might be explained, at least in part, by the timing of the studies. The stakeholders in Smrekar and Goldring's (2009) study, understood the well-documented impact that socioeconomically diverse schools have on the academic growth of students from high-poverty neighborhoods since their study occurred just after Nashville's unitary status declaration, prior to which busing was used as a desegregation measure. My study also took place shortly after Morgan County's unitary status declaration, but unlike Nashville, it had not experienced a similar change in student assignment policy. The stakeholders in my study hadn't previously experienced socioeconomically diverse schools, therefore, their perspectives may have been limited by their own experiences.

Considered in isolation, each of these scenarios can be problematic. Previous research (Clotfelter, 2005; Rumberger, 2005; Wells, 2005) has documented that the overall socio-economic status of a school has a greater impact on achievement of students from high-poverty neighborhoods than any other factor. However, removing students from their neighborhood schools, via policy measures such as magnets or other transfer policies, creates additional difficulties.

Engaging Families in Schools of all Sizes

The benefits of some kinds of family engagement on educational outcomes are well-documented (Allen, 2007; Smrekar, 1996; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). Numerous studies have "found a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement. This relationship holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds, and for students at all ages" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 24). Critical characteristics of effective family-school partnerships include a focus on how parents can support their children's learning at home, involvement opportunities that are linked to student learning, and programs that nurture respectful and trusting relationships between school staff, families, and community members (Allen, 2007).

On the surface, every participant expressed the importance of family engagement to student success. But just beneath surface-level readings of stakeholders' accounts, I found two major disconnections between policies and practices, between beliefs and actions. The structure of these disconnections parallels those of the previous section and can be thought of as macro-micro relationships. The first disconnection is large-scale,

and relates to the district's plan for student assignment. The second disconnection concerns the complex relationships between families and schools.

In the following section, I explore these two sources of tension between the belief that family involvement plays an important role in student success, and the kinds of policies both at the school and district level that help and hinder it. The data made clear that although all stakeholders claim to value parent/family involvement, tensions arise when the structures and resources that support that involvement were at odds with economic imperatives. Additionally, the nature of the relationships between school staff and family members was shaped by school- and district-level policies related to student assignment.

District-level stakeholders, including two Board members, one attorney, and one director, all reported that family involvement was crucial to student learning. They also expressed support for neighborhood schools, and understood how neighborhood-zoned schools had the potential for maximizing family engagement. Betty Hocking, a School Board Member representing an affluent portion of the district, explained, "everyone wants the very best for their child and in my opinion, there's something to be said about neighborhood schools. And it's much easier to volunteer at the neighborhood school that is five or fifteen minutes away from your house than the school that's thirty or forty minutes away." Neighborhood schools may allow family members opportunities to be more "involved," assuming that if the school is closer to home, parents and family members are more likely to visit or volunteer at school. However, Goldring et al. (2006) cautioned, "there is little evidence about whether a return to neighborhood schooling under unitary status provides benefits to students and whether those benefits are equally

distributed among all students" (p. 337). Further, small, urban, neighborhood schools are not as economically viable as larger schools.

The disconnect between stakeholders' values and student assignment policy stemmed from the tensions that arose when what was right for kids and families was at odds with what was best for bottom lines. The model for ideal schools in Morgan County consisted of "larger prototype schools that use an educational framework that promotes efficiency." According to Morgan County's TASAP grant application, the creation of small, under-enrolled urban schools occurred for a number of reasons: (1) transfer policies allowed children whose race was the majority in their attendance zone to transfer to schools where their race would be a minority; (2) high crime rates in those neighborhoods had forced families to vacate; (3) aging populations; and (4) "upper mobility in minority populations, which led to relocation to the suburbs." Additionally, in the throes of the economic downturn in 2008, larger schools become more appealing in order to maximize funding. Considering these discourses of economic efficiency as they apply to student assignment policy, school choice, and school closures reveals the neoliberal practices and ideologies that produced the conditions that made small urban schools like Riverside and Springfield economically unsustainable in the first place.

Ms. Hocking explained: "we were originally looking at losing I want to say it was between 113 million and 200 million dollars in operating money so… if we closed a small school, we were going to save a million dollars on every small school we closed". In 2008, part of a large federal technical assistance (TASAP) grant was the proposed closure of seven predominantly Black, small urban schools. Two of those seven schools were the sites for this study.

The sociopolitical contexts in which these school closure debates occurred cannot be ignored. The declining student populations in urban schools like Springfield and Riverside do not occur in isolation. District leader Phillip Price, claimed that the proposal to close the small schools was "about economics," simply that these schools "had a problem recruiting students". However, Lipman (2011) explained, "Under-utilization of school buildings is not simply a natural process of demographic shifts. Declining school enrollments are socially produced in the nexus of capital accumulation and the cultural politics of race and class in specific places" (p. 224).

The claims made by both Betty Hocking and Phillp Price about how the school closures were solely "about economics," along with their assertions that the small neighborhood schools themselves were to blame for their own under-enrollment because of their inadequacies at recruiting students illustrate the neoliberal notion that market mechanisms are preferable to state interventions. The proposal to close the small schools and transfer the students who attended them to larger, more "efficient" suburban schools is an example of what Harvey (2005) termed the neoliberal practice of "accumulation by dispossession," which involves redistributing capital away from the poor and working classes to the economic elites.

Though the Morgan County school closures were touted as cost-saving measures, the community outcry against them was so strong that the Board of Education finally agreed to keep them open for at least the next five years. Teachers and parents were among the most vocal in opposing the school closures. As Springfield teacher Megan Gates described:

> we had to fight for our lives… they wanted to close us down and what we tried to explain to those folks that were making the decision is that this is a unique school, it has an unique place in the community, it's been here forever, since the early 1900's and it's a neighborhood school. And our parents walk their children to school. Moving the children out of the neighborhood would mean less parent involvement…less community participation, less community support.

