THE GREAT BLACK HOPE: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT CHARTER SCHOOL PERSPECTIVES AT UTOPIAN ACADEMY FOR THE ARTS

By

ANDREA NICHOLE SMITH

(Under the Direction of Sheneka Williams)

ABSTRACT

Since the conception of education in the United States, schools have been the battlegrounds for equal opportunities among African American students. In response to the underachievement of African Americans in education, a rise in market-based policies under the guise of school choice have emerged and serve as popular solution for improving the educational opportunities of African American students. As a result, researchers (Frankenberg, 2011; Orfield, 2005) note that failing public schools are the civil rights issue of our day.

This qualitative case study examined the perceptions and motivation behind the choices of 12 African American parents who their children enrolled in Utopian Academy for the Arts charter school in Clayton County, Georgia. The purpose of this study was to examine charter school perspectives of twelve African American parents who have children enrolled in Utopian Academy for the Arts. Specifically, the questions that were addressed included: 1) How do African American parents who have decided to enroll their children in a charter school make decisions about schools for their children? a) What are African American parents’ perceptions of charter schools? and b) What are African American parents’ experiences of having children
enrolled in Utopian Academy charter school? In order to answer the research questions for the study, an interpretive approach was used to examine and understand African American parent perceptions, experiences and decision-making concerning enrolling their children in Utopian Academy charter school.

Findings from this study shed light on a specific set of African American parents’ perceptions of charter schools and placed value on the experiences of African American parents who enrolled their children in Utopian Academy for the Arts. Using a qualitative case study methodology, parental experiences were evaluated via a semi-structured interview instrument. Purposeful sampling of 12 African American parents was employed in order to align with the focus of the study. Their responses were evaluated using constructivist grounded theory methodology for sorting and categorizing data in order to identify emergent themes and patterns in the parents' reaction to the charter school experience.

INDEX WORDS: African Americans, education, common school, equity, equality, discrimination in education, capitalism, educational philosophy, oppression
THE GREAT BLACK HOPE: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT CHARTER SCHOOL PERSPECTIVES AT UTOPIAN ACADEMY FOR THE ARTS

by

ANDREA NICHOLE SMITH

BS, Georgia State University, 2008
MS, Georgia State University, 2011

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

ATHENS, GEORGIA

December

2015
THE GREAT BLACK HOPE: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT CHARTER SCHOOL PERSPECTIVES AT UTOPIAN ACADEMY FOR THE ARTS

by

ANDREA NICHOLE SMITH

Major Professor: Sheneka Williams
Committee: April Peters-Hawkins
           Kathryn Roulston

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2015
DEDICATION

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my mother, Michelle Sharpe. Her support, encouragement, and constant love have sustained me throughout my life. Thank you for always being my cheerleader and biggest supporter.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my amazing cousin and brother, Charles Sanford. Although his time in this world was short-lived, his life was not in vain. Thank you Charles for always being a positive force in my life and keeping me grounded.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Though only my name appears on the cover of this dissertation, a great many people have contributed to its production. I owe my gratitude to all those people who have made this dissertation possible and because of whom my graduate experience has been one that I will cherish forever. My deepest gratitude is to my advisor and committee chair, Dr. Sheneka Williams. I have been amazingly fortunate to have an advisor who gave me the freedom to explore on my own, and at the same time the guidance to recover when my steps faltered. Dr. Williams taught me how to question thoughts and express ideas. Her patience and support has helped me grow in both academically and professionally.

Special thanks to my committee members, Dr. April Peters-Hawkins and Dr. Kathryn Roulston for their support, guidance and constructive feedback. Their guidance has served me well and I owe them my heartfelt appreciation. Their insightful comments and constructive feedback at different stages of my research were thought-provoking and they helped me focus my ideas. I am grateful to them for holding me to a high research standard and enforcing strict validations for each level of research, and thus teaching me how to do research.

I am especially thankful to Dr. Elizabeth DeBray who first believed that I should apply to the doctoral program. Thank you for seeing something in me that I did not first see in myself. I am forever grateful for your encouragement and wealth of knowledge that has guided me throughout my studies at the University of Georgia.

The friendships and bonds that have developed over the course of my time in this program will be ones that I will forever cherish. A special thanks goes to Artesius Miller,
Beverly Harper, LaKesha Goff, and Farris Muhammad for offering their friendship and support as I navigated through this process.

Most importantly, to my parents and family, thank you for your continuous support and unconditional love. Mom and dad, you have always believed that I could reach my highest dreams and potential. Your support has served as a catalyst for my consistent strive towards my calling and purpose in life. Finally, I thank God for the strength and determination to begin and finish this task. May God continue to order my steps so that I may live a purposeful life.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of African American Education in the U.S. South</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A New Identity in Education</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Research Methods</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Dissertation</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segregated Public Schools: Pre-\textit{Brown}</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desegregation and African American Schools</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Costs of \textit{Brown}…Education Today</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The History of school Choice</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter School Evolution</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charters as Markets</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Parents and Charter Schools</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III CONTEXT OF THE STUDY</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Look at Georgia</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clayton County, Georgia</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utopian Academy for the Arts</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study and Research Questions</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of the Study</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Sources</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representation of Data</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating Constructivist Grounded Theory</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjectivity Statement</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Profile Overview</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro-level Themes</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme #1: African American Parents Recognize Traditional Public Schools as Sites of Oppression .......................................................... 92
Theme #2: African American View Charter Schools as a Way to Provide Better Educational Experiences for their Children .............................................. 95
Theme #3: Parent Advocacy and Support is Important in Order to Ensure the Success of Utopian Academy for the Arts .................................................. 97
Theme #4: Parents View Utopian Academy as a Catalyst for Future Success Among Their Children ................................................................. 101
Discussion of Emerging Theory in Relation to the Research Questions ....... 102
Research Question #1 ........................................................................... 103
Research Question #1a ....................................................................... 107
Research Question #1b ....................................................................... 110
Chapter Summary ............................................................................... 111

VI SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS ..................................... 114
Summary of the Study .......................................................................... 114
Discussion .......................................................................................... 116
“The Great Black Hope” .................................................................... 118
Hope Defined ..................................................................................... 120
Hope for a Return to Black Schooling and Values in Education ............. 120
Implications for Policy and Practice .................................................... 124
Future Research .................................................................................. 126
Limitations of the Study ..................................................................... 127
Concluding Thoughts ....................................................................... 129
REFERENCES ........................................................................................................................................... 132

APPENDICES

A  Gatekeeper Letter .................................................................................................................................. 142
B  Recruitment Letter .................................................................................................................................. 143
C  Consent Form ......................................................................................................................................... 144
D  Interview Protocol .................................................................................................................................. 147
E  Parent Couponing Club Observation Notes ......................................................................................... 148
F  Utopian Academy School for the Arts School Charter ...................................................................... 149
G  Eagle’s Nest School Newsletter ........................................................................................................... 151
H  Utopian Academy for the Arts School Mission/History .................................................................... 152
I  Utopian Academy for the Arts Student/Parent Handbook .................................................................. 153
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Charter School Debate: Proponents vs. Opponents</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Pro-Market Versus Social Conflict Theory</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Types of Charter Schools in Georgia</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Sample of Substantive Codes</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Personal Memos</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Kathy Charmaz’s Ground Theory Evaluation Criteria</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.1</td>
<td>Constructivist Grounded Theory</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.1</td>
<td>Ages of the Participants</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.2</td>
<td>Level of Parental Involvement Among Participants</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.3</td>
<td>Push and Pull Factors for Choosing Utopian Academy for the Arts</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The history of education in the United States abounds with double themes and purposes for education: schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship. Such opposing traditions have thrived in American society and were validated by the government and mainstream society. Particularly in the South, the education of African Americans has historically been synonymous to a dual system of education that is often characterized as sporadic and unreliable. Conceived as a means for great equalization, history echoes the intense disapproval of formal education for African Americans since the conception of the United States. Although African Americans encountered significant legal barriers and threats of death while trying to obtain an education, their yearning for knowledge and opportunities served as a catalyst for the establishment of successful African American schools. As a result, African Americans erupted from slavery with a philosophy of education and perseverance that served as a precursor to the establishment of universal schooling that would serve their needs and provide hope for a better life.

History of African American Education in the U.S. South

The laws that passed during the American Civil War and Reconstruction era strived to reverse much of the southern ideology that had dominated the South during slavery. Three amendments to the U.S. Constitution, the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth, paved the way for the freedom and enfranchisement of millions of African Americans.\(^1\) While both the thirteenth

\(^1\) While the 13th amendment abolished slavery and the 14th amendment guaranteed ex-slaves constitutional rights, it is the 15th amendment that expanded the franchise to all male citizens over the age of majority.
and fourteenth amendments were extremely significant in the quest for African American equality in the U.S., the fifteenth amendment served to provide a crucial and symbolic meaning for African Americans and their quest for equal education.

**The Fifteenth Amendment**

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Prior to this monumental piece of legislation being passed, African American men enjoyed a brief stint of participation in the electoral process. In 1870, Congress approved and passed the 15th Amendment, which granted African American men the right to vote (Haskins, 1998). While short lived, African American participation was at its highest ever in history. As late as 1876, black male turnout rates in Louisiana and South Carolina (the two states which have voting data by race) were 75% and 78% of the eligible population (King 2001, 2002).

The onset of political participation among African Americans brought representation in government positions. Foner (1988) notes, “In virtually every county with a sizable black population, blacks served in at least some local office during Reconstruction ... assumed such powerful offices as county supervisor and tax collector, especially in states where these posts were elective” (p. 32). In fact, African American representation in government was substantial to everyday life for all African Americans.

The growth in African American representation during Reconstruction resulted in redistribution, principally in the form of public goods. Education by far was the most important of the public goods, and the most sensitive to racial tensions. The period of education for African Americans in the South after the Civil War stood in sharp contrast to the period of slavery that mandated that African Americans could not be educated by law; a law that held strong support

---

2 This act is considered the most significant piece of civil rights legislation since Reconstruction. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in voting, public accommodations, public facilities, public education, federally funded programs, and employment.
from southern Whites, both rich and poor. However, the Freedmen’s Bureau and Republican state education superintendents viewed public education as essential for ex-slaves to gain human capital, as well as to help garner representation in government. It further meant that an educated African American population would also encompass an electoral block of voters who would favor the Republican Party and ultimately aid in the principle of state responsibility for public education.

**Self-Reliance and Support**

While northern private generosity and the federal government deserve credit for aiding the education of African Americans after the Civil War, the primary stimulus and sustaining force came from African Americans. Anderson (1988) highlighted extensive social activism among African Americans in areas to formalize education by former slaves. He further noted that former slaves were first among White southerners to campaign for a universal, state-supported education system (Anderson, 1988). In their quest for universal schooling, ex-slaves welcomed and often pursued the aid of the Republican politicians, the Freedman’s Bureau, northern missionaries, and the Union army. This uprising among former slaves, however, was the central threat to the planter rule and White southerner conceptions of the appropriate roles of school, church, and family in matters of education.

At this time, the South had some poor White children, but they were educated as a means of charity from wealthy White southerners through private means. State-funded education; however, was against the planter’s beliefs. These ideals stemmed from the belief that the state government should not interfere in education, and ultimately that the social caste system should remain in tact to ensure the ‘natural’ evolution of society (Anderson, 1998).

---

3 The Freedman’s Bureau was a Federal agency that was intended to solve many of the problems faced by newly freed slaves, such as securing jobs and housing, but was disbanded in 1868.
The Freedmen’s educational movement did not commence, however, without opposition. Postwar southern economic and social development was heavily influenced by the domination of the planter class. The planter ideology centered on an established hierarchical system that placed African Americans at the bottom with limited, if any land ownership. Anderson (1988) noted that in 1880, 75.4% of the South’s labor was in agriculture, and 40% of African Americans constituted the total agricultural labor force. Examples of African American laborers’ desire for education could be seen in their labor contracts that entailed ‘educational clauses’ between planters and ex-slaves. However, southern planters were fueled by fears that education of African Americans would mean the end of African American plantation labor.

Combined with economic, political, social, and psychological relationships among southern Whites, both wealthy and poor, these ideologies helped to establish a system of opposition to universal public education. To this end, former slaves broke sharply with the planters’ beliefs and instead formed relationships with Republican politicians that helped them to garner significant political influence in state governments. This rise in political affluence served as a catalyst for universal public education in the South.

Even before the Emancipation Proclamation and northern missionaries entered the South in 1962, African Americans understood the power of education and sought it by any means necessary. Without waiting for White encouragement and sponsorship, African Americans established, owned and operated African American schools, staffed them with African American teachers and raised funds from community efforts. Although African American educational initiatives were often in confrontation with powerful Whites, they were not powerless. Their faith in the power of education largely shaped many southern African American institutions. The African American agenda was highlighted in thousands of small choices such as African
American parents’ decisions on when and where to send children to school, decisions by churches and local communities to start new schools, and the decision to oppose outside philanthropy (Anderson & Moss, 1999).

The relationship between African American self-help and educational attainment in the South was further highlighted by former slaves’ efforts in Georgia. In December 1864, a committee of African American leaders met with Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and General William T. Sherman to solicit support for the education of Georgia’s African Americans. The end goal of this meeting was the establishment of an organized system of free schools. A year later, African American leaders formed the Georgia Educational Association (GEA) to supervise schools and districts throughout the state, establish school policies, and raise funds to help finance the cost of education (Anderson, 1988). Through this association, African Americans in Georgia owned and operated at least two-thirds of their schools. This accomplishment fulfilled the primary purpose of the GEA in that freedmen⁴ aimed to establish schools in their own communities that were supported entirely by African Americans. Additionally, Anderson and Moss (1999) further note that these beliefs and behaviors were further consistent in other southern states such as Louisiana, South Carolina, and Virginia.

Early African American schools were established and greatly supported by means from the African American community. Anderson (1988) outlines some schools that opened in the South such as schools in Monroe, Virginia in 1861 under Mary Peake, an African American teacher, and a school in Savannah, Georgia existed from 1833 to 1865 and was led by an African American teacher by the name of Deveaux. While many of these early schools lacked a lot of financial resources, many made great leeway in providing a blueprint for an education system that was structured and unique to their roots and values. Often, African American leaders in

⁴ Newly freed African American slaves in the South
southern states such as Georgia were critical of misconceptions that attributed the schooling of freedmen to the philanthropy of White northerners.

Without White support, African Americans were preemptive in establishing their own Sabbath and African American-controlled and operated schools, staffing them with African American teachers, and supplementing outside help with community self-help (Jones, 1978). In one instance recorded in the *Freedmen’s Record*, complaints were made about the tendency of African Americans who preferred to send their children to private African American-controlled private schools rather than to White-dominated free schools (Anderson, 1988). The ability to establish and control their own schools gave African Americans the opportunity to restructure their lives and establish their freedom. Although they were grateful for northern philanthropy, they resisted any efforts that threatened to undermine their own educational philosophy and self-reliance.

**Northern Philanthropy**

Northern private generosity and the federal government deserve credit for aiding African American education during Reconstruction, but the primary incentive and sustaining force came from the African American community. After the Civil War, the Freedman’s Bureau was established in the War Department in 1865 to undertake the relief effort and the unprecedented social reconstruction that would bring freed people to full citizenship. It issued food and clothing, operated hospitals and temporary camps, helped locate family members, promoted education, provided employment, supervised labor contracts, provided legal representation, investigated racial confrontations, settled freedmen on abandoned or confiscated lands, and worked with African American soldiers and sailors and their heirs to secure back pay, bounty payments, and pensions (The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 2014). The
department charged with overseeing education of northern missionary schools in the South raised funds, and recruited teachers who were both African American and White. In essence, the Freedman’s Bureau was a school governing organization that assisted various aid societies and schools that educated African Americans.

The local advocacy for literacy and elementary education among ex-slaves provided the grassroots foundation for the educational activities of the northern missionaries. Anderson (1988) points out an observation made by the Freedmen’s Bureau’s Superintendent, John Alvord. Alvord recognized the structure and tenacity that underlay the African American school campaign and (as cited in Anderson, 1988) noted, “They [schools] are growing into a habit, crystalizing into a system...more and more complete and permanent. Self-reliance is becoming their pride as it is their responsibility” (p. 15). While most White northern missionaries held preconceived notions about African Americans and their ability to establish schools based on the belief that slavery had completely dehumanized them, African Americans aimed to establish schools that would uplift them and be supported by state funds. Yet, in the midst of their independence, many African American schools still continued partnerships with northern philanthropic societies that often hinged on debates surrounding practical control and competing ideological debates.

In their quest to mitigate African Americans from the harsh realities of racism and provide an avenue for African American advancement, northern philanthropists miscalculated just how powerful White supremacy had become in the South. For example, Jim Crow laws served to reiterate the belief that African Americans were inferior to Whites. Further, the institutionalization of such beliefs provided a safeguard for southerners to justify racism. In the hopes of trying to form an alliance with the South’s upper class, White northerners were
deflected from their original aim to challenge racism through means such as liberal education and equal opportunities. Instead, they compromised with the South’s White supremacists to provide African Americans with what was believed to be an education for slaves that could fit into the scope of what would not be farfetched from slave work.

Anderson (1988) suggested that northern White philanthropists deliberately funded industrial education in order to pacify White segregationists by supplying them with a cheap source of manual laborers. He cited the story of John Davidson, who founded a high school in Georgia. Mr. Davidson sacrificed his own money to keep the school afloat, even mortgaging his home. When he later accepted much-needed financial support from Northern sponsors, he had to do so with the condition that the school’s academic curriculum be modified to a vocational one. By the 1880s, many White southerners realized that any attempts to eradicate ex-slaves’ school campaigns would be unwise and cause major African American resistance. They began to make amends with many northern Reconstruction-era education reformers. Since several southern Whites did not agree with the idea of universal education for African Americans, they instead placed focus on adapting the education system to the region’s traditional social structure and racial values. To this end, this compromise, the Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial education, was posited as the great compromise for ensuring education for African Americans and controlling the ‘race problem’ in the South.

The ‘Common’ School Movement

African Americans did much more than establish schools based on ‘self-help’ and support for their schools. In their quest to establish universal schooling in the South, their hard work and efforts helped to materialize a national common school movement by 1870. Started by Horace Mann in the mid-19th century, common schools were conceived in Massachusetts as a
means to ensure social and economic stability and patriotism. The concept of the common school for all people stressed many ideals. Chief among them was the need to create an institution capable of preparing students to contribute positively to the community and society as a whole.

In order to achieve this lofty goal, Horace Mann advocated three main ideas: (1) schooling should instill Protestant virtues in students; (2) community should be taxed to support the school in order to create a bond between the school and the community; and (3) a commitment to training those who teach America's youth (Urban & Wagoner, 1996, p.132).

Efforts made by the common school movement to educate the masses or be the “Great Equalizer” as Horace Mann hoped, proved great in theory, however, did not fulfill the promise of equality to groups other than white males, especially in the southern region of the United States. The “social control” arguments that were used to garner support of common schools in the North did not appeal to southern Whites. Laws such as *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) allowed schools to be segregated by race, setting the conditions for inequitable distribution of educational resources from the state government for African Americans and their schools.

**A Philosophical Compromise**

As freedmen struggled to build an educational pedagogy and philosophy that was different from the planter ideology and caste system in the South, a contradictory pedagogy emerged that paralleled with southern mores and values. Founded and supported by a northerner, Samuel Armstrong, and former slave, Booker T. Washington, the Hampton model served to avoid confrontations and to maintain existing social order in the South that did not challenge traditional inequalities of wealth and power (Anderson, 1988). Armstrong felt that African Americans should be disfranchised and do the laborious field work of which they were accustomed. He further felt that they should not involve themselves in any position in politics.
As a result, his collaboration with Washington, however, placed Washington and his school, the Tuskegee Institute, at the center of confrontation. Essentially, the “Hampton-Tuskegee” ideal represented the antithesis of the educational and social movement that ex-slaves began.

The Hampton-Tuskegee program did not go without criticism however. Debates predated and paralleled with those that are famously known between African American scholars such as W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington in the early twentieth century. Opponents argued that the model was apolitical, and was not designed to encourage African Americans to challenge the status quo. African Americans were offered a basic education that enabled them to return to their communities and support themselves within the system. Proponents of the model feared that if an African American school challenged the politics of the day, White citizens might refuse to allow it to open or would later shut it down (Anderson & Moss, 1999). All in all, this was not the classical type of education offered to many White students in the North. Highly educated African Americans such as W. E. B. Du Bois thought the Tuskegee model was too limited and did not support it. He argued for ensuring that the most talented students could get a full academic education to advance the race.

The Hampton model debates set the stage for the early twentieth century struggle over the proper education of African Americans. Centered on industrial education for African Americans, this reform encompassed a more powerful and well-organized movement than had the early missionaries and former slaves in the mid nineteenth century. The Hampton model had garnered huge support from northern businessmen and southern Whites. Additional support was also won in small areas of the African American community. In all, the success of this movement can be attributed to the ability of its supporters to orchestrate a well-organized campaign that kept with traditional southern ideologies.
A New Identity in Education

In the midst of institutionalized racism, emerged the identity and structure for African American schools. Researchers (Anderson, 1988; Horsford, 2011; Siddle Walker, 1996, 2000) provided contrasting accounts of African American education and their schools. The authors highlighted significant parent and teacher advocacy, and caring models that were used to educate African American students. Yet, the conception of a system for African American schools led to conflicting ideologies over the purpose of African American education and ultimately its place in a hegemonic society.

The *Brown* decision in 1954 marked what was heralded in education as the end of racial segregation in schools. Since that time, countless federal and district policies have outlined expectations such as busing and district and re-zoning to ensure racial diversity and the allocation of equal resources in schools. However, the era when courts were willing to force integration through mandatory busing ended in the mid-1990's as more schooling options for parents became popular on the education scene.

Recent studies continue to find that low-income and minority students still encounter inequities in learning, inadequate instruction and support, and lower expectations of their schools and teachers when compared to their White counterparts (Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). Haycock (2002) argued that schools overwhelmingly reflect the values of white, middle-class society. In Siddle Walker’s (2001) view, this is due to the mass amounts of African American educators who were displaced due to desegregation and the closing of African American schools. The racial achievement gap is further evidenced by disparities in school performance, test scores, graduation rates, higher drop-out rates for minority students, and college completion rates (Taylor, 2006).
Scholars (Frankenberg, 2011; Frankenberg & Lee, 2002; Orfield, 2004) note that failing public schools are the new civil rights issue of our day. To this end, much of the current discussion about school reform in the United States over the past two decades has shifted from one of equity to one based on excellence in the form of student achievement and high test scores. Much like legislation that began in the late twentieth century, the hope is still that federal involvement will assist with the issue of underachievement of African American students today.

The establishment of a system for all students regardless of race, creed, or class still presents issues that center on equity in public schools. Well over fifty years after the Civil Rights movement, civil rights activists are still trying to equalize schools; they are unsung heroes, understanding that minority children ultimately pay the price for decisions that are politically based. Whatever the case, history has shown that while African Americans have achieved much of what they wanted, they also have achieved little of the social vision for education that they originally hoped to sustain during the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s.

**Purpose of the Study**

Charter schools have been posited as the solution to failing schools -- particularly for minority and underprivileged students (Frankenberg, 2011; Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2009; Orfield, 2004). Despite the lack of evidence that proves that charter schools significantly improve student achievement, African American students make up 28.7% of enrollment for charter schools in the U.S. and that number is steadily growing (Georgia Department of Education, 2013). In particular, 34% of African American students make up the total charter school enrollment within Georgia, compared to 29.2% nationally (Georgia Department of
Consequently, the purpose of this study was to examine and understand African American parent perceptions, experiences and decision-making concerning enrolling their children in Utopian Academy charter school.

