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Too Much of a Good Thing: A Look into the Educational Climate of Port Townsend Washington

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Too Much of a Good Thing: A Look into the Educational Climate of Port Townsend Washington

Rebecca Stewart

Scripps College 2018

Table of Contents

Introduction	Page 3
▪ Introduction	Page 3
▪ Methodology	Page 5
▪ Conclusion	Page 10
Chapter I – The Development of the Current System	Page 12
▪ Introduction	Page 12
▪ A Brief History	Page 14
▪ Standard Education	Page 17
▪ Alternative Education	Page 27
▪ Conclusion	Page 30
Chapter II – Wanting What’s Best	Page 32
▪ Introduction	Page 32
▪ Fusion – The Development of a Complex Cultural Climate	Page 34
▪ Simple Titles for Complex Ideas	Page 40
▪ My Child Isn’t Like the Others – Risk Management and Future Planning	Page 43
▪ Conclusion	Page 46
Chapter III – The Illusion of Choice	Page 49
▪ Introduction	Page 49
▪ The Right to Choice	Page 52
▪ Schooling as a Consumable	Page 56
▪ Should We Have Options?	Page 59
▪ Conclusion	Page 65
Conclusion	Page 67
References	Page 72

Introduction – A Small Northwestern Town

Introduction

Walls of evergreen trees surround my family's car as we speed along one of Washington State's many obscure highways. Way up in the far Western corner of the United States, many of the small rural towns are spread throughout the deep green sea of the forest, with only bits of civilization fighting their way through the trees. With this expansive landscape it isn't completely unheard-of for people to need to commute long distances on a daily basis to get to important locations, but the hour long trip my family takes for my younger siblings to get to school rests on the border of excessive. Gently rounding another bend in the trees, a sign reading *West Sound Academy* becomes visible through the trees and we take a sharp left up a gravel driveway and into a large clearing containing a small collection of buildings. My first impression is that the visual layout of West Sound Academy is fairly pleasing. The fields of green grass are well-trimmed and the manicured local plant life growing along the side of the buildings is healthy and relatively free of weeds. The buildings themselves look recently painted with a collection of calm earthy colors. Overall the campus looks functional and well kept, giving the sense that a fair amount of money went into the school's presentation. Though not particularly fancy, as I had anticipated from one of the most renowned private schools on the Washington Peninsula, the grounds still visually showed wealth.

I turn my attention back to my mother as she excitedly explains each of the buildings around us and all the impressive programs each one holds, even pointing out the distant boarding house where West Sound houses its international students. No matter what my initial reaction to my siblings' new school might be, my parents are ecstatic with the program and I am happy that

they have found a choice they love. Especially keeping in mind all of the time and resources my family has struggled to produce so that my siblings have this option. West Sound Academy is a one hour drive from my house, and while the school does sometimes provide a van that drives kids from Port Townsend to the school's campus, my family still finds itself needing to make that commute at least once a week. Additionally, private school tuition isn't cheap, and while my siblings both earned scholarships, my family still makes great sacrifices in order to pay for the little fees that still seem to pop up for this school. Thankfully, from the conversations with my siblings I have gleaned they are also happy with West Sound Academy, which is important because with the commutes and tuition this private school isn't exactly the easiest option when it comes to education, so there must be a valuable reason my parents would choose such a school.

Initially, what is important to note is that my parents are far from the exception. Across the country, in communities ranging from rural to urban, you will find families making great sacrifices so that their children can get the best education possible, be it in the public or private setting. In the United States education is rightfully seen as the important foundation for success, and as a result many parents will move heaven and earth for their children to be taught well. However, as education is supposed to be a basic human right here in the United States, I argue that it shouldn't be an insurmountable task for parents to properly teach their kids. Especially, because the ones that must work the hardest are disproportionately the ones with the least amount of resources to do so. It is important to note, that in the context of this thesis, I will be referring to education and the education system not in the basic concept of classrooms and administrators, but as an expansive cultural structure. Education as a whole is a wildly complex structure founded on federal policy, local economy, and overarching social expectations. As a result, education is constantly changing while remaining the bedrock that effects the future of

every child that grows up in America. Education should be an easily accessible public service, not a commodity only accessible by America's privileged individuals. In order to better understand the struggles a parent faces when navigating their own community's educational landscape, I decided to interview families located in my hometown of Port Townsend (PT) Washington. I wanted to know about the choices these that small-town families had to make and to understand the reasoning behind them. Throughout my research I wanted to fully grasp the answer behind three central questions. What exactly are the different educational choices that have developed in my hometown, and how did their come to be so many for such a small population? I recognize the different factors that work behind the scenes in different family's educational choice, and how overarching cultural and policy norms influence them. Perhaps by locating common problems solutions might come into focus that could benefit the community as a whole. Finally, I explore the dichotomy between whether the abundance of choice found in my hometown was beneficial or harmful not only to my interlocutors, but to Port Townsend education as a whole.

Methodology

Field Site

The main focus of my research was on the experiences of parents trying to educate their children in the small Northwestern town of Port Townsend Washington. Port Townsend is an old Victorian seaport founded in 1851 by seamen looking for a safe and reliable shipping location for boats traveling the Pacific. For a long time, this town was a booming hub of commerce and activity until a railroad was built in Seattle and the majority of trade ships started docking there. As a result, a majority of the industry in Port Townsend froze, leaving it almost in a State of

preservation, to this day you can still see advertisements from the 1800s painted on the sides of buildings in the downtown district. In the present day, Port Townsend has grown to be about 9.46 square miles with a population of 9,113 people. Commercially, it has become more of a tourist destination that relies heavily on visitors vacationing in the summer. To help draw in more sightseers Port Townsend holds several festivals throughout the summer months. As a result, a large portion of the citizens work in service related jobs. Other common professions include working at the local thesis mill and working in the nautical industry (rigger, shipwright, sail-maker, etc.). However, the largest industry in Port Townsend is currently healthcare and social assistance, to care for the large elderly population that resides there. The population living in Port Townsend is vastly homogenous at all, with the white population taking up about 90% of the total population. Port Townsend's poverty rate is about 12.9%, with 86% of those living in poverty being white (Port Townsend, WA n.d.). Education levels in Port Townsend vary from groups of college educated individuals to people who never got their G.E.D. Overall, while not being ethnically diverse, Port Townsend is very politically, educationally, and socioeconomically diverse.

In many ways I chose Port Townsend as my research site out of selfish reasons. I moved into the city with my family when I was 10 years old away from the larger city of Seattle. Growing up in Port Townsend was a rich and unique experience that in many ways shaped how I view the world. It is hard to explain the perspective of small town life to those who have never experienced it. Knowing everything about the people around you and having them know everything about you can be both comforting and terrifying. Similarly, growing up in a location that has both extreme wealth and extreme poverty interacting on a regular basis is a unique experience that can pointedly illustrate the difference that income plays in daily lives. I never

realized I was growing up in these distinctive circumstances until I left and went to college in a larger city. Looking back, I find myself not only fascinated by the exceptional workings of my home town, but also longing to understand ways that it can be improved. On a larger scale I am hoping that the lessons that I gather from my research in Port Townsend can be applied on a more national scale to other small rural communities that may also struggle with their education system not benefiting the community.

Access to the Site

I should note that because I grew up in Port Townsend, I had my own experience with Port Townsend education. As a quick overview, I moved to Port Townsend when I was ten, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through my 4th grade year, I had only attended public school at this point. I finished 4th grade in a Port Townsend public schools at a place called Mountain View Elementary that closed a few years later. Unhappy with the public school my parents transferred me into something called the I.C.E. program, which would later become O.C.E.A.N., a sort of public/ homeschooling hybrid for 5th grade. However, my family didn't have the time required for homeschooling, so for 6th grade I moved to a local private school called Jefferson Community School. I stayed in Jefferson Community School until I graduated in 2014. As a result, while this connection gave me greater access to different key interlocutors, I also find that it gave me a slight bias towards different programs. I really only focused on the programs in Port Townsend that I personally knew families participated in, thus only exploring certain parts of the educational landscape.

Interlocutors

At the end my research I was able to interview nine families all from different educational backgrounds and participating in different educational methods. I also looked for different families that had participated in a number of different programs with their children so that I could find an understanding as to why they switched. It should be noted that all the families that I interviewed self-identified as white and fell onto the middle-class range (I never asked for socioeconomic status during my interview), and they are all employed in some fashion. All the families I interviewed had either two or three kids and had lived in Port Townsend for an average of about 18 years. The only people that I met were mothers, although this seemed to happen more by chance rather than by me not attempting to talk to fathers. At the time of my interviews a majority of the families I talked to were nuclear families, with the exception of one divorced family. All the women I interviewed had been educated at least through college and were active in their children's education. Finally, I chose to give all my interlocutors pseudonyms to protect their identity for they are still living in Port Townsend. I have named the families after the local trees that can be found in Washington State. So, a parent will be called something like Palm mother or Palm father and a specific family will be referred to as the Palm family. I chose to name my families after trees not only because it fits in with the local natural environment, but because trees and growing are often associated with learning.

Interviews

The main method that I used during my research process was singular one on one interviews. I did a majority of my research over the summer and during my month-long winter break. To start gathering interlocutors I first went through me and my siblings, old school

contact lists to see if there were any families that I thought would be valuable informants with good insight. I also went through my siblings' extra-curricular rosters and approached families at my siblings' community events. After I obtained a list of potential families, I then called and emailed them with a predetermined statement to see if these families had any interest. After I received some responses, I spoke with the families that had reached out to me and set up an interview time that worked well for both of us. There were a few families that contacted me that I couldn't interview due to scheduling conflicts. My interviews took place in a wide variety of locations that ranged from my interlocutor's house to a public meeting space like a local coffee shop. I was careful to make sure that my interlocutor chose the meeting location and time in order to ensure their comfort during the interview. I made sure that no minors were around during the interview, and when children were present I only engaged in basic greetings and small talk. On average the actual interviews lasted about 45 minutes, although I did stay for some small talk after the interview had concluded on numerous occasions. With the permission of my interlocutors I recorded the interviews on my phone. The recordings were later deleted after my thesis was complete. I also left my contact information with my interlocutors at the end of my interview and answered all questions that they had. At this point I have not completed any follow up interviews.

Site Visits

In addition to my interviews I also went on a number of site visits to the different schools that I discuss in my findings. The schools that I visited include all the public schools located in Port Townsend, Jefferson Community School, Swan School, West Sound Academy, and Sunfield. I should also mention that I did go to the house of a homeschool family and was able witness and take notes on their learning environment. For all these site visits I was careful to go

when children weren't present, mainly over the summer and winter breaks, if I did see families I was careful to not bother them or make it obvious that I was writing about the location. I preformed all of these site visits before I had any of my interviews with parents I thought would address them. While I do not specifically discuss these site visits in the body of my essay, I found them extremely helpful when it came to getting a visual understanding of the learning environment that I was going to discuss. As I spoke about in my opening, we can often find ourselves making prejudgments about a program before we get the chance to see the reality. As a result, these site visits were able to better shape my opinion on education in Port Townsend.