Megan aptly stated that parents are so involved in their children's schooling, in part, because of its longstanding role in the community, and its proximity to their homes. Springfield mother Catherine Brown echoed the same passion for the school: "[Springfield has] been here for so many years, now you want to close it and send our kids way off. We want something here and it was the same way with other stuff they tried to do to us."

The ways in which Megan Gates and Catherine Brown described their passion for Springfield and the surrounding community, the need to "fight for their lives" against the "stuff they tried to do to us," can be interpreted as acts of resistance against the hyper-individualistic neoliberal economic and political conditions that created the under-enrollment that put Springfield in danger of being closed.

While family engagement would have certainly suffered if Springfield had been forced to close, the family engagement dynamics surrounding Riverside's proposed closure took shape differently. In the previous section of this chapter, I presented stakeholders' perspectives on how the creation of the magnet program at Riverside was meant to bolster enrollment, as well as enhance family engagement, among the incoming

participants in the magnet program. However, when the school closure discussions began, many Riverside staff and parents suspected that parent involvement at another local elementary school was a major factor in the potential closing.

Parents whose children attended neighboring Freemont Elementary School were outspoken about their desire to shut Riverside Middle School down, and use its building to create a K-8 Language Academy School. In all of my interviews with Riverside staff and parents, the Freemont parents were discussed. Carol Winters gave her appraisal of the situation:

> Freemont primarily wants this building. Freemont Elementary is right over there, they want the building. They want to be a K-8, which is the new thing and they're language academy or language magnet so that's one of the things that parents can get their kids into Freemont, they don't live around here. And they didn't like it but then their child had to come to Riverside….okay? They wanted it to be, that this was, K-8, Freemont… And so, it was really…going to be become, you know, a little white magnet school… Business-wise, Riverside is under-enrolled. Okay, is there a way to reconfigure it so that it gets more kids? Yeah, I'm going to be in fine arts academy and hopefully people are going to want to send their kids here…but…you know, it felt icky.

Had Riverside been shut down to create a Freemont K-8 Academy, many of the lower-income neighborhoods currently within the Riverside zone would have been reassigned to other schools.

The proposal that Freemont create a K-8 Academy on the Riverside campus can be understood as an example of the neoliberal urbanism described by Lipman (2011), which has lead to community destabilization, increased school violence, and weakened family and community participation in schools in cities like Chicago and surrounding areas. Tara Ferguson, a teacher at Riverside, could sense immediately how if the Riverside neighborhood students were sent to other schools, their safety might be in jeopardy. She explained:

> People think it's a joke but in this area there is a lot of gang activity and they were now going to be sending our kids from one part of the neighborhood across and through streets of another part of the neighborhood and it was literally not safe for them to be walking like that because kids who live here are affiliated with this and kids that live here are affiliated with that….and they're sending [them] across gang territory….nobody was thinking about those kinds of things.

Previous research (Lipman, 2011) documented the negative impacts, such as increased drop-out rates and school violence, that displaced Riverside students likely would have suffered had their school closed and they had been transferred to schools further away from their neighborhoods. Tara Ferguson went on to explain how ground-level stakeholders like teachers were able to see the human implications of the proposed school closings in ways that policymakers appeared to ignore. "Teachers were really mad about it, I think more of moral/ethical standpoint. When you looked at it, it was so obvious, it was so obvious…they were cutting out the kids." My data made clear a disconnection between the stated beliefs of district stakeholders that family engagement and

neighborhood schools are valued, and the proposed small school closures in the name of economic efficiency.

Small neighborhood schools like Springfield Primary and Riverside Middle play pivotal roles in maintaining community stability, and school closures have rippling effects reaching far beyond school walls (Lipman, 2011). The impact of these schools on the surrounding communities was palpable in all of my interviews with teachers, parents, and school administrators. Allison Tolbert, Springfield's counselor, explained:

> If Springfield were to close… my feeling is that there would be great grief in this area about that and then, followed by that, there would be anger, and the anger would be "One more time you're giving us a second class option at the Great American Dream and the opportunity for our children. The obstacles [our families face] would not be changed by changing schools. The parental access for their involvement in their child's education would be diminished. I don't know how you can have a better education when you don't have parent involvement and you don't have some of the other obstacles removed".

When Morgan County considered the school closings, I was surprised to learn that Katrina Stewart, the Board Member that represented Springfield, and the only Black Board Member, was actually in favor of the school closings. She opined that the school closures would improve the educational experiences of students.

In the midst of the debates, Board member Katrina Stewart visited Springfield for a parent meeting. Allison Tolbert, the school counselor, described Ms. Stewart's message to the Springfield audience:

> [Katrina Stewart said,] "Let's get a new school. Springfield deserves to have a new building. Let's close this old thing that was built in 1926 and let's move our kids over to downtown or…" and it was almost as if it were a, "You deserve to have a better place for your kids"…but that wasn't exactly right on because what that meant was that parents wouldn't have access to the programs, to the kids, because there is no transportation and it didn't necessarily mean that it would remain a neighborhood school.

While I don't disagree with the fact that Springfield could use a facelift, I found it striking that Ms. Stewart did not equate the strong connection between the school and the families it served, and the location of the school itself. Megan Gates, a Springfield teacher and college instructor, described the visit to me during our first interview. She said:

> [Katrina Stewart] had the idea that building new schools was better for the community. And our parents actually…I wish you could have been there…because our parents stood up…wonderful people who are not used to speaking to a crowd… would say things that would make your heart bleed because they didn't want their school to be closed… [We] want[ed] our parents to come and become educated about what was about to happen to their school…and my students from my college class…gives me goose bumps still…all came and they took care of the children so their parents could go to the meeting with Katrina Stewart to tell her that we didn't want the school to close.