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question for this study was: How do African American parents who have decided to enroll their children in a charter school make decisions about schools for their children?

The following questions will also be considered:

1a. What are African American parents’ perceptions of charter schools?

1b. What are African American parents’ experiences of having children enrolled in Utopian Academy charter school?

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms were used frequently within this study. Aware that in other studies there may be gradations of the meaning of the terms than what is reflected here, the researcher preferred the following meanings for the terms:

**African Americans:** “Black” or “African American” refers to a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (Rastogi, Johnson, Hoeffel & Drewery, 2011).

**School Choice:** Refers to a parent’s ability to have educational options for their children’s schooling experiences whether in private, public, or homeschool settings (Kahlenberg, 2001; Townsend, 2005).

**Charter School:** A charter school is a public school of choice that operates under the terms of a charter, or contract, with an authorizer, such as the state and local boards of education. Charter schools receive flexibility from certain state and local rules in
exchange for a higher degree of accountability for raising student achievement. Charter schools are held accountable by their authorizer(s) for upholding the terms of their charter (Georgia Department of Education, 2015).

**Significance of the Study**

Numerous studies have highlighted the pervasive inequities of the U.S. public education system post-*Brown* that center on school budgets, curriculum, finance, teacher quality, among much more (Freire, 2000; Kozol, 2005, 2012). In addition, African American children have been tested, labeled, and stigmatized for dropping out when they could not meet societal standards for success. By exploring why African American parents chose charter schools for their children, this study provided some insights into hopes, dreams, and aspirations that African American parents have for their children. It further highlighted their understanding and perspective of what parents felt they needed to do in order to provide their children with an educational experience that they deemed appropriate to ensure their current and future success.

Findings that were revealed from this study shed light on African American parents’ level of satisfaction with public educational school options even with the landslide decision that made segregation of public schools illegal based on the *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) decision. One hundred fifty years after the adoption of the 13th Amendment that abolished slavery; one hundred fifty-three years after the 14th Amendment guaranteed equal protection under the law; and fifty years since African Americans were legally allowed to vote without laws that forbade them to do, it seems that African American parents are in search of more. Even though it is evident that African Americans have made gains in their quest for equitable education, there is growing dissatisfaction in the African American community regarding the traditional public
school options that are available to their children (Binder, 2009; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Johnson & Immerwahr, 1994).

This study placed value on the experiences of African American parents, and provided them a voice to discuss their decision to choose Utopian Academy for the Arts charter school over a traditional public school. It further provided a means for parents to stress their expectations and what they hope to accomplish by making such a decision. Armed with their answers, perhaps school districts and policymakers will be better able to serve African American children more effectively, and create policies that will take into account the experiences and expectations that African American parents have for their children in this education system.

**Overview of the Research Methods**

The illumination of processes and practices of succession through people’s experiences requires a qualitative case study approach (Stake, 1995). To aid in highlighting such experiences, the researcher employed a constructivist grounded theory method of data analysis to frame this qualitative case study. The researcher focused on the experiences of African American parents who chose Utopian Academy as an educational option for their child in order to gain an in-depth understanding about African American parent decision-making regarding charter schools.

Use of a constructivist grounded theory approach to data analysis allowed the researcher to focus attention on the underlying social process that might be occurring in the given context (Charmaz 2006, 2015), which was not immediately apparent, but emerged over time as the data was analyzed and theorizing began. The case was bound in Utopian Academy Charter School, a small middle school situated within Clayton County school district. It is the fifth largest school district in Georgia with an enrollment of over 50,823 students, and is ranked among the 100 largest school systems in the United States. Utopian Academy is one of three charter schools
within the school district. Purposeful selection of twelve participants enabled the researcher to gain in-depth knowledge about African American parents who have a child enrolled in Utopian Academy Charter School within Clayton County, Georgia (Maxwell, 2012). Participants who (1) identified as African American and (2) had a child enrolled in Utopian Academy for the Arts within Clayton County, Georgia were recruited to participate in the study.

Data collection took place in the form of one semi-structured interview with each participant as the primary source for data analysis. African American parents from Utopian Academy were recruited and took place in a one-hour interview. Upon completion of each audio-recorded interview, each interview was carefully transcribed. Secondary sources such as observations and documents were further used to describe historical and contextual characteristics of the African American parents in this study.

Data collection and data analysis occurred concurrently through the use of a constructivist grounded theory approach to the data. Data analysis began with initial coding as the researcher developed categories from the first interview and further reduced and recoded categories based on the rest of the interviews to follow (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). Throughout this process, meaning from the data was co-constructed between both the participants and the researcher as constructivist grounded theory views the researcher as subjective and important to the data analysis process. In addition, the researcher used memos to document her positions, ideas, and assumptions. Reflexivity, triangulation, and member checking were employed to ensure the credibility of the study (Charmaz, 2014).

**Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter one provides a general overview designed to help frame the study for the reader. Chapter one includes the following sections: introduction, statement of the problem, purpose of
the study, research questions, significance of the study, limitations of the study, and organization of the dissertation. Chapter two presents the theoretical framework for the study and reviews related literature that is significant to the study. Chapter three describes the political landscape in both Georgia and Clayton County regarding charter schools. Chapter four outlines the data sources, data collection, data analysis, researcher reflexivity, and criteria for ensuring quality of the study. Chapter five presents the findings of the study based on the data that was collected and analyzed. In Chapter six, the conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future research are presented.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

Racial domination was, from the outset, the most glaring flaw in the ideology of the American dream.... And that terrible irony, the simultaneous invention of American slavery and American freedom, has shaped American society every since. It has shaped its public schools as well (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003, p. 28).

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework of the study. In addition, a review of literature based on the educational history of African Americans in the U.S. South is highlighted in order to provide the context from which the utilization of school choice among African American parents has emerged. The charter school movement from both a national and state perspective will follow in order to illuminate the significance of the charter school movement since the first charter school law was passed in Minnesota in 1991. Though there are limited resources on the topic of African American parent utilization of school choice, an analysis is necessary in order to form a basis of comparison for the research findings and to substantiate the need and significance of the researcher’s study.

Theoretical Framework

Interpretivism

As educational researchers struggle with the implications of their research, the use of theories is often a ‘lens’ through which they can align their results and provide for better understanding of the findings. The theoretical framework of interpretivism is often one such lens. While it has become the ‘umbrella’ framework for other theories, this framework served as a means for the researcher to conduct research without predefined theories. Ultimately, the researcher allowed additional theories to emerge from the data.
The interpretive nature of qualitative research also acknowledges, “...that findings and reports are researcher-subject interactions” (Stake, 2010, p. 15). In qualitative research, the researcher cannot be totally separated from the research. Therefore, the researcher’s work was informed by an interpretivist paradigm (Lincol & Guba, 1985). Developing understanding and the development of a mid-range theory is an interpretation made by the researcher, informed by the data and ‘...is contextually situated in time, place, culture and situation’ (Charmaz 2006, p.131). Therefore, interpretations are a shared reality and a co-construction of a theory that is co-constructed between the researcher and the participants.

The researcher sought to gain insights through discovering meanings from her participants and exploring the richness, depth, and complexity of the African American parents who have enrolled their child in Utopian Academy for the Arts charter school choosers in Clayton, County GA. This perspective informed the following research questions:

1. How do African American parents who have decided to enroll their children in a charter school make decisions about schools for their children?
   a. What are African American parents’ perceptions of charter schools?
   b. What are African American parents’ experiences of having children enrolled in Utopian Academy?

Interviews were used a primary source of data. Documents, observations, and memos were used as secondary sources for data collection within this study. Corbin and Strauss (1990) highlight the importance of participants’ abilities to make sense of their world. In this way, the participants’ experiences were socially constructed and the various forms of data collection provide a lens through which they view their worlds. The use of multiple data sources further provided for a triangulation of data to ensure the credibility of the research. Figure 2.1 represents
the researcher’s interpretation of the Constructivist Grounded Theory position as conceptualized for this research. Overall, this framework permitted the researcher to define and build the theoretical progressions and research steps that reached toward her vision and ability to explain and understand how African Americans parents make decisions about their children’s schooling.

Figure 2.1 Constructivist Grounded Theory. A diagrammatic representation (Grounded theory tree of knowledge) of the authors’ view of the theoretical position that supports the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach. Adapted from Gardner, A., McCutcheon, H., & Fedoruk, M. (2012). Discovering constructivist grounded theory's fit and relevance to researching contemporary mental health nursing practice.

**Grounded Theory.** Grounded theory methodology employs a systematic set of procedures to inductively develop theory that is “grounded” in the data from which it was derived (Charmaz, 2000, 2006, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994, 1998). The ultimate aim of a grounded theory approach to data analysis is to produce new theory that is grounded in data collected directly from participants on the basis of their lived
experiences (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). The theory produced from grounded theory methodology is ‘grounded’ in practitioners’ real-world practice, is sensitive to practitioners in the setting, and represents the complexities found in participants’ experiences. Glaser (1992) states, “Grounded theory renders as faithfully as possible a theory discovered in the data which explains the subjects’ main concerns and how they are processed” (p. 14). Ultimately, the outcome of this study was the outcome of emergent theory “from the data that accounts for the data” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 157).

Grounded theory methodology includes the following characteristics: (a) simultaneous processes of data collection and analysis, (b) an inductive approach leading to conceptual understanding of the data, (c) pursuit of core themes early in the data analysis, (d) sampling procedures driven by constant comparative analysis, and (e) the integration of categories into theoretical frameworks (Charmaz, 2003, 2006, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 2009). “The comparative and interactive nature of grounded theory at every stage of analysis distinguishes grounded theory from other approaches and makes it an explicitly emergent method” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 163).

**Constructivist Grounded Theory.** Mills et al. (2006) emphasize that constructivist grounded theory is distinguished by (a) “the nature of the relationship between the researcher and participants,” and (b) “an explication of what can be known” (p. 2). In contrast to classical versions of grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory is described as “epistemologically subjective” and “ontologically relativist” (p. 6). A relativist stance accepts that theoretical analyses derived from the grounded theory process “are interpretive renderings of a reality, not objective reportings of it” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 206).
The development of theory in this study took a ‘middle ground’ between positivism and postmodernism, as it “assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims towards interpretive understanding of subject’s meanings” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 250). Charmaz (2003) defined constructivist grounded theory in the following three points: (a) Grounded theory strategies need not be rigid or prescriptive; (b) a focus on meaning while using grounded theory furthers, rather than limits, interpretive understanding; (c) we can adopt grounded theory strategies without embracing the positivist leanings of earlier proponents of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003, p. 251). Essentially, the researcher acknowledged that the use of a constructivist grounded theory approach to data analysis “offered an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10).

The researcher sought to understand the parents’ decision-making based on their social construction of personal experiences with education. In addition, meaning was constructed through the qualitative researcher’s interpretive understandings, an interactive perspective that assumes a relativist and reflexive stance toward the data (Charmaz, 2009). The researcher was extremely aware of the duality of her role as the researcher and the research instrument. The researcher also acknowledged the intersection of her own experiences as an African American student and employee of a charter school, and the purpose of the study understanding that, “We cannot rid ourselves of this subjectivity, nor should we wish to; but we ought, perhaps, to pay it very much more attention” (Cheater, 1987, p. 172). It is through such reflexive processes that new theory was generated from—rather than is discovered in—the data reflecting practitioners’ lived experiences (Charmaz, 2009).
Segregated Public Schools: Pre-Brown

According to Powell (1973), the ideal of equal education opportunity was a goal to be considered only after the needs of White children were met. Once Jim Crow laws were firmly established in the public schools of the South, inequities persisted and increased. Examples of inequities included, but were not limited to African American teachers teaching classes that were twice the size of those taught by white teachers, while receiving pay that was only half as much as their white colleagues. Further, African American schools often received the White students’ old books, desks, and other equipment (Powell, 1973; Siddle Walker, 2000, 2001). Etta Joan Marks (as cited in Foster, 1997) recalled:

in 1961 or 1962, when our school burned down, we didn’t have textbooks of any kind. We held classes in the church. The white schools sent us their used textbooks just before they were ready to put them in the trash. Pages were torn out; they were old, worn, and so marked up that there wasn’t any space to write our names (p.xxxii).

As segregated public schools became available to African Americans towards the end of the nineteenth century, two consequences resulted: (1) Public funds were diverted to White schools, (2) and there was major opposition to African American education among many planters and White southern small farmers (Anderson, 1988). Consequently, African Americans in the South could expect little, if any, state and local support for public education. So, this often left African American schools to find alternatives to resources from state and local revenues. The alternatives were necessary since White school boards and government officials seized school funds, gerrymandered African American school districts to keep them from collecting certain local tax benefits, and doubled taxed them. Essentially, the structure of this oppressive education
system set the stage for the dominant ideology among African Americans that centered on ‘self-help.’

Despite the inequities that existed between White and African American schools, African American communities continued to utilize self-reliance and organization that helped to make many African American schools successful. Additionally, these schools succeeded in providing nurturing environments that aided in the educational success of African American students. Though the memory of segregated African American schools is ripe with focus on unequal distribution of resources, scholars (Anderson, 1988; Siddle Walker, 1996, 2000, 2001) place emphasis on the extensive communal and caring models that were present in such schools.

Success by Any Means

The memory of inequities and deficit perspectives are often recounted in literature on African American schooling during segregation. But, such documents have only painted a partial portrait of the whole truth. Although such schools were lacking in funding and often quality facilities, some evidence suggests that the environment of African American schools encompassed sentimental traits, institutional structures, and community support that helped African American children learn in spite of neglect from White local school boards. Thomas Sowell (1974) recounted the positive attributes of African American schools and notes these schools are remembered as having atmospheres where, “support, encouragement, and rigid standards combined to enhance students’ self-worth and increase their aspirations to achieve” (p. 3).

To better understand the significance of African American learning environments, Henry Bullock (1967) utilized a conceptual framework that centered on the unintended consequences of intentional school board neglect and segregation. In particular, Anderson’s (1988) work speaks
to the unintended consequences of neglect among African American schools and documents two major themes present in African American schools such as parent advocacy and a commitment to students from African American teachers and principals.

**Parent Advocacy.** Although the financial role of African American parents is often discussed, their role as advocates is often neglected and downplayed in much of the literature. Siddle Walker (1996) outlined their role in the education of their children and the broader community. Specifically, in Caswell County, North Carolina, Siddle Walker (1996) provided a context of parents and their role as major advocates. She went on to further highlight the lack of support from local school boards in establishing new schools that was often rationalized as an expectation that African Americans should be grateful that they could contribute to their own schools. In fact, often the idea of self-help among African Americans was often counterproductive for African American schooling in that local school boards expected African American communities to offer labor and materials in exchange for little support such as flooring, from the local school board. In essence, African Americans had to ‘prove’ their need for education by demonstrating their resourcefulness in helping to achieve it (Siddle Walker, 1996).

African Americans continuously searched for ways to improve the educational opportunities for their children. At a time when the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) was a burgeoning force in White schools, African American parents pulled together and also organized to form a PTA. This organizational structure of such meetings included the expectations and overview of school budget and concerns, but the significant value of such meetings is evidenced in the way Siddle Walker (1996) recalled a parent from one of the meetings.
She noted,

What parents frequently recall about the nature of these talks about the school and their children was not just the particular information received but the tone of genuine concern the principal conveyed for the educational advancement of the children (p. 70).

Through the PTA, parents further made efforts to support the community both in and out of school.

**Teachers and Principals.** Although research on segregated schools reveals that they were indeed lacking in facilities and funding, some evidence proposes that the environment of the segregated school had affective traits, institutional policies, and community support that helped African American children learn in spite of the neglect their schools received from white school boards (Siddle Walker, 1996, 2000). In her study of a former segregated African American school community in North Carolina, Siddle Walker (1996) found that many teachers and principals created environments of teaching and learning that inspired students to excel. Siddle Walker concluded that, “they countered the larger societal messages, which devalued African Americans, and reframed those messages to make African American children believe in their ability to achieve” (p. 219).

The segregated school is most often associated to a family where teachers and principals, with parent-like authority, exercised almost complete autonomy in shaping student learning and ensuring student discipline (Siddle Walker, 1996, 2000). Several accounts of this period emphasized that educators became part of students' extended families, as they resided, worshipped, and worked in the same communities as their students (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 1999; Siddle Walker, 2000). These studies further maintain that because of their knowledge of and investment in the communities of their students, African American teachers were able to create community atmospheres in schools where students experienced continuous expectations and
interactional patterns between their homes and schools, their parents and their teachers (Siddle Walker, 1996).

**Desegregation and African American Schools**

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) began its effort to achieve desegregated schools in the early 1930s but initially did so within the "separate but equal" framework of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The NAACP tried to make separate schools more equal in facilities, teachers' salaries, school terms, and transportation as a way of putting financial pressure on the South to dismantle a dual system of education. As late as 1954, Black schools got only 60 percent of the funding White ones received (Lowe, 2004).

The ‘separate but equal’ doctrine was illustrated in every facet of U.S. society including schools up until 1954. On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court overturned the *Plessy* decision, and rendered its decision in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The *Brown* decision stated that where states had undertaken the responsibility of providing public education, it must do so in a way that ensures equal opportunity for all of its students (347 U.S. 483, 1054). Reactions to the decision were varied and touched a range of emotions among nearly all citizens of the United States. For some, *Brown* was heralded as the triumph over legal barriers to better educational opportunities for racial/ethnic and minority students. Yet, for others, it endangered a way of life that in the eyes of some, ensured “separate but equal” under *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896). Whatever the perspective, *Brown* meant a departure from past rules and values. It meant change.

**Reactions to the Brown Decision**

Such change, however, did not come without resistance. Subsequently in 1955, in what came to be known as the *Brown II* (349 U.S. 294, 1955) decision, the Supreme Court basically
left the execution of desegregation efforts in the hands of district level courts. The opinion of the court was:

…school authorities have the burden of establishing that a grant of additional time for transition is necessary in public interest and is consistent with good faith compliance at earliest practicable date. School desegregation must proceed with all deliberate speed (349 U.S. 497, 1955)

The “all deliberate speed” mandate in the Brown II (349 U.S. 294, 1955) ruling was so vaguely phrased that the Court’s opinion was left open for various interpretations of the law. This ambiguity essentially gave individual states license to drag their feet (Ogletree, 2004).

Various critical race theorists have argued that these events came as no surprise. For instance, Derrick Bell (1995) argued that an ‘interest convergence principle’ catapulted the Brown decision to the federal agenda. This principle states that interest-convergence covenants are decisions in which “…black rights are recognized and protected when and only so long as policymakers perceive that such advances will further interests that are their [whites’] primary concern” (p. 49). Bell (2004) further outlined the context for the Brown decision by describing two types of silent covenants that have stimulated several policy decisions in U.S. history: racial-sacrifice covenants and interest-convergent covenants. After setting forth these concepts, Bell characterized Brown's legitimacy as an interest-convergence covenant that was directly related to the nation's Cold War concerns. Thus, Brown was less an issue of discrimination and more a means to reinforce the country's image as democratic and anticommunist.

Tate, Ladson-Billings and Grant (1996) further criticized the Brown II ruling. They noted that it did not explicitly define equality, much less offer any recommendations as to how desegregation could be realistically achieved. Essentially, the Supreme Court recognized only
the large-scale undertaking of the issue without addressing remedies. In effect, by placing the
task of implementation efforts in the hands of state and local authorities, power was handed back
to those very groups whose goal was to uphold the existing hegemonic structure that maintained
racism throughout every institution in the South.

Governors in South Carolina, Mississippi and Georgia threatened to abolish all public
schools rather than desegregate. In their creation of the Southern Manifesto, they aimed to unite
all southern states though compliance from the states in the region. This document was drafted
by state governors and signed by numerous representatives from eleven states to signal their
intention to maintain segregation on the grounds of interposition. The Manifesto declared the
Supreme Court’s ruling in the Brown decision to be in violation of states’ rights and contrary to
the Constitution (Southern Manifesto, 1956).

In the decades following Brown, stalling tactics included repealing compulsory
attendance laws, funding private White academies, and reducing the flow of funds to
desegregated schools (Kluger, 1976). One major desegregation effort in the South typically
consisted of court-approved “choice” plans. These plans took three forms; pupil placement laws,
Freedom of Choice plans, and incremental desegregation plans.

Pupil placement laws assigned students to segregated schools, but allowed students to
request transfers. Requests were evaluated by school boards on an individual basis, and took into
account the “psychological qualifications” of the students making the requests, the likelihood of
their adjusting to the curriculum and the possibilities of community backlashes. In light of the
fact that these were subjective factors, it is not surprising that little integration resulted from such
plans (Kluger, 1976).
Freedom of Choice plans allowed students’ parents to select the school of their choice at the beginning of the school year, thereby supposedly eliminating the automatic initial assignment of students to segregated schools and thereby putting the schools in compliance with the required desegregation edicts. Orfield (1969) cited that many White schools claimed to be over-enrolled and only encouraged African Americans to enroll in these schools so that it appeared that they were somewhat integrated.

In 1965 the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) found that approximately 94 percent of African American children in the South continued to attend segregated schools. In order to try and rectify the problem some districts that were found in noncompliance with the 1964 Civil Rights Act and facing termination of federal funding, adopted incremental desegregation plans. These called for the integration of one grade level per year, across districts. While incremental plans demanded a more comprehensive form of integration, they allowed the transition to occur as slowly as possible (Bullock, 1970).

**The Costs of Brown…Education Today**

The *Brown* decision in 1954 marked what was to be heralded in education as the end of racial segregation in schools. Since that time, countless federal and district policies outlined expectations such as busing and district and re-zoning to ensure racial diversity in schools. However, the era when courts were willing to force integration through mandatory busing ended in the mid-1990's as more schooling options for parents made its way on the education scene.

Beginning with *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966) (Coleman et al. 1966), achievement tests demonstrated vast academic disparities between Black and White students.
Similarly, recent studies\(^5\) continue to find that low-income and minority students still encounter inequities in learning, inadequate instruction and support, and lower expectations of their schools and teachers when compared to their White counterparts. Haycock (2002) argued that schools overwhelmingly reflect the values of white, middle-class society. In Siddle Walker’s (2001) view, this is due to the mass amounts of African American educators who were displaced due to desegregation and the closing of African American schools. The racial achievement gap is further evidenced by disparities in school performance, test scores, graduation rates, higher dropout rates for minority students, and college completion rates (Taylor, 2006).

The establishment of an education system for all students regardless of race, creed, or class still presents issues within public schools today. Over fifty years later, civil rights activists are still trying to equalize schools; they are unsung heroes, understanding that minority children ultimately pay the price for decisions that are politically based. Whatever the case, history has shown that while African Americans have achieved much of what they wanted, they also have achieved little of the social vision for education that they originally hoped to sustain.

**The History of School Choice**

To understand the current political framework of school choice among African American parents, it is helpful to place school choice in a historical context by considering the progression of earlier education reforms related to school choice theory. Over the past fifty years, there have been major efforts to revise the structure of education in order to equalize educational opportunities for minority students. Early examples of attempts to equalize education came in the form of desegregation within the public education system. Such a reform sought to erase physical boundaries between traditionally White and Black schools by equalizing the resources

available to all schools within a state (Ryan, 1999). As a result, desegregation reform often threatened the concept of neighborhood schools in White areas that preferred to maintain existing segregation from African Americans (Ryan, 1999). However, the use of school choice as a method to combat desegregation attempts was far from the original intent of school choice. 