Conclusion

In this thesis I want to take a journey through the complex and multilayered issue that is education in Port Townsend Washington, exploring not only the history behind it, but also the complexities of the forces shaping this community's educational landscape. I start by laying out Port Townsend's schooling options and how they developed. Starting with the formation of the American education system and working all the way down through the development of the different types of education currently found in Port Townsend, I will finish with a detailed explanation of every educational choice available and utilized by the citizens that live in Port Townsend today. This allows for a basic understanding of the different options and what they represent as I move onto more critical analysis.

Then, I move onto a look at the reasoning the different families I interviewed gave for their various educational choices. Beginning with an explanation of the current cultural climate found within Port Townsend, including it's founding and the cultural shifts that lead to present day, I will then move to a discussion of the different common words and phrases utilized by the

schools that I studied along with the parents I interviewed. I will also speak to the deeper values that these words represent. Finally, I give a theoretical explanation for the different reasons parents gave for their choices in education, ranging from protective and reactionary to proactive and foundational. Overall this section should bring clarity to the choices that parents make regarding their children's education, as well as the cultural reasoning behind it.

In the final chapter I investigate the positives and negatives surrounding choice in the education system. I want to dive into United States' complicated relationship with the concept of choice, and how it remains one of our most beloved values. Similarly, I will reveal how choice in the education system leads to the overall commodification of education in America, as well as the complicated issues that have risen from this shift. Finally, I look back to Port Townsend and how the presence of choice has impacted the educational experiences of the children living there, concluding with a discussion on whether the abundance of options is positive or negative for the community at large. Overall, I find myself wanting to explain exactly why Port Townsend Washington has so many educational options, and their effects on the educational landscape in the community. In this thesis, based on my overarching ethnographic study in PT, I argue that educational options develop from necessity and are formed by the needs and values of the community they serve. Furthermore, I contend that the concept of choice in education is not a simple benefit or detriment to a community, but instead a complex and necessary contributor that maintains the American education system as a whole.

Chapter I – The Development of the Current System

Introduction

The crisp Washington morning still hung in the air as I made my way down the dirt and gravel road toward the tiny building labeled the Blue Moose Café. Unlike with many of the other restaurants and coffee shops that lined Port Townsend’s streets, The Blue Moose remains tucked away from tourists, hiding in the center of the larger of the two major ship yards in the area. Because of this relative obscurity, The Blue Moose is dearly beloved by Port Townsend’s local population. Like with any small town that relies heavily on tourism we crave a space that is distinctly our own, and selfishly hide it from outsiders even if it harms the business in the long run. We Port Townsendites always prefer independence. Despite the early hour that yard is already a bustling place, and as is customary, I smile and wave at the hardworking shipwrights as I pass.

Inside the busy café I find my informant, Ms. Cedar waiting at a small table for two, and after warm greetings we get started on the interview. Ms. Cedar herself is a lively and passionate woman who talks energetically with me about education in our community. After moving through many of the basic introductory questions we eventually move to the subject of school creation. Ms. Cedar in a very frank manner explains how after her child eventually graduated from his private elementary program she was dissatisfied with all present middle school and high school options. So, she got together with a few her fellow graduated parents along with some passionate community members and decided to create a school. “We had all these ideas” she recalled, detailing the process from wish to reality of creating a brand new private school. While it was fascinating to hear about the behind the scenes process of creating a school, it was also

difficult not to revel in the sheer distinctly Port Townsend spirit of the situation. Here we were sitting in a tiny local café in the heart of a bustling shipyard discussing the creation of a school that came about because a group of people were simply displeased with the options at hand. Little did I know that would I realize that this very concept would go on to perfectly explain the current educational climate located in my tiny town.

The history of education in America illustrates a winding and gnarled branch that can lead to present day Port Townsend. Much like America's constantly changing views on the complex concept of freedom, the educational options presented to the American public have shifted and expanded based on what factors society prioritizes and who is deemed worthy of education. While it may seem obvious to anyone that there would be substantial changes to the educational field between the one room school-houses of the earliest settlers to the modern massive schools that provide education to thousands of children, I believe it is incredibly important to understand American education's gradual transition that led to these modern views on education. Society and education cyclically shape one another; society decides on the topics and morals that it want the school system to embody, while education shapes the next generation of influencers who will then continue to shape society. Also known to many educational theorists as the theory of socialization. (Meyer 1977) However, while it is important how the American education was shaped at the base, it is also imperative to understand how this system and distinctly American education values interact with the different communities it governs. Though it is hardly revolutionary to point out that the public education system struggles to serve its poorer rural and urban communities in comparison with its wealthier pockets it is interesting to delve into how these different communities handle this problem. The main solution that has been chosen by the sea faring town of Port Townsend, is to simply create new programs to encompass

dissatisfied parents. As a result, four distinct styles of education have developed, ranging from the nationwide standard of public and private programs to the more distinctly Port Townsend homeschooling and mixed alternative programs. Though it may seem like common sense, it is important to understand that it is a melding of a local population's beliefs and overarching American educational values that create every community's schools and overall educational climate. Without this overarching lens that incorporates an understanding of local policy, communal values, and underlying structure, it is impossible to fully grasp many of the choices made by parents living in Port Townsend today.

A Brief History

To fully understand the development of the two essential American educational values, education for all and parents have the right to choose how their children learn, people must look at how education was first implemented into American society, and how it manifested and evolved with our growing country. The earliest forms of specifically “American” education naturally sprang up with the very first American colonists back in the 1600s and mirrored the needs of the new settlers.(Boston Latin School | American Secondary School n.d.) Thus, educational options and practices significantly varied depending on the specific colony and the resources surrounding them. Up in the Northern colonies there was a general push for public literacy. As a result, throughout most of New England's colonies, practically every child was able to receive at the very least, basic elementary level education, and in the larger towns some children were even provided secondary education. It is important to note that while these Northern schools did provide education for both the rich and poor, education was emphasized and prioritized for the rich. Similarly, Northern girls were sent to the elementary level schools, but much like with the poor children their education was less focused on compared to the boys.

Unsurprisingly, young black children were very rarely educated at this time. However, despite the lack of attention given to these specific marginalized groups, the Northern colonies had nearly universal education. This scholastic mindset is typically attributed to Puritan influences. The Puritans wanted people to be able to read the bible and participate in community gatherings, and as a result the largely Puritan colonies would have created laws that provided a more encompassing educational system than other colonies. For example, the Massachusetts law passed in 1647 that required all towns with specific population sizes to provide different levels of education to its population. (Vinovskis 1987)

Along with the Puritan explanation, I would argue that the reason the Northern colonies pushed for a stronger education system is directly related to their environmental needs. It is a common fact that the New England colonies were more densely populated, and mainly comprised of skilled workers and merchants. As it can be found in most cities throughout history, with some minor exceptions most of the people living within a city will emphasize education as a necessity for their children. This phenomenon could be attributed to the tight conditions, people living so close together need to develop good organization and communication skills in order to live harmoniously. Another possibility could be the type of labor found within cities. Unlike the rural landscape that primarily consisted of farms, towns mainly have businesses. Also contrasting their farming countrymen, shop owners greatly benefit from formal education. Not only is being able to read practically a necessity for business men but understanding basic mathematics and commerce could greatly benefit an overall business. Thus, the American Northern education was built on principals of “practically” universal literacy and the general necessity of education.

The colonial South was completely different. Local public schools were practically unheard of, as the general education of the public was pushed aside. Naturally, the main population that was educated were the wealthy white boys. Women during this time were not expected to be able to read and looking at the historical environment of the South obviously Black people would never be willingly provided with an education. In fact, in most places it was illegal. Even the poor were left out of the educational loop, instead placing their focus on farming and other manual tasks. The population that did experience schooling (the rich white boys) would typically get their education from tutors that came to them. This education system fit well for the Southern States. Those wealthy enough to provide a high-level of education for their children were saved from the hassle of traveling miles through rural farmland to a school on a regular basis. For the poorer southern farmers, education wasn't a necessity. It was assumed that a boy would continue to work the land as his father before him and didn't need to read to be able to grow crops. (Best 1996)

Furthermore, many children living on these small farms often spent a majority of their day working alongside the rest of their family, completing the daily requirements. For them, spending hours to travel to a distant school and learn about information that you may not have had a real-world use wouldn't have been as beneficial as staying home to help around the farm. Thus, while the Southern education system may have not seemed very fair or just, and in many ways, it wasn't, for some of the specific populations living in these colonies the lack of public education was well suited. It is also important to note that during this point in time, schooling wasn't mandatory; far from it, rather than saying that sending their children to school was an option for families, it was more of a privilege certain families had. However, this would change at the conclusion of the Revolutionary war.

In the years after the Revolutionary war, as the fledgling America was first deciding what kind of country it wanted to become, a number of concepts were thrown around. We already discussed the idea of freedom being important, but another concept that was brought up was that of basic human rights (I.E. life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness). One of the basic rights that was pushed for in those first few decades was that of public education for the masses. As stated by our country's second president John Adams, "The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and be willing to bear the expenses of it. There should not be a district of one-mile square, without a school in it, not founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the public expense of the people themselves." (Strauss 2011) Essentially, he advanced that the American public should take it on themselves to educate the masses, rich and poor, by creating schools that are well made and easily accessible. This notion of "free education for all" was continuously enforced throughout America's early years. During the 1800's, public schools funded by the State were being constructed and utilized throughout every major town around the United States, and as a result a majority of the American population became at the very least literate. (Monroe 1911) The only locations that didn't have a dramatic increase in public schools were unsurprisingly, the rural communities. By 1918, however, every State in America finally implemented mandatory schooling laws for its citizens. (Graham 1974) Thus, started our countries path to modern education.

Standard Education

Public Schooling

Public schools are currently the most utilized source of education in America. On the Federal level, the government remains fairly hands off when working with public schools, only

handling basic frameworks and gathering information. America first created the Department of Education back in 1867 in order to support the creation of new statewide education systems. To do this day the department of education continues “to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.” Both by gathering information on how to improve American students and by creating educational programs for the public.

The public education system provides free education for all students regardless of race, gender, religion, or personal beliefs. At around the age of five, children will start going to Kindergarten and will typically continue their education all the way through high school graduating in 12th grade at around 18. While public schools are required to teach certain subjects by the federal government, for example all schools must teach history and science, there is a degree of freedom granted to each State. Under the No Child Left Behind act passed in 2002, States were given the ability to set their own standards for students under their jurisdiction, as well as, to create their own testing systems. The goal of this was to promote the States flexibility, so that these local governments could decide for themselves what they wanted to emphasize and spend money on locally. This mindset would seem to continue to support the idea of choice and personalized education within America. After all it does seem reasonable that students in Florida might have different needs than students in Washington State. However, it can also be argued that this “freedom” is another way to justify the educational gap found between richer and poorer States. If States are able to decide how much they spend on education, then the Federal government doesn’t need to be held accountable if a poor State chooses to defund educational programs. Still, it is difficult to blame the State for its lack of education funding when they may need to divert the money into other necessities like infrastructure. Thus, while the State is

making informed choices about what their community needs educationally, it might not be benefiting the students living there.