Later in the interview, she went on to conclude, "It was a very difficult time for our

parents to hear that because here was a Black woman, a leader, telling them, "You don't know what's best for your kids, I do"".

If the schools had closed, the students who attended them would have been bused to larger, more cost-efficient, suburban schools, at the expense of family involvement. Morris's (2009b) notion of "communally bonded schools" captures what Springfield Primary and Riverside Middle symbolized for the families they served. Megan Gates summed up the complexity of the issue: "it was a very political thing and I understand why they were doing it and I understand the inefficiency of our school but I also understand the…things that our school does that you can't measure with efficiency and it's just beyond belief."

School-level stakeholders at both of the research sites believed that smaller schools like theirs allow teachers and school staff to foster and maintain long-term relationships with students and families. These relationships developed over time through authentic, often informal, interactions between individuals who shared a common commitment to their children's learning, not during one-shot curriculum nights or "Muffins for Moms" sorts of events. When asked about how he was able to cultivate these relationships at such a high-needs, high-poverty school, Ricky Cevallos, principal at Springfield, explained:

> It all starts with a one-to-one relationship. What occurs every morning at arrival time and every afternoon is that we have staff interacting positively with parents, staff that are not judging families. If people come to pick up their kids in their PJ's or a million tattoos, who cares, who cares, who cares. We want you here, we're happy to see you, we love that you're part of our Springfield family and

> we're going to work together. So the way that plays out is parents and teachers aren't fighting each other, they're are hugging each other, kissing each other, having conversations about their child.

In a follow-up conversation, Ricky explained how teachers are able to forge these connections: "there are lots of hugs, lots of smiles and lots of communication that occurs in the morning before school, during school, at dismissal time, home visits, where we go into some very…interesting settings and we model just staying focused on the child". By focusing on their common investment on the success of their child, teachers are able to connect with parents and family members without judgment or pretense.

Small schools like Springfield Primary and Riverside Middle were able to provide their students and families a sense of community and belongingness. Similar to Morris's notion of communally-bonded schools (Morris, 2009b), the teachers and administrators at the schools in this study, claimed to have developed supportive relationships with families that enriched students' school lives.

Tara Ferguson, a teacher leader at Riverside, explained: "teachers have a tendency to know more students than just the ones that are in their class and the administration has a tendency… to be able to build relationships, know who the students are, when there aren't that many". It seems overly simplistic, that smaller schools are better able to meet the needs of students and families, but the data repeatedly revealed the importance of these close ties. Tara summed it up when she said, "…being a small school, knowing everybody, whether you teach them or not… the family atmosphere, it's just a great environment for the kids, for us. It just always has been so amazing. I always feel like I am home".

Janet McQueen, a Riverside staff member and parent, expressed a similar appreciation for the relationships she and other parents have with the teachers and staff at Riverside. She said:

> And you have the family oriented feeling where you can go to the teachers and have a personal conversation with them about your child or about anything about yourself with the open door policy, you just come in and talk to them and everything…you know, is one on one and they will help you as much as possible in any situation. So, I appreciate that.

While Riverside teachers talked about how having a smaller student population allowed them to maintain connections with parents, particularly with students who experiencing academic or behavior difficulties, they also expressed concern that once the magnet program started the nature of the relationships between teachers and parents of students in the magnet program might change in order to cater to the families who had chosen their school. In the following section, I explore teachers' and parents' perspectives on home-school partnerships.

The Nature of Home-School Partnerships

Allen (2007) made clear the need for relationships and interactions between families and schools to be based on a strong sense of mutual trust and respect – that these are two-way streets. Stakeholders at Springfield, but not at Riverside, described those types of relationships and interactions. The data showed a few reasons for this. First, the parents of students involved in the newly-formed magnet program were described by teachers as "helicopter parents," and were thought to be over-involved and distrustful of

teachers, while teachers expressed the desire for the parents of neighborhood kids to be more involved at school.

When I asked Ms. Vaughn, a Riverside parent, about her perception of how parent involvement at Riverside would change once it was a magnet, she mentioned how she thought teachers would have to adjust. She said, "I think they'll have to get used to having a lot more emails and phone calls from parents checking on their children… asking "Why this or why that?" and so year they're getting ready."

On the other end of the spectrum, teachers described the parents of the neighborhood kids at Riverside as being "under-involved." They described feelings of disappointment and powerlessness with trying to reach out to neighborhood parents, particularly when students were having academic or behavior problems at school. Tara's frustrations were apparent when she talked about reaching out to neighborhood parents:

> A lot of parents, what it is is that they're too…I don't want to say embarrassed but almost self-conscious about coming to the school for anything because normally in their mind, if they're coming up here the kid's in trouble otherwise they don't need to come up here. Sometimes they don't feel like…properly equipped, I guess, you could say, to participate in a parent/teacher conference or a parent night or any type of like little nights that we have here…they either don't have the clothes or they feel stupid when they come, a lot of the parents have told me before, like, "Y'all are talking and I don't even know what you're talking about"…It's like a self-conscious issue so I go to them, I go to the rec centers over [downtown], pop in, see the kids, drop off supplies and stuff when I know

> projects are coming up and the kids go to the rec centers to work on their homework and projects on the weekends so I can drop stuff off and try to show my face around, you know, the parents start trusting me then…it works out.

This sentiment was echoed by all of the teachers at Riverside I spoke with. They were concerned that magnet parents would be catered to, viewed by administrators as customers to be kept happy, while neighborhood kids and parents would be overlooked.

Summary

The data showed that although all stakeholders at the school and district levels claimed they valued home-school relationships, those relationships took shape in a variety of complex ways. The disconnections at the macro level revealed themselves when district leaders expressed the value of neighborhood schools and family engagement, while at the same time describing Morgan County's plan for larger prototype schools based on a model of economic efficiency, and proposing to close up to sixteen schools located in the downtown area. On the micro, or school-based, level the disconnection between the stated beliefs that family engagement was crucial seemed to contradict the practices of teachers at Riverside Middle School.