Nobel Prize winning economist, Milton Friedman (1955) first introduced the idea of school choice through the use of vouchers in an article titled “The Role of Government in Education.” He provides a blueprint for educational choice by stating:

Government, preferably local governmental units, would give each child, through his parents, a specified sum to be used solely in paying for his general education; the parents would be free to spend this sum at a school of their own choice, provided it met certain minimum standards laid down by the appropriate governmental unit. Such schools would be conducted under a variety of auspices: by private enterprises operated for profit, nonprofit institutions established by private endowment, religious bodies, and some even by governmental units (p. 14).

In alignment with this ideology, scholars in the 1960s and 1970s, in favor of school choice such as Christopher Jencks (1966) argued that the vast differences in educational quality between Blacks and Whites could not be resolved with the current structure of residential segregation. Accordingly, Jencks (1966) argued for a policy concept introduced by Milton Friedman (1955) more than a decade earlier, in which he proposed to offer public funds to families to be used only for education but in any educational institution, public or private. Friedman, unlike Jencks, saw vouchers as a way to break the monopoly over the public sector of education and increase consumer choice. On the contrary, Jencks (1966) saw vouchers as a way of improving educational opportunities for disadvantaged groups in the United States.

Ironically, the Brown I and II decisions marked what was to be heralded in education as the end of racial segregation and inequality in America’s public schools. Yet, in the years following desegregation, White parents utilized inter- and intra-district and voucher public school choice plans as a vehicle for maintaining school segregation through what theorists call
“White flight” in the public education system (Bell, 2004). This, in effect, often left schools even more segregated than before as de facto segregation had replaced legal barriers that traditionally left African American students in inferior, segregated schools long after desegregation policies.

**Charter School Evolution**

The desire to improve classroom learning and student achievement is a reoccurring theme in American public education. The current school choice effort to form "charter schools" can be traced to a movement that began in the late 1960's and early 1970's when innovative schools were established in such places as Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Minneapolis and St. Paul. These schools rejected the notion that "one size fits all" and sought to create distinctive schools that provide choices to parents and students. As an alternative to the traditional public school, charter schools were created by individuals and groups, which are committed to the realization of a “truly flexible [and] self-defining” (Fulford, 1997, p. 1) vision of how education should be.

Many scholars (Frankenberg & Lee, 2002; Frankenberg, 2011; Orfield, 2004) note that failing public schools are the civil rights issue of our day, especially for students of color. To this end, much of the current discussion about school reform in the United States over the past two decades has shifted from one of equity to one based on excellence in the form of student achievement. Charter schools as a primary solution for student achievement have been popularized and made into dominant discourse through legislation such as No Child Left Behind (2001) and Race to the Top (2009). Ultimately, both pieces of legislation promised that neoliberal market choices would prevail as a solution to this problem; a problem that can be solved according to school choice advocates, by extending choice to parents in the form of various educational options.
Charter school proponents point out that the forces that originally shaped this movement differ from the racial issues that led to the formation of “magnet schools” and ‘White academies’ during the 1950s. However, researchers add that parental choice becomes a method that is entangled in an already inequitable school system in which practices and policies are historically linked to race and class (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011; Rofes & Stulberg, 2004). While most agree that the issue deserves attention, consensus dissolves around how to respond to the problem of school reform and ultimately figure out a place for charter schools in the public school sphere.

In the midst of massive reform in education following the years of desegregation, charter schools originated as a way to allow local school boards to provide small groups of teachers’ contracts or "charters" to explore new approaches. Albert Shanker, former president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), then publicized the idea, suggesting that local boards could charter an entire school with union and teacher approval (Peterson, 2010). The increased federal oversight of public schools and underachievement of students as highlighted in the *A Nation at Risk* all combined to serve as a catalyst for the charter school movement.

The idea of charter schools was further developed in Minnesota where charter schools were developed according to three basic values: opportunity, choice, and responsibility for results (Peterson, 2010). Chubb and Moe (1991) further elaborated on choice and competition, concluding with a set of sweeping recommendations to restructure public education on market principles. Although Chubb and Moe (1991) proposed a voucher-based and largely unregulated system of schooling, many similarities, particularly in regard to school autonomy, existed between their recommendations and the charter school concept. As a result, their ideas and
metaphors supplied education reformers, including supporters of the budding charter movement, with a theoretical context and market orientation (Henig, 1994).

The onset of the charter school market began in Minnesota in 1991 with the establishment of first charter school law, with California following suit in 1992. By 1995, 19 states signed laws allowing for the creation of charter schools, and by 2003 that number increased to 40 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia (WestEd, 2000). According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), there are now more than 2.5 million students attending nearly 6,500 charter schools. Over the past 10 years, charter school enrollment has risen by 225 percent and the number of new schools has risen by 118 percent (2014). Although they still serve a small proportion of students, charter schools have quickly become a center of attention in the education reform movement with their unique characteristics that differentiate them from the rest of public schools (CER, 2005).

First, unlike traditional schools, charter schools are independent public schools established under a charter contract with a designated charter school authorizer such as the local board of education or a specific charter authorization institution. Groups such as teachers, parents, or for-profit or non-profit foundations can operate them. Second, they are exempt from many regulations and restrictions that affect public schools, which make them much more flexible. Charter schools can design and implement their own curricula and use innovative teaching techniques or management practices; however, they are still required to take academic state exams and improve student achievement. Third, charter schools have entirely different accountability standards. They operate under limited-term and performance-based contracts. The schools are accountable to achieve the performance goals listed in their charter at the end of the contract period to get a renewal of their contract (Hill et al., 2001). Finally, despite these
distinctive qualities, charter schools are public schools, funded with public money on a per-pupil basis. When a student leaves a traditional public school to attend a charter school, public funding follows the student from one type of school to the other. Private schools may take students from public schools, but they do not directly influence public school budgets. Charter schools on the other hand directly influence district budgets. With the ongoing expansion of charter schools and given that they are funded by public money, they may be considered as more direct competition for public schools (Carnoy, et al., 2005).

Some view charter schools as a welcome addition to the public school sector, while others doubt the benefit of these schools. Table 2.1 provides a breakdown of the charter school debate. Advocates note that charter schools provide more educational options to families with special educational needs or students who feel underserved by local schools. They further noted that charter schools serve as sites of pedagogical innovation for teachers (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Toma & Zimmer, 2012). Critics assert that charter schools drain local districts' resources, outsource education into the hands of external organizations and represent part of a broader agenda to privatize education (Resmovitz, 2011). Opponents further argue that charter schools are no more effective than traditional public schools, that they may exacerbate racial segregation, that they create fiscal strains for school districts, and that too many of them are fly-by-night operations (Chudowsky & Ginsburg, 2012; Preston, Goldring, Berends, & Cannata, 2012; Wohlstetter, Smith & Farrell, 2013).
Table 2.1

*Charter School Debate: Proponents vs. Opponents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proponents</th>
<th>Opponents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charter schools provide a higher level of accountability and focus on customer satisfaction (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2000).</td>
<td>Charter schools promote the segregation of children and create social fragmentation (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2000).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter schools allow greater parental involvement in the education process (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2000).</td>
<td>Charter schools have not actually demonstrated any ability to increase academic achievement, nor have they led to the development or implementation of innovative teaching practices (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2000).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter schools are the most effective way to deliver specialized programs and ensure educational choice (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2000).</td>
<td>Public schools currently offer a wide range of alternative programs that respond to the needs of students within an inclusive setting (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2000).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter schools encourage excellence by promoting innovative teaching practices (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2000).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Federal Support for Charter School Schools**

Since the adoption of the first U.S. charter school in Minnesota in 1991, charter schools have received considerate attention from policymakers, educators, parents, and the media. The charter school movement has had bipartisan support including the support of three consecutive presidents: Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Legislation such as The Charter School Expansion Act of 1998 created grants to support the expansion of charter schools in those
states permitting them (Public Law 105-278); Georgia being one of those states. Versions of both these laws existed as part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (Public Law 107-110).

Moe (2003) declared, “School choice has provoked more political conflict than any other reform…” (p. 60). NCLB employed school choice as a penalty for schools that fail to exhibit adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward universal student proficiency on state assessments of reading, math, and science achievement. NCLB’s choice provisions will be described in greater detail below and, as will be shown, mark a dramatic shift in federal support for choice. Likewise, under the Obama administration, charter schools have been stressed under the “Race to the Top” fund of the American Recovery Act of 2009 and the regulations of the School Recovery and Investment Act of 2009 (Nagel, 2009).

**Charters as Markets**

In the last three decades the main ideological and political source of support for school choice policies has been one based on neoliberal ideals. Neoliberal economics have reshaped democratic agendas by promoting market discourses (e.g. choice) to describe both the problem and value of public schools (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001). In this sense, school choice is intended to generate competition between schools largely to leverage new and better educational opportunities for students attending failing schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Arsen and Ni (2008) stressed that one of the most important arguments for market-based educational policy is that it creates competition that will pressure education systems to use their resources more efficiently through equitable distribution of opportunities for minority and disadvantaged groups.

Similarly, Levin (2011) maintained that competition and limited restrictions to market entry encourage charter schools to streamline bureaucracies, reward and retain highly effective
teachers and administrators, and raise student achievement, learning, and productivity. Since Milton Friedman first proposed a voucher system more than half a century ago, school choice proponents have maintained that the competition introduced by choice policies will spur improvements in public schools and benefit students who remain in them. This argument has been central to countless school choice policy debates in recent decades and has garnered both support and opposition. Thus, some view school choice as the ‘civil rights’ issue of our time since it provides access to more and presumably improved educational options, particularly for disadvantaged communities (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003).

Lubienski (2006) further provided an analysis of school choice debates and notes that privatization versus marketization debates within neoliberalism are counter dynamic in that educational decision-making is privatized, the purposes of education are individualized, and the modes of control are not apparent. His analysis further demonstrated that such debates in education are synonymous to other sectors (security/defense, healthcare, etc.) undergoing privatization. Essentially, he insisted that debates over the issue of marketization perversely obscure personal development because there is an increased focus on standardized testing and educating for the workforce. Third, the overarching mission of the schools is to create workers to support the capitalist system. Fourth, although the school system has sometimes served the dominant class interests of profit and political stability, it is often an influence of contradictory external forces such as poverty. Fifth, the organization of education evolves and takes on distinct and characteristic forms in response to political and economic struggles associated with the process of capital accumulation (Bowles & Gintis, 2002).
Theoretical Implications

Researchers have carefully documented the political and social effects of neoliberalism in education with particular interest in the concept of school choice (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, 2002; Giroux, 2004; 2011; Wells et al., 1999; and Whitty et al., 1998). In particular, researchers cite examples of social reproduction theoretical implications that are primarily concerned with how and why relationships of inequality and domination are reproduced through or within groups by providing conceptual models such as the cultural reproduction and social reproduction model. These theories serve as a means to highlight how politics and economics combine to impact the underlying social processes involved in school choice.

Culture and Social Reproduction. Bowles and Gintis’ (2002) work takes the form of a Marxist analysis in which education plays a role in the social production of surplus value in our economic system. First, prevailing degrees of economic inequality defined primarily by the market, property, and power relationships define the capitalist system and are reinforced in education inequities such as tracking and re-segregation of schools (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003; Giroux, 2004, 2008; Hallinan, 2001). Second, the educational system represses individual personal development because there is an increased focus on standardized testing and educating for the workforce. Third, the overarching mission of the schools is to create workers to support the capitalist system. Lastly, although the school system has sometimes served the dominant class interests of profit and political stability, it is often an influence of contradictory external forces such as poverty (Bowles & Gintis, 2002, p. 45). In essence, schools, by their very nature, tend to help society reproduce itself - passing the structures, morals, habits, customs, preferences, and even manners of one generation on to the next, or at least strongly attempting to do that. Adding to this, charter schools further the divide between those with “motivated” parents and
those without. Ultimately, the growth of charter schools continue the American pattern of offering better educations to students based on the students’ parents’ behavior - thus continuing to doom children on the basis of the accidents of their birth.

**Social Conflict Theory.** Lauder and Hughes (1999) contend that while pro-market theorists encourage competition and choice in the educational system, social conflict theorists question the pragmatics of free parental choice (as shown in Table 2.2). In this view, markets reduce educational opportunities for minority and disadvantaged groups in terms of access and availability of quality schools. They further add that equality of opportunity has been replaced by the more slippery concept of “fairness,” defined in the narrow terms of fair play between a seller and a buyer in the market. On the contrary, supporters of social conflict theory point first and foremost to the necessity for social integration as a key to the academic success of African-American students. When parents can choose schools that share their moral, pedagogical, and other beliefs, education is more effective because schools can quickly and efficiently teach coherent lessons rather than having to struggle to accommodate different children, values, and so forth (McCluskey, 2007). Essentially, the authors’ views outline important theoretical implications for school choice that scrutinize it for what they view as maintaining social inequality and preserving the power of those who dominate society.
Table 2.2

Pro-Market Versus Social Conflict Theory of School Choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pro-Market Theory</th>
<th>Social Conflict Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents are equally capable of choice in education marketplace (Lauder and Hughes et al. 1999, 18, 32).</td>
<td>Choice is determined by social location (Lauder and Hughes et al. 1999, 18, 32).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools become socially more mixed thanks to free choice (Lauder and Hughes et al. 1999, 18, 32).</td>
<td>Markets polarize school enrollment through systems such as ‘cream’ skimming and ultimately result in a lack of social integration (Lauder and Hughes et al. 1999, 18, 32).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools are more innovative and diverse (Lauder and Hughes et al. 1999, 18, 32).</td>
<td>Competition for exam results leads schools to focus their work on teaching to the test and curriculum based on global needs and competition (Lauder and Hughes et al. 1999, 18, 32).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The contrasting pro-market and social conflict theories of markets in basic schooling (Lauder and Hughes et al. 1999, 18, 32). Retrieved from G:\neoliberalism/Whathappens_to_the_common_school_on_the_market.mht

African American Parents and Charter Schools

Existing research on why African American parents choose charter schools is very limited. A common misconception about market-oriented reforms such as school choice is that all parents seek the same thing when deciding on schools for their children. Serious questions have been raised about this assumption in the literature (Hassel, 1998; Shneider, Teske, Marshall, & Roch, 1998; Wells, 1993; Wells, Scott, & Holmes, 1999).

Several researchers argue that racial differences among households correspond to differences in preferences for choosing schools. One common argument in support of this
argument is that minority households value things other than educational quality, such as discipline or safety (Henig 1996; Wells, 1993). Wells’ (1993) study of thirty-six inner-city African American households in St. Louis shed light on the various factors that parents consider when choosing schools for their children. Wells’ (1993) found that school quality was but one of the many factors of which African American parents seek when deciding on schools for their children. Factors such as racial safety and appreciation are among factors that the study revealed as important for African American parents in the study.

Henig’s (1996) study of several hundred parents in Montgomery County, Maryland, revealed that White parents predominantly choose schools with higher White student populations and minority parents chose schools with predominantly minority student populations. Similarly, Schneider, Marshall, Teske, and Roche (1998) further validated the aforementioned claims that differences in preferences were structured by race. The authors found that their sample of minority respondents were more concerned with the quality of schools as defined by tangible measures such as tests scores and maintenance of discipline. Weiher and Tedin (2002) further addressed the issue of parental choice based on racial composition of schools by analyzing the responses of 1,006 charter school households in Texas. They found that race was a good predictor of the choices that households make. In addition, Whites, African Americans, and Latinos transfer into charter schools where their groups comprise between eleven and fourteen percentage points more of the student body than the traditional public schools they are leaving.

In a study based on 1,100 interviews of parents in Texas, Kleitz and colleagues (2000) found that within each racial subgroup (including anglo, black, and Hispanic as well as low, moderate, and high income groups) a majority of parents indicate that school quality is important. Of the five factors parents were asked to rank in order of importance, researchers
found that concern for education quality was valued most by 93%-96% of respondents and was not mediated by race/ethnicity or by income. In the same study, Kleitz et al. (2000) found that substantial majorities of all subgroups “say that class size is important in making decisions about their children’s’ schools” which they consider “one of the more concrete indices of school quality” (p. 850). These findings contradicted arguments that suggested that academic concerns were not central to the decision when minority, low-SES households choose a school for their children (Carnegie Foundation, 1992; Henig, 1996; Wells, 1993).

Personal experiences with schooling also impacted parental decision-making for their children. Weiss (1995) explained that the “institutional domain involves the structure, culture, standard operating procedures, and decision rules of the organization” (p. 576). Weiss (1995) emphasized that when she addressed the “institution of schools” she was not referring to a single school but rather to the consistency in U.S. schools which she argued “is the result of institutional beliefs and practices that are common across the schools” in the country (p. 577). In this view, parents are not affected by the strong influences that institutions are able to bring to bear upon their employees from within. They are, instead, consumers of educational services, outside of the institution, who are free to consider the perceived advantages and disadvantages of charter schools and traditional public schools (TPS) from which they may choose. As such, many parents depend upon their personal experiences with the institution of TPS as students and as parents of students from which they have collected first-hand information and formed opinions. If their experiences at TPS were positive, then they are more likely to feel confident that a TPS would be a good choice for their children. Parents whose experiences were less than positive might consider a new institution, a charter, in which they may not have had first-hand experiences but about which they have not as yet formed a negative opinion either.
Cooper (2005) highlighted 11 African American mothers’ experiences within the school choice marketplace. Cooper's (2005) sample was comprised of low-income mothers who were African American, and have engaged in the marketplace. Through in-depth interviews, the participants shed light on how school choice and school vouchers impact opportunities for African American students. Their responses showed that their race, gender, and class impacted their decision-making.

Cooper’s (2007) later study on African American parents and school choice drew on in-depth interview data to discuss the school choices and educational advocacy roles of 14 African American mothers. The narratives from the participants in the study, who have low-income or working-class status, show how race, class and gender factors influence their school choice-making and their value of education. The author asserted that the mothers’ school choice-making constituted an important act of cultural resistance and empowerment called motherwork. Analysis of the data from this study challenges traditional stereotypes that African parents are not involved or active in the education of their children.

Within much of the literature on African American parents and school choice, there is limited research that targets why African American parents as a racial group choose charter schools or detailed accounts of their experiences as charter school choosers (Henig; 1996; Kleitz and et al., 2000; Schneider, Marshall, Teske, and Roche, 1998; Wells, 1993; Weiher and Tedin, 2002; Weiss; 1995). Further, the existing research is limited to brief accounts of African American parent perspectives, and does not provide for their in-depth experiences to be highlighted in the studies.

Many of the studies used surveys and comparative analyses among various racial groups with often-predefined reasons as to why parents choose charter schools and utilize school choice
that provides a limited scope for understanding parental choice rationale among African American parents in particular. On the contrary, Cooper (2005; 2007) provided in-depth interviews based on African American mothers’ experiences and in the educational marketplace. These studies provided a frame of reference from which to view school choice and highlight the significant advocacy that this group of parents utilized when making educational decisions.

Throughout many of the studies, the data does not allow the reader to address whether racial composition of schools is itself a factor in the decision to choose charter schools since charter schools have become increasingly segregated since their inception. In sum, more in depth studies that focus on African American parents who choose charter schools are needed to fully understand why African American parents decide to enroll their children in charter schools.

**Chapter Summary**

The educational context for African Americans in the South was an ideological province through which northerners and southerners debated on issues surrounding race, class, culture and democracy. African American education was a central area that served to define social relations and shape the future of southern society. Thus, constant struggles between African American leaders, northern philanthropists, and White southern ideologies framed the environment for the establishment of sustainable African American schooling, and ultimately, universal education in the United States.

Conflicting ideologies among various groups in the South were consistently at odds. For example, the planter’s class felt that education of African Americans would give them too many aspirations and limit the amount of manual laborers on southern plantations. On the contrary, education was a hope and solution to racism for freed and free African Americans in the South. Prior to the emancipation of slaves, education had already been a concealed process that proved
to be both dangerous and essential to many slaves. The ability to read and write was considered a move towards racial advancement and integration into society.

The long struggle over the development of education in the South after the Civil War occurred largely in part because the dominant groups could not convince African Americans that their education relied on maintaining social order. History has steadily shown that the former slaves had the courage and knowledge to resist competing ideologies and chart a course of their own. There, within the slave community developed a shared belief in self-improvement and universal education as a means to secure freedom and citizenship.

Such desires on the part of newly freed and already free African Americans highlighted the rationale for establishing a system of universal education that sparked a national movement and shaped our public education system today. In addition, the establishment of a system for all students regardless of race, creed, or class still presents issues in public schools. Fifty years later, school choice options have emerged as “solutions” to underachievement and equal educational opportunities for African American students. While there is limited research on African American parent charter school choosers, enrollment data demonstrates that African American students are among an ever-increasing population of students who enroll in charter schools. So, this ‘new,’ expanded marketplace of school choosers warrants the in-depth research on this phenomenon. In essence, this research examined and gave voice to African American parents who decided to enroll their children in Utopian Academy.
CHAPTER III

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

“Choice is the best thing that has come around for my people since I’ve been born. It allows poor people to have those choices that all those other people who are fearing it already have.”

-Polly Williams
Wisconsin State Representative
Washington Times, April 2, 1990

A Look at Georgia

Charter schools could easily be called the ‘all things to all people’ reform, as the rhetoric of charter advocates continues to appeal to people with diverse political viewpoints. As growing policy support for charter schools throughout the nation continues to grow, goals of charter school legislation vary widely from state to state (Bulkley, 2005). Particularly in Georgia, the historical significance of charters schools as compared to the other regions in the United States, lends itself to a fairly different purpose for charters. For example, states such as Michigan and Arizona policy-makers were interested in creating more competition in education, and used charter schools as a compromise towards this end when other policies such as vouchers and open enrollment became politically unviable (Bulkley, 2005). Historically, however, Georgia has had a rich history of government influence on schools as court-ordered desegregation efforts directly impacted the South’s way of educating African American students. So, Georgia’s interest in charter schools, or lack thereof, stems not from focus on competition, but methods to deregulate and decentralize education after a period of increasing centralization to the state.
The History of Charter School Legislation in Georgia

In 1993, Governor Zell Miller proposed the idea of charter school legislation in Georgia for a second time; the first time was met with little support in 1991. The bill passed with bipartisan support and received support from many education groups. Initially, it was expected that such legislation would be low-cost and incremental in nature. Charter school legislation was intended not to result in major changes in education reform. Currently, the Charter Schools Act of 1998, located in Title 20 of Georgia Code, is the law that governs Georgia charter schools today. The legislative intent of the act is “to increase student achievement through academic and organizational innovation by encouraging local school systems to utilize the flexibility of a performance based contract called a charter” (Charter Schools Act of 1998, 20-2-2062).

Absent from the original discussion of charter schools, despite national discourse, was serious concern for concepts such as parental choice and competition. Instead, policymakers in Georgia focused on addressing issues raised by the 1985 Quality Basic Education Act (QBE). The QBE, and particularly the way in which it was implemented, led to increased state control over local education issues (Wohlstetter, 1994). In this context, Georgia charter school law developed out of a continuous struggle between state and local control. Moreover, the ongoing struggles led to incremental steps towards less state control and more local control of public schools.