Washington State is an example of one of the wealthier States in America. With a booming tech market in the west and a strong agricultural presence in the east Washington is a land that is rich in not only natural resources, but in the startup of many new industries (for example Boeing, Amazon, and Starbucks). As a result, Washington has an overall highly ranked public education system. During the national census done in 2005 Washington eighth graders preformed above national average in both mathematics and literacy. However, just like with any State with a large population, there is still dramatic diversity within the population, especially regarding socio-economic status. As to be expected, communities and school districts with wealthier populations are typically also the ones that are producing the higher marks. Notably, however, some of this might change because in the last 5 years Washington voted to allow charter schools. (More Charter Schools to Open in Washington State, Encouraging New Network 2017) Overall, while Washington overall does produce higher than average rankings in national academics, it is important to note that schools in smaller rural towns are still struggling. One such rural town that I am going to be focusing specifically on is the town of Port Townsend.

Port Townsend is located in the Jefferson County and runs its own school district. This school district consists of 3 schools, serving about 1,200 kids total, grades kindergarten through 12th grade. Grant Street elementary teaches kids up through third grade and is generally regarded favorably by the community. One of the older schools, Grant Street looks nice and well maintained. The halls are clean and well-lit with artwork and achievement certificates lining the walls. The playground out back borders a sizable field and new forest, and the play structure itself, while older, is still safe and comfortable. The school boasts both a music and art program

that always has plenty of supplies. Overall, it visually seems like a generic small town elementary school; it is nothing fancy but still well loved.

Blue Heron Middle School is the newest school in Port Townsend. Built around 2008, it serves the community's fourth through eighth graders. This school is built bordering some wetlands in the back and a track to the side. The winding grey linoleum halls are just now starting to lose their new building sheen. The school, ultimately seems visually nice and well-funded. Finally, Port Townsend High school teaches the remaining 9th through 12th grades. Built in 1891, PT high school is one of the oldest schools not only in the State, but on the West Coast in general. As a result, the school holds a fair amount of deeply engrained tradition, and as with most small towns athletics are treasured by the entire community. As to be expected with most old structures there is a bit of wear, and some of the buildings are no longer used. However, the spaces that are used are still maintained and ultimately usable. No new additions are being added, but those that are there are being lovingly remodeled (people love the new gym). Physically, it is not a terrible place to attend school.

Ultimately public schooling is required to be available for every American citizen, so it is the one type of schooling that doesn't need a justification for existing anywhere, much less Port Townsend. However, what can be discussed is the reasoning for the type of public schooling available. As discussed in earlier chapters Port Townsend is a unique place due to its diversity, specifically in socioeconomic class, but also in age demographics. Primarily the wealthy people in Port Townsend are retirees that have moved out to the country to enjoy the scenery. As a result, these retirees who no longer have children in the school system tend to shoot down any bills that might raise taxes to bring more money to public schools. But at the same time, many public schools will get large donations from people in the community, so while some programs may be

underfunded, others are doing well. Similarly, due to the isolated nature of the town and the lack of budget for salary, many of the local teachers have typically been teaching the same subject for years and when they do retire it can be enormously difficult to convince new teachers to come fill their positions. So, despite the promise of universal equality promised by the federal government, we do see Port Townsend schools performing at a lower level than its close but wealthy neighbors. The thing to understand about Port Townsend public schools is that the community is able to support them, but not make them great. Students attending these schools may acquire all the information they need, but not necessarily the confidence or skills to excel beyond the small town that they are in. In fact, many of the community's families may instead to send their children somewhere else.

Private Schooling

The other most commonly used form of education in America is the private school. Private schools have a long proud history in America, the earliest developing in the original thirteen colonies. These schools would continue to develop across the United States alongside their public-school counterparts. Essentially, the two main reasons that have guided the formation of most mainstream private schools is either religious reasons or academic rigor. Religious schools are typically built to create a strict educational environment that allows teachers to teach what subjects and beliefs they find important, and as to be expected there is typically a predominantly religious influence on what is taught. While Port Townsend does have churches and a diverse number of religious communities, the town as a whole isn't particularly religious. In fact, in recent years there has been a greater push for inclusivity of all religions during holiday events. As a result of this lack of over whelming religious schools there isn't any religious private schools. There simply hasn't been a call for one, deeply religious people either

participate in local programs or homeschool. The other main reason for private schooling is academic achievement. Prestigious private schools are well known across America for taking in wealthy children and sending them off to the nicest of colleges. In fact, unless they live in a particularly wealthy and well-funded district, most well to do families will send their children to private schools to secure a potentially more successful education for their kids. This is especially true on the east coast where some of these schools have existed for centuries.

The main appeal behind private schools is that they are not only typically well-funded (at least the fancy ones are) but that they allow the schools to teach anything they want in any way they deem fit. While they may need to meet some basic State mandated guidelines in order to produce accredited diplomas, these requirements typically far below the school's already present curriculum. As a result, a public school will often be created to fill a void that a community may feel they have. For example, if a group of local families don't feel that the public option has enough opportunities to immerse into the community they can create a private school that is focused on hands on learning. At the same time, as certain private schools become more established they will attract families that gel with their mission plan, effectively changing the community around them. In a sense you get a bit of a cooperative relationship where communities create schools, and schools then shape communities. Either way, the important take away is that private schools are able to illustrate the needs or at least part of the educational desires of a notable subsection of the community.

Port Townsend has four notable private schools that serve the community. Two are within city limits, and two are located about an hour outside of town. The most prominent private school located within the city is an elementary school called Swan School. Swan School was created in 1981 in order to create an alternative to the local elementary school. Serving kids

starting in preschool up through 6th grade, it boasts several different teaching strategies that creates a program that teaches children in a more “natural” way. As stated in the online mission statement “We pride ourselves in putting children first and our core question has always been “What is best for children?” A number of the “benefits” that Swan School advertises include a smaller class size, a “balanced” school year, and a less age-focused and more personalized academic path. From looking at the website and briefly visiting the campus I found that Swan School really seemed to want to create a more community and nature-based program that could provide kids with a safe environment that allowed for more enrichment activities.

This school is an excellent example of the well-educated hippie counter-culture community present in Port Townsend. Within the city limits, typically among the younger generation, we find that there are a huge population of extremely liberal families that came to Port Townsend for the aesthetics and later to be amongst like-minded kin. Unlike the initial hippies of the 60’s and 70’s who pushed for freedom and lack of conformity, these newer “hippies” still push for the freedom and creativity but also want their children to do well and succeed. Typically armed with an understanding of basic child development and education, these parents will typically seek out a program that seems rigorous, but at the same time fits with their beliefs on child rearing. However, despite the changes in the length of school breaks and shifting of focus Swan School ultimately doesn’t seem like that radical of an educational program.

The Sunfield Farm School is located a few miles out into the country land surrounding Port Townsend. Another private school with an elementary school focus, Sunfield provides education for students from preschool up through eighth grade, what is particularly notable about Sunfield is that it is a school that follows a Waldorf philosophy and curriculum. The Waldorf program was first created by Rudolf Steiner in 1919 Germany, its main objective is to combine

education to accommodate children's spirits, souls, and bodies. This educational model has in recent years spread across America and become one of America's most popular forms of private education. Sunfield School utilizes the foundation of Waldorf beliefs and combines it with the education experience of working on a functioning organic farm. While Sunfield does have a well laid out curriculum that seems to eventually cover all of the material that would be expected for an American 8th grader to know, in many ways it primarily focuses on unconventional aspects of these subjects. For example, students will learn basic arithmetic, but a portion of class time will be dedicated to drawing and sculpting the numbers so that students will get a feel for them. At the same time as these more conventional courses are being taught students will also work on the farm, learning about basic agriculture and animal husbandry. This is supposed to teach students more personal life skills and get them in tune with themselves.

Another notable feature is unlike some other alternative programs students at Sunfield are clumped into a singular tight knit class that they are expected to be a part of through-out their entire time at Sunfield, often with the same teacher. This is supposed to foster a supportive environment that allows students time to reflect inward. From what I understand Sunfield was developed by a group of educators and parents that loved the Waldorf school philosophy and wanted to bring it to their community. Surprisingly I have found a fair amount of similarities between these parents, and the Swan School parents. Perhaps it could be argued that Swan School families seem to be professionals living within city limits, while Sunfield families tend to be a bit more on the fringe socially and physically. Overall while I understood why Sunfield was created, it was for many of the same reasons as Swan School, but I don't understand why it would be filling the same niche. Both of these schools seem to hold very similar philosophies but

are competing for students. Other private schools in town at least focused on different age groups.

Jefferson Community School is one of the few private schools that cater to high schoolers located in Port Townsend and looks to serve grades 6 through 12. Created by parents to serve as the high school equivalent to Swan School, Jefferson Community School (JCS) is the most centrally located standing right in the center of downtown Port Townsend. Built in 2004, JCS has undergone the most changes as staff and school leadership has had a high turnover rate. Similarly, student enrolment has fluctuated between 18 and 45 kids in total, with an average graduating class of about three to five students. This constant change has made it hard to fully nail down the school's overall philosophy and mission. However, some of the general features include a focus on creating global citizens, there is an annual expedition that the school will go on to different parts of the world

While JCS was initially created to be a continuation of Swan School, many Swan school graduates will turn toward other programs instead. As a result, JCS has in many ways turned into a school for kids that for many different reasons weren't successful in public school. While coming from a strong and understandable community base, JCS is now a school for misfits that struggles yearly to keep its doors open. Because of this reputation JCS seems to hold a unique place in the community, while not being necessarily favored by the locals it does hold a clear role in caring for the misfits who were able to escape public schooling but didn't really have anywhere else to go.

A tiny program called the Compass Rose Learning Collective is the newest of the private schools found in Port Townsend. This program is exclusively for girls and is designed to support them through the tricky middle school years, namely 4th through 8th grade. From what I have

gathered the school itself rents out a building in Fort Warden State Park, located within Port Townsend city limits, and teaches all the classes in a one room school house setting. However, because I learned about this program particularly late in my research, and that this school only has a handful of students, I was unable to find any families that were currently or had previously utilized the program. Still, I wanted to note the existence of yet another scholastic option available to Port Townsend families.