Community Connections In and Out of School

School-level stakeholders expressed that they valued a sense community within schools. In the data, notions of community were discussed in two ways. The first referred to the ways in which the school forged a sense of community with the neighborhood in which it was located. Smaller schools can be more responsive to the students, families, and neighborhoods they serve, but small schools are far more expensive to operate, and therefore, unfavorable to district-level leaders. This happened

at both research sites, but Springfield's efforts were more school-wide and part of the school culture, while at Riverside individual teachers valued this sense of community, but there were no school-wide initiatives. The second way in which community was discussed referred to the sense of community felt within the schools. At both schools, the principals played key roles in the sense of community felt within the school.

I use the parameters of the term "community" from Henderson and Mapp's (2002) report on studies of family engagement, which included, "the neighborhood or the places around the school; local residents, who live in the area and may or may not have children in the school, but have an interest in the school; local groups that are based in the neighborhood" (p. 10).

Schools do not exist in a vacuum. They impact, and are impacted by, the communities in which they are located. Parents, teachers, and school-level administrators I interviewed expressed the importance of a sense of community within their school, as well as maintaining mutually supportive relationships between the school and its surrounding community. Morris's (2009b) construct of communally bonded relationships between schools and the communities in which they were located helped me conceptualize what I saw in my data.

Though Morris's use of the notion of communally bonded schools applied specifically to Black students and families, I found it to be useful in considering how stakeholders at both Springfield and Riverside described the sense of community they felt both within the school and with their surrounding communities. According to Morris, communally bonded schools are pillars in their local community, employ educators that

affirm the cultural backgrounds and experiences of students, reach out to families and students, and have principals that ensure students and teachers have the resources they need to succeed.

During both of my conversations with Ricky Cevallos, principal at Springfield, we talked about the structures in place at his school that allow more meaningful connections between the school and community to be cultivated. He emphasized the importance of creating a sense of community within the school where those relationships are valued. In our first interview, he said, "You find people who really feel that way, that have a track record of being personable and friendly and approachable and who can interact with families, all families, regardless of their situation." What stood out for me here was the absence of neoliberal discourse about outcome data, i.e. test scores, and his focus on relationships.

Megan Gates, teacher at Springfield explained that Ricky Cevallos, the principal, encountered resistance from community members and staff regarding personnel decisions he made when he became principal. She said:

> He's received his share of criticism because a lot of the teachers when we first came here were African-American and many of those folks are the folks that have moved on and he's brought in a lot of young, middle class, White teachers and he's been criticized from the county's perspective and from the neighborhood, you know, "Why do we have these White teachers around?" Why? Because they are the best and it's not because of the color of their skin, it's just who we have right now that are the best. And I think once the parents became comfortable

that's it's not just "White woman," it's a "White woman who loves your kids and who wants what's best for them" and who is working really hard and happens to be really smart. I think that made a difference, yeah. But that takes time to prove that to people, unfortunately.

Morris (2001) might take issue with Mr. Cevallos's personnel decisions. Morris argued that "the conceptualization and implementation of educational policies – particularly those with serious implications for African American education – are incomplete when they ignore the perspectives of Black educators" (p. 596). I did not ask Mr. Cevallos explicitly about the teachers who have been hired, or who have left Springfield. However, based on the interview data collected in this study, I argue that his staffing decisions not only honored the perspectives of Black students and their families, but also created a community of educators and parents who maintained critical perspectives on issues related to social class injustices, and created spaces for the deconstruction of neoliberal discourses impacting their lives.

In the following section, I will explore how maintaining this sense of community, both between the school and surrounding neighborhoods, and within the school itself, is strained by the current policy environment. At Springfield, relationships between the school and the surrounding community are part of the fabric of the school. While at Riverside, though individual teachers have taken it upon themselves to create positive relationships with students' families, these efforts are not replicated school-wide.

First, I'll show how Springfield Primary School has supported their community by cultivating responsive relationships between school and families. On the other hand, though individual teachers at Riverside Middle School reach out to students and families

in their community, there has been little school-wide initiative to engage the families of the surrounding neighborhoods. Next, I'll examine the within-school communities at each site. What both schools have in common are passionate staff members who are committed to helping students achieve their full potentials. At Riverside, however, school stakeholders also described some frustrations regarding this within-school community that shed light on the complications of these relationships.

School and Surrounding Community

At Springfield Primary School, teachers and administrators believe that their jobs extend far beyond meeting students' academic needs. The Kingswood neighborhood in which the school is located is one of the poorest and crime-ridden areas of the city (AreaVibes, 2012). Yet on any given day, one might see parents having breakfast in the Family Service Center while participating in a workshop on saving energy, teachers walking through the school's parking lot to catch up with a parent for an impromptu conference, the school counselor facilitating an afternoon parent-child play time, or the principal visiting a student's home to check on a sick family member. Megan Gates, who has been teaching at Springfield for nine years explained, "This school has always been sort of a safe haven for the community. Teachers have never been bothered, you know, you drive up and down the streets safely, teachers are always respected."

Principal Cevallos recounted to me how one parent explained the impact the school had on the community. He said, "Everybody knows the saying 'It takes a village to raise a child,' but it also takes a school like ours to raise this village." This statement captures the dynamic relationship between Springfield Primary School and the families of the Kingswood community that it serves.