The Charter School Act of 1993. The Georgia Charter School Act states that the legislation will ‘provide a means whereby local schools may choose to substitute a binding performance contract approved by both state and local boards of education, called a charter, for state and local rules, regulations, policies, and procedures’ (1993 Georgia Code 20-2-255). For

---

6 The Quality Basic Education Act increased the total amount of money appropriated for K-12 education. Under the "local fair share" provision, additional state funds were given to school districts that increased local funding. The state acquired the power to compel poorly funded systems to spend more money on programs found deficient.
Georgia, the introduction of charter schools meant deregulation from the state and school improvement for public schools in the form of teacher control and school quality.

In particular, charter school law in Georgia initially required charter school applicants to go to their local school board and request permission to be exempt from state codes and maintain additional control at the school level. While there were no caps on the amount of charter schools that could be opened under the law, only existing public schools could apply to become charter schools through a conversion process that had to be supported by two-thirds of school staff and parents. Overall, Maughs-Pughs (2005) noted that Georgia had one of the most restrictive charter school laws compared to all states in the nation with charter school laws at the time.

Unlike most charter school legislation in states like Milwaukee and Arizona, charter schools in Georgia were not originally created as schools of choice. So, students who were already enrolled in a public school prior to its conversion were required to remain in the school. The resistance of charter schools as schools of choice in the South ultimately reflected a greater distrust of choice in the state, and much of the South, because of the association between parental choice and efforts to evade desegregation earlier in the twentieth century (Bulkley, 2005).

Bulkley (2005) elaborated on Georgia’s decision not to utilize charter schools as schools of choice due to the fear of them being used as ‘backdoors’ (p.13) to segregation. She went on to further note that the lack of discussion of parental choice also reflected a general lack of interest in the state in using markets to ‘solve’ public policy problems. In the end, the relief from strict regulations and state and district control, coupled with the freedom to write charter missions and goals, was expected to lead to charter schools that were more innovative than what was offered at district-run schools. However, Georgia’s restrictive charter school law failed to provide relief
in the form of school choice for families at a time when education reform for ‘failing’ schools was becoming the dominant discourse in public education.

**Charter School Growth in Georgia**

Under the previous Georgia Charter School Act, only traditional public schools could convert to charter schools; however, the passage of the Charter Schools Act of 1998 opened up opportunities for schools to form start-up charter schools. Since then, Bonnie Holliday, executive director of the State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia notes that “Georgia’s school choice market has grown steadily over the last 20 years; comparable to neighboring states like Tennessee and North Carolina, but slower than others like Florida” (Newsome, 2013). In light of the issue with choice, school choice in Georgia gained momentum since House Bill 1187 was adopted in 2002. The law states that the Georgia Board of Education would allow parents of children attending failing schools (according to the state guidelines) the option to transfer to a public school within the district, thus creating the scurry of parents seeking options for their children.

After charter schools in Georgia began to develop as tools for school choice, many start-up charter schools formed in 2008 under House Bill 881. This bill established the Georgia Charter School Commission (GCSC) as an alternative means to approve charter school. But, the State Board of Education could still overrule the commission's approval with a two-thirds vote. This commission authorized municipalities, counties, consolidated governments, universities, technical schools, and *Regional Education Service Agencies* (RESAs) to act as a cosponsor or joint petitioner for a charter school (Resmovits, 2011).

With mounting debates surrounding HB 881 and charter school viability, legal complications surrounding the law played out. In 2011, the Georgia Supreme Court overturned
the previous court decision that granted approval of a state charter school commission (Georgia Charter School Commission, 2014) making the establishment of a state authorizer illegal. Gwinnett County School District (GCSD), along with a number of other local school districts, filed suit in state court challenging the validity of the Georgia Charter School Commission Association (GCSCA) under the state constitution’s “special schools” provision. GCSD cited part of the 1883 Georgia constitution that stated that Georgia’s constitution imparts general authority to local boards of education “to establish and maintain public schools within their limits. Ultimately, House Bill 881 was ruled unconstitutional because it violated the “special schools” provision in the Georgia Constitution of 1983.\(^7\)

Prior to the 1983 version, the state constitution’s “special schools” provision included examples such as vocational trade schools, schools for exceptional children, and schools for adult education. But, in 1983 the state constitution eliminated the “special schools” provision. Nevertheless, the majority of the state Supreme Court justices determined that the absence of those examples did not constitute “… a relinquishment of the historical exclusivity of control vested in local boards of education over general K-12 schools or as a carte blanche authorization for the General Assembly to create its own general K-12 schools so as to duplicate the efforts of or compete with locally controlled schools for the same pool of students educated with the same limited pool of tax funds.\(^8\)” So, this decision left many state approved charter schools and families with uncertain futures.

\(^7\) See http://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/topics/government/related_article/constitutions/georgia-constitution-of-1983-as-ratified-without-subsequent-amendments
\(^8\) See Gwinnett County Sch. Dist. v. Cox, No. S10A1773 (Ga. May 16, 2011) - See more at: http://legalclips.nsba.org/2011/05/19/georgia-supreme-court-declares-state-charter-school-law-unconstitutional/#sthash.5DDo2Iry.dpuf Gwinnett County School District; the Bulloch and Candler County School Districts; the DeKalb County School District and the Atlanta Independent School System; and the Griffin-Spalding County and Henry County School Districts.
Political debate and backlash over the court reversal of HB 881 led to enough support for an amendment proposal that would provide charter schools with a state charter school authorizer. The campaign drew millions in out-of-state money from big-money donors who saw the issue as a substitution for the broader question of whether parents should have more choice. As a result, Amendment One was passed in 2012, which reauthorized the charter school authorizing entity at the state level (Georgia Charter Schools Commission, 2014). Since 2012, charter schools in Georgia have experienced exponential growth. Currently, there are 315 charter schools in Georgia. Table 3.1 provides a breakdown of the different types of charter schools in Georgia.

One of the most striking results from the vote on Amendment One in Georgia was the level of support from African American voters. In the 20 Georgia counties where African-Americans make up half or more of the population, the amendment was approved by 61% of all voters and in 14 of those 20 counties. In two of the other six counties, the amendment still got 49% of the vote; in the other four, support ranged from 42-44%. In the 13 counties where more than half of Georgia’s three million black citizens live, the margin of support was even higher: 62% approval (Blackmon, 2013).
Table 3.1

*Types of Charter Schools*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Charter Schools</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start-Up</td>
<td>A startup charter school is a charter school that did not exist prior to becoming a charter school.</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversion</td>
<td>A conversion charter school is a charter school that previously existed as a traditional public school. The traditional public school entered into a charter to gain additional flexibility in exchange for greater accountability.</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Charter</td>
<td>A state charter commission school is a school that has been approved by the State Board of Education after having been denied by a local school district.</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter System</td>
<td>A charter system is a local school district that operates under the terms of a charter between the State Board of Education and the local school district. The system receives flexibility from certain state rules and regulations in exchange for greater accountability.</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


A total of more than 805,000 “yes” votes (out of a total of 2.1 million statewide in favor of the amendment) were cast in the counties with the largest number of black voters. That included DeKalb (54% African American), where the amendment passed with 64% of the vote; and Fulton (43% African American), where it was approved by 66% (Blackmon, 2013). Clayton County, however, got the highest level of support: in 66% black Clayton County, a system that lost its accreditation as a result of staggering negligence by the elected board. Consequently, African American voters in Clayton County gave the charter school amendment a stunning 71% approval (Blackmon, 2013).
Clayton County, Georgia

National and state debates attract attention surrounding charter schools, however, Kirst and Wirt (2009) noted that local politics were crucial in the charter school debates. To this end, Clayton County has had a slow progression of charter school expansion in the district. Over the past decade, the changing demographics, locally competing views on charter schools, and the loss of accreditation have all played major roles in the charter school movement within the school district.

The closing of various predominantly African American communities in the mid-1990s in Atlanta led to the migration of many of these families to the Clayton County area over a period of ten years. Such a shift in population resulted in a once predominantly White county becoming predominantly African American. As the African American population grew, so did enrollment in the public school system, political systems, among much more. Clayton County is the fifth largest school district in Georgia and is ranked among the 100 largest school systems in the United States (Clayton County School District, 2014).

On August 28, 2008, the district lost its accreditation, citing a 'dysfunctional' school board. The accreditation loss and the removal of the board members generated anger and concern about the fate of the 52,000 students in the largely black district’s 59 schools. Additionally, as a result of accreditation lost, there was a significant increase in the number of students dis-enrolling from district schools. This made only the second school system in the nation to do so since 1960.

Up until the Clayton County Public School System was re-accredited by SACS on May 1, 2009, many families sought public school choice options such as charter schools as an option to their troubled school system. Unfortunately, in Clayton County, the demand for charter
schools significantly exceeds its supply. Utopian Academy marked the county’s fifth charter school to open since 1998.

A shift in the way in which the state of Georgia viewed charter schools shifted in the late 1990s and early 2000s substantially due in part to a push from federal legislation aimed at providing parental choice and better educational options for families who had children in low-achieving schools. Yet, it was not until 2005 that the Clayton County school board approved Lewis Academy; its first locally approved charter school. This, however, would not take place again until 2009 with the local board approval of Elite Scholars Academy.

School board issues plagued the district for many years that resulted in the 2007 loss of accreditation for Clayton County schools. So, local or state approval of charter schools in the district came to a halt during the two-year period that the district was trying to get its accreditation back. Once accreditation was reinstated in 2009, the district opened Elite Scholars Academy, the second locally approved charter school. This, however, would be the last locally approved charter school to date, while Utopian Academy for the Arts marked the district’s most recent charter school to be approved under the Georgia Charter Schools Commission in 2013.

Garnering a 71% vote from African Americans, to outsiders, it would seem that the district was in favor of charter schools and any alternatives to the traditional modes of schooling. However, what is evident is that hosts of politics at both the state and local level have played a significant role in the establishment of future charter schools in the district.

The establishment of the Georgia Charter Schools Commission provided for the state authorization of three more charter schools in the district over the past five years. However, issues over local control and fears of losing per pupil dollars to charter schools have stalled the growth of locally approved charter schools. Elise Falco, Director of Education and Training at
the Georgia Charter Schools Commission noted in regards to Clayton County, “As promising as these schools are, they will not be locally authorized without an increased understanding, at the school board level, of how charters can be a solution to tactical challenges the district continues to face (Georgia Charter Schools Commission, 2014). Yet, what cannot be denied is the overwhelming support in the district by African American parents who want charter schools as an option for their children.

**Utopian Academy for the Arts**

In 2008, the state of Georgia and our nation witnessed the Clayton County School District lose its accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools; the second U.S. district to do so in 40 years. The accreditation loss and the removal of the board members generated anger and concern about the fate of the 52,000 students in the largely black district’s 59 schools. As a result, there was a significant increase in the number of students who dis-enrolled from the district’s schools.

Recognizing the need for education reform and increased charter school offerings in Clayton County, school Founder and Executive Director, Artesius Miller, began to conceive the idea of a school that would offer a new style of curriculum that embodied the African American experience. The charter proposal detailed a curriculum centered on “dramatic arts,” “media arts” and “culinary arts” programming in additional to single-gender classes in core subjects — math, English, social studies and science — with help from the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards-aligned Expeditionary Learning curriculum (Jackson, 2013).

The desire for a new charter school with a new style of learning did not come easily. Historically, Clayton County did not approve many charter schools due to the strong belief that charter schools were a form of competition that drained resources from traditional public schools
(Leslie & Sawicki, 2014). It took Utopian Academy for the Arts two failed attempts with the Clayton County school board before finally gaining approval for a charter at the state level through the State Charter Schools Commission. Utopian Academy for the Arts was approved by the State Charter Schools Commission on October 30, 2013; the only school approved out of 16 initial statewide applications in 2013.

On August 4, 2014 when Utopian Academy was set to open, a new obstacle surfaced from the district. Despite state approval and authority to open its doors to the new set of students, a county official reportedly told Utopian Academy founder, Artesius Miller, that he needed a business license to access the school and, because he didn't have one, the building could not receive a certificate of occupancy (Leslie & Sawicki, 2014). Many parents took their concerns to the local school board and even to local Mayor Dr. Evelyn Wynn-Dixon. Mr. Miller, noted, “At every step, Clayton County tried to sabotage us. It wasn’t just occupancy permits; when Utopian requested transcripts and test scores for transferring students, some schools sent sealed envelopes that contained blank sheets of paper or school supply lists” (Burns, 2015). Finally, after a two-week battle with the City of Clayton County, Utopian Academy opened. By then, 120 children, out of 300 who had previously enrolled, had found schools elsewhere (Burns, 2015). For many start-up charter schools that relied on per-student funding, this was to be considered a crippling blow; however, for Utopian Academy, this would test the strength and commitment of the parents, faculty, and staff, and students within the community.

**Chapter Summary**

All in all, the intended purpose of school choice as witnessed during desegregation has shifted in its original intent and population of supporters. Once used as a tool for ‘White flight,’ school choice is now a major tool for minority and disadvantaged students who lack access to
better educational options. In the midst of various education reforms currently underway in the United States, “market-based” reforms encouraging competition outside of traditional public schools are some of the most controversial. Such reforms have been closely monitored and challenged for many reasons. For one, families are provided immediate alternatives to low performing schools. Further, policymakers are able to infuse competitive forces into public education with the hope to yield positive student outcomes. As a result, market-based reforms, particularly charter schools, have developed as a popular education reform for many state legislatures since 1991. With the help of federal support under laws such as NCLB and Race to the Top (RT3), the growth of charter schools has been much more rapid in the past decade.

While the movement for greater school choice in the form of charter schools has been widespread throughout the U.S., its implementation has been disproportionate. In the case of Georgia, issues over federal and even state control of schools have impacted how local schools respond to education reforms. Charter school legislation in Georgia grew out of a need on the part of local school and political officials to allow for greater teacher control and local school flexibility. To date, there are currently 110 charter schools in Georgia, not including schools within charter systems. Of the 110 charter schools, there are 80 start-up charter schools and 30 conversion charter schools. In addition, there are 14 charter systems in Georgia, which include 107 schools (Georgia Department of Education, 2014).

The expansion of charter schools in Georgia, coupled with parental demand, previously relied on implementation of such laws to take place at the local level. Stoddard and Corcoran (2007) note that states and localities vary widely in the level of actual participation in these schools. Now, the creation of an alternative authorizer, the Georgia Charter Schools Commission, has opened up the gateway for more charter schools to get authorization.
The politics highlighted in the slow growth of charter schools in Georgia and Clayton County alike illuminate controversies over a large charter school debate. A lack of approval of charter schools by the local school board centers on a system plagued by a loss of accreditation and redemption of local control. Utopian Academy’s obstacles highlight the politics surrounding charter schools and the desire for more educational alternatives in the district.

Voter polls proved that the people of Clayton County support Amendment One, and in particular that African Americans support charter schools and options for families with children in struggling schools. So, as Georgia has become more ‘charter friendly’ through legislation aimed at creating more charter schools, the question is not whether African American parents are choosing educational options such as charter schools, but how and why this group of parents is making such decisions.
CHAPTER IV
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The history of education for African Americans in the United States is one that is both traumatic and victorious. Education reforms both past and present have tried to level the playing field and offer opportunities to African Americans in many forms. One such form, charter schools, has emerged as a popular solution that seeks to eliminate disparate opportunities and improve African American student achievement (Almond, 2012). As a result, African American parents have become primary consumers of charter schools in the school choice marketplace.

In this qualitative research study, the researcher sought to understand the decision-making process of African American parents who enrolled their children in Utopian Academy for the Arts charter school. Glesne (2011) defined qualitative research as “research that focuses on qualities such as words or observations that are difficult to quantify and that lend themselves to interpretation or deconstruction” (p 283). Merriam (1998) simply labeled qualitative data as “data conveyed through words” (p 69). Ultimately, the main focus in this qualitative research study was to understand the phenomenon being investigated primarily from the participants’ perspective and not the researchers’ (Patton, 2002; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

Constructivist grounded theory methodology guided the data collection and analysis process in this study. Using a combination of theoretical and purposeful sampling, the researcher sought African American parents who had enrolled their children in Utopian Academy for the Arts (Patton, 2002). The researcher conducted open interviews with each participant. Using the
transcripts of the interviews as data, the researcher analyzed the data using initial, focused, and theoretical coding procedures consistent with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

The researcher utilized the constant comparative method, which is a characteristic of grounded theory. Initial data analysis informed later data collection in a recurring process until saturation or redundancy was reached. Grounded theory methodology is not only a process but also a product (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thus, helping to reveal common themes from this study.

The research design and methodology outlined in this chapter provides a detailed description of the research process that will be used for this study. The chapter is divided into seven sections: 1) purpose of the study and research questions, 2) design of study, 3) data sources, 4) data collection, 5) data analysis, 6) trustworthiness and 7) chapter summary. The outcome of this study was an empirically based theoretical perspective of African American parents who have enrolled their children in Utopian Academy grounded in the experience of the participants.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine and understand African American parent perceptions, experiences and decision-making about enrolling their child in Utopian Academy for the Arts charter school. The overarching research question for this study was: How do African American parents who have decided to enroll their children in a charter school make decisions about schools for their children?
The following questions will also be considered:

1a. What are African American parents’ perceptions of charter schools?
1b. What are African American parents’ experiences of having children enrolled in Utopian Academy?

The researcher used a single, instrumental case study design to answer the research questions through semi-structured interviews, observations, and documents in conjunction with constructivist grounded theory to analyze the data for the study.

**Design of the Study**

Merriam (2002) noted, “The key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (p. 3). With this in mind, the researcher examined African American parent perspectives and experiences regarding the enrollment of their children in Utopian Academy. A qualitative approach to this case study further allowed the researcher to understand this phenomenon in its uniqueness as part of a particular context and the experiences that have occurred. Merriam (2002) goes on to state, “[In] qualitative research…the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the researcher as instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (p. 6).

Bogdan and Biklen (2003) outlined five defining characteristics of qualitative studies. First, the research occurred in natural settings because the setting or context of the research is important to ensuring that participants feel at ease when discussing their experiences. In this case, interviews were held at the locations specified by participants (typically the public library). A second characteristic of qualitative studies is that they are descriptive. This research design allowed the researcher an opportunity to share the words of participants in detail and within
context based on their experiences. Third, qualitative studies are concerned with process rather than with merely outcomes. Qualitative inquiry seeks to understand how individual actors make sense of their situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, the researcher strove to make sense of how African American parents made sense of charter schools and their experiences with Utopian Academy. Fourth, qualitative researchers employ inductive reasoning. Rather than attempting to confirm or disconfirm a pre-established hypothesis, the researcher was attentive to emerging ideas from the data sources (Noblit & Engel, 1999). Finally, participant perspectives are considered valid and essential to the construction of meaning. In this work, the researcher viewed the participants as the authorities over their own realities. It is these realities that the researcher documented since the stories of African American parents as charter school choosers has not yet been articulated extensively within the research community.

**Case Study Design**

Merriam (1988) notes that the purpose of a case study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and the meaning for those involved. Anderson (1993) sees case studies as being concerned with how and why things happen, allowing the investigation of contextual realities and the differences between what was planned and what actually occurred. Case study is not intended as a study of the entire organization. Instead, it is intended to focus on a particular issue, feature or unit of analysis.

Case studies are “an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ of a case or multiple cases over time through detail, in depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). Stake (1995) explained that case studies are investigated because,
We are interested in them [case studies] for both their uniqueness and commonality. We would like to hear their stories. We may have reservations about some things the people tell us, just as they will question some of the things we will tell about them. But we enter the scene with a sincere interest in learning how they function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus and with a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn (p. 1).

There are several categories of a qualitative case study, and the selection for the type of case study depends on the overall purpose of the study. Stake (1995) identifies case studies as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective. For the sake of this research study, the researcher utilized an instrumental case study design. An instrumental case study investigates a comprehensive understanding of a particular individual case (Creswell, 2002). The purpose of an instrumental case study is, “to study a case (e.g., person, specific group, occupation, department, organization) to provide insight into a particular issue, redraw generalizations, or build theory.” (Stake, 1995, p. 445). For this case study, the researcher defined the case as African American parents who enrolled their children in Utopian Academy charter school. In this type investigation, details of the experiences of the particular African American parents contributed to the understanding of the uniqueness and complexity of the case, but are less important than the fact that African American parents’ use of charter schools as an educational option has increased over the past two decades (Stake, 1995).

While participant selection was based on common characteristics, the researcher believed that their individual experiences were unique and diverse. In regards to the issue of generalizability in qualitative research, Maxwell (2013) noted that generalizability is not based on a sample of a predefined population where results can be extended. Instead, he says that the
focus in qualitative research is on the development of theory that can be transferred to other cases in whether the outcome is the same or not in various circumstances. Thus, the researcher gained a more comprehensive understanding from studying the same phenomenon via the multiple perspectives brought forth by various African American parents of children enrolled at Utopian Academy for the Arts.

Data Sources

The purpose of this study was to examine and understand African American parent perceptions, experiences and decision-making concerning enrolling their children in Utopian Academy for the Arts. In the following section, details about the research site and participant selection process are provided.

Participant Selection

“Qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples, even single cases (N=1)...selected purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth” (Patton, 2002, p. 46). Purposeful sampling (or participant selection) is specific to qualitative design because there is no effort to choose randomly. By selecting cases that were purposeful to the study and information rich, the researcher was able to gather descriptive data using a small sample size. To this end, the researcher selected participants who had knowledge about the topic of study (deMarrais, 2004).

Purposeful selection of participants for the study enabled the researcher to gain in-depth knowledge about African American parents who have a child enrolled in Utopian Academy Charter School within Clayton County, Georgia (Maxwell, 2012). Participants who (1) identified as African American and (2) had children enrolled in Utopian Academy for the Arts within
Clayton County, Georgia were recruited to participate in the study. Once theoretical sufficiency was established, the researcher ended up utilizing 12 participants for this study.

**Site Selection**

Utopian Academy for the Arts charter school is located in Clayton County, Georgia. As highlighted in chapter 3, Clayton County witnessed a shift in racial demographics that led to a change in the educational landscape within the district. On August 28, 2008, the district lost its accreditation, citing a 'dysfunctional' school board. The accreditation loss and the removal of the board members generated anger and concern about the fate of the 52,000 students in the largely Black district’s 59 schools. Additionally, as a result of accreditation lost, there was a significant increase in the number of students dis-enrolling from district schools. This made only the second school system in the nation to lose accreditation since 1960.

Up until the Clayton County Public School System was re-accredited by SACS on May 1, 2009, many families sought public school choice options such as charter schools as an option to their troubled school system. Unfortunately, in Clayton County, the demand for charter schools significantly exceeds its supply. Utopian Academy for the Arts marked the county’s third charter school to open since 2009.

**Data Collection**

**Participant Recruitment**

Namageyo-Funa et. al (2014) notes that gatekeepers, which may include staff at a recruitment site or stakeholders off-site, can provide a researcher with access to potential participants. In qualitative research, gatekeepers are used to assist in gaining access and developing trust with the community of study (Namageyo-Funa et. al, 2014). The parents were identified with the assistance of a gatekeeper at the school. The gatekeeper and researcher had
several conversations about the parents who were necessary for this study. For example, the researcher tried to get parents who were either male or female, and who were single or married.