The final private school option, West Sound Academy, is located a great distance out of town and is utilized by so few Port Townsend families that I almost didn't consider in this thesis. It is, however, becoming more and more popular in the community, so it is important to examine. West Sound Academy is an International Baccalaureate middle/ high school located in Poulsbo Washington which is about 40 minutes to an hour away from Port Townsend. In many ways West Sound is what you would picture when you think of a stereotypical elite private school, it is located on a stunning and well-maintained campus, teaches the International Baccalaureate (IB) educational program, and even boards international students in a house located on site. However, with a maximum student body of only about 116 students ranging in grades from 6th to 12th, West Sound is still incredibly small. However, despite its small student body West Sound remains a well paid for and functioning school. This is obviously due to its high private school tuition, and as a result the student body is primarily composed of wealthy families, even more so than most of the other private schools I have covered. It is also important to note that West Sound's student body is still primarily comprised of students from the Poulsbo area, with only a small population of Port Townsend students. But as more and more families send their students on the one-hour van ride to school, it is important to understand why families are choosing options outside of their own city limits.

Alternative Schooling

The concept of alternative schooling often leaves a bad taste in many Americans mouths. The concept of how students should be taught, and what children need to know, are so deeply engrained in our societal consciousness that even the slightly different private programs may be considered “hippie dippy” and lack the ability to prepare children for the real world. However, despite these negative connotations, many parents still choose and standby even the most radical of the alternative programs. Because of this, alternative programs play a vital role in supporting and understanding even the most fringe and radical members of a given community. In this case, Port Townsend is far from the exception.

Home Schooling

An argument can be made that homeschooling is the oldest form of education in this country, and probably even the world. From birth parents are typically the primary teachers of children, and for some parents it seems logical and feasible for them to continue this pattern well into the school years. While in the early years of America home schooling may have been a necessity, in the modern era there are typically two distinct reasons to why an individual would choose to home school their children. The first reason is that parents don't agree with the curriculum that the public and private schools are providing. This group of parents are usually of the religious type, and they typically have a deep problem with the scientific or literary curriculum their children would be exposed to through more mainstream channels. Much like with the religious private schools, there aren't very many families that are religious to the point of home schooling. While I will contend that there may be some incredibly isolated families that are home schooling their children for religious reasons within the city limits, they are so far

removed from the main societal structure that I was unable to find them. The other main reason for home schooling, is that parents feel that they will be more successful in teaching the various subjects than any other school systems. These parents may feel that they have a better program for teaching children, or even the idea that they are better communicators with their child than basic teacher would be. Either way the main influence over a parent's ability to choose home schooling as an option is time. While the driving force behind private schools is the ability to afford a tuition, for home schooling parents more than having an education background parents need to have the time and patients required to effectively teach they're throughout an entire year. In many cases, parents may not be able to sustain this sort of system and will choose to only home school their children through elementary school. Still, others may utilize resources in the community to maintain home schooling throughout their child's entire education career.

Port Townsend boasts a very strong and well supported home schooling community. Due to the small and enclosed nature of the town, even the most removed of home schooled kids will typically find peer integration through community events and basic extracurricular activities. Even on local public-school sports teams you would find at least one or two kids that spend a majority of the day working with their parents. Because of this constant intermingling, it can be argued that home schooling is one of the most accepted of the alternative educations, but at the same time this constant intermingling often means that a child will push parents to allow them to attend a more mainstream program, especially in the later years. As such, while it is common to home school a child, it is extremely uncommon for a child to be home schooled for their entire lives without at least one experimental year at a more standard program. From what I have come to understand, home schooling occurs in almost every community, however it is the most prevalent where people have the most time. A wealthy college town may have plenty of well-

educated parents who would be qualified to teach their children, but they would typically be too busy. On the other hand, in Port Townsend you will find a number of households where only one parent goes to work, while the other one is often unemployed or works from home. Either way, because of these greatly diminished hours, many Port Townsend parents feel they have the option to home school their children and will utilize this opportunity. Beyond the generic home schooling there are also other, less conventional programs present in Port Townsend.

Mixed Alternative Educational Programs

The final two educational programs that I came in contact with didn't seem to fit into any of the other categories. The OCEAN/PI program and OPEPO are free programs run by the Port Townsend school district, that have classrooms located on the Grant Street Elementary school campus. OPEPO is a small one room school house elementary school program that serves kids starting in 1st grade up through 5th grade. This program focuses on creating a strong internal learning community where the younger kids are helped by their older peers, while the older kids are able to learn about leadership and personal strength. The entire program is set in one portable on the outskirts of Grant Street, where two teachers will instruct up to 50 students. These students are split between upper and lower grades and will rotate between the literacy and mathematics teachers. This program seems to fill the same role as the earlier mentioned Swan School and Sunfield. But due to the fact it is run by the public-school district, is able to support families with similar mindsets as their private school counterparts but couldn't necessarily afford it. While the development and reasoning behind this program is about the same as the private schools, and the parents are practically the same demographic, but often with less disposable income, you have another example of a program that is trying to pull from the same small demographic.

The final program that I came across is the OCEAN/PI program. OCEAN and PI are incredibly similar programs that are located in two different locations. The OCEAN program is also on the Grant street campus, while the PI program is located one district over in Chimicum on their public-school campus. Both of these programs are funded and overseen by their respective public education counterparts. OCEAN/PI are hybrids of home schooling and public schooling that offer the most flexibility possible when it comes to education. These programs both serve kids in first grade through 12th grade and run in a similar fashion. PI and OCEAN are essentially a collection of classes that can be picked by participating families. Designed as supplementation to generic home schooling, parents who only feel confident in teaching very specific subjects can send their children to learn other fundamental material from a flexible class environment. This program is also helpful for families that want to home school, but don't necessarily have the time or experience to teach their children. OCEAN and PI are able to create a very loose structure, and as a result will typically draw families that are more flexible about their child's education. While the PI program is located just outside of town in Chimicum, it still educates a good number of Port Townsend students, despite its very similar cousin being right in the hub of the town.

Conclusion

Looking at the steady progression and development of the American education system over time it is easy to see how any community's educational climate was created. Port Townsend's is no exception. Starting with at the base with America's two primary educational values, equal education for all along with the freedom to choose how your child learns, that encompass all modern American education. Then add in several factors that distinctly make up Port Townsend's cultural climate; relative isolation, inner-communal culture clash, and a distinct

desire for independence. Thus, we create my town's educational finger-print, poorly funded public schools and a smattering of competing small alternative programs that come and go with parent's passion and interest. While it is obviously unrealistic to say that the development of Port Townsend's education system is a representation of all American communities, all its elements can be used as a case study that can be applied to the current body of research. Similarly, it is important to understand how Socio-economic status (SES) can affect a population's schools, it is also important to note how a community culturally deals with problems. So, in the future when policy changes are developed and implemented, they can work with what the community actually is and note what law makers assume it to be. Does a community come together to fix a struggling public school from within the system, or does it instead strike out to create a new system? By understanding these initial factors, we are then better able to understand a district's overall success as it moves into the future.

Chapter II – Wanting What’s Best

Introduction

The wheels of my parent’s car churn gravel as I make my way off the main street and onto the private driveway of the Willow family. While the distance to the house is rather short, the dramatic increase in trees and shrubbery effectively isolates the approaching house from the neighbors. I note that the Willow property mimics the trend shared by most other houses within Port Townsend, insisting upon private independence no matter how close the neighbors are. However, this physical isolation is immediately offset as I participate in another common Port Townsend ritual and simply walk through the unlocked front door announcing my arrival as I enter. While this strange dichotomy can seem indicative of the underlying local communal culture, to a local like me it goes unexamined as I find Ms. Willow in the kitchen. Ms. Willow and I greet each other warmly and exchange the usual small-town pleasantries before deciding to have our interview out on the front porch. The late fall sun streams down on us as we sip ice water and discuss the various educational choices that Ms. Willow has made raising her children in a small town. I smile and nod along to her complex educational journey, noting its similarities to the various interviews before her until one point stuck me. Working my way through my different written topics I had finally gotten around to the rather generic question regarding on in a perfect world how she would educate her children. After discussing her own experiences with education Ms. Willow finally said, “You wish the most for your kids, you want them to find the place where they are happy.” While this statement may seem incredibly generic, of course a parent would want to create a situation where their child is happy, I couldn’t help but note the underlying ambiguity of it. All parents want their children to be happy, but how do they perceive

one program and the values it promotes as making their children happy as opposed to a different program. Similarly, are we living in a world where what a parent perceives is “best for their child” effected by their own personal beliefs or by wishes their child is expressing? All parents want what is best for their child, but there are a number of relevant factors, ranging from parent’s personal views to what the entire family is realistically able to provide, that can influence what a parent feels are “best”

There are several factors that can contribute to the development of a parent’s educational values, including family history, education back round, SES, and basic inter-community opinions to name a few. While a number of these contributors have been analyzed in other studies I am mainly focusing in on the role of inter-communal values. When I am discussing the concept of inter-communal opinions/values I am addressing the specific cultural communities found in Port Townsend and how the beliefs they hold may or may not influence the educational choices made by the parents inside these communities. I will be looking into the most common reasoning given by the different families as to why the program they have chosen is what is best for their child, as well as looking into the different key phrases that are consistently repeated and what the underlying messages behind these words might be. Ultimately, educational values work in a cyclical fashion, with parents gravitating towards communities that hold similar beliefs, then creating educational programs that further mirror these values which then draw in more similar people into the community. This would seem like a utopic system, but in practice many of the same broad values two different families find important will practically manifest in very different ways.

Fusion – The Development of a Complex Cultural Climate

A Small Victorian Seaport

While I have discussed the overall demographics and politics of Port Townsend in earlier chapters, it is also exceptionally important to note how the local culture was formed. Historically speaking, Port Townsend is classified as a Victorian seaport. Built during 1850's Port Townsend was predicted to become the largest Port in the Northwest. At sea level the working-class shipwrights and sailors participated in all means of Victorian debauchery, while their wealthy genteel counterpart lounged in their mansions up on the bluff. Thus, as money continued to be pumped into the town a bustling economy was developed. This trend held until 1890 when Seattle unceremoniously took the title of largest seaport when the railroad chose to end at that location, and with it all of the trade and wealth. So seemingly overnight the great sea port was abandoned, leaving only old Victorian architecture as a trace of its former glory. For the next 80 years, Port Townsend was a purely low-class subsistence town, with blue collar jobs like milling, canning, and fishing. From this small rural town, a distinct culture was developed. The local families became deeply intertwined with one another as generation upon generation lived on the same land and preformed the same professions. The locals developed a sense of grit and a deep appreciation of hard work and manual skills. While independence was prized neighbors would come together to help those in need.

The town lived on in peaceful isolation until the 70's, which brought with it a new demographic. During the 1960's the local military base finally closed along with the juvenile detention facility, turning Fort Worden into a State park. With the new addition of a State park came a small community of hippies, looking for suitable places for free expression. This small

subset of the community continued to grow until the 1970's when Port Townsend was finally "discovered" by the elite masses. In subsequent years a large number of wealthy urbanites bought property in Port Townsend, looking to move into (or create) summer homes, retirement homes, or even just a place where they could escape the rat race. Drawn in by the now quirky old architecture, funky hippy artistry, and small town laid back vibes this influx of educated middle class newcomers vastly shifted the overall culture of the town.(Preusch 2008; PTguide Port Townsend, WA - History & Attractions n.d.)