The small size of the school is an important factor in how it maintains such positive bonds with the surrounding community. At approximately 280 students, Springfield Primary School is one of the smallest schools in the entire district (https://www.ocps.net/fs/governmental/pupil/Documents/Enrollment%20Summary%2012%2017%202012.pdf). School stakeholders repeatedly expressed how it was this small size that allowed the school to forge some strong ties with the community. Ricky Cevallos, the Springfield Principal, explained:

> One of the big advantages that we have is that we do have a small school with relatively low number of students where our staff can really get to know the needs of our children and pull and marshal our resources together to meet the needs of families and students that we kind of know in an intimate way… Even though the stories are very intense we're still able to know the children at a different level and know layers about what could be affecting their learning because you just simply have fewer numbers to deal with. I think that serves us well or serves any high needs school well.

In fact, Springfield is so small, and serves such a tight-knit community, there isn't a need for school buses to transport children to and from their homes. It is truly an anomaly in a city where there are over 81,000 elementary-aged students enrolled in the district's public schools.

With their small numbers, Springfield uses its resources to help develop the potential of the community surrounding it by providing a number of support services available to parents and families. There is a Family Service Center on the school's campus that provides healthcare and social services, along with a number of weekly

workshops and events. During my visits to Springfield, the Family Service Center was a gathering place where I had the opportunity to talk with parents about their experiences there. Principal Cevallos explained the mission of the Family Service Center:

> We provide opportunities to develop capacity, you know, that's the big push here is developing capacity within our families, not so much a hand out but a hand up. We want to give them the skills and show them the resources that are available within their community, advocating for them, but more importantly, show them how to advocate for themselves.

One of the routines that sustains the community at Springfield are the Great Starts breakfasts that are held every Thursday morning in the school's Family Service Center, a separate building located at the back of the school's campus. These weekly events are open to all members of the community, and during my visits, several of the attendees were parents and family members of children who no longer attended Springfield. Every Thursday morning, Allison Tolbert, the school counselor, and other staff members prepare a nutritious breakfast, which is preceded by a workshop or discussion. The school counselor explained how these Springfield topics are determined:

> All of the programs that we do are programs that are geared toward empowering…it's not to tell parents that we know and they don't know anything…Our task is to support the parents' role in helping their children to succeed and to partner with them in ways that will permit mutual learning, not just between parent and child but between teacher/parent/child.

During my first visit to Springfield, I attended the Great Starts breakfast. That morning, the facilitator was a local community activist who led a discussion on tenants' rights, an

issue of vital importance in the Kingswood neighborhood where the school is located. Other topics discussed during the Great Starts breakfasts have included energy conservation, nutrition, and physical fitness. As a researcher, the Great Starts breakfasts were my entrée to building rapport with Springfield parents and other family members.

The sense of empowerment that activities like Great Starts breakfasts cultivate creates a climate of mutual respect between school staffers and the community. Ms. Tolbert described how they have impacted her:

> I would say that as a middle class Caucasian woman, that I have been transformed by the lives of the men and women with whom I've had the privilege of having weekly breakfasts with on Thursdays in discussion groups. What I feel that is so remarkable…is that the stereotypes that one can have about people of poverty…really are that stereotypes.

Parents and community members who attend Great Starts explained how these events have benefited them as well - not only in providing them with useful information, but also in them trusting the school's faculty and staff. As one parent explained:

> Mr. Cevallos is a wonderful principal. Staff is excellent, you couldn't have a better principal and teachers here. It's gets emotional because you want somebody because half the day you're with your child but these are the people who are with your child the majority of the day and you have to have…you have to be comfortable, you know?

Another parent described how the Great Starts breakfasts had helped her with a number of issues:

> Wow, we go through so many…every week there is…how to budget… and how

> to save energy…and things about the children, safety, the air and the trees…there are so many of them, every week it's very good topics that are useful… And last week we were talking about ADD and that was helpful for me because just the week before that, I was talking to Ms. Tolbert about my child…making sure they tested her and so the follow up came up and she was able to get information and we were able to have that discussion and get information about it. Any topic, Ms. Matthews, Ms. Tolbert, they'll get the information for you and they will have the discussion about it.

During the school closure debates, the Great Starts breakfasts became a forum for Springfield parents to share their concerns and plan ways to take action. The school counselor, Ms. Tolbert, recalled:

> Parents also attended the Board meetings and it became very clear through the Great Starts breakfasts that mean and women were getting this [possible school closure] as a real social justice issue, not how it was painted, but a social justice issue in terms of "You're casting off our kids… you're going to just make them disappear into some place else and I won't have any way to be able to follow my child's education and don't tell me that I can follow their progress on a computer. I don't have one… I know that the last six and a half, seven years that I've been meeting with parents on a weekly basis for our Great Starts breakfasts, I have come away… with a greater understanding of what it's like to struggle to achieve something small such as getting a photo I.D., getting a bus pass.

Riverside Middle School also has a long history in serving its community. Established in 1926 as the city's first high school, it was also the first high school to

desegregate. In 1952, it became a junior high school serving seventh through ninth grades. It later became a middle school, containing grades sixth through eighth in 1987. Located in an area of downtown known for art galleries and fine dining, there are not many families that live in the neighborhoods closely surrounding the school.

When I began collecting data for this study in the summer of 2011, Riverside was the third smallest middle school in the district, with approximately 650 students. Many of the Riverside teachers I spoke with mentioned the benefits of teaching in such a small middle school. Tara Ferguson, who has been teaching at Riverside for five years, said, "I just feel small schools… for obvious reasons… you can be more productive… fewer kids in your class, you have more opportunities to interact, you know? … I understand the while monetary whole value, like I really do". However, its small size had made it economically unfavorable at the district level and had put it high on the list of potential school closures during the previous school year.

During my third visit to Riverside in March 2012, the principal, Dr. Adam Rogers, reported that there had been more than 300 applicants from around the district for the upcoming 2012-13 school year, the first for the magnet program. As I discussed in earlier sections of this chapter, the magnet program was conceived of first as a way of increasing enrollment to ward off school closure discussions, in order to control their own futures. Dr. Rogers explained, "We felt like we were on a ride we had no control over. The morale in this place could not have been any lower".