Taking this into account, the researcher gained permission from the CEO/Founder of Utopian Academy Charter School (APPENDIX A) to access the parent listserv that included parent contact information. A recruitment email was sent out to potential participants through the school listserv (APPENDIX B) to parents at the school. Once participants were selected, they received both electronic and hard copies of the consent form so that they could fill it out and officially participate in the study (APPENDIX C).

**Interviews**

Constructivist grounded theorists attend to the situation and context of the interview, the construction of the research participants’ story and unspoken words, and the interviewer-participant relationship (Charmaz, 2009). In this sense, the researcher viewed the interviews as emergent interactions that had the potential to be the site of “exploration, emergent understandings, legitimation of identity, and validation of experience” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 91). In-depth semi-structured interviews and an interview protocol were the primary sources of data collection used for this study (APPENDIX D).

The interview location of the twelve participants varied between locations, and depended upon the comfort preference of the participant. Semi-structured interviews further provided the researcher with an opportunity to ask a combination of questions; some which required a specific answer, and open-ended questions to seek the perspective of the interviewee (Merriam, 1998). Each participant participated in a one-hour interview. During the interview, a small digital data recorder with an internal and external microphone was used so that data collection was both
accurate and unobtrusive. Afterwards, the researcher compiled memos at the end of each day of interviewing.

All audio files were saved in a digital folder on the recorder and individual interview notes and field notes were then uploaded to a personal computer. The files were later downloaded directly to a computer for future analysis and transcription for data analysis. The transcriptions from each of the interviews were completed within twelve weeks. Once the interviews were transcribed, the transcription and interpretation of the interviews were sent to the participants’ personal email addresses. This allowed the participants the opportunity to read the transcription and interpretation for verification and clarification. But, each participant was satisfied with the transcription and interpretation. This form of member checking allowed the researcher to ensure that each participant’s narrative was in alignment with his or her experiences based on the phenomenon under study.

An interview protocol was used during each interview. However, “the interview guide is just that—a guide” (deMarrais, 2004, p. 63). The use of a semi-structured approach to interviewing allowed the researcher to remain, “free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style— but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined” (Patton, 1990, p. 283). By aligning the interview questions with the research questions, the researcher was able to focus the interview and make good use of the participants’ time. However, there was fluidity to allow for enhanced understanding as, “…understanding occurs when we surrender to the movement of question and answer” (Vandermause, 2008, p. 72). By surrendering to the natural flow of the conversation, the interview provided a more complete description of African American parent perceptions of charter schools and experiences with Utopian Academy.
Documents

Documents were also included as the second data source. McCulloch (2004) highlighted the need to try and understand documents in relation to their context. The researcher used documents in the form of both electronic (i.e., Internet-based) and hard copies of the school charter (see APPENDIX F), the Eagle’s Nest school newsletter (see APPENDIX G), and the school mission and history (see APPENDIX H). Each document was utilized based on references from the participants in their interviews. Following each interview, if a document was referenced, the researcher followed up and examined the documents to verify information based on participant responses.

Bowen (2009) presents five specific functions of documents when used in qualitative research: 1) provide data on context, 2) suggest questions that need to be asked and situations that need to be observed, 3) provide supplementary research data, 4) means of tracking change and development, and 5) verify findings and corroborate evidence. Documents collected for the purpose of this study were used as supplementary research data, as a means of tracking change, and to corroborate evidence. Essentially, the common features of the use of documents about Utopian Academy allowed the researcher to verify how parents were informed about Utopian Academy in Clayton county prior making a decision to enroll their child in the school and the factors that impacted that their current experiences at the charter school.

Observations

Direct observations are the most common type of method in case study research and were used as a third data source. Pauly (2010) adds that such methods provide an opportunity for researchers to observe directly what is happening in the social setting, intermingle with participants, and take part in activities. The researcher engaged in hour-long observations in July through September of school programs such as curriculum night and PTA to observe the various
activities that took place for students and parents at the school. In addition, the researcher observed how parents interacted and advocated for Utopian Academy through observing events such as Parent Couponing Club days (APPENDIX E).

Yin (2011) added that once observations are complete, composition of the narrative based on observation notes must be considered. He identified three points that the researcher considered while constructing the narrative: (1) whether the presentation represents the researcher’s trying to be as neutral and factual as possible, (2) whether it represents the view of (one or more of) the field participants in the researcher’s case study, or (3) whether it represents the researcher’s own deliberate interpretation of what has been observed. Overall, Yin (2011) noted that either approach is legitimate as long as the goal of the research aligns with the focus for the direct observation.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) to data analysis and the overall framework of the study. In accordance with this approach, the steps of data analysis included the following process for working with the data: initial coding, focused coding, memo writing using focused codes, core categories and theoretical coding to discover the common themes within the data (Charmaz, 2006). The steps for data analysis are described below.

**Initial and Focused Coding**

The researcher began with the following types of coding in this research: initial and focused coding. Charmaz (2006) suggests that there are at least two primary phases of coding in grounded theory: the initial phase where data is examined by segment or line by line; and the second focused or selective phase where large amounts of data is organized by the most frequently occurring codes. Charmaz (2014) notes that coding is the pivotal link between
collecting data and developing emergent theory to explain data. In the initial stage of grounded theory data analysis, the researcher approached the data from an open mindset, seeking to discover what concepts were revealed within the data. The researcher also considered the research questions that guided the study and sought to identify data concepts that pertained to the research objective.

The initial coding was based on the participants’ actions and statements, assisted in analysis of the data from the ground up, and reduced the likelihood of superimposing my own predetermined notions on the data (Charmaz 2006). Additionally, the focus on participant actions refocused the researcher’s interest on actions and processes instead of viewing individuals as individual units of analysis (Charmaz, 2014). In order to organize the large amount of data, the researcher used Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis computer program. Initial codes from the qualitative data were sorted, synthesized, and conceptualized within the computer program. To achieve this, the researcher proceeded to revisit the data while looking for similarities across initial codes. These preliminary coding categories were developed based on the first interview transcription of the first participant and the researcher engaged in line-by-line coding to generate initial themes from which to compare the later interviews. Upon developing 102 preliminary codes, the researcher conducted an inductive analysis of each interview transcript since there were several interviews to be compared and contrasted. Some of the initial codes consisted of the following: beliefs and values parents teach their children, expert teachers, community service, different curriculum, and issues in traditional public schools.

Charmaz (2006) noted, “…the researcher uses the most frequently appearing initial codes to sort, synthesize, and conceptualize large amounts of data” (p. 684). To achieve this, the researcher proceeded to revisit the data while looking for similarities and across initial codes.
These preliminary coding categories were developed based on the first interview transcription of one participant. The researcher began by conducting inductive analysis of an individual case since there were several cases to be compared and contrasted. Essentially, the researcher had to write notes about the individual cases. Then, cross-case analysis began with a search of patterns and themes that cut across individual cases. As the researcher continued through the documents, focused coding led her to see that many of the initial codes expressed similar ideas.

The second phase of coding entailed focused coding. Charmaz (2006) described the second phase of coding as one in which previously identified line-by-line codes are used to go through large amounts of data in order to make analytical decisions about which initial codes will make the most “analytical sense” to categorize the data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). Essentially, focused coding resulted in the grouping together of initial codes into categories. In effect, this established more substantive codes while still undertaking the data collection and analysis. So, the researcher was able to condense many initial codes into more substantive codes as shown in table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Sample of Substantive Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
<th>Transcript Line Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to help school through advocacy</td>
<td>Includes how parents service/advocate for Utopian</td>
<td>143a-154a, 112b-124b, 99c-108c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Experiences of schooling</td>
<td>Includes how parents have experienced schooling themselves</td>
<td>22a-32a, 14b, 15b, 16b, 17b, 18b, 19b, 20b, 21b, 22b, 13c, 14c, 15c, 16c, 17c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inequities in public school system in United States</td>
<td>Includes lack of rigor in the curriculum, unqualified teachers, low expectations</td>
<td>20a-25a, 50b-62b, 26b, 27b, 18c-41c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disconnection in schooling for African American students</td>
<td>Includes lack of cultural understanding of how African Americans students learn</td>
<td>26a-43a, 30b-64b 25c-38c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal opportunities</td>
<td>Includes educational</td>
<td>129a-156a, 99b-111b, 86c-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Development of Core Categories and Theoretical Coding

Core categories helped to aid in the development of theory during the theoretical sampling phase. “Categories explicate ideas, events or processes in your data--and do so in telling words” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 189). Based on the interviews, the researcher developed core categories and began to analyze the categories and codes from the data to generate preliminary themes that helped explain how and why parents chose Utopian Academy, and their experiences with the school since their children enrolled.

Memo Writing

Following the identification of more substantive codes, Charmaz (2006) described the final stage in the coding process within constructivist grounded theory as theoretical coding, which is the selection of a code that conveys the key conceptual category around which the remaining codes can be organized. Charmaz further elaborated as to how memo writing could aid the researcher in the analysis process. In this study, memo writing proved to be especially useful during theoretical coding. For example, reviewing the data and the stages of the coding process led the researcher to develop memos (as shown in table 4.2) regarding the experiences of African American parents who had children enrolled in Utopian Academy, as well as memos
regarding factors that influenced African American parents’ decisions to enroll their child in the charter school.

Table 4.2

Personal Memos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Memo #1 Researcher Reflexivity</th>
<th>Memo #5 Parents are kids’ first teachers and advocates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upon reflecting on my background and assumptions, I can easily see how my subjectivities will play a significant part in the analysis of the data, and overall study. As an African American woman, I think that my experiences in the education system have been quite unique. I attended pretty racially diverse schools and a charter school for high school. While I was successful academically in school, I can still remember often feeling as if my culture and history was not valued. The only time that we spoke about significant African Americans was Black History month or during social studies (slavery, Civil Rights, etc.). There is definitely value in attending racially diverse schools. I love learning to appreciate all people from all walks of life and the knowledge that I gain from relationships that are built. But, I think that while desegregation of public school had many positive aspects that resulted, it also had some challenges that arose. One challenge that comes to mind is figuring out how to educate students of color in a one-size-fits-all system. So, it is within this system that something is often lost in an effort to appease the masses. From my experience, that something that was lost was the sense of self-pride and worth and the appreciation for cultural and racial differences.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A common theme among the interviews was the idea that parents are very influential and important in ensuring their child’s success in school. Many parents felt that parents are the first teachers and must be advocates for their children. When schools failed many of their children, they noted that they did whatever was necessary to get them to what they deemed as quality schools. Some said they traveled more than 30 minutes to get their child to a better school. In regards to volunteering, many of the parents volunteered and had leadership roles on the PTA board and within the school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In thinking about my topic of African American parent charter school choosers, I think it comes to no surprise that there is an increase in the enrollment of African American students in charter schools. Upon</td>
<td>The parents felt great value at the school and often spoke of the community feel within school and the open door to parents to get involved as much as possible. One parent shared that her husband actually cut the grass for the school. A look at PTA boards and online newsletters shows the creative ways that the parents, in conjunction with the school work to raise money for the school. I had an opportunity to attend and observe Saturday Parent Couponing Club event where parents and teachers were learning how to save with coupons and raise money at grocery stores for the school. It is apparent that the parents who were interviewed were very dedicated to the vision and mission of the school so that they could ensure their children were in a successful school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
researching charter schools and academic achievement, however, the researcher is mixed and often tells contradicting stories about whether students fare better in charter schools. So, if this is the case, I wonder if parents are aware of this, and if they are, what other factors influence their decision to enroll their children in such schools. As I begin this research, I am under the assumption that parents probably choose charter schools for reasons other than academics, even though academics are important. I think that parents are looking for something different than what is being offered in traditional public schools such as personalized school environments; caring environments.

My rationale for using an interpretive paradigm and constructivist grounded theory centers on my belief that an adequate dialog between the researcher and the participants results in a collaboration to construct a meaningful reality. Such meaning meanings are emergent from the research process.

The act of memo writing meant that the researcher’s thoughts were dedicated to paper, and that they assisted in illuminating what was in the data, both implicit and explicit (Charmaz, 2006). In addition, memo writing served as a reflective tool through which she explored her own ideas and assumptions about the data, including what it is that participants said compared to what they actually meant. Milliken and Schreiber (2012) suggest that memo writing “makes visible the researcher’s internal dialogue regarding the data” (p.43). Through memo writing, the researcher engaged in a process of constructing and reconstructing her own personal meanings about what guided participant action and interaction as they attempted to understand the phenomenon under study.
Memo writing proved to be especially useful during theoretical sampling. For example, reviewing the data and the stages of the coding process allowed the researcher to develop memos regarding the experiences of African American parents who have a child enrolled in Utopian Academy, as well as memos regarding factors that influenced African American parents’ decisions to enroll their child in the charter school. Essentially, the memos formed the core of the researcher’s constructivist grounded theory study as they provided a record of research and analytic process throughout the data collection and analysis phase of the study.

Following the coding and memo phase of data analysis, the researcher began to re-examine the codes to create categories. Strauss and Corbin (1990) define categories as “…concepts, derived from data that stand for phenomena” (p. 114). Based on the interviews, the researcher developed categories and began analyzing the categories and codes to generate preliminary themes to help explain how and why parents choose Utopian Academy, and their experiences with the school since their child enrolled.

The comparative, interactive process of inquiry led the researcher back and forth between data collection and analysis as each informed the other (Charmaz, 2008). The constructivist grounded theory emphasis on theory construction affected how the researcher interacted with participants and the questions that they brought to the empirical world (Charmaz, 2009). Ultimately, the comparisons sharpened the researcher’s analyses and the iterative data collection further allowed the researcher to test her ideas and check emerging theoretical concepts that arose.

**Theoretical Sufficiency**

Instead of claims of achieving saturation, Dey (1999) argued that the term ‘theoretical sufficiency’ (p. 257) better fits how researchers conduct grounded theory. Rather than
establishing categories that were saturated by data, the researcher established categories that were suggested by data (as cited in Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical sufficiency occurred when no new patterns emerged in the empirical data in combination with the researcher’s theoretical sensitivity. This was considered to have occurred in this study due to decreasing interrogation of data in conjunction with increasing abstraction, the incorporation of various data sources, and the literature review being exhausted (as cited in Charmaz, 2014).

Although there are no firm guidelines with regard to sample size in qualitative research, the researcher selected a sample size appropriate to the research question and the methodology (Patton, 2002). However, Riley (1996) states that most studies achieve sufficiency between eight to 24 interviews depending on the topic focus. Due to the emerging nature of qualitative inquiry, and the theoretical sampling strategy in grounded theory specifically, this study was completed with in-depth interviews of twelve participants based on other similar case studies on school choice among African American parents (11 participants) (Cooper, 2005) and (14 participants) (Cooper, 2005). According to Charmaz (2006), “the notion of saturation, or sufficiency, of categories supersedes that of sample size, and sample sizes for some studies may be quite small, yet still achieve the requirements for a project” (p. 114). As such, the researcher achieved the final study with twelve participants for the study.

A grounded theory study needs to be representative, but researchers are advised that it is unnecessary and even defeating to collect huge amounts of data (Charmaz, 2014). The risk is that large amounts of data go unanalyzed, or the researcher becomes overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data and loses sight of the fundamental processes and quality within the area of study (Stern, 2007). Essentially, the researcher’s determination that theoretical sufficiency was evident was not based on the finding of a repeated pattern of data, but rather a repeated pattern of
conceptual and theoretical dimensions that led to the creation of themes based on the data and ultimately representation of those themes.

**Representation of Data**

When doing qualitative analysis, researchers interact with data in meaningful ways to decipher relationships among concepts in the research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). As such, case studies are flexible in that they can be presented in a number of ways—there is no specific format to follow. In the many forms it can take, “a case study is generically a story; it presents the concrete narrative detail of actual, or at least realistic events, it has a plot, exposition, characters, and sometimes even dialogue” (Boehrer, p. 42, 1990). Since the researcher is the one who creates the ‘story’ or write up, Stake (2000) noted that the researcher is the constructor of knowledge.

There are multiple ways that qualitative researchers use to present the data. Many involve the use of quotations and/or excerpts. Some researchers choose to present the data by data collection method, a unique description, or by key theme with each chapter representing a different theme. However, for the sake of this study, the researcher utilized multiple sources of data to analyze and display emerging themes through both narrative and poetic transcription. Glesne (2006) noted that, “Poetic transcription is filtered through the researcher, but involves the wholeness and interconnectedness of thoughts” (p. 206). With this in mind, the researcher provided poetic transcriptions at the beginning of each thematic analysis to help the reader come to know the participants and their stories in a very few words.

Charmaz (2000) described the presentation of data in the following manner, “The grounded theorist’s analysis tells a story about people, social processes, and situations. The researcher composes the story; it does not simply unfold before the eyes of an objective viewer. The story reflects the viewer as well as the viewed” (p. 514). To this end, the researcher analyzed
the data specifically for what the participants said and did not say to see if they could present themselves as evidence to provide insight and an understanding of the experiences of African American parents who have selected Utopian Academy for their children.

**Evaluating Constructivist Grounded Theory**

The naturalistic and interpretive nature of qualitative research provides for, “hazardous passage from the writer to the reader [and] the writer needs ways of safeguarding the trip” (Stake, 2000, p. 443). So, the safeguards that the researcher put in place allowed for an increased degree of trustworthiness, which guaranteed the overall credibility of the study. Criteria for evaluating this qualitative case study depended on the outcome of the data analysis based on the co-construction of both the researcher and participant of the data. To this end, the quality of the study was evaluated based on the following criteria: credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness (Charmaz, 2006). Table 4.3 provides questions that the researcher considered while evaluating the quality of the research for this study.
Table 4.3

*Kathy Charmaz’s Ground Theory Evaluation Criteria*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Questions to Consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Credibility  | • Do the categories include a diverse range of empirical observations?  
• Is there a strong link between the data and the argument presented in the research?  
• Is there enough evidence to allow the reader to reach the same conclusions as the researcher?                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Originality  | • Does the research provide and extend current thinking around this topic?  
• Is there a social and theoretical significance to this work?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Resonance    | • Has the researcher uncovered both unstable and liminal taken for granted meanings?  
• Has the researcher identified the links between individuals and larger structures (if in the data)?  
• Does the grounded theory make sense to participants and offer deeper insights about their experience?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Usefulness   | Is the analysis useful?  
• Will this research help initiate other research into this area?  
• Does the research propose any generic processes?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |


**Credibility**

According to Merriam (2002), the qualitative investigator’s equivalent concept, i.e. credibility, deals with the question, “How congruent are the findings with reality” (p. 74)? Lincoln and Guba (1986) argue that ensuring credibility is one of most important factors in establishing trustworthiness. In order to ensure credibility of the study, the researcher certified that credibility of the study through the following provisions:
1. Triangulation of data
2. Member checking
3. Reflexivity

**Triangulation of Data.** Triangulation involves the use of different methods, especially observations, focus groups and individual interviews, (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 2002). The researcher interviewed a total of twelve participants in the study and each participant brought a distinct set of experiences and views to the study. Data was collected in three different ways: semi-structured, individual interviews, observations, and documents.

While triangulation of data sources was used as a method to ensure credibility, the researcher proceeded with the use of triangulation that was guided by Mathison’s (1998) perspective. Mathison (1988) provides an alternative perspective to the use of triangulation. She notes that triangulation has traditionally been used as a means to form a singular proposition or hypothesis that makes for unrealistic findings about the phenomenon being studied. This alternative perspective takes into account that triangulation results in convergent, inconsistent, and contradictory evidence that must be rendered sensible by the researcher or evaluator. Instead of data ‘converging’ that may result in inconsistent findings, Mathison (1998) recommends that, “we attempt to make sense of what we find and that often requires embedding the empirical data at hand with a holistic understanding of the specific situation and general background knowledge about this class of social phenomena” (p. 17). Ultimately, the researcher evaluated each of the data sources to construct plausible explanations about how African American parents make decisions about schools for their children.

**Member Checks.** Member checking gave participants an opportunity to clarify any misconceptions or misrepresentations they thought might have occurred during the interview or
the researcher’s interpretation of the data collected during the interview (Roulston, 2010). The researcher sent each participant a copy of their transcript and analysis for them to determine which aspect of the data analysis fits their perspective. This allowed the researcher to identify any areas that might misrepresent the participants’ words so as to paint a more accurate portrayal of the participants’ narratives. In one instance, while deciding on how to name the first theme from the study, the use of ‘oppression’ concerned the researcher. The researcher felt that maybe the participants would think that such a word would misrepresent how they felt about the education of African American students as a whole. So, the researcher sent the findings to the participants to ensure accuracy and appropriate representation of their narratives. Each participant responded and felt that the use of ‘oppression’ was very accurate for their experiences and perspectives. One participant, Delia, shared a definition from the online Webster-Merriam dictionary, which defined oppression as, “A sense of being weighed down in body and mind” (2015). This, in Delia’s mind was how both she and her child’s schooling experiences could be described. She further went on to explain that although overt racism has decreased, more covert forms of racism such as low expectations of African American students have surfaced over time.

**Reflexivity.** Morrow (2005) defined reflexivity as a way for researchers to inform their audiences about their perspectives as well as to manage their subjectivities. Reflexivity permitted the researcher to better understand how her own experiences and understanding of the world affected the research process. Essentially, qualitative research requires that the researcher is self-conscious of their impact on the study (Roulston, 2010). Throughout the research process, the researcher was cognizant of her own experiences regarding racial identity as an African American and schooling processes in the U.S. South. The subjectivity statement was central to
maintaining reflexivity and positioning the researcher within the research prior to designing the study (Creswell, 2007).

**Originality**

The review of the literature highlighted a limited perspective on African American parents who choose charter schools. This exploration of African American parents’ decisions to choose Utopian Academy for their children provided more in-depth research that centered on their experiences and decision-making. It further highlighted the participants’ understanding and perspective of what they feel they must do in order to provide their children with an educational experience that they deem appropriate to ensure their current and future success. The importance of acknowledging and addressing the growing presence of African American parents in the school choice marketplace cannot be underestimated, and this research contributes new information to this topic. Overall, this study provided fresh insights through a conceptual rendering of the data, with social and theoretical significance that challenged and extended current ideas, concepts, and practices.

**Resonance**

The term, resonance, refers to a researcher’s ability to meaningfully resonate and affect an audience. The researcher recognized that even the best written accounts of her participants’ lives may not be able to provide direct insight into their lived experiences. However, the researcher engaged in practices that promoted empathy, identification, and reverberation of the research by readers who have no direct experience with the topic discussed. Tracy (2010) notes that, “Resonance can be achieved through aesthetic merit, evocative writing, and formal generalizations as well as transferability” (p. 844).
Aesthetic merit is defined by Tracy (2010) as the artistic and beautiful representation of the text. The significance of the text to the reader is greatly impacted by the way in which the researcher presents the text. So, the researcher asked the following questions when evaluating the resonance of the study: a) Did this study affect me? b) Is there clarity about the findings? c) Are the findings easy and comprehensible for the target audience (school district leaders and education policymakers to understand)?

Likewise, Bochner (2000) looked for qualitative narratives that were vivid, engaging, and structurally complex, or, in short, a story that moves the “heart and the belly” as well as the “head” (p. 271). Richardson (2000) also emphasized the importance of aesthetics, saying that, writing should be creative, complex, and encourage the reader to feel, think, interpret, react, or change. Essentially, the researcher represented the aesthetics of her research through artistic elements such as poetic transcription to elicit emotion in the reader about the phenomenon under study.