The influx of new residents rendered socioeconomic differences to the neighborhood. Yet, interestingly, the dynamics between old and new residents maintained the outlook of small town of Port Townsend. While I think it would be foolish and brazen to suggest that these new community members gentrified Port Townsend, a similar phenomenon did occur. Unlike in urban cities where space is limited, the new community members were able to restore unused houses or simply build new ones. This is in direct contrast to the typical use of gentrification which dictates that

"Gentrification was generally understood, initially in sociological literature, as a process of demographic change by which the original working-class residents of a neighborhood are displaced by new, usually individual, middle-class residents buying properties originally belonging to working-class residents and renovating and improving them to conform to middle-class tastes"(Arkaraprasertkul 2016)

Meaning, for gentrification to occur, the old lower-class residence would have to be physically displaced by the new middle-class population, which simply didn't happen. Plus, none of these newcomers were looking to take many of the manual labor jobs held by the locals so none of the original families were forced to move. So initially a fusion was created, with the new art galleries and artisan ice cream shops opening next to ancient pubs and hardware stores. However, it would

be false to imply that these changes didn't hold some negative ramifications for lower income families living in Port Townsend.

For many local families, even something as simple as buying food and clothes can be difficult. While the “good old boys” and the new community members didn't exactly get along, both groups remained fiercely protective of Port Townsend's small-town image and refused to allow any chain stores and big business inside the city limits. Many of these locals picture a small town to be a simple place free of the consumerism of the outside world, instead wanting to focus on locally owned shops. For some the older elderly locals they simply don't like the idea of change. But for many of the newer residence, this fight against development comes from the desire for the rural *experience* (Hines 2010). In simple terms, these new middle-class families want to live in a small undeveloped town where they can feel safe and guilt free as they buy locally grown carrots from an all organic supermarket. Thus living an “authentic” American life, as opposed to the phony industrial life found in larger cities (Hines 2010). So, much like with any economy experiencing a new influx of money, the overall physical and cultural market place has been slowly adapting to tailor to the money spending population's needs. Thus, there are primarily expensive organic co-ops and grocery stores within the heart of port Townsend sitting next to middle aged clothing boutiques and hand-made baby clothes stores. So, if a lower income family needs to buy food or clothes, they need to go to the chain grocery store on the edge of town or drive two hours to the local mall to find affordable children's clothing. Though many families, including my own, are able to do this extra work, it shows who this small-town is really catering to. While, we do still value grit and hard work, we also reward businesses that are unique and gimmicky. Thus, the Port Townsend of today was born; a tourist destination and

retirement community surrounded by farms and mills. Still desperately trying to hold on to its old roots but being pulled steadily toward “progress”.

The Development of Counter-Culture

This incursion of wealth has brought many positive changes to the town of Port Townsend. We have gorgeous public parks, clean and well-groomed streets, and recently some brand-new top of the line medical facilities. However, one notable aspect that hasn't experienced a positive change is the local public education system. Unlike a service such as medicine, which benefits anyone living within city limits, education is only necessary for populations with school age children. Unfortunately, a majority of the population that has the money doesn't fall into that category. The wealthy members of Port Townsend that populate the renovated Victorian homes and isolated bluffs are usually either retired, transient, or childless. The few that do have children will send them to distant private schools far outside city limits. This means that few tax dollars are placed into public education, and the students enrolled will find little socio-economic diversity compared to the overall town population as a whole. In the same vein it is safe to say that PT public schools are considered by many of the newer more educated families to be underfunded and unable to provide quality education. It is important to note that many of the older less wealthy families are still perfectly happy with the current education system. There isn't a lack of literacy in Port Townsend, the local schools aren't failing in some spectacular way. In fact, for those who are happy to work a local blue-collar job find themselves adequately prepared for life in the adult world. So, with the wealthy Port Townsends uninterested in public education, and the lower class local families content with what they already have, the underrepresented group comes to light, the educated middle class.

People gravitate towards locations where they find others with ideals that match their own. As the discovery of Port Townsend travelled via backwater channels it developed a following among a very specific subset of the middle class that I would like to call the idealist alternative. The idealist alternative class consists of middle class Americans who want to create their own small world bubble that encompasses their ideal world view. I find myself likening them to the hippies of the 60's – 70's, but they have some distinct differences. While they don't have the money or the youth to connect to today's neo-hippie movement, they still hold a strong capitalistic and independent sentiment that differentiates themselves from traditional family values. Even thoughts that seemed deepest into the cultural values of loving the earth and rejecting typical cultural norms still held a strong Facebook presence where they are able to network their small candle business through clever channels. This population is not stuck in the past, they are simply shaping their own present. This population typically consists of young liberal families that generate income via socially acceptable but slightly odd means. A few typical examples would be wood worker, acupuncturist, or artist. Drawn into the quirky isolated town by the lure other likeminded individuals and the possibility of finally accomplishing their lifelong dream of opening an organic fudge shop Port Townsend seems like the perfect sanctuary away from the world of corporate America. Port Townsend seems to fill every role an alternative idealist could hope for, there are local organic farms and reasonably safe streets so crime free that a majority of people never lock their doors. Everything seems perfect; however, these young families will quickly hit a roadblock when it comes to educating their children. This demographic has developed its own conglomerate of counter-culture ideals on education but can find it difficult to implement them in the restrictions of a still relatively low socioeconomic status small town.

Counter-cultures crop up in pockets where groups of likeminded people feel that they are being left behind or unappreciated by the systems of power that work over them. This holds true for those who feel that their child doesn't mesh with the education system they are provided with. So much like with anti-establishment movements of the past, the dissatisfied parents of Port Townsend decided to create their own systems of education that matched their own personal ideals. Thus, the Port Townsend hydra of alternative education was born. Parents who felt that they didn't have an option that suited their needs worked with other likeminded parents to create private and publicly funded options that suited what they believed to be their child's needs. In theory grass roots educational movements on the surface level seemed to turn Port Townsend into the ideal alternative paradise. However, upon closer inspection you start to see the cracks in the foundation. Much like with any social movement, counter-cultural or otherwise, you find the unanimously held ideals viewed by outsiders have a huge degree of differentiation within a group. Parents didn't want an alternative to the public classic education system, they wanted their alternative. If a certain program didn't seem to accommodate their specifications, they would move their kid to the next one. If none of the programs suited their needs, they would try to start a new one that did. The need for the perfect program created a vortex of change for students as the constant movement of teachers and programs left little room for a stable educational foundation. While wanting the ideal situation for their children's educational success is nothing if not admirable for parents, it is important to realize that it is borderline impossible. There will be no program that meets all a parent's expectations, instead it might be more beneficial (or at least stabilizing) to settle with on that work for your family

Simple Titles for Complex Ideals

One thing that I found particularly interesting as I was conducting my research is the amount of repetition I found when it came to specific words. When I started looking at the websites and brochures about the different programs I was investigating I found many similar ideas and phrases. I was even more intrigued when a majority of the interviews I conducted had many of these same words despite being significantly different programs. While the general concept of the “buzzword” is general I am using it in the context of a popular word that holds an underlying set of popular values and ideas behind it. However, in practice these words can mean wildly different actual manifestations despite signaling the same audience. Below are a few the most prevalent words I came across.

-Alternative

This is an interesting word because I find myself using it often when describing the programs, I am researching, yet it is ultimately a very broad term. When I first started explaining my project I used alternative to mean any program that wasn't public schooling. However, it was pointed out to me that for many people private schooling can be seen as similarly generic, and for a majority of the population they are just as mainstream as public school. But, when looking into the private institution Jefferson Community School's website I found that it described itself as alternative (Jefferson Community School n.d.), which was corroborated while talking to the Willow Family which was sending their child there. So, what does it really mean to be an alternative school? Looking strictly at the State definition “broadly defined as educational activities that fall outside the traditional K–12 curriculum... The literature suggests that the definition of alternative education should include target population, setting, services, and

structure.” (Porowski, O’Conner, and Luo 2014). This definition is fairly all encompassing and can cover nearly every nonpublic school program. However, on this strictly policy level it is also stated that alternative education is typically created and defined for “troubled” kids (Porowski, O’Conner, and Luo 2014), which doesn’t seem to apply to the families and programs I interviewed. Similarly, I doubt any of the parents I interviewed would be pushing to have their kids attend a school known for taking “troubled” students. So, there must be a different and more positive set of beliefs associated with the word alternative.

While I can’t find any specific definitions for the word, through general context it seems that most parents and programs that use the term alternative are instead focused on the idea that they are providing an educational experience that is looser with slightly more fringe ideas on education. Therefore, a rigorous private school like West Sound wouldn’t call themselves alternative but a more relaxed public option like the PI program would. It is less about how popular or accessible the program is and more about how “traditional” it is. Thus, the parents who would be drawn to this particular word are essentially drawn to more radical educational practices.

-Small

The most common phrase I came across during my research is small, small school, small program, small student to teacher ratio, etc., and this prevalence was across all programs and all interviews. In many ways this can be looked at as simply a descriptive term, Port Townsend is statistically a small town and so many of the educational programs it supports are also going to be statistically small. However, with the prevalence of the word usage and the context around when parents would define a program as small, then there must be a deeper meaning to the word than basic descriptive. This usage seems to be fairly straight forward, smaller programs means

more direct one on one attention for the students. I have found that is a pretty common desire of all parents from all philosophies of educational thought, more individualized attention from the teachers a better experience for your kid. The only difference lies in how important this is to the parent, for some they are happy to simply push for smaller class sizes while others go as far as to homeschool the kid, so they can have as much attention as possible. But overall, small is ideal for any Port Townsend family.

Still despite this positive reaction to the idea of a small there were a few times that the word was used in a more negative way. In this situation parents would complain that due to having a small program they didn't have access to as many benefits as a larger program might. This mainly came up with the Birch family and public school. Even though the Birch mother is an avid believer in public schools, she does struggle a bit with the fact that Port Townsend High School is too small to afford many extracurricular and additional programs. The Cedar and Pine families also brought up similar issues when talking about their own programs.

-Flexible

As I mentioned in the alternative section the idea of flexible learning mainly appeals to a very specific philosophy on education. Parents who want to send their child to a college prep-school don't want a program known for being flexible. Thus, much like with alternative this particular word is a signal for parents who believe in a more tranquil learning environment that is more tailored to the child and their wants and needs. Programs that are flexible often tout their ability to allow students to focus on the subjects that interest them instead of a normal standardized curriculum. Flexible can support both slower and more accelerated students, as well as a broad range of learning types. Flexible is also good for families that feel that their child and family need more relaxed attendance requirements like with the Willow family. Much like with

the rest of these words the importance of flexibility can range from heavily regimented standardized education like with the IB program to completely free like with unschooling.