Within-School Community

Another way in which participants discussed a sense of community referred to the community within the school. Participants at both research sites described the principal

as playing a key role in sustaining this sense of community. The principals at each school stressed the importance of recruiting and retaining teachers who were committed to the schools' mission. Ricky explained,

> I feel like the most important thing I do at the school is put teachers and a staff members, all throughout the campus that are caring, dedicated and who can build relationships with students and families and who will work very hard at their craft and who will work with other teachers in a collaborative manner.

Teachers echoed the reciprocity of these relationships, and expressed that they felt the commitment that administrators had for the school. Carol Winters explained, "I really do like how small it is, I do… I'm treated very nicely by my administration… I don't mind coming here… I think we have a nice racial balance and I feel like we really are… offering a good education to the lower socio-economic kids."

Stakeholders at Riverside also described a number of factors that eroded the sense of community within their school. When it came to students, teachers repeatedly described Riverside as having a "school within a school," because tracked scheduling kept student groups separated. Though Riverside was in the process of becoming a magnet school for the visual and performing arts, most of the students admitted to the magnet program were not from the neighborhood zone.

Summary

This section on community within each school, and with the surrounding community, illustrates the underlying thread of my findings, that parents and school level stakeholders value connectedness and engagement over diversity and test scores when it comes to student assignment policies. Megan Gates explained, "Everybody is saying

what they've always said and pretty much that is, "I want my kids to go to school close to my home." School stakeholders and parents repeatedly expressed that the policy focus should be on providing quality school experiences for all students in their own neighborhood, and that the disadvantages of pursuing diversity across community boundaries far outweighed the potential benefits.

The ways in which my participants described this sense of community brought together some of the major points from the previous sections of this chapter. First, the difficulties with pursuing diversity through policy measures such as magnets, transfer opportunities, or other voluntary programs has done little to enhance the schooling experiences of non-White, non-middle-class students because they are often not able to access these special programs because of restrictive admission requirements. Moreover, if they do take advantage of one of them, they must leave their neighborhood community for school, and family and student engagement suffers. Second, as small schools, Springfield Primary and Riverside Middle can be responsive to the needs of the families and communities they serve. They give families and school staff opportunities to form more meaningful relationships that are based upon helping students be successful in and out of school.

Reflections on Themes

"I don't know, I try not to really worry about any of that stuff. But…I remember the frustration of…the people who were making the decisions who had never been out here before." – Marie Corbett, second grade teacher at Springfield Primary School

This quote from a passionate educator early in her career captures the sentiment I heard echoed from the parents, teachers, and school administrators, and illustrates the

disconnect between policy makers and those impacted by policy. In this chapter, I have presented three overarching themes revealed in stakeholders' perspectives on, and experiences with, the impacts of student assignment policies. These themes can be understood as disconnections or separations between student assignment policies, and those individuals involved in creating and implementing them, and those individuals who are impacted most closely by them.

In the first section, I presented two policy measures in Morgan County that were in place, at least hypothetically, to lessen the potential dangers of racially- and socioeconomically-isolated schools, magnet programs and transfer options. The data suggest that although participants saw some value in these measures to avoid racial segregation, the most important factors in maximizing educational opportunities for all students are schools that are close to students homes and neighborhoods, and small enough so that meaningful relationships can be maintained between school staff and students' families. Megan Gates, one of the teachers at Springfield Primary, contended, "When we took the schools out of the neighborhoods we really removed the last vestige of humanity in the Black neighborhoods…unitary status is like a lot of other things we do…it's sort of a paperwork exercise to make ourselves feel better."

By using a theoretical lens informed by cultural political economy (Dumas & Anyon, 2006), I interrogated my previously held assertion that the only racially and socioeconomically diverse schools could provide the quality educational opportunities guaranteed to all children by *Brown*. This interrogation led me to a more nuanced understanding of the potential power of small, urban neighborhood schools. Reflecting back, my beliefs relied too heavily on the theory and research I was reading, and forgot

for a moment the messiness of the realities of children and schools. These issues have "Yes, and," the sorts of possible solutions, rather than the Black-White, "either-or," kinds of plans. As Morris (2009a) reminded me, "Educators, researchers, and policymakers must research, understand, and improve the schools these children presently attend, and not where they believe the ideal setting for the children would be" (p. 282). I would urge us to take this idea a step further, and deconstruct what we mean by "ideal," and whose "ideal," gets to be pursued. None of this is possible, however, without including the voices of stakeholders, either whose children attend those schools, or teachers and administrators who work there.

The data revealed the importance of family engagement and the connectedness both between the school and surrounding communities, as well as the sense of community felt within each school. In the next chapter, I explore the implications for future student assignment policy considerations in unified school districts, and offer policy recommendations based on the findings presented here.

CHAPTER 5:

NEXT STEPS

"So, I guess that's the long answer to a short question. I don't think it was…you know, unitary status is like a lot of other things we do…it's sort of a paperwork exercise to make ourselves feel better… So, I'm not sure what we've done with the whole unitary status thing other than they wanted to get free from some of the mandates. " - Megan Gates, Springfield Primary School teacher

Summary of Findings

The purpose of my study was to explore the discourses used by stakeholders, i.e. parents, teachers, school administrators, and district leaders as they talked about their experiences and perspectives on issues related to student assignment policy. In Morgan County specifically, the issues related to student assignment policy included school choice policies, school closures, and parent involvement. My study highlighted the experiences with, and perspectives on, these student assignment policies by those who were most closely impacted by them. I conducted semistructured interviews with all participants, examined select policy and newspaper documents, and used a qualitative case study methodology to analyze the data.