While resonance emerges through aesthetics, it also emerges through transferability of findings across a variety of contexts. Maxwell (2013) noted that generalizability in qualitative research is not based on a sample of a predefined population where results can be extended. Instead, he says that the focus in qualitative research is on the development of theory that can be transferred to other cases whether the outcome is the same or not in various circumstances. In this study, the researcher provided sufficient personal information (the researcher as an instrument) and the research context (African American charter school choosers at Utopian Academy in Clayton County, Georgia), processes, participants (African American parents of charter school students), and researcher–participant relationships to enable the reader to decide how the findings may transfer. Unlike generalizability, transferability does not involve broad
assertions, but invites readers of research to make connections between elements of a study and their own experience.

**Usefulness**

The research from this study speaks to the practicality of the theory, as a stimulus for further research, contribution to knowledge, and to providing a voice to African American parents since they have grown exponentially within the school choice market as consumers of charter schools. Given the exponential increase in African American parent charter school choosers, the findings of this research add new knowledge to the research field at a time when it is desperately needed. Moreover, this study demonstrated the importance of understanding African American parent perspectives on charter schools as a multifaceted phenomenon.

**Subjectivity Statement**

Maxwell (2013) notes that separating our research from other aspects of your life prohibits us from a major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks. Maxwell (2013) terms ‘experiential knowledge’ as the value of biases that lie within qualitative research. In acknowledging the significance of bias in research, researchers must also be aware that it is not a license to uncritically incorporate one’s own assumptions and values on the research. In keeping with this, the researcher highlighted a “reflexive stance” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 344) in order to describe how her background and personal experience relates to the participants, and ultimately impacts the final written representation for the data.

The researcher was born to a single, teenage mother and lived half of her life in a low-income socioeconomic status. As a school-age child, much of her school career was spent being driven to predominately White schools opposite her side of town, because her mother considered the predominantly Black schools inferior due to limited resources and course offerings. After
spending time at her predominantly White school outside of her school district, she quickly realized significant differences in how African American students were treated as the minority within the predominantly White school.

While in college, the researcher decided to major in Early Childhood Education so that she could go back and work in low-income areas that serve students of color. Within three years of working in the public school sector, the amount of charter schools doubled in her county and the choosers of these schools were predominantly African American parents. Instantly, charter schools began to become a popular choice among parents who were looking to provide their children with what they perceived to be better opportunities than what were available within the schools assigned to their zip code.

Since that time, she has worked in traditional public schools, and recently in a charter school in a large urban district. The researcher has since had opportunities to learn more about charter schools and the value, or lack thereof, placed on them by the public. On a personal level, the researcher has experienced the ongoing struggle within the educational system to accommodate and ensure equity for students of color. As a result, many African American parents are also faced with decisions about the educational quality of many public schools and the pedagogical approaches used to teach their children.

Nevertheless, as the researcher delves deeper into her work, she has become increasingly aware that the status quo of American education remains an ongoing debate for educators and other scholars alike. While Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) was passed to ensure integration and equal resources for all children in public schools, it is very evident that academic opportunity gaps still exists between White and Black.
Since charter schools have been deemed by many as a ‘civil rights’ issue for children of color, the researcher has been very interested in understanding what draws parents to these schools despite mixed data on student academic outcomes. By developing an understanding of these factors, the researcher hopes to gain insight into this new group of school choice choosers who no longer have to be limited by their zip code.

The researcher’s life experiences and work is closely connected to the research study. The researcher chose not to ignore this connection, and instead highlight it. Mills (1959) proclaimed, “The most admirable scholars within the scholarly community…do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously to allow such dissociation, and they want to use each for the enrichment of the other” (p. 195). By recognizing one’s own subjectivity and engaging in reflexivity consistently, the researcher was able to enrich the study and provide an additional degree of trustworthiness. The researcher hopes to provide educators and policymakers with information that will help them to make policy decisions concerning charter schools and traditional public schools that serve large African American populations. It is the hope that African American parents can finally have a sense of confidence in the public education system that was founded on a premise as ‘the great equalizer.’
CHAPTER V
PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

This chapter provides brief overview of the participants so as not to compromise their identity, findings based on analysis of the data from the interviews and, to a lesser degree, on observations and information drawn from an examination of relevant documents. African American parents provided their view of their perspectives on charter schools and their decision to enroll their children in Utopian Academy. Verbatim interviews with parents were transcribed and analyzed; keeping in mind that, as Silverman (1993) has suggested, interview responses need not be heard as “simply true or false reports on reality…instead, we can treat such responses as displays of perspectives” (p. 107). Documents provided historical and demographic information and served to corroborate observations and interviews and/or to raise questions. Data analysis further consisted of providing a rich and detailed description of the findings of the context across each case presented in this chapter. Within the final chapter, chapter 6, the researcher discusses a summary of the findings, implications in light of the relevant literature, the overarching macro-level theme of the study, an outline of the limitations and recommendations for future research that would extend the findings, and a conclusion of significance.

Participant Profile Overview

The 12 participants of this study were selected purposefully. The ages of the participants ranged from 25 to 54. Each participant varied in age and level of volunteerism at Utopian Academy for the Arts. Figure 5.1 provides an overview of the participants’ ages. Upon interviewing for the study, the researcher felt that it would be of significance for multiple
reasons. Since the first charter school law was enacted in 1991, this opened up a new era for students and parents to gain exposure to the heightened publicity surrounding charter schools. Prior to this, many African American students attended schools within their immediate neighborhood that were often in need of reform or provided parents with limited schooling options that were free and impervious to decades of institutionalized racism since slavery.

Figure 5.1 Ages of the Participants

The level of participation at the Utopian Academy varied among the parents. Figure 5.2 provides an overview of the level of parental involvement among each participant at the school. Examples of parent participation included, but were not limited to cutting the grass at the school, coordinating the parent carpool, and working in an executive position within the Parent-Teacher-Association (PTA).
This section identifies common micro-level themes from the participants’ interviews in a structured response to the following research questions for this qualitative case study: 1) How do African American parents who have decided to enroll their children in a charter school make decisions about schools for their children? a) What are African American parents’ perceptions of charter schools? and b) What are African American parents’ experiences of having children enrolled in Utopian Academy charter school?

Upon analyzing the data from parent interviews, the following themes emerged from the data: (a) African American parents recognize traditional public schools as sites of oppression, (b) African American Parents View Charter Schools as a Way to Provide Better Educational Experiences for Their Children, (c) Parent Advocacy and Support is Important in Order to Ensure the Success of Utopian Academy, and (d) Parents View Utopian Academy as a Catalyst for Future Success Among Their Children.
Early vignettes were utilized for each theme in order to provide what Stake (1995) suggests as a “vicarious experience, to get the feel of the place and the time” that the study is attempting to portray (p. 130). The early vignette took the form of poetic transcriptions that Glesne (1997) defines as, “The creation of poem-like compositions from the words of interviewees” (p. 202). To that end, they offered a window into the parents’ perspectives and experiences as they explain their rationale they have for choosing Utopian Academy.

**Theme 1: African American Parents Recognize Traditional Public Schools as Sites of Oppression**

I think that the curriculum does not address the identity of the child, and the individual child itself.

There's no room for that.

When you go in, it's almost like a factory.

It's almost just like pumping the same thing out.

The same child is coming out of the public school system every year.

Just carbon copies.

- Karen

The first theme focused on the perspectives of African American parents in regard to how they view traditional public schools. Upon describing their experiences with traditional public schools (TPS), parents in the study frequently described their experiences in negative terms. They further felt that TPS often placed African American children at a disadvantage. Janice stated,

So, I just think it's not extensive, and they don't follow through with kids like they need to follow through with them. So once you get turned out with this system in 12th grade, you turned out. God bless you. You are no longer our problem until
you become the police's problem, or until you become an asset to the society, then we get that--you know, then we can claim you.

Such a statement paralleled with all of the participants in the study who felt that the traditional public school system also lacked quality and often focused on quantity.

Various rationales for the parents’ dissatisfaction with the education system as a whole provided very detailed and passionate responses that provided a context from which they drew and made their educational decisions for their children. In an interview with Maurice, he indicated,

Yeah, I'm not impressed with it at all. Because if someone puts you in this small box, and you're confined to that box, you have no room to move, to be who you are. You have no room to experience how you learn. You got to get it this way, or you're not going to get it at all. So you spend all your time trying to get it the way the teacher's teaching it, and the way they say you have to get it, and the way they say you have to get it to pass the test. And then anything outside of that, any other way that you learn outside of that, it's not going to be addressed, and if it is, it's probably going to be an issue.

In particular, race seemed to play a very strong role in how the parents viewed the quality of education provided to their children and African American children in general.

All of the parents were aware of inequities that existed in the education system that centered on race and even location of schools in providing equal resources to all schools. Forms of overt and covert discriminations were evident in the narratives of the participants and seemed to shape their perspectives about the public education system. In her own experiences, Janice recounted,

… I saw the lack when I went to -- when I came to the north end [of the county], and I saw the difference in the education versus the south end, I knew it was a disadvantage then. Then I had to try and figure out, okay, how do you piggyback off that? I went to Fulton High School…But I think in my junior year -- had to be my junior or senior year -- that's when they finally started introducing computers.
Personal experiences from the parents’ own backgrounds were often situated on a dichotomy of north versus south, which was code for White versus Black areas in a district. According to parent responses, African Americans often lived in the south end of cities and towns and often had limited resources and opportunities in comparison to their White counterparts in the northern parts of the district. Kathy further shared, “The public education that’s provided 15 miles from here…in Buckhead is not the same here [Clayton County].” The interview with Janice revealed another factor that was related to the theme of oppression in traditional public schools. In the interview with Janice, she highlighted key conversations with her father during childhood. Based on this conversation she shared that her father would frequently say, ‘Well, you know, you expect only this set of people to have this, and only this set of people to have this, because this set can't understand it.’ She further validated this view by stating, “So, with that being said, he made sure we understood the difference.”

There is a vast amount of literature on expectations of African American students. This literature centers on teacher expectations and institutionalized ways of thinking (Irbine, 1990; Obiakor, 1999; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007) as factors related to student achievement among African Americans. This literature takes into account the vast historical inequities in U.S. society, more than a century of institutionalized racism, and the ever-widening Black-White achievement gap. But, education is supposed to be great equalizer; the leveling playing field that will help to catapult historically disadvantaged students. Next to voting rights and ending segregation, the biggest fights in the civil rights movement involved the power and promise of education. Taking this into account, Tara recalled conversations and words of wisdom from her own father who frequently advocated for her school. She mentioned,
Because he would say, ‘No, I expect more out of you. I expect you to give our kids more. Don't just settle.’ So watching him do that, and with him telling them they can't settle with us, made them give us more; Made them go to the corporations and made them come back and give to our community

Such comments from her father and some later experiences helped her to understand the level of negative expectations and stereotypes about African American students that were both spoken and unspoken.

**Theme 2: African American Parents View Charter Schools as a Way to Provide Better Educational Experiences for Their Children**

She has been here in the public-school system,

and she has been, now, in the charter.

And there is clearly a difference in her experiences.

There's clearly a difference in academic setting,

    classroom setting,

    and now she can know that education doesn't have to just be this humdrum mote thing.

- Michelle

In order to understand the significance of this theme, an understanding of the parents’ own personal experiences of the education system in the United States were provided as a framework within the first theme of this study. Ultimately, parents often had negative experiences and opinions about the education system and its ability to provide quality educational experiences for African American students.

Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang (2011) note that charter schools are the new civil rights issue of our time. Specifically, they address the issue of charter school segregation and its
problematic implications. Utopian Academy is majority African American and its focus centers on nontraditional modes of educating African American students (APPENDIX F). Contrary to Frankenberg et al.’s (2011) focus on negative effects of segregation in charter schools, parents in the study often celebrated the majority African American student population, teachers and administration at Utopian Academy. Not one parent said that the high population of African American students was problematic. In fact, this, in their view, was a way to ensure that their children’s individual identities and modes of learning were well regarded. Ultimately, the major injustice or civil rights issue to the parents in the study was not that schools were segregated, but that their children had limited opportunities and room to grow and be in an environment that encouraged them to appreciate who they were as individuals. Karen strongly believed that, … charter schools are a way of voicing that, and saying, look, you know what? That's fine, we don't need to be a part of that anymore, this is our solution over here. And this is what we're going to do to identify our kids as individuals, to see them as individuals, to let them see that, okay, you don't learn like that, but you learn like this, so you are capable, you know. And that, you know, we just are not going to try to squeeze into your box anymore. We don't fit that. We don't fit that mold. This is how we learn. We learn differently, and that's okay. It's okay to learn differently.

In the search for better educational options, Dawn elaborated by stating, “We wanted to find a school where our child could be challenged.” Kathy went on to add, “…it’s like you’re looking at my child as a number…lack of connection [in traditional public school].” April further stated, “So, knowing that I had an extra…another option to go to, to at least try, that was like, Whew!” Essentially, she felt a sense of relief just to know that options outside of the traditional public schools in their district had opened up for her children.

Further discussion with the parents in the study highlighted their beliefs that charter schools offered a different curriculum and variety of courses that were different from traditional courses such as foreign language and P.E. Yvonne stated, “I like the different connections they
have, like drama, the glee club, art, video…” In addition, the Eagle’s Nest school letter further detailed the variety of courses and clubs available to the students (APPENDIX G).

**Theme 3: Parent Advocacy and Support is Important in Order to Ensure the Success of Utopian Academy**

It is kind of a way for us to take back our community and our kids.

It is kind of a way of us saying,

we want more control over the way that our kids learn

and the way they are taught.

- Margaret

Parent advocacy was another common theme that was prevalent throughout each of the parent interviews in the study. Aside from the teachers and curriculum, the majority of the parents in the study felt that parents played a crucial role in helping Utopian Academy achieve a level of success that would provide the experiences needed to guarantee a quality education for their children. Maurice affirmed,

Parents are what make a good school. The students don't make it a good school. The administrators don't make it a good school. It's the parents. Because, if you're standing behind that mission, or the purpose, the objective of what it is, it doesn't matter if you believe what this church that you go to, because of the purpose and the mission of what it stands for, you're going to support it.

Parents in the study shared examples of parents who cut the grass at the school, donated items and money, and volunteered most of their time to make sure that Utopian Academy was successful. Margaret highlighted,

If you have dedicated parents, then we will make sure that our school and our students have--we're going to volunteer the time that we have, and the money and the resources that we have to get them to where they need to be.
Parents also felt that high levels of parental support would translate into a sense of ownership for parents and their role in making the school a success. Maurice acknowledged that, “Everybody wants to feel like they're making a difference, that they are present, or they're doing -- they're mowing the grass, or something. It's that special touch that's making the school function.” Whatever the case, the level of support among the parents in the study was very high.

The high level of parental support also played out in Utopian Academy’s challenges at the beginning of their first school year. Some of the parents discussed the intense struggle between the Clayton County school district and the battle to open the doors at Utopian Academy. In chapter three, the context of Clayton County was outlined and shared as a means to highlight the slow progress of charter school conception in the district. Although charter school legislation has been in effect in Georgia since 1993, Utopian Academy marks Clayton County’s fifth charter school to date. Upon discussing the challenges involved with opening Utopian Academy, Janice highlighted the challenge just in opening Utopian Academy’s doors:

When it gets to the point that you've got to fight the school -- the traditional school system, just to allow your school to open, when you've got to fight with the city, because the school system has done got in cahoots with the city to stop you from opening up, you're trying to stop my child from being educated. Why? Why are you stopping my child's growth? And when it gets to a point when you have to go before the courts -- and that's what happened with Utopian, we ended up having to go to court to ask the judge to allow us to open. We're in Georgia. Clayton County, of course, like you know, had -- 71% of the voters in Clayton County voted for charter schools. Why in the world are we fighting?

Further discussion on the challenges and barriers to open Utopian Academy set a context to help explain the parents’ level of commitment and dedication to Utopian Academy and their quest for quality education for their children. This level of support and dedication on
the part of the parents helped to frame its importance for Utopian Academy, and ultimately their children.

Delia elaborated on the various ways in which parents could volunteer and support the school. One of the volunteer activities involved opportunities to shop and save money through couponing. In an observation of the Parent Couponing Club at the school, parents and teachers engaged in coupon clippings in support of Utopian Academy. At this particular social, parents taught teachers, parents, and other visitors. This particular means for fundraising allowed participants to raise money for the school while shopping and saving money at local and online stores.

While all of the parents felt that parental involvement was much needed in order to ensure that both their children and the school were successful, one of the parents felt that parent advocacy and support was a lost tradition among African American parents and still an ongoing issue at the school. In an interview with Maurice, he discussed the importance of parent responsibility for their children:

It's our responsibility to pass down that tradition, of the values and the morals and the principles. We done got out of that. Nobody don't have no morals anymore. Nobody has no principles. If you can do and say -- if you think you're big and bad enough to do it, you think you can do it. Where's your principle behind what you're doing? Where is your integrity? Back then, you was taught that your integrity, your word, was everything. The way you conducted yourself, the way you behaved went a long way.

Upon further discussion with Maurice, he further revealed the creative and nontraditional modes of parental involvement at Utopian Academy. Some of the activities included Parent Couponing Club and a Girls Rock Mother-Daughter Tea. While Maurice was the only participant to bring up this concern, the literature provides various reasons for the lack of involvement in schooling among African American parents.
Parental involvement has been defined in various ways. Perroncel (2003) defines it as a partnership between home, school, and community members to support a child’s education process. That partnership is essentially what all of the parents felt was essential to a child’s success. While there are varying levels and types of ways in which parents can be involved in their child’s education, Maurice felt that parents were needed in any capacity possible. He spoke of parents needing to just build relationships with teachers, get their children to school on time, and providing even spaces within the home to do homework and discuss the importance of education. Essentially, his various definitions of parental involvement were consistent with the literature on alternatives modes to parental involvement (Decker, Gregg & Decker, 1996; Finders & Lewis, 1994). This, according to Maurice, would not only ensure the success of the child, but the school as a whole. In describing the importance of parents as influential to the well-being of the school, Yvonne stated,

So we don't look at that, and I think, to me, for parents, they want the charter school, but they've got to see the whole picture. It's just like you want a house, or you want a car, but you need to understand the full thing about the car. It ain't just putting the gas in the car. You know, you've got to pay the car note, you've got to get insurance, you've got to put the gas in it, and you've got to keep up with the maintenance.

This analogy highlighted the underpinning belief that parents are crucial to the success of Utopian Academy. Evident in the narratives from the parents about parent advocacy are common threads of self-reliance, sacrifice, and a sense of communalism between them. This commitment not only created ongoing sustenance for the schools, but also provided an image for the role that interested parents could play. Broadly, each of the parents in this study recognized that the level of effectiveness and achievement for Utopian Academy was dependent upon the continuation of support and involvement between parents and the community as a whole.
Theme 4: Parents View Utopian Academy as a Catalyst for Future Success Among Their Children

She's able to have her own voice, so she's able to change the world.

Whether it's in her community,

whether it's in her county,

whether it's in her state,

whether it's over the United States,

or the whole country or world.

- Alison

The fourth theme focused on the participants’ experiences upon enrolling their children in Utopian Academy for the Arts. Participants expressed optimism since enrolling their children in Utopian Academy and were very affirmative and optimistic in regards to their child’s future success. Studies conducted by various researchers (Buckley and Schneider 2006; Almond 2012) align with what each participant expressed. The participants viewed Utopian Academy as the facilitator for equitable educational opportunities and have situated the school as a major medium for future success their children.

In the midst of Utopian Academy for the Arts being situated as a vehicle for success for their children by parents in the study, parents further expressed their contentment with the school as a place of love and compassion for their kids’ racial identities. Dawn noted, “I think it’s [sending child to Utopian Academy] going to tell him that you don’t have to settle for anything.” In addition, April added,

That they can be -- well, efficient as a citizen in this world that we live in; that they're able to be decision-makers, to able -- and be problem-solvers. To be able to adapt into this world that we live in, and not feel like they are outsiders.
The parents’ responses further revealed the high value placed upon the staff and environment within Utopian Academy. They feel that the quality of the staff further elicited the success of their children. Margaret added,

She’s receiving a quality education and she’s receiving it from people that look like her. The majority of our staff is, actually all of our staff is African-American. And they see that...wait a minute, these people...they’re successful, they’re young, they think outside the box, they meet me where I am, and they encourage me to think outside the box.

The idea of caring teachers was also central to the theme of Utopian Academy as a catalyst for future success for students. Parents felt that that the teachers were focused on cultivating student interests in the content they were teaching through employing a variety of strategies that connect content to their students' lives. Across the literature, caring teachers have been defined as warm demanders, an idea conceived by Kleinfeld (1975).

They also felt that the caring teachers set high expectations for all students in their classes and pressed students to understand the material, not merely for the sake of performing on a test but to understand the world around them. Among teachers who push their students to excel, Kleinfeld (1975) notes that what distinguishes teachers perceived as caring is the quality of their interpersonal interactions with students. Examples were shared from parents that centered on teachers’ expectation that students could and would produce quality work and failure was not an option. Fundamentally, many parents described how the teachers and staff at Utopian Academy exerted their positive influence on their students' learning through relationship building with them.

**Discussion of Emerging Theory in Relation to the Research Questions**

The purpose of utilizing a constructivist grounded theory approach to data analysis was to understand the African American parents’ perspectives at Utopian Academy and their experiences regarding their decision to enroll their child in Utopian Academy for the Arts charter
school. The following research questions guided the study: (1) How do African American parents who have decided to enroll their children in a charter school make decisions about schools for their children? (a) What are African American parents’ perceptions of charter schools? and (b) What are African American parents’ experiences of having children enrolled in Utopian Academy charter school?

The outcomes of this study have provided a new lens from which to re-envision school choice theory in relation to African American parents. Their perspectives and experiences of enrolling their children in Utopian Academy for the Arts charter school were grounded in their personal experiences, and have, in conjunction with the themes that emerged from this study, helped to answer the overall research questions in this study.

**Question #1 How do African American parents who have decided to enroll their children in a charter school make decisions about schools for their children?**

Traditional school choice theory is grounded in the assumption that decision-making can be can be generalized to all parents, and does not adequately represent African American parents. This theoretical supposition implies that all parents make well-informed decisions about schools based on traditional school quality indicators such as test scores (Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000; Schneider, & Buckley, 2002; Wells, 1993).

Rational choice assumptions about school choice further highlight the individualistic nature of such assumptions in that it implies that an educational choice and outcome of such choice is the direct result of the individual’s poor decision-making; whether failed or successful (Cooper, 2005). Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe (1995) further add that rational choice assumptions fail to consider the social context and political landscape that impacts the parents’ decision-making process about schools for their children.
Most of the prior school choice research that addresses parental choice making is embedded in theories that assume that parents function as objective, rational choosers who maximize benefits for their children. Based on the parents’ narratives, however, the parents' subjective positionality, as opposed to the often-assumed objective rationality, powerfully influenced their decision to enroll their children in Utopian Academy. Parents, therefore, made a positioned decision to choose Utopian Academy.

Positionality, a term that comes from feminist scholarship, refers to how one is socially located (or positioned) in relation to others given background factors such as race, class, and gender (Maher & Tetreault, 1993; Martin & VanGunten, 2002). A person's positionality relates to the extent to which they are privileged, resourceful, powerful, and thus able to navigate and succeed within the dominant social structure. The notion of positioned choice conceptualizes a highly subjective parental school choice process that is intricately linked to the parents’ race, gender, and class. Positioned choices are value-laden and culturally relevant. Upon analyzing the responses from the parents in the study, examples of positioned choices were evident. In particular, the parents were informed by how they were socially and politically situated in the greater society, which eventually shed light on how they chose schools for their children (Cooper, 2005).