-Experiential

Experiential as phrase, mainly seems to be used as a key-word used to describe a program rather than something that parents specifically wanted or liked. I mainly found it on websites like for Jefferson Community School and Swan School (Swan School | About n.d.; Jefferson Community School n.d.) The only time I heard parents use the term is when they were introducing schools known for experiential learning. Although another broad term experiential learning is typically used to describe a teaching style that is more hands on and out in the community rather than in a classroom. For example, Sunfield's farm work would count as experiential as would the expeditions/ trips that Jefferson Community School and West Sound Academy take. I am not entirely sure why this term would be so prevalent online but less prevalent in conversation, it may simply be the jargon lots of parents will simply say hands on rather than experiential. Another theory could be that most parents believe that experiential learning is a given with alternative schooling, so they don't feel the need to mention it. Either way I thought it was an interesting trend.

My Child Isn't Like the Others – Risk Management and Future Planning

Protection

It is completely understandable that most parents want to what is best for their children in any context, but especially in education. In your generic school setting students will typically spend 6 hours a day away from home solely interacting with teachers and their peers, which is almost half of their awake day. So, if this time is a seen largely negative experience for their

child it is reasonable for parents to want to make a dramatic switch in programs. This sentiment was lightly hinted at in several my interviews. While most of my parents would never come out and say that they felt their child was in capable of functioning at least socially in a public-school program, a few parents did allude to the idea that their child would have had a difficult time connecting and thriving in a public program. As the Cedar mother explained “(her child) was really shy when he was little and having a program where he has been in class with the same kids since first grade has just been really good for all the kids I think they have been more confident and comfortable. Where as in some school situations some kids are confident, but sometimes at the experience of other kids.” While this statement doesn’t suggest that the Cedar family child couldn’t survive in a public-school environment, it does suggest that his initial shyness was better overcome in a more interconnected environment.

Most parents don’t like to think that their child is particularly disadvantaged, or couldn’t survive in any environment, instead they simply want to protect their child so that they can be successful and stable in the future. Many middle class parents will experience at least a certain level of what is referred to as “parental anxiety”, a general concept that refers to the rise in concern coming from parents about how well they are protecting “their children’s safety, self-esteem, learning, and, perhaps most importantly, ability to compete in the new social and economic order” (Cucchiara 2013). This concept of parental anxiety has led to the basic child rearing style known as “hot-box parenting”. “Hot-box parenting” is the notion that parents should remove all struggles and concerns from their children’s lives, although it should be noted that this term is commonly used with negative connotations as a poor form of parenting that leads weakened and emotionally stunted children(Marano 2008). However, it is important to note that I saw very little of this parenting style during my interviews. While I will admit that as I

began my research I fell into believing the general stereotype that parents who support homeschooling or alternative choices would be overly concerned with protecting their children from adversity, but I found that this was largely not the case. There were obvious signs of parental anxiety found among all the parent's reasoning, but most parents seemed more interested in finding an environment for their children to thrive in rather than protecting them from an environment where they would be unhappy. In fact, most parents were more concerned with academic rigor than social comfort.

Future Success

One of the most common reasoning I came across when discussing with my interlocutors why they chose certain educational options is that of academic rigor. This largely makes logical sense because the main reason that parents send their children to school is, so they get a good education, and if they feel that the program is lacking they will make other choices. Looking at all of the school programs I encountered the one that was considered the most prestigious was West Sound Academy, this while partially playing into private school stereotypes is also linked to the International Bachelorette (IB) program which highly respected by most colleges for its academic rigor. Thus, the parents that I spoke to that chose to send their children to West Sound heavily stressed that they wanted their children to succeed and get into high level institutions in the future. However, even those that sent their children to other less academically rigorous programs still sighted educational quality as a main reason for their decision. Looking back at Sunfield and the Waldorf school philosophy we see that while academics are still important (it is a school after all) less demand and pressure is put on the children. Unlike the IB program that places emphasis on a structured curriculum and series of incredibly difficult essay projects and tests Waldorf focuses on allowing kids to obtain information in a looser environment and utilize

a few different methods to find one that works for them. One example I heard was to draw the human body to understand anatomy as opposed to taking an anatomy quiz. Both programs are incredibly unique and different in their teaching styles, yet both groups of parents felt they were making the best educational choices for their child and setting them up for the future. While I will be the first to admit that I am not nearly educated enough to decide which parent is correct I do find it fascinating that one group of parents found the public-school lacks in rigor for their child to be fully prepared for the future, while another group found it to be far too structured. Both groups contradicting the public-school parents I interviewed that felt the public school gave perfectly adequate education. As the Birch Family mother explained she was “happy enough” with the local Port Townsend High School and felt that her children benefited from interacting with all kinds of people, making them more understanding people. While the Birch mother did believe she would abandon public education if she felt that it wasn’t fully educating her children, it was still her first choice and she had found no reason to leave. I think the main point this section illustrates is that while almost all the parents I interviewed were making choices to protect their children’s future, since every parent has a different idea of what proper schooling is they will all send their children to different programs.

Conclusion

Looking back at the presented information it becomes clear that beyond the basic demographic information is a major factor that influences parental choices when it comes to education is community values. Every family will have a unique take on education and the best way to have their children all the information that they need to succeed in the world. The definition of success may even differ between families, with some focusing on their child having and economically stable future while others want their child to have a happy and personally

fulfilling future. However, looking at the community as a whole it becomes possible to place families into different sub-categories based on the general similarities of their beliefs. Some parents want to make sure their child gets into a top-notch college, while others feel that it is more important that their child to feel confident and engaged with the world around them. These sub-categories of parents will then gravitate together based on their shared values and attempt to create educational systems that reflect the way they feel that their children should learn. For some communities this could result in a dramatically revamped public-school system, in Port Townsend this desire manifests itself as a wide collection of different schools and schooling programs.

Overall, the Port Townsend parents that I interviewed seemed to desire individualistic education that is specifically tailored to their child. Teacher-student ratios should be as small as possible, so that teachers can adjust their instructional methods based on the specific student's learning style. Additionally, the students should have as much freedom to explore the subjects they find themselves interested in as possible, all while still learning everything they need to get into a good college. While there was a notable exception, overall parents want educational programs to adapt to their student and not the other way around. Thus, parents are willing to switch and create programs until they could find the one that fits around their child adequately. Lucky for the parents in Port Townsend, by being in a community of likeminded individuals they have created the environment where numerous similar but still slightly different programs can exist, and parents are able to shop through them until they find the one they like. At least, the parents that are able to afford alternative options (i.e. those with the time and the money required of alternative options) are able to search through the choices. For those who don't have the luxury of choice they find themselves settling with the classic public-school option, for better or

for worse, whether they agree with the teaching style or not. While I will be the first to admit that I wasn't ever able to find a family that felt they were stuck with public school, or that felt they would choose an alternative option if they had the resources, but it is certain that they exist. In the end, it is hard not to wonder if all of this choice comes as a benefit or a detriment to the education of Port Townsend's youth.

Chapter III – The Illusion of Choice

Introduction

I met my only public-school parent at a coffee shop in early January. Though the weather outside remained chilly, the sun was high and bright without a cloud in the sky. I had found myself the first to arrive at the tiny Aldrich's' grocer located at the heart of Port Townsend's uptown district, so after climbing the stairs to the second-floor coffee place I chose a well-lit seat by the window. I had only waited for a few minutes when Ms. Birch arrived and hurried over to join me. The Birch family was another staple of Port Townsend that I had known since my arrival. Unlike any of my previous families, the Birches had sent their children only to public school, from kindergarten up through their current grades. After only interviewing parents who had chosen alternative programs and getting all the negatives about Port Townsend public education, I was deeply curious as to why a family would choose to stay. Though neither of our families attended any school together, much like with the rest of the community we knew each other through a complex weaving of after school extra-curriculars and joint friends. Still, I was relieved to finally have a family that had stuck with public education despite the other choices.

After exchanging the expected niceties and working through basic demographic information I was finally able to get to the main topic that was burning in my head. What about Port Townsend public education? Up until this point there had been numerous programs specifically created to solve the all the problems parents in the community had with our local public schools, suggesting an imperfection within the system. Still, I couldn't help but wonder if this abandoning of public education indicated a core issue, were Port Townsend public schools flawed beyond hope of repair in the eyes of the community they serve. After interviewing so

many families that decided to leave or altogether avoid the public schools for a wide array of reasons, I wanted to know what, if anything, would cause a family to stick with it. Ms. Birch stated that she had always been a huge supporter of public education due to her family's love of it. She explained that her family had emigrated from Eastern Europe after the cold war where there had been inadequate educational opportunities. So, when they got the United States and first experienced public education for all, they became avid supporters. This value in public education had then been passed through her family and was something she was using with her kids. While Ms. Birch did admit that she would find other options had Port Townsend public schools been grossly inadequate, she was more in the mind to fix a program for everybody than abandon it for something she perceived as better. This one concept really stuck with me. Perhaps what would really benefit Port Townsend families isn't the ability to choose the perfect program but fix pool all of our time and resources into one school that could support everybody.

The concept of choice is a very loaded ideal when it comes to American policy and values. As a culture built on the foundation of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness we highly value our freedom to make our own life decisions separate from the mandates of any overarching power. Furthermore, we press for this independence on both sides of the political spectrum albeit for very different topics. The political left strives for the personal choice on who to marry or how to identify yourself, while the political right will often push for the freedom to make religious choices or own fire arms. These two sides will often polarize on hot button topics, however they both seem to be for choice when it comes to educational freedom. While there is clear dissent within both movements, especially when it comes to subjects like charter schools, both the political left and the political right generally follow the American concept that parents should be

in full control of how their child is educated, and even where the government funding for their child's education should go.

However, despite the similarity in thinking between the two political leanings they both seem to have very different core reasoning. The left believes in choice as not only the right of parents, but also as a potential equalizer for those stuck in inadequate public options (Johanek 2016). While the right tends to push for a more neoliberal take of education as a competitive market place of schools and programs (Bartlett et al. 2002). While both policy theories may appear similar, and even lead to similar conclusions (i.e. charter schools) the overall differing philosophies result in contradictory implementation. Still, I find that while both of these concepts have great merit, they still seem to remain a bit hollow. Both sides are pushing for a way to improve education through the concept of choice, which works well on a macro level by providing options and competition. However, by actually looking at a town surrounded by choice, and interviewing parents who are living with real consequences we see that the bright solution of educational choice might be more of a mirage. Looking more cynically come sociologists argue that there is no point to finding the best education because education is ultimately "is a set of institutional rules which legitimately classify and authoritatively allocate individuals to positions in society." (Meyer 1977) Meaning that it is simply the act of institutional education that allocates where a person fits in society, not what they actually know. So, no matter what educational choice we choose we can't escape the overarching will of the institution. From a less skeptical perspective, choice doesn't always work because no matter how many options are created some family and their child (usually the underprivileged ones) will get left with the least desirable option. Still, by narrowing in on the more Liberal lean of the parents I interviewed in Port Townsend, most families seem to subscribe to the idea that choice is able to

provide opportunities in an underfunded rural public situation, but it is difficult to see if these choices truly are benefiting the community.