My findings revealed the tensions between the discourses used by stakeholders to describe their values related to student assignment policy, and the policies themselves, and those involved in creating and implementing them. Allison Tolbert, the school counselor at Springfield Primary School summed up these tensions when she stated, "The

policy makers and people who are distant from one on one with children or on a daily basis need to come and refresh their spirits and be with children… they deserve to be treated as decent human beings." This sentiment, along with the quote from Springfield teacher Megan Gates at the opening of this chapter, highlight the need to create spaces for dialogue between all stakeholders about how to create or enhance access, equity, and equality in the educational opportunities offered to all children.

All stakeholders used discourses that expressed the favorability of neighborhood schools that were responsive to the needs of the communities they served over racially diverse schools to which children would be bussed. The school district leaders and School Board representative in this study used a discourse of economic efficiency in order to justify the school closures as necessary cost-saving measures. These discourses neglect the human and community costs, including increased transportation costs to schools that are further away, decreased parent involvement, and reduced services offered to children and families:

> Studies indicate that schools located outside a neighborhood reduce the extra-curricular activities of students as well as the active involvement of parents… Enlarging class sizes, eliminating instructional programs… and providing fewer adult parenting classes are all examples of potential results of closed neighborhood schools that will likely have a negative impact on educational performance. (Lytton, 2011, p. 3)

Further, I argue that neoliberal social and political practices such as neighborhood gentrification, and school choice measures, created the circumstances in which small

urban schools like Morgan County's Springfield Primary and Riverside Middle became under-enrolled to begin with.

The disconnections between the discourses used by stakeholders at the district level, and those in the schools and communities centered on three key themes. The first was that racial desegregation should be pursued through policy measures such as voluntary choice programs like magnets and transfer options. While these measures may increase school-level racial diversity to a degree, they do little to improve the quality of school experiences for non-White, non-middle-class students and families. Further, access to magnet programs is limited by overly complex application procedures, academic requirements, and transportation needs. Additionally, transfer policies that are in place to subsidize diversity measures result in students traveling further from their homes to attend school, which severely limits parent involvement. The common thread braided through all of these voluntary choice options is neoliberalism. Evidence of this can be found in the illusion of choice offered by the various options that are only available to students with the necessary resources and capital to access them.

The second key theme revealed in the data was the importance of home-school relationships. All stakeholders maintained the significance of these. However, I found that there were disconnections between the discourses used by stakeholders and policies and practices that took shape in multiple ways. The disconnections at the macro level revealed themselves when district leaders expressed the value of neighborhood schools and family engagement, while at the same time describing Morgan County's plan for larger prototype schools based on a model of economic efficiency, and proposing to close

up to sixteen schools located in the downtown area. On the micro, or school-based, level the disconnection between the stated beliefs that family engagement was crucial seemed to contradict the practices of teachers at Riverside Middle School.

The third theme I presented was that Morgan County parents, teachers, and school administrators valued a sense of community, but district leaders did not echo a similar value. The disconnection of valuing a sense of community brought together elements of the two previously presented themes. Although stakeholders at both school sites emphasized that having a smaller school enabled them to be more responsive to the needs of the families and communities they served, voluntary choice policy options like magnets and Opportunity Transfers not only helped cause the under-enrollment that put them up for closure discussions, but also deepened the classroom-level segregation problems, and made home-school connections much more difficult to maintain. Additionally, these smaller urban neighborhood schools represented a stark contrast from the larger prototype schools that Morgan County touted as the ideal. In the next section, I will reflect on what it might mean if these disconnections persist.

Implications for Stakeholders

This study has implications for future discussions of how student assignment policies might involve a broader range of school and community stakeholders. What readers of my research believe are the implications, gets at what they believe the nature and purpose of school to be. For me, the words of Allison Tolbert, Springfield Primary School's counselor come to mind:

> What I think we need to do is we need to send our most precious resources out into the world with the best preparation that we can provide and that means from

> parenting and supportive parenting to prenatal care to health care to dental care to… and is out of the realm of public schools but to spiritual care… to help us look at the world as a place not to be exploited but to be living together in a peaceful that gives everybody opportunity.

As I look back at how I became interested in this study, I am reminded of Morgan County's initial TASAP proposal for involving community members in the design and implementation of their own District-Wide Rezoning Project (The School Board of Orange County, 2009). Initially, I thought my dissertation would be a study of how these stakeholders were involved with the design and implementation of a new student assignment policy landscape in a newly-unified large urban school district. The fact that the Morgan County Board of Education shied away from the project, even after the United States Department of Education funded it, signals not only the need to involve these key individuals in educational policy discussions, but also the intensely politically divisive implications of them.

If the current political discourse surrounding the student assignment policy landscape continues on this course, schools will remain segregated at both the classroom and school levels. But perhaps more significantly, student assignment policy conversations will continue to have a "traditional Black/White dichotomy" (Morris, 2009a, p. 274), ignoring the need to enhance the schools in urban neighborhoods that serve predominantly non-White, non-middle-class students and their families.

In the current policy landscape in Morgan County, the neoliberal rhetoric of "educational choice," limits access to quality schooling experiences to a select few, and turns its back against small urban schools like Riverside and Springfield in favor of larger

suburban schools that favor "economic efficiency," over family engagement and community responsiveness. In the following section, I offer my recommendation for next steps in informing the discussion of student assignment policy options.

Recommendation

As I consider what recommendation I might offer for both future student assignment policy discussions as well as future research, I am reminded of the need to think beyond the realms of the educational policy discourse. As Anyon (2006) emphasized:

> Education policy has not addressed the neighborhood poverty that surround and invades urban schools with low expectations and cynicism. Education policy has not addressed the unemployment and joblessness of families who will have few, if any resources for further education of their children, even if they excel in K–12 classes. And education policy—even in response to state financial challenges—has not addressed the political economy that largely determines low levels of city district funding. (p. 55)

At the same time, we, as educators and as citizens, need to consider what policy measures can be taken to enhance the educational opportunities and schooling experiences for all children. In doing so, I put forth two recommendations for future student assignment policy design conversations. My recommendations are aimed specifically for Morgan County, and I highlight stakeholders' perspectives from the data that support and contextualize them.