Parents’ choices revolved around both ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors that directed their way in which they choose schools (as shown in figure 5.3). Push factors can be defined as factors that prompted parents to take their children out of traditional public schools. Pull factors are factors that parents used to characterize quality schools and ultimately drew them to enroll their children in Utopian Academy.
Push and Pull Factors for Choosing Utopian Academy for the Arts

**Push Factors**

‘Push’ factors were highlighted in order to explain each parents’ rationale for leaving traditional public schools. Most of the parents in the study shared their personal experiences of schooling and often their responses centered on negative experiences within the public school system at TPS. Similarly, when many of the parents shared their children’s experiences, the responses were still adverse. Chapter 2 highlighted the history of African American schooling and the challenges that were prevalent in obtaining and maintaining a quality education and schools. Likewise, common themes such as inequities in resources and expectations for African American students were prevalent in the parents’ dialogue. In the search for better educational options, Dawn elaborated on her ‘push’ factor by stating, “We wanted to find a school where our child could be challenged.” Alison went on to add, “…it’s like you’re looking at my child as a number…lack of connection [in traditional public school].” Kathy further stated, “So, knowing that I had an extra…another option to go to, to at least try, that was like, Whew!” Essentially, each participant felt a sense of relief just to know that options outside of the traditional public schools in their district had opened up for their children.
Further comments from the participants highlighted participant beliefs that traditional public schools lacked equity and opportunity for their children. Such ‘push factors’ illuminated the decisive factors that led parents to dis-enroll their child from a traditional public school. Michelle stated, “The public education that’s provided 15 miles from here…in Buckhead is not the same here [Clayton County].” She began to point out disparities in funding and valuing of African American parents’ voices. She then added,

Not listening, not hearing, and not understanding. I think we, as African Americans, are always gonna be labeled. Instead of labeling, because we’re not all the same, so instead of labeling, listen. Listen. Let us have an opinion. We’re trying to tell you it’s this, and not what you’re saying. So just active listening and then just being open.

Consequently, parents sought information and selected schools based on their prior knowledge and experiences with education. They further came to the market with their own set of beliefs, values, and social capital (Schneider, Teske, & Marshall, 2000).

**Pull Factors**

The literature that focuses on why African American parents choose charter schools has often been limited to survey data from a variety of racial and ethnic groups (Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, & Rothstein, 2005; Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000; Schneider, & Buckley, 2002; Wells, 1993). Based on this literature, parents indicate they choose schools for academic reasons (quality), safety and convenience for example (Goldring & Smrekar, 2002; Hamilton & Guin, 2006). In addition, research also suggests that parents choose for factors such as the promise of smaller class size, which parents believe will provide better educational quality (Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000).

Parents in this study elaborated on the ‘pull’ factors that led them to enroll their children in Utopian Academy. Kathy said, “I like the fact that there is a middle school that’s offering arts. Not too many schools have something to give the kids to do besides sports. Yvonne further
discussed the significance of Utopian Academy’s environment stating, “… For one, it's more communication. And it seems like the expectations are much higher, and I don't know if it's due to funding, that it seems like these teachers at Utopian Academy -- they love to do what they do.” Dawn also liked the genuine concern for parental involvement and added, “Parents are able to have more input and more say and more involvement.” Margaret added to this by saying, “And the school is really supportive around the parents, and letting them know, “We need you up here. Where are you at? We need you!” You know. So, everybody -- the way I look at it, everybody wants to feel needed.”

Several studies have found that parents who utilize school choice options typically cite academic priorities as the major incentive for changing schools (Armor & Preiser, 1998; Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000). These studies also note slight differences between whites and non-whites when academic priorities are concerned. Non-whites are slightly less likely to list academics as the most important factor in choosing schools for their children (Goldrig & Rowley, 2006). Comparably, the parents in this study were more focused on choosing Utopian Academy for their children based on non-academic factors such as arts-based programs, caring teachers and staff, and opportunities for their children to gain a sense of self-worth and pride about who they are.

**Question #1a What are African American parents’ perceptions of charter schools?**

The literature on charter schools is based on arguments that both support and negate their existence (Bulkley, & Wohlstetter, 2004; Timpane, Brewer, Gill, & Ross, 2001; Vergari, 2002). Since all parents in the study were supportive of charter schools, their perceptions of charter schools were all positive. As Bulkley and Wohlsetter (2004) note, “Charter schools offer parents a way out, an opportunity to escape from schools they dislike and enroll their children in new
schools (p.181)…” In essence, this ‘way out’ was the premise for parent perceptions that resulted in the parents’ decision to enroll their children in in Utopian Academy.

Based on the responses from the parents in this study, their perceptions of charter schools demonstrated that they viewed charter schools as an educational option that empowered both their children and them. They also felt that that charter schools provided hope to them and their children that would translate into future success. Charter schools, in the eyes of the parents, served as a viable option that would provide their children with options such as a diverse curriculum and caring teachers and staff. Ultimately, parents felt that charter schools would help to level the playing field for their child in a school system that has historically underserved and neglected the education of African American students (Anderson, 1988; Anderson & Moss, 1999; Siddle Walker, 1996).

The parents in the study elaborated on charter schools as an environment in which African American students could learn in a way that was culturally relevant and sensitive to the needs of the students. Based on many of the parents’ responses that are parallel to Tara, it is evident that parents are cognizant of the racial differences as to how their students are educated in the traditional public school system. Essentially, the parents’ personal education experiences served as a context for their perceptions of charter schools as well.

As previously mentioned in chapter 4, the growth of charter schools in Clayton County and Georgia as a whole has been very slow to develop due to limited charter school legislation that supports start-up charter schools and charter authorizing entities. In particular, parents in the study felt that the limited start-up and authorization of charter schools could be viewed as a civil rights issue. Michelle expressed how charter schools question the status quo-traditional public schools and its methodology,
And I think that's what all civil rights movement is -- is that, that the person that starts off, makes the first step might not see the end -- but somebody's got to make that first step. And it ain't going to be many. And we can look at that with a side of history in anything. But everybody will reap the benefit from it. But it just takes those few to step out, to say, "Hey, it's okay, you don't have to go with the minority -- the majority. You don't have to go to the majority, because everybody's in public school and you're stuck. You can step out. You can be that first one to step out…

Recent call to arms for support amongst African American parents further demonstrated that African American parents perceive the creation and need for charter schools as extremely important and necessary. Shapiro’s (2014) article adds to the concept of charter schools as a civil rights issue. The author discusses the struggle of the de Blasio administration and the Success Academy charter network in New York and their respective fights to open charter schools; a story similar to Utopian Academy’s fight to finally gain authorization from the Georgia Charter School Association. So, many parents in the study repeatedly invoked the analogy to the Civil Rights movement in an attempt to stress the urgency of their cases and need for charter schools.

Kathy stressed,

Charter schools were originally designed to give a selected group of people a better educational quality, so that they wouldn’t have to pay for it. However, I think that as things have come along, it has become more of the disenfranchised groups of people who have taken advantage of it…

Essentially, the parents recognized that charter schools take on major challenges just to open in the largest areas of need-areas where decades of failure have left families, often minority, hopeless and without a choice and hope.
Question #1b What are African American parents’ experiences of having children enrolled in Utopian Academy charter school?

In context, Utopian Academy and Clayton County was ripe for support for education reform and increased parental choice. The history of failing schools, and ultimately loss of accreditation in 2007, provided a framework for parental perceptions and thoughts about the quality of education in the district.

Since the development of the few charter schools in Clayton County, a significant amount of African American students have enrolled in charter schools. A look at the literature on parental satisfaction with charter schools finds that the majority of charter school parents are highly satisfied overall with charter schools in comparison with the traditional public schools they left (Buckley & Schneider, 2006; May, 2006). Similarly, the parents in this study expressed positive experiences with Utopian Academy in contrast to their child’s former traditional public school. What is interesting is that parents in this study seldom discussed academic factors as a major influence in their positive experiences. For one, the parents’ experiences centered on personal attention from teachers, which they felt enhanced student self-esteem. In fact, May (2006) notes, “Many parents base their school choice decision on factors that have nothing to do with the quality of education.” In her study, parents reflected on positive feelings, which translated into smaller class sizes, teacher familiarity, one-on-one attention, and a sense of belonging. May refers to this construct as “the perception gap”—the positive expressions parents attribute to charter schools that center more on their feelings rather than with what is often deemed as ‘academic satisfaction.’

However, the parents in this study illuminated that public charter schools have done a successful job in attracting this academically disadvantaged group to their schools by providing
an atmosphere that is satisfactory and enticing to the parents. The need for educational options in
the Clayton County school district is emphasized as factual and common belief among parents in
the study. Given the context of the district and its history, Utopian Academy has situated itself as
a viable educational option for parents in the district; in addition to being an element of hope for
the African American community within the district. Alison speculated on this idea and claimed,

I think that Utopian will help change the community. Because it will bring parents
together. And it'll bring -- really, the community together -- to realize, and open
their eyes and see that there's a better way. And that their -- that every child can,
and has that option...It's just a matter of finding that right voice, that right tone,
that right note. And on top of that, helping that family to realize, "Hold on." If
the child changes, the family changes.

To this end, such thoughts and experiences situate Utopian Academy as the core of the
community with the power to change the children and ultimately the community as a whole. A
look at the *Utopian Academy for the Arts School Charter* and the *Utopian Academy for the Arts
Mission/ History* states, “Utopian Academy for the Arts was founded on the premise of serving
one of the most historically underrepresented, and underserved communities in the metropolitan
Atlanta area; Clayton County, GA” (APPENDIX H). It is the very mission and vision of Utopian
Academy that parents in this study felt embodied the current experiences and future impact of
the school on their children.

**Chapter Summary**

Perhaps what we are experiencing in education in Georgia, over sixty years after the
Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown*, is a grassroots movement by African American parents to
leave behind the promise of equality of opportunity in integrated, traditional, public schools. The
parents in this study felt that traditional public schools had not afforded their children equal
treatment or success. Instead, they have opted for segregated charter schools, whether de facto or
not, that they believe focus on their children, and promise true acceptance and recognition of their unique history and culture.

The parents in this study were cognizant of the role they play in their children’s eventual success or failure. As such, the utilization of school choice through the selection of Utopian Academy has provided parents with a renewed sense of hope and empowerment. They recognized the power of choice that charter schools offer and seem determined to exercise their new rights as consumers of educational services in order to find a school that will support them as they try to lead their children to academic success. Their interest in their children’s treatment and education were the stimulus for their actions.

This study sought to examine and understand African American parent perceptions, experiences and decision-making about enrolling their child in Utopian Academy for the Arts charter school. All of the parents in the study first became dissatisfied with traditional public schools and chose to exit them because of negative experiences based on their personal experiences of schooling, in addition to their own children’s experiences. The belief of the majority of the parents was that their children would be better served in charter schools; particularly, Utopian Academy for the Arts.

The parents in this study were drawn to Utopian Academy as a charter school for multiple reasons. They valued the fact that it was smaller and that the classrooms had fewer students. In addition, they perceived that the teachers and staff truly cared about and loved their children; that the faculty and staff made every attempt to get to know both the students and parents personally; often by first name. The parents also liked that both teachers and staff had high expectations of their children and worked toward keeping the lines of communication open.
The parents were further drawn to Utopian Academy by what they perceived to be the promise of charter schools—that their children were children with potential, who could and would succeed, and be afforded the opportunities that were missing in traditional public schools. The fact that the Utopian Academy served mainly African American students was of little concern, and in fact, served to benefit their children both socially and academically. A detailed summary of the macro-level theme and implications of this study appear in the final chapter.
CHAPTER VI
SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

This qualitative case study explored and examined twelve African American parents’ perceptions, experiences and decision-making concerning enrolling their children in Utopian Academy charter school. To understand the many themes and patterns that stemmed from the parents’ decision-making, three questions were addressed in this study:

1. How do African American parents who choose to enroll their children in charter schools make decisions about schools for their children?

1a. What are African American parents’ perceptions of charter schools?

1b. What are African American parents’ experiences of having children enrolled in Utopian Academy charter school?

Summary of the Study

The illumination of processes and practices of succession through the participants’ experiences required a qualitative case study approach (Stake, 1995). To aid in highlighting such experiences, the researcher employed a constructivist grounded theory method to data analysis in order to frame this qualitative case study. The researcher further focused on the perceptions and experiences of African American parents who had chosen Utopian Academy charter school as an educational option for their children. In effect, the researcher wanted to gain an in-depth understanding about African American parent decision-making regarding charter schools. Use of a constructivist grounded theory approach allowed the researcher to focus attention on the underlying social process that occur in a given context (Charmaz 2014), which was not
immediately apparent, but emerged over time as the data was analyzed and theorizing began.

The case was bound in Utopian Academy Charter School, a small middle school situated within Clayton County school district. Clayton County Public Schools is the fifth largest school district in Georgia with an enrollment of over 50,823 students, and is ranked among the 100 largest school systems in the United States. Utopian Academy is one of three charter schools within the school district.

Purposeful selection of participants enabled the researcher to gain in-depth knowledge about African American parents who have a child enrolled in Utopian Academy Charter School within Clayton County, Georgia (Maxwell, 2012). Participants who (1) identified as African American, and (2) had a child enrolled in Utopian Academy for the Arts charter school within Clayton County, Georgia were recruited to participate in the study. In the end, 12 participants enabled the researcher to provide a lens from which to view this phenomenon.

Each of the 12 participants took place in a one-hour semi-structured interview. The interviews served as the primary source for data analysis in this study. Upon completion of each audio-recorded interview, the researcher carefully transcribed them. The interview protocol was semi-structured so that, in alignment with any constructivist grounded theory study, both the participant and researcher could help co-construct data in a meaningful way. All interviews were transcribed soon after they were held, and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity.

In addition to interviews, observations and documents were examined and related back to interview data, and further described historical and contextual characteristics of the African American parents who chose Utopian Academy for their children. Documents included newsletters, newspaper articles, the school mission, and the school charter. Observations included board meetings, Parent Couponing Club, and PTA meetings.
Data collection and data analysis occurred concurrently through the use of a constructivist grounded theory approach to the data. As such, data collection continued until the data collected no longer informed the conceptualization of theories (Charmaz, 2006). Concepts and linkages between the concepts that formed the themes were verified, and no additional data was needed after analyzing the 12 participant interviews.

The use of Atlas.ti allowed the researcher an opportunity to effectively store and manage data throughout data analysis. The researcher’s analysis began with initial coding as the researcher developed categories from the first interview and further reduced and recoded based on the rest of the interviews that followed (Charmaz, 2006). During the process of coding, the constant comparative method provided a means from which the researcher could condense multiple, initial codes into more substantive codes in order to generate the final themes in this study.

Throughout this process, meaning from the data was co-constructed between both the participants and the researcher since constructivist grounded theory views the researcher as subjective and meaningful in the data analysis process of research. This interactive process to data analysis further led the researcher to form analytical questions that merged both the subjective with what appears to be objective, as the researcher contended with understanding this phenomenon under study (Charmaz, 2014). In addition, reflexivity, triangulation, and member checking were employed to ensure the credibility of this study (Charmaz, 2014).

**Discussion**

Many themes emerged from the data across each of the participants’ interviews. The micro-level themes uncovered in this study were:

1. African American parents recognize traditional public schools as sites of oppression
2. African American parents view charter schools as a way to provide better educational experiences for their children

3. African American parents feel that advocacy and support is important in order to ensure the success of Utopian Academy

4. African American parents view Utopian Academy as a catalyst for future success among their children

The micro-level themes were presented as patterns of African American parent views and decision-making regarding enrolling their children in Utopian Academy. Each theme was analyzed with an eye on the relevant literature about African American education in the United States and charter schools in order to look for agreement or disparity on the findings of the present research.

The four micro-level themes that emerged from the findings were but a small, underpinning of the phenomenon under study. Following the response to the research questions, a larger macro-level theme was elucidated—that of hope. This larger theme provides a lens and greater understanding from which readers can probe deeper into this phenomenon. Consequently, the majority of the findings from this study were not consistent with prior literature on parents’ reasons for choosing a charter school and the factors that influenced their schooling choices. Specifically, parent responses revealed the importance of nonacademic factors such as parent advocacy and culturally relevant teaching in choosing a school such as Utopian Academy; a contrast to much of the literature on school choice among African American parents (Cooper, 2005, 2007; Schneider, & Buckley, 2002; Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000; Wells, 1993).

All parents in the study acknowledged that inequities still exist within the education system in regards to African American students and even their own children. Their responses
further highlight the connection between their decision to enroll their students in Utopian and their own background experiences and views about the education system in the United States. Such views included vast differences in resources between schools within the same district and a lack of culturally responsive teaching of their children and African American students in general.

The parents in the study utilized their dissatisfaction with the district and traditional public schools as a whole to make a change that they perceived was for the better. In spite of the obstacles in Clayton County that resulted in the Utopian Academy not being able to open during its first week of school in 2014, all parents in the study strongly felt that Utopian Academy was worth their investment of time and commitment to ensure that this school would open to provide a quality education for their children. Janice shared her commitment to the vision of Utopian Academy by stating,

\[
\text{When it gets to the point that you've got to fight the school -- the traditional school system, just to allow your school to open, when you've got to fight with the city, because the school system has done got in cahoots with the city to stop you from opening up, you're trying to stop my child from being educated. Why? Why are you stopping my child's growth? And when it gets to a point when you have to go before the courts -- and that's what happened with Utopian, we ended up having to go to court to ask the judge to allow us to open. We're in Georgia. Clayton County, of course, like you know, had -- 71% of the voters in Clayton County voted for charter schools. Why in the world are we fighting?}
\]

In essence, the parents perceived Utopian Academy as a symbolic site of sociopolitical and cultural resistance from traditional public schools that ultimately centered on the ideal of hope.

\textbf{“The Great Black Hope”}

Hope was an overarching macro-level theme that was present throughout each of the participants’ interviews. In the parents’ quest to find another educational alternative to traditional public schools, hope emerged as a major common thread that was inherent in their perspectives on charter schools and decision to enroll their children in Utopian Academy. Upon reflecting on
the themes that were prevalent in this research and the literature on African American education in the United States, the landmark decision from *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) is so pertinent in understanding the significance of the decisions made by the parents in this study. Despite efforts from the *Brown* decision of 1954, the findings from this study accentuate the impact of parents’ views on education and particularly those of African American students in a post-Civil Rights era. Such views further illuminated a context in which the parents live that posits American education as a place of continued discrimination and inequality that *Brown* sought to eradicate.

**Regression Since Brown?**

Effectively educating African American and other minority students still remains one of the most challenging tasks for education in the United States. Today, over half a century since the *Brown* ruling made desegregation the law of the land, African American students are arguably still the most underachieving group of students. Amidst the plethora of school restructuring, desegregation attempts, and other educational reforms, the disproportionate underachievement among African American students has remained a consistent challenge (Ford, 1996). Maurice highlighted his opinion of progress for African American children in education by declaring, “I think with time, of changing and everything, what they believe was doing something for our good, is really turning out to be for our bad.” Although the number of African American students completing high school, attending and completing college, and enrolling in graduate and professional schools has increased over the past six decades, African American students continue to lag behind most ethnic groups on a number of academic indicators (Fryer & Levitt, 2004).

In this study, every parent was well aware of the significance of the African American
achievement gap and the significance that it played in education reform, especially in the school choice movement. What is interesting; however, is that all the parents were knowledgeable about the academic underachievement of students in relation to test scores. But, they still did not focus their decision-making solely on quantitative measures such as test scores. Overall, it was evident that the parents in this study were looking for something greater. They were looking for an educational experience that could not be quantified.

**Hope Defined**

The *hope* that was evident from the participants’ narratives entailed a double meaning. On the one hand, the participants held on to hope for Utopian Academy as a school option that provided better educational options and ensured long-term success for their children. Yet, on the other hand, parents also viewed Utopian Academy as a quality schooling option that centered on pre-*Brown* characteristics of successful African American schools such as self-reliance, ownership, and strong teacher, parent, and community relationships.

**Hope for a Return to Black Schooling and Values in Education**

Utopian Academy as a school that resonated with pre-*Brown* ideals provided another definition of hope among parents in the study. Siddle Walker's (2000) consistent characteristics of successful African American schools during segregation included exemplary teachers and culturally relevant teaching, self-reliance and ownership for education, and parental support and advocacy. While numerous narratives on segregation and African American schools speak on the deficits of such schools, Siddle Walker (1993; 2000) documents countless African American narratives on the strengths of these schools and successes that occurred among African American students at these segregated schools. She goes on to say, “These voices do not speak of test scores and/or any measured success of graduates in defining goodness. Rather, they fondly
recall a time when, in the words of one eighty-year old grandmother, colored children learnt something in school” (p. 163).

Interdependence between and among the African American school, family, and community was the cornerstone of successful educational success enjoyed by Black students pre-
Brown (Morris, 2009; Tillman, 2004). As a collective, the parents in the study viewed their children’s future in a new and more hopeful way due to the fact that their children had opportunities to be taught by more teachers who were African American and dedicated to building relationships among the students, parents and the community as demonstrated by Siddle Walker (1996) in her book. The other point—worthy of a discussion of its own—was in the way the teachers and principals in Black schools proved to parents that they were genuinely interested in their children. This was evident through methods of “caring.” Valenzuela (2010) further discussed the political and cultural context involved in caring for minority students. She examined how students experience ‘caring’ in schooling contexts. She found that many students achieve at lower rates and have negative experiences because they view the schooling environment as ‘uncaring.’ Ultimately, her work highlights a connection between situations and historical contexts that impact minority students’ schooling experiences and hope for better opportunities. Similarly, the parents in this study recognized the benefit of caring teachers, principals, and schooling environments and attributed to the present and future success of their children.

The parents in this study highlighted the emancipatory potential of Utopian Academy. Parents’ discussion of Utopian Academy in regards to their children’s future was extremely optimistic and hopeful. Armed with the commitment to the school and its mission and vision, parents strongly felt that Utopian Academy would provide their children with options such as the
ability to be creative, to develop socially and emotionally, and develop a sense of racial cultural pride that was not encouraged in the traditional public schools (Horoford, 2011).

A consistent concern among the majority of parents in this study was that children were not recognized as an individual and had limited opportunities to express themselves creatively, and truly establish a sense of cultural pride. For example, Karen pointed out that Utopian Academy was, “a way of voicing that, and saying, look, you know what? That's fine, we don't need to be a part of that anymore, this is our solution over here. And this is what we're going to do to identify our kids as individuals, to see them as individuals… we just are not going to try to squeeze into your box anymore.”

The narratives from the participants significantly parallel with what W.E.B. Dubois terms *double consciousness*. W.E.B. (1903) Dubois defines this term as “the sense of looking at one’s self through the eyes of others (p. 51),” and uses it to describe the confliction among African American people as a race in relation to the mainstream White culture. According to Du Bois (1903), the prejudices of White people elicit “self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals” (p. 12) among Black people, and when such theory is applied to this study based on parent responses, the feeling of inferiority and need to be someone other than themselves reinforces this concept of double consciousness. Many of the parents felt that limited self-identity and pride had penetrated their children’s total wellbeing within the traditional public school setting, and impacted their schooling experiences, and ultimately self-esteem, negatively.