The Right to Choice

American Independence

Americans love their right to choice. Ever since the founding fathers decided on our basic American rights we have striven for freedom in all tracks of life. This strive for freedom is just as powerful in the field of education. On its purest level people will support educational choice because they believe that parents get the final say on how their child is educated, no questions asked. The main thinkers of this concept of choice usually are those who support homeschooling and other fringe teaching theories. As addressed in earlier chapters, within American policy lawmakers have decided that all children must not only have access to education, but they also must receive some form of an education. We don't allow parents to opt out of an education for their children, and instead send them off to work a job. However, there is some grey area when it comes to the overlap of these two basic principles. The perfect example of this would be something like the unschooling movement that is currently gaining traction in America.

The home schooling mindset known as unschooling is still a relatively radical idea, even in the modern era. Basically, because it is the choice to not make a choice when it comes to teaching children. Based on the concept that children will naturally choose to study what they are interested, unschooling parents will choose to focus on creating a knowledge rich environment for their children to explore rather than choose specific subjects for their children to learn. If a child wants to learn to read they will come to the parent for guidance, if they don't then a parent won't push the subject. The same goes for math, history, science, etc., the child will learn all of

the necessary information for their lives by following their passions. (Grunzke 2010) While on thesis this does seem like a reasonable alternative for some families, in practice this educational style is difficult to regulate making it impossible for policy makers to ensure a child has a complete breadth of knowledge. Some people would argue that this is the way that education should be, but others (namely teachers and parents who don't believe in unschooling) would contend that certain basic skills are necessary to survive in today's world (i.e. being literate) and as a result some regulation is needed. Still, because this new style of education has only recently come into the spotlight, little research has been done on its long-term effects. Though Port Townsend does have a number of unschooling families I was unable to get an interview with any of them, so I am unable to really provide insight into the reasoning behind a parent's choice to use unschooling.

The other more liberal reason that many people support the concept of American choice as it relates to education comes from the struggles of the underprivileged. It is a common fact that children from underprivileged families struggle to obtain adequate education (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 2012; The Condition of Education - Population Characteristics - Demographics - Characteristics of Children's Families - Indicator May (2017) n.d.; Johaneck 2016). Due to socio-economic clustering impoverished families will be pushed into the same towns and more importantly school districts, often resulting in low SES families being forced to send their children to underfunded schools where they will get an education that has inadequately set them up for a successful life. Thus, while many American's tout the right to make their own path in life, numerous low SES families find themselves forced into a specific life with little choice. For many low SES rural and urban families these public schools may seem like a hopeless cause, so they will instead turn to alternative choices as a means for getting their children the best

education possible.(Knoche and Witte 2016) With this in mind, it is not surprising that many left leaning individuals whole heartedly back any option that could possibly even the educational playing field.

This particular reasoning is also especially relevant to my research site of Port Townsend. As a rural town Port Townsend struggles somewhat with education funding and locating tip tier educators. Though the town is mostly white, the majority of the residents that have children in school range from lower middle class to poverty. Those who do have money in the town are typically retirees with no personal stake in the current education system. Both are populations of people who do to their positions within American society often find themselves with more restricted control over their lives, and lower perceived social standing. (Underlid 2005; McMullin 2000). As a result, the American ideal of independence becomes even more desirable as these populations push to take hold of as much perceived control as they can. So, citizens will push for as little academic oversight and as much freedom of choice as they can. Be it defunding public school levees, so they aren't forced to pay more taxes, or deregulating the public schools in any way they can. So, for many of Port Townsend's middle-class families, the only way that they can obtain an education that they deem as acceptable is to remove their child from the public schools and seek out alternative options.

Neoliberal Approach to Choice

The concept of neoliberalism is rather broad and can be applied to almost every facet of American policy and is readily utilized by the different fields that study these policies. However, despite its wide usage other contexts in the field of anthropology, there is a fairly uniform agreement that neoliberalism is invoked to

“Apply the term to a radicalized form of capitalism, based on deregulation and the restriction of state intervention, and characterized by an opposition to collectivism, a new role for the state, an extreme emphasis on individual responsibility, flexibility, a belief that growth leads to development, and a promotion of freedom as a means to self-realization that disregards any questioning of the economic and social conditions that make such freedom possible.” (Hilgers 2010).

Simply, neoliberalism is a new form of hands-off policy making that dramatically decreases the federal government’s oversight into various key aspects of American life, instead putting all the responsibility for personal and societal wellbeing onto the decisions of the individual. Thus, neoliberalism is a huge proponent of the “free market of ideas”, suggesting that only the strongest businesses and policy will survive. This “promotion of freedom” has now noticeably spread it on all our lives, even beyond the economic and policy sectors where they originated.

Narrowing down onto neoliberal ideals as it pertains to education the general concept is that people should be allowed to do whatever they want with their child’s education, and more importantly what they want to do with the funds for their child’s education. In the perfect market place of ideas, the best institutions and schools will rise to the top, gathering more students along with more funds, while the lesser schools will be forced to close. On this thesis, this would initially seem like the best approach American’s could take toward improving its struggling public education system. However, when considering many real-world factors, we see that this is not the case. First and foremost this concept “implies that all parents are equally informed, politically connected, and capable of securing for their own children the best education.”(Bartlett et al. 2002) Not all parents are willing or even able to hunt down the best program for their child, and those that are may not have the educational knowledge required to make an informed decision. Getting children into non-public schools takes time, resources, and connections that many families don’t have, and as a result neoliberal educational policy

disproportionately benefits the wealthy continuing to leave the underprivileged behind. Still, despite this information, the push for the “free market place of educational options” has only grown stronger.

Schooling as a Consumable

Education as an Industry

As the neoliberal educational policies have spread throughout the country we have started to see a shift from education as a public American service into a full-blown industry. Now it is relevant to note that as I mentioned in chapter one, paying for private education has been going on since the founding of this country, but there is a noticeable difference between privatization in education and industrializing education. Private schooling is simply paying teacher to teach your student in a personal level, industrialization happens on an institutional level and can lead to situations like pop-up chain charter schools that make money of falsifying student enrolment. (Last Week Tonight n.d.) While public schools do continue to exist, and in some wealthier districts thrive, a social and political change as begun to take hold in the rest of the country. We no longer look at education as a way to better the lives of our citizens, but more as a way to improve our own economy. As discussed in earlier chapters our founding Americans created mandatory public education not as a means to create a more competitive market, but to create a more stable and well-informed citizenship that could actively contribute to their communities. While it would be ignorant to ignore obvious blemishes on the overall history of the American education system, namely racial segregation that affects students to this day, on the whole it has been a system about bringing people from all walks of life together. As Ms. Birch noted in chapter two, her explanation of the benefits of sending her children to public school that her

children are able to interact with children from all walks of life, and as a result learn tolerance and understanding for people they might never have met in other circumstances. Which, to this date, is one of the strongest benefits of public education.

Now, education is slowly becoming an industry that is designed to train kids to become competitors in the global market. Through various methods a price tag has been placed on education. Those who can afford it send their children to expensive private schools who are able to hire the best teachers and afford the best facilities. Allowing the upper middle class to continue to perpetuate the education gap. Those who can't afford private school can then try their luck in the charter school gamble. Either placing their children onto long waiting lists or into a lottery. Or, for those that are truly desperate they can try to send their children to new charter school programs and hope that they don't close leaving their students without a school.(Charter Schools Closure Rate Tops 15 Percent n.d.) For the public schools that do remain open, schools are incentivized to make improvements through restriction of funds to those that provide subpar test scores, dragging already struggling schools further down. While there have never been more choices for parents, it is hard to say education as a whole has benefited from this growth.

Resulting Educational Options

While charter schools don't yet exist in Port Townsend, there has been enough behind the scenes discussion that it is entirely possible one might be created in the future. Charter schools as a whole are fairly new to Washington State, we didn't allow them until 2012 when a highly debated vote was narrowly won by charter school supporters. Even to this day these schools are still highly contended and fought over by the citizens of Washington (More Charter Schools to Open in Washington State, Encouraging New Network 2017) However, those who do support the charter philosophy have been slowly adding new schools throughout the State, so the new

question is should new options be brought to Port Townsends already large school count. Historically speaking charter schools are privately run schools that receive funding from the State but with minimal oversight. For many parents this seems like a welcome inclusion, for in Seattle Times article avid charter school parent Natalie Hester explains “We have to have some other options for kids.” (More Charter Schools to Open in Washington State, Encouraging New Network 2017). However, does Port Townsend really need more choices?

For some parents this is a whole-hearted yes. A number of the parents I interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the number of options they had access to. As the Pine mother expressed, despite loving homeschooling her kids, she wished that they didn’t live in such a small town with so few options. “Because there are more choices in the city ... I think there would be more lively homeschool programs in the city, where homeschool families get together, and I can see that would be something that I would want to do.” Pine mother felt that in a larger city there would be even more options and homeschooling groups where her children could be further enriched beyond what she could provide by herself. For other parents, while none expressed desire for a charter school option, all of them said they would switch to a new and better option if they had the chance and one existed, even those who claimed they loved their program. From a purely neoliberal perspective this would make sense. As many charter school proponents would argue the presence of a new program would force old public and private options to either improve or die out. Perhaps new blood would kill off some of the older programs that weren’t doing well. Plus having a free alternative could help the lower middle-class families that can’t currently afford to send their children to private school. However, looking at the history of education in Port Townsend, it seems that a new program wouldn’t in any way help the children living there.

While some programs in Port Townsend have closed over the years, a majority of programs that exist seem to hold on despite the emergence of new competitors. So instead of the neoliberal promise that new programs force out the old, we simply get more new schools slowly spreading around the small town's resources. Though a new charter school would be an option for families that don't have the time or resources needed for the current alternative options Port Townsend has to offer, it cannot provide for every public-school family in Port Townsend. Not only because it is highly unlikely that every family would get behind a brand-new charter school. With how contentious the legality of charter school issue remains in Washington State, it wouldn't even be surprising if at least half the families refused to send their children to any charter program. Additionally, the State by law must have at least one public school up and running at all times. As a result, the introduction of a new charter program would still take money away from the local public schools, which are already underfunded as it is. While I am speaking in hypotheticals as no charter school program has even been presented to the city of Port Townsend, it is important to understand that moving forward any new educational program brought to the local community, charter school or otherwise, could be ultimately harmful or at the very least detrimental to the families there.

Should We Have Options?