My first recommendation for Morgan County's future student assignment policy considerations is one of the three recommendations offered by Justice Kennedy in his

concurring and controlling opinion in the 2007 *PICS* decision, which urged school districts "to devise student attendance zones to encompass racially defined/segregated neighborhoods" (Smrekar, 2009, p. 210). This is not a remedy that would be effective in every newly-unified district, but it does have potential in Morgan County because of its size and demographics.

Stakeholders at both school sites, as well as district-level leaders in Morgan County, mentioned that redrawing attendance zones could potentially remedy some of the problems related to racially- and socioeconomically-isolated schools, as well as under-enrollment and resource inequities. During my second interview with Ricky Cevallos, the principal of Springfield Primary, he explained the balance between the benefits of having a small school and the need to remain economically viable within the school district. He said, "I think any school leader in a small school setting realizes that it costs more money to operate smaller schools. I'm hoping that that they would consider the expanding the attendance zone for our school."

Teachers at Riverside Middle School had similar views about redrawing attendance zones in order to balance enrollments as well as student populations across racial and socioeconomic lines. In my second conversation with Tara Ferguson, I asked her what she thought the Morgan County School Board and other district leaders should consider when they revise their student assignment policies. She explained, "My big thing when the small school closure came up… don't close small schools, rezone the entire district because some schools are smaller because their areas are smaller…"

Elizabeth Freeman, a first grade teacher at Springfield echoed a similar opinion when I asked what policymakers should consider in future student assignment policy

debates. She said she believed that Morgan County could redraw the attendance zones and still maintain community schools. She said, "[They should be] filling up schools that are little… Principals know every kid that way and this, that and the other and it's again, that neighborhood school thing again, that community school."

In addition to increasing the enrollments of small urban schools, redrawing attendance zones in Morgan County could also more equitably balance resources at each school. Springfield Primary in particular, located in the high-poverty, high-crime Kingswood neighborhood, might stand to benefit from this since school funding is based in large part on the property tax based of the neighborhood it serves as well as the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-priced lunches. As Megan Gates explained:

> I'd rather we just have the schools everywhere…schools are not equal…you know, look at our school. I mean, we have rats in the building for gosh sakes, I mean, it's just not fair the way schools are funded because they're funded based on tax dollars and…it's not spread out equally.

My work in the field, however, made me realize that redrawing attendance zones in Morgan County would cause a heated debate. Board Member Betty Hocking explained how she thought that might play out, and described the potential for parent opposition:

> Now if you think it's ugly when you think about trying to close a school, just magnify it when you start moving children around just for the sake of moving children around to a facility. So at some point you have to have that discussion of where it is, the breakeven point, and the harder decision for me is even if you assign children to a school will they go there if they perceive it as not where they

want their children and they don't want their children to go, will they take some school choice option or put them in private school to avoid going to some school and so, on the surface it sounds very easy but you're dealing with human nature and you're dealing with parents' most prized possession, which is their children.

Ms. Hocking's explanation echoes the neoliberal discourse that, when perceived through a CRT lens, that when White middle-class parents are unhappy with public education, they will simply "walk with their feet," and exercise their "choice options," by taking their children out of public school.

What I found in my data is that stakeholders from a variety of vantage points claim that they value neighborhood schools. However, how neighborhoods are defined, and where the boundaries are drawn, continue to ignite strong opinions on both sides of the socioeconomic spectrum. The fact that Morgan County covers such a vast area geographically, and has such a diverse population, makes the recommendation that they reconsider where attendance zones are drawn in order to balance enrollments across schools even more compelling. The district leaders in my study also agreed that redistricting should be considered in Morgan County's very near future, as was evidenced by the original plan for their TASAP grant, which sought to engage community members in the entire redistricting process. However, at least for now, Morgan County has not begun to explore the issue.

Conclusions

In recent news, the Chicago Public School System (CPS) has proposed to close 100 "failing" neighborhood schools and replace them with 60 charter schools (Bryant, 2013). A teacher strike followed, demanding that the discussion be reframed

around childrens' educational needs and opportunities, and away from market-driven neoliberal discourses about "effective" schools and "value added" teaching. Though there were no formalized strikes in Morgan County when it proposed to close Springfield Primary and Riverside Middle Schools, the outcry against the closures was loud enough to keep them open.

This study explored the discourses used by a variety of stakeholders, including parents, teachers, administrators, and school district leaders, as they described their experiences and perspectives on issues related to school choice. In Morgan County these issues included school closures, choice options, and parent involvement.

The data revealed a number of neoliberal discourses embedded in the language used by participants. Neoliberal motives were revealed as stakeholders described the proposed school closures at both Springfield Primary and Riverside Middle, and further, neoliberal policies created the schools' under-utilization to begin with. At both schools, gentrification had changed their neighborhoods' landscapes, which led to the under-enrollment of the schools. Within the schools, high-stakes test scores were used to commodify students, which at Springfield resulted in the school being turned in to a primary learning center, exempt from the tests, and at Riverside creating a magnet program that attracted students who met high test score admission criteria from across Morgan County.

Looking forward, our attention should be focused on working against the neoliberal practices that have undermined the realization of the aims of *Brown* for five decades: "Schools are supposed to equalize opportunities across generations and to create democratic citizens out of each generation, but people naturally wish to give their

own children an economic head start or political protection, and some can do it. But some can't. The circle cannot be squared" (p. 37). We, as a nation and as individuals, need to work toward closing the gap between what we say we believe in terms of educational reform, and what we are willing to do to achieve it. What is "good" for us as individuals, may not be the same as the "common good." By creating an increased number of spaces for multiple voices in policymaking, these neoliberal policies and practices can be countered.

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