In a national discussion on educating Black males, one Black teacher explained to CNN News that black male students with a black male teacher are “…able to see what they'll become one day, and if those images are positive, it raises their self-identity to another level” (Bennet, 2012). In addition, Agee (2004) explains that a Black teacher “brings a desire to construct a
unique identity as a teacher...she [or he] negotiates and renegotiates that identity” (p. 749) to meet their objectives and to meet the needs and expectations of their students. Overall, in accordance with parent responses, there was a high value placed on African American teachers and their significance in working with African American students and ensuring their future success.

Although African American students can now legally attend integrated schools, there underlies an importance to understanding the significance of school quality as it relates to the education of African American students. On the one hand, school choice literature on charter schools emphasizes the re-segregation of schools (Frankenberh & Lee, 2003; Orfield, 2001; Renzulli & Evans, 2005). Yet, while policy has been geared over the past few decades to improve the issue, this study and literature (Anderson, 1988; Siddle Walker, 1996; 2000) provides an alternative perspective to such concerns. Literature supports the idea that African American communities valued segregated schools due to the caring environment and vested personal interest in the students (Anderson, 1988; Siddle Walker, 1996; 2000). In addition, parent narratives in this study were comparable to the existing literature and provided a positive perspective on the significance of their children attending a majority African American charter school. This, in turn, is important for historical accuracy and current education reform as it demonstrates that parents are focused not necessarily on equality or sameness, but on ensuring equity. In effect, parents were not concerned with schools treating their children the same, but providing each individual child with what they needed based on who they were as individuals.

Parent responses further expelled the myth that parents who utilize school choice are solely seeking factors such as test scores and safety. As discussed below, this study revealed the importance of understanding this phenomenon from a perspective that facilitated the ability to
tackle recurring issues in education regarding how to best serve African American students. Additionally, this study further highlighted the significance that African American parents play in their role as positioned school choosers seeking new hope for their children’s educational experiences.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

This section of the chapter focuses on the implications of the findings. The implications of this study may be of interest to legislators, school officials, and school board members who can affect schooling policy, be instrumental in school reform, determine the size of school buildings, and/or select school personnel. It may also be of interest to those who are responsible for instructing and preparing administrators and teachers in schools of education; and school administrators, teachers, and support personnel in all types of schools who are interested in gaining additional skills that could be useful in connecting with African American parents and their children in order to build more effective, working partnerships. Equipped with the insights provided by the participants in this study, perhaps schools can be improved for *all* children.

**School and District Leaders**

With the advent of charter schools, the African American parents in this study have become consumers of educational services. Empowered by the choices afforded to them by charter schools in their area, they now have the means to possibly secure better schools for their children. For one, they were cognizant of inequities such as unequal distribution of resources the educational system. But, even more so, they are aware of inequities embedded within the level of expectations and instruction provided to African American students. Moreover, the parents in this study believed that charter schools had a better chance of providing hope to their children and serving as a catalyst for their current and future success than traditional public schools.
because charters treat their children differently in a multitude of ways.

The parents in this study chose Utopian Academy based on what Cooper (2005) describes as “positioned choices” which she says are “emotional, value-laden, and culturally relevant” (p. 175). School leaders must understand that parents want smaller, more inclusive, and culturally relevant pedagogical approaches for their children. Parents no longer find value in schools simply because they are integrated. Boyd’s (1987) warning of the potential endangering of American public schools because of “fundamental demographic and value shifts” has come to pass (p. 85). Educators who are attached to their old ideas as to what parents expect from schools and the power of the educational monopoly need to attend to the choices that parents are making if they want traditional public schools, as they know them, to survive. Essentially, school leaders must take responsibility to ensure the equitable treatment of all of their students.

Policymakers

Research indicates that the satisfaction rates of parents whose children attend charter schools are generally much higher than those who choose traditional public schools (Figlio & Kenny, 2009; Goldrig & Phillips, 2008). Yet, the academic achievement rates of such students are not significantly higher. Nevertheless, as data from this study suggests, standardized test scores are not the most important factors that African American parents consider when choosing charter schools. African American parents appeared to be seeking schooling environments that were attentive to their student’s needs, inclined to place high expectations on their children, college-centered, and allowed parents and the community to be involved. These matters, while not measured by tests or other quantitative measures, influence the overall schooling experiences that parents in this study felt contributed to their decision-making when choosing Utopian Academy and ultimately success of their children.
Charter school policy should aim to re-evaluate how it views African American parents in the charter school market. Traditional views of charter school choosers center on a rational choice theory approach to explain school choice among parents. According to this standard view, parents take part in the process of determining what options are available and then choose the most preferred one according to some consistent criterion (Levin & Milgrom, 2004). However, this study revealed that parents, particularly African American parents, utilize real-world choices that are highly situational or context-dependent and were inconsistent with uniform criteria such as high tests scores and other factors that research has carved out as factors that parents choose in the school choice marketplace. To make decisions regarding their children’s education, parents also rely on their personal values and subjective desired goals of education, as well as others within their social and professional networks to collect information. Essentially, policymakers should understand that the context of parental decision-making is far more complex. Although the supply of quality schools matters, if choice is to deliver significant equity gains, policies must take better account of the social and historical inequities that constrain traditional public schools and thrust parents into the charter school marketplace.

Future Research

School choice policies, particularly regarding charter schools, have remained an important topic for educational researchers who share mixed views about this growing form of school choice. While there is limited research that highlights school choice among African American parents, researchers have found that the desire for educational options among them has not wavered (Cooper, 2005; 2007). Many African American parents are still willing to struggle and sacrifice to escape low-performing schools, secure educational opportunities for their
children, and enact agency by taking advantage of school options (Pedroni & Apple, 2005; Stulbberg, 2008).

Further research in this area should examine the link between preferences and behaviors, perhaps exploring what factors help or hinder parents in acting on their preferences. It should also take into account contextual factors such as geographic location, constraints, and supply, to more fully understand the operation of choice. Educators, scholars, and policymakers must give African American families more credit for their knowledge, wisdom, ability to make informed decisions, and risk-taking and thus, provide parents greater opportunities to communicate their own views. Ultimately, it is only through better understanding how African American parents construct and exercise school choices can equitable, high-quality school choice options be devised and well informed.

**Limitations of the Study**

There are some important considerations to keep in mind before others use emerging theory in this study to guide theory, practice, or research. This study was conducted with a limited number of participants who were parents of students in one charter school in Clayton County, Georgia. Particularly, the study included only a small group of a select racial group of parents who were African American. The purpose of this study was to explore in depth the experiences and perceptions of African American parents who have enrolled their children in Utopian Academy, not to develop a theory that would be generalizable to all African American parents. Any attempt to do so would not be in keeping with the purpose of this study. The constructivist approach used here implies that the researcher was not seeking to discover an objective reality that existed, but an understanding of the reality that these participants portrayed as constructed in their social context.
Charmaz (2000) described the end product of such constructivist research as “more like a painting than a photograph” (p. 522). The limitations and their epistemological roots of this study did not diminish the value of the study. Instead, it enriched the study by making the underlying assumptions, premises, and approaches transparent, visible, and open to critique. As with any qualitative study, the researcher had tremendous influence on the process and the product of this research. So, the researcher framed the study, conducted the interviews, co-constructed meaning with the participants, and developed theory based on the experiences of both the participants and herself.

The researcher was very much aware of the effect that she had on each of the respondents by the personal characteristics she brought to each interview during this study. Because the participants’ experiences were so central to this type of research, it was vital to create a space in which the participants felt comfortable being honest and vulnerable. As an ‘insider,’ the researcher identified as African American and could relate to participants both ethnically and racially. The researcher is also familiar with charter schools since she is an employee at a charter school in Georgia. However, as an ‘outsider,’ the researcher is not a parent, and thus has not been a consumer in the school choice marketplace.

This study did not attempt to confirm or disprove the research conclusions of previous studies of choice by African American parents; however, it did attempt to expand the information that has been found. In some instances, the findings that developed supported the existing literature, but in other areas, the findings conflicted considerably from the results of other studies.
Concluding Thoughts

The market forces in the school choice arena did not drive the decision-making of the parents in the study as much as their quest to find hope and better educational options for their children. The question as to why African American parents choose charter schools needs to be considered within a historical context. However, the answer to this question of charter school choice is not simple or straightforward. As such, to understand the present, the past needs to be considered. Findings from this study broaden the dialogue regarding definitions and complexities involved with the charter school phenomenon. This study increases the role that the narratives of African American parents play in regard to their experiences and perceptions of charter schools, and ultimately decision to enroll their children in charter schools such as Utopian Academy.

The findings from this study also suggest that examining past histories of African American education through the lens of identity and culturally relevant pedagogy uncovers areas of strengths that are not fully emphasized in the literature on African American schooling. These areas of strengths, the influence of the Black community on ethnic identity, ways of caring in the Black community and schools, and the importance of the Black community as a vehicle for the academic success of Black students should be considered in any serious discourse regarding the success of African American students and benefits of schools that serve this particular population. While the findings from this study cannot be generalized to all African American parents, the data provides valuable insight and theoretical implications regarding charter school enrollment among this racial group.

The success of charter school policies does not rest on the actions of individual parent choosers alone. It also relies on the relationship between parental choice and structural inequality. Since parents in this study made positioned choices, educators and policymakers
share the responsibility of ensuring that all students gain access to high quality education. The parents in this study have shed light on their perspectives of charter schools and the impact that played in the enrollment of their children in Utopian Academy.

Increasingly, the literature supports charter schools as a popular school choice option for African American parents for reasons that center on frustration with the quality of public education. While school choice initiatives have elicited intense discussion within and across every racial and class group, African American students continue to enroll in charter schools at a rate faster than any other racial group. While the Brown decision was structured to ensure equality in the form the distribution of equal or same resources to all students, this study sheds light on the significance that parents felt charter schools played in ensuring equity for African American students.

No longer are African American parents content with the status quo of equality in education, or an educational system that treats all children the same. What was evident from parent narratives, however, was the need for a system that instead places the focus on equity for their children. African American parents in this study recognized and understood the significance of African American history and experiences in the United States. They were also fully aware of the unleveled playing field of opportunities and embedded inequities in the educational system and society as a whole. This, according to the parents, was a direct cause for the limited advancement of African American student achievement both academically and socially.

This study does not suggest that charters are the solution to problems of inequity, but may serve as one promising avenue for educational reform for social justice that should be pursued by policymakers and educational leaders- but not at the exclusion of more system-wide structural reforms of public schooling. Traditional public schools must meet with greater success in
educating and providing a sense of hope for African American students and parents. The parents’ narratives demonstrate that their schooling decisions center on a very American dream that schools will serve the needs of all students: a dream contrary to centuries of contradiction that would not go unfulfilled. It is this unfettered feeling of hope that charter schools will be the birthplace of hope for African American students, parents, and their communities.
REFERENCES


Lauder and Hughes et al. (1999). The contrasting pro-market and social conflict theories of markets in basic schooling, 18(32). Retrieved from G:\neoliberalism\Whathappens to the common school on the market.mht


5/3/2015
Mr. Artesius Miller
Utopian Academy Charter School
6630 Camp Street
Riverdale, GA 30274

Dear Mr. Miller,

This letter will confirm our recent telephone conversation. As previously mentioned, I am a doctoral student from the Educational Administration and Policy program at the University of Georgia. I would like your permission to access your parent listserv so that I can recruit parents for my study titled, The Great Black Hope: A Case Study Examining the Perspectives of African American Parents Who Choose Charter Schools. If permission is granted, parents will be contacted and sent the recruitment flyer and consent forms if they agree to participate in the study.

Please indicate your approval of this permission by signing the letter where indicated below and returning it to me as soon as possible. My phone number is (678) 662-6891 and email is smia21@uga.edu. By signing this letter, you are confirming that you agree to the above described material.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Andrea Smith

__________ I do consent for you to utilize the parent listserv to recruit participants.

__________ I do not consent for you to utilize the parent listserv to recruit participants.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________    ___________________________    _____________
Print Name             Signature              Date

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Gatekeeper Letter
Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Letter

Date: May 20, 2015

Re: THE GREAT BLACK HOPE: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT CHARTER SCHOOL PERSPECTIVES AT UTOPIAN ACADEMY

Dear Participant,

My name is Andrea Smith and I am a doctoral student from the Educational Administration and Policy Studies program at the University of Georgia. I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study about African American parent perspectives about charter schools. I will be conducting interviews for a research project to gain a greater understanding about African American parent decisions to send their children to charter schools in the Clayton County school district. The results of this study are intended to provide a greater perspective African American parents charter school choosers. You are eligible to be in this study because you are African American, and you have enrolled your child in Utopian Academy for the Arts charter school in Clayton County.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will take part in an interview about your experience and decision to enroll your child in a charter school. The information you provide in the interview will help me provide traditional public schools, charters schools, policymakers, and researchers with a deeper understanding as to why African American parents choose charter schools for their children.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you would like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email or contact me at 678-662-6891 or smia21@uga.edu.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Andrea Smith,
EdD Candidate
University of Georgia
Appendix C

Consent Form

THE GREAT BLACK HOPE: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENT CHARTER SCHOOL PERSPECTIVES AT UTOPIAN ACADEMY

Researcher’s Statement

I am Andrea Smith and I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Purpose of the Study

Since the adoption of charter school legislation, charter schools have been posited as the solution to failing schools -- particular for underprivileged students. An increasing amount of parents are opting to select options for schooling that has yet to generate significant academic data on the success of charter schools as a whole. Despite the lack of evidence that proves that charter schools significantly improve student achievement, currently African American students make up 34% of enrollment for charter schools in the U.S. and that number is steadily growing. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to examine and understand African American parent perceptions, experiences & decision-making concerning enrolling their children in charter schools.

I would like to ask you to allow me to interview you. I am interested in understanding your experiences and perspectives on the issue. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Sheneka Williams
Associate Professor, Education Administration and Policy Department
Phone: (706) 542-1615
Email: smwill@uga.edu
Study Procedures

The interview will be conducted in a mutually agreed upon location and time. Audio recording devices (digital recorder/iPhone/Audacity computer program) will be used to record interviews to provide accuracy in transcribing. At the end of the study these recordings, such data will be securely stored in a password-protected facilities and/or locked storage at the University of Georgia for five years following the study and it will then be destroyed.

Risks

I do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study as a research subject.

Findings from this study will provide a greater understanding as to why African American parents choose charter schools for their children in Clayton County, Georgia. In addition, this research will increase community members' and policymakers' abilities to make sound decision with regard to these issues. The resulting information and participant interviews from this project will provide education stakeholder with clear, thorough data on which their decisions can be based and can be tailored to the needs of the predominantly African American student population in the Clayton County school district.

Privacy/Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept confidential. The co-investigator will not include the name of any parent involved in the research in my report. Research records will be kept in a locked file at the University of Georgia. The co-investigator will be the only person who will have access to these records.

If you agree to participate in this study, please complete and sign the attached consent form and return it to me during the time of the interview.

Thank you in advance for your contribution.

Sincerely,

Andrea Smith
If you have questions

If you have any question about this interview, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone: (678) 662-6891, email: smia21@uga.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject’s Consent to Participate in Research:

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

_______________________   ______________________   ______________________
Name of Researcher      Signature               Date
Appendix D

*Interview Protocol*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question(s)</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Tell me about your own experiences of schooling</td>
<td><strong>RQ# 1</strong> How do African American parents make decisions about schools for their children?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. How have such experiences shaped/influenced your decision-making about your child’s schooling?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Tell me about your views on public education in the United States.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Tell me about the education of African American students in the United States.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What comes to mind when you hear the following: “Charter schools are the new civil rights issue of our time.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Tell me about your child’s previous school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. What were some elements that you liked and/or disliked?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                                                                 |                                                                 |
| 1. What do you see as the differences between charter schools and traditional public schools? | **RQ# 1a** What are African American parents’ perceptions of charter schools? |
| 2. Tell me how you first heard about charter schools.                              |                                                                 |
| a. How did you gain knowledge about charter schools?                                |                                                                 |
| 3. What do you perceive to be the advantages and/or disadvantages of charter schools? |                                                                 |

|                                                                 |                                                                 |
| 1. Describe your feelings and/ or thoughts when you learned of your child’s acceptance to Utopian Academy. | **RQ# 1b** What are African American parents’ experiences of having children enrolled in Utopian Academy? |
| 2. Tell me about your experiences with Utopian Academy thus far.                    |                                                                 |
| 3. As an African American parent, what does your child attending a Utopian Academy Charter School mean for their future? |                                                                 |
| 4. What are your expectations and hopes for your child at Utopian Academy?          |                                                                 |
Appendix E

*Parent Couponing Club Observation Notes*

**Utopian Academy for the Arts**  
**Parent Couponing Club (Field notes)**  
**Saturday, August 15, 2015**  
**10:00am**

Both parents and teachers are entering a classroom next to the principle’s office. Some people are still outside the classroom carrying on a conversation. A woman with multiple piles of newspapers and magazines zips right past me and enters the classroom. Around 10:00am, people begin to enter the classroom. As I walk in, I notice one table in the center of the room with a couple of chairs. There are scissors and paper clips on the table. A television is hooked up to a laptop displaying a PowerPoint titled, ‘Couponing.’ After about fifteen minutes, a lady closes the door. There are about five people in the room (I guess not many parents like couponing).

As I go further into the room, the lady who brought in the piles of newspapers says to me, “Have a seat right there. Start cutting your coupons that you use.” As I take my seat, I notice that the people who are present are all women (are we the only ones who shop). Some of the women have started cutting coupons and sorting them according to different categories such as feminine hygiene, dairy, etc. Many of the women seem to know each other and are discussing different fundraisers for the school and Saturday school. As I begin cutting my coupons, I strike up conversation with a lady who has a child in the sixth grade at the school. “I’m lost. I’ve never done this before,” I say. I then ask her if she’s ever done extreme couponing. The presentation is more conversation style.
Appendix F

Utopian Academy for the Arts Charter

This charter for Utopian Academy for the Arts (“Charter”) is entered into by and Utopian Academy for the Arts: The Miller Foundation, Inc., (“Petitioner) and the State Charter Schools Commission (“SCSC”) (collectively referred to as “the parties”).

WHEREAS, the Petitioner submitted a petition to the Local Board proposing to establish a state charter school pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2060 cl.i <9., the Charter Schools Act of 1998 (Charter Schools Act’) and O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2084, and the Local Board denied the petition;

WHEREAS, the SCSC finds that the petition compiled with the provisions of the Charter Schools Act, and the rules, regulations, policies and procedures promulgated in accordance with O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2063 and O.C.G.A. § 20-2-2084 and further kinds that the petition is in the public interest; and

WHEREAS, pursuant to G.C.G.A. § 20-2-2083, the SCSC grants this Charter to permit Petitioner to operate Utopian Academy for the Arts (“the Charter School”) in accordance with the terms and conditions of this Charter.

NOW THEREFORE, in consideration of the promises, mutual agreements, and covenants contained herein and other good and valuable consideration, the sufficiency of which is hereby acknowledged, the parties agree as follows:

1. Definitions. File terms below will be interpreted in accordance with the following definitions, unless and until federal or state law, or the state accountability system, is amended otherwise:

Adequate Yearly Progress: Adequate Yearly Progress is a measurement based on a series of performance goals that every school, LEA, and state must achieve within specified timeframes in order to meet the 100% proficiency goal established by the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), subject to any amendment, waiver or reauthorization thereof.

b. Annual Measurable Objectives: In defining Adequate Yearly Progress, each state sets the minimum levels of improvement, based on student performance on state standardized tests, that school districts and schools must achieve within time trances specified in law in order to meet the proficiency goal under No Child Left Behind. These levels of improvement are known as Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs), and they ensure that all student groups, schools,
school districts, and the State as a whole reach the 100 proficiency goal by 2013-2014, subject to any amendment, waiver or reauthorization of NCLB.
Utopian Academy for the Arts
6630 Camp Street
Riverdale, GA 30274
Office 770-892-1644/Fax 770-731-2135
www.utopianacademy.com

News from the Eagles’ Nest

March 2015

Greetings Parents! As the school year rapidly comes to an end, we at Utopian Academy for the Arts, would like to thank you for entrusting us with the care of your children. Please make sure that we have the correct contact information on file and that you have completed our re-enrollment form. It is very important that we receive this information by March 18th to insure your child’s space at UAFA. Also, below are a few reminders:

* Allergy & Asthma season are upon us. If your child has been diagnosed with Allergies or Asthma, please bring the appropriate medications and forms to be placed our nurse’s office.
* All medicines must be in its original bottle and have proper paperwork on file.
* Food Allergies are a very serious issue! If your child has food allergies, please make sure that all necessary medications and paperwork are maintained in the nurse’s office.
* The Fine Arts Department is still looking for parent volunteers to assist in our production of the Wiz. Please see Ms. Ballantyne for additional details.

Eagle’s On the Move!!

Due to the lack of response for the Selma Calendar Fundraiser, we have decided to discontinue the fundraiser and all monies received will be refunded to parents. The Utopian Eagles will be soaring to Six Flags for their Math and Science Day on May 1st. The cost will be $40 per person to include admission, transportation, an all you can eat lunch and a free ticket to White Water for later use. Payment plans will be accepted with an initial deposit of $20 due by April 2nd, and the final
Appendix H

_Utopian Academy for the Arts school Mission and Vision Statement_

MISSION AND VISION STATEMENT

Through a structured and supportive environment, the Utopian Academy for the Arts will develop academic and artistic students to enter and to succeed in the global society with proficiency to enroll in a college, university or specialty school of their choice. Utopian Academy for the Arts shall be a community-nurturing academic excellence for all students and demonstrating leadership in character development. The vision statement is intended to serve as both the blueprint for improvement and the benchmark by which we will evaluate our progress.
Appendix I

_Utopian Academy for the Arts Student/ Parent Handbook_

Artesius Miller Founder and Founding Board Chair
Anthony Bryant Founding Board Treasurer
Jacqueline Heard-Fields Founding Board Secretary
George Bandy Jai Gilyard Danielle Hillman Linda Stevenson

Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM)
Providing a unique approach to instruction is one of the fundamentals of charter school status. We will meet this by adopting the Schoolwide Enrichment Mode (SEM). The SEM focuses on the development of gifted behaviors in a specific area of learning and human expression. The model suggests a behavioral definition of giftedness and greater emphasis on applying gifted program knowledge to larger segments of the population (Renzulli & Reis, 1994a).

This learning model provides students motivation to learn. The Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) focuses on use of concepts rather than skill learning, use of interdisciplinary curriculum and theme-based studies, student portfolios, performance assessment, and cross-grade grouping. The SEM is comprised of three service delivery components: Total Talent Portfolios, Curriculum Modification Techniques, and Enrichment Learning and Teaching. This model ensures that student receive the most appropriate education based upon their individual interests and strengths.

Uses of the Curriculum Modification Techniques are designed to adjust levels of learning so all students are challenged, and increase the number of in-depth learning experiences. One of these techniques is called “Curriculum Compacting.” Rather than covering all of the material in a textbook, this model allows teachers to analyze the textbooks to determine which material is to be covered in greater depth. Teachers are able to focus on concepts and ideas that capture the essence of a topic, or area of study through themes, patterns, and sequences.

Constructivist Foundation of SEM
SEM is based on the principles that each learner is unique, learning is more effective when it is enjoyed, learning is more meaningful when it is in the context of a real problem, and that knowledge results from students’ own construction of meaning. The belief that students learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process reflects the constructivist theory of learning (Gomez, 1996). The constructivist principles of instruction focus on enabling students to construct and use problem-solving strategies to develop their own meaningful understanding of the ideas.