How Choices Can Be Positive

Despite the overall negative lean on the neo-liberal view of choice and education, I would be remiss if I never acknowledged the positives that choice can bring. The first and most important factor for additional options is that some kids really do need more flexibility from their schooling. The reasons behind this can fluctuate, for some transient families, homeschooling is

the only way that their children can have any semblance of a steady stable education. While I couldn't get a hold of any during my research, a number of families that live on their boats will pass through Port Townsend's port and stay for a few weeks. These families obviously have to homeschool their children, because enrolling them in our local high school for less than a month is unrealistic. While this example may seem not completely applicable, and a bit extreme, for the general population of Port Townsend it illustrates the point that I have found while just talking to a handful of families in one location. Every family has a different set of circumstances that they are dealing with, and while they might not be as intense as my example, strict rigidity in the school system would only hurt the family. It is simply impossible to cover every family's living situation. As a result, at least some level of flexibility and choice is required.

Similarly, even for families that are rooted many children will have personal struggles that will prevent them from being able to consistently attend a structured school program. For example, one family I interviewed had a child (who I want to remain as anonymous as possible) that due to emotional struggles at home simply could not attend school every day. While this would lead to truancy in public school programs, in their alternative school they were able to create a system that allowed the child to still attend school but only when they were emotionally ready. This exact same principle can be applied to children dealing with anxiety, depression, or any other medical condition that prevents them from being able to attend school on a regular basis. For these children and families, having a program that allows for peer interaction while simultaneously accommodating their medical needs could be a saving grace.

Another important positive that comes from having choice in the Port Townsend educational system is that it does allow families to access better education than what they have publicly. Say what I might, the harsh reality is that the American education system favors

wealthier communities, and as a result those who live in well-to-do towns will get a better public education than those living in poorer communities. Overall, while Port Townsend does have some older wealthy families its educational district is still relatively poor (though not completely underfunded like some other communities). As a result, no matter how unfair it might be, the only way to ensure an education that would prepare a child for the world of college academia would be to buy it at a private institution. While it would be easy for me to get up on a soap box and exclaim that these private schools only ensure that those who can afford an education get one while those who can't remain uninformed. Thus, further perpetuating the education gap found between socioeconomic classes. I still must recognize that all of these Port Townsend private school kids are real world people who still need a good education regardless of politics or equality. While it would be nice for every kid in Port Townsend, regardless of their family's socioeconomic status, to get the best education possible, currently it isn't realistic for that to happen. So, every family that feels they can scrape together enough time and money to have the ability to afford a private education that can insure their child's future should be able to do so. I know that of the families I interviewed that had made the private school choice (as well as my own family) feel they are protecting their child and insuring that they have a bright future. As I discussed in chapter two these families want what is best for their child, no matter their external circumstances, and faced with the current Port Townsend public school system they should be free to choose a private program, free of judgment. In fact, any parent in the United States that feels that the only way to improve their child's chances in life is to send them to a nonpublic option should be received with an open-mind and understanding. As much as I would like to tout equality for all, I would never push for any program that would deny a child the best future possible.

How Choices Can Be Negative

Now that we have the positives out of the way, let us also address the question of how choice negatively affects the educational environment in Port Townsend. Overall, I think the main answer to this question is that it spreads the cities resources out far too thin. Starting with the most obvious of the resources, we have money. When it comes to tax money the Port Townsend school district doesn't need to worry about competing with charter schools or other programs that would siphon off their funds. Everyone still has to pay their taxes and support the local school. The trouble comes from the fact that I addressed earlier in this chapter, the locals don't want to raise their taxes for public schools. Much of Port Townsend's population is elderly retired people who don't want to pay for a school that they have never and will never utilize, or wealthy families that only weekend in Port Townsend, so their kids attend school in wealthier neighborhoods. As pointed out by the Pine mother who has a close family member who works as a school teacher "Our schools suffer from just a lack of funding, and there are some exceptional teachers there, but it would be super cool if that choice was just so alive!". Meaning, that while there are some fantastic teachers in the public schools, they lack the resources that would allow these programs to bring in new and exciting material. Basically, Port Townsend School District is underfunded regardless of the number additional educational options it may be competing with.

At the same time listening to a majority of my interviews we find that even those attending alternative programs wish they had more funding. As the Cedar mother explained, there is a critical mass of students required for a school to function well, and if a program doesn't hit that critical mass it finds itself struggling to properly run as a school. However, this lack of financing for both private and public education can be undercut through community support

from things like donations and bake sales. So, when other Port Townsend school programs hold fundraisers it could be argued that they are taking money that could have gone to the Public schools as well as each other. At the same time, it isn't a stretch to suggest that families that are willing to pay for a private school option might be willing to donate funds for a bland new science lab if they were forced to live with public school. While I can't definitively say that by removing the educational options in the district would lead to an increase in funds for the local public schools, a slight culling of programs could lead to a better consolidation of funds.

Similarly, another extremely valuable resource for all educational programs is parental involvement. Parental involvement is more than just on the student level, parents are often the driving force behind school events, fundraising, and program improvements. Parents are able to assist in the classroom and provide free chaperoning and services that the school would need to fund otherwise. The more that parents are immersed in their child's school the more that a school flourishes, making parental time a valuable commodity for any program. Thus, the more highly involved families that a program has the better it does. The most involved parents would probably have to be the homeschool parents, they are after all the ones that decide to go as far as to teach their child everything themselves. However, the next most involved set of parents are surprisingly the private school parents. It has been suggested that one of the main factors that draws parents towards the private school track is that they allow for more accessible and immediate parental involvement (Goldring and Phillips 2008). It follows that without access to private options, highly involved parents would be forced to stick with the public schools and use their now combined driving energy to improve the overarching municipal school district rather than a bunch of smaller programs.

The final resource that I am going to address is quality teachers. Teachers are obviously the central back bone to any school. Good teachers are able to not only inform students but encourage and inspire them to push themselves toward great achievements, while bad teachers can pull a child away from even having marginal success. As with any small rural town Port Townsend struggles to acquire new teachers. Most bright young teachers want to move to a dynamic city or an esteemed institution, so they would need a specific reason to decide to pursue a career in a sleepy port an hour away from even the closest metropolitan city. Fortunately, we have been able to acquire some fantastic teachers. As pointed out by the Birch mother during our discussion on the Port Townsend public schools, we have good teachers and we have bad teachers and as a parent you need to hope that your child gets the better teachers and that the family is able to supplement their child's education when they receive bad teachers. For an example of this, the Birch mother gave a story about how Port Townsend High said they were unable to accommodate one of the Birch children's accelerated math pace, so the family supplemented by sending their child to a different math program with a better teacher while still remaining enrolled in public school for everything else. At the same time, in between programs you will see a good amount of teacher hopping, as the different schools fight over the best ones. During my time at Jefferson Community School, we had several our best teachers leave to work at Port Townsend High School and Blue Heron Middle school. Something that was not only difficult for us students, but as the Cedar mother pointed out was incredibly difficult for parents and the JCS school board to fix on a regular basis. So, it could be argued that with a consolidated school system all the best teachers would be funneled into one program allowing them access to all the local children and benefiting the community as a whole.

Conclusion

Looking at all of the evidence as a whole I find myself more critical of alternative education. Not because it may have unusual teaching practices, but because of how it can affect the community as a whole. We in America cherish are freedom of choice and bring this value to almost every aspect of our daily lives, including education. Thus, as we watch this neo-liberal ideal of choice slowly change our countries educational landscape we see that education has become more of a commodity rather than a public service afforded to all. While some may argue that this new system allows American education to grow strong, in reality it only does so for the privileged wealthy that can afford it. For the already poor and marginalized this commodification has only lead to a more imposing struggle to find even adequate education, overall continuing to increase the education gap found between the haves and the have nots.

This fact remains true for the community of Port Townsend. While options are able to benefit individual families by providing flexibility, they also seem to drag down the communities overall educational landscape by spreading the small town's limited resources too thin. With a total population of only about 9,000, Port Townsend simply cannot effectively support the number of alternative programs it has, yet many of the families living there need these options to effectively educate their children. While programs in the town do close when they are ineffective, new programs quickly pop up to take their place; all the while through these tribulations children's education is being negatively impacted. Still, I think it would be problematic to definitively determine whether options are positive for Port Townsend, or the American education system as a whole. As I mentioned earlier, I do recognize the importance of a few alternative options, some families need those options, and I would never argue that Port

Townsend should only have a public school. Perhaps it is better to look at the concept of choice in American education as a complex necessity rather than as being wholly positive or negative.

Conclusion

Now at the end of my research I find myself not only fully understanding the structure of Port Townsend's education systems, but also how American education systems function on the community level in general. At the start of my research I felt that it was preposterous that so many different programs existed for a town whose population was less than 10,000 people. But, with a general understanding of the history American education and how it intermingles with the cultural history of Port Townsend this mass of programs makes more sense. The American education system was developed around two core, but somewhat contradictory, values. The desire for uniform education among all citizens, and the desire to allow parents and communities to have the freedom to make their own choices based on their personal beliefs. In theory, these beliefs should have the rigidity to make sure that all citizens receive an education, but the flexibility to allow options to arise and shape to the needs of any particular community.

Thus, the Port Townsend educational landscape was molded into what it is today by the community that it serves, namely the parents. Parents form and choose between these programs based on what they believe will protect their child and provide them with a successful future. These beliefs are largely influenced by the parent's social grouping's underlying values. This brings us to the concept of choice. Choice is no longer the simple value that was woven into early American education to allow for freedom and flexibility, it has grown with the rise of neoliberalism to become a lens in which we interpret education as a concept. Schooling is becoming less of a service and more of a consumable. While the free market of educational choice may seem ideal for families looking to escape underprivileged systems, it can in many ways be an illusion that still ultimately benefits the advantaged. In Port Townsend, the best way

to get a good education is still to have time and resources. However, it must be recognized that the historical importance of choice in education remains. While it would be simple to recommend strict laws of equality among students, the reality is that every family needs something different from the system. I found so many unique situations even amongst the tiny community of Port Townsend, creating perfect singular program for the entire population would be impossible. Instead, we as a nation need to recognize options, and how they develop, for what they are. Choice is not the shining concept that will pull our nation up from mediocrity, nor is it the root of all educational disparity; instead we must understand it as a complex and necessary tool that with proper insight can help us develop Port Townsend's, as well as our nation's, educational network as a whole.

To come to this understanding, I needed in-depth and open-ended personal interviews with my interlocutors, so I could obtain their very specific perspective. I found that while a simple library search could inform me on the large institutional forces at play in the broad American educational system, it was through personal interaction and testimonies that I was able to learn about the actual realities of navigating these institutional bodies on a human level. It is so easy to hold a black and white view on educational policy and develop general fixes for problems based on fields like test scores or perceived inequality. However, as with any case involving working with the public, we need a more micro perspective to notice the subtlety of the situation. It was through these interviews with my amazing group of interlocutors that I was really able to understand the complexities of the Port Townsend educational system, and then hopefully apply it to the American educational system as a whole. However, I do recognize that my method was not without flaws.

The most obvious problem with my research is the overall lack of diversity within my interlocutor pool. While I did my best to get families from as many different programs as possible, I wasn't as cognizant of the breadth of diversity within these families. Racially, all of the families that I interviewed were white (although I didn't ask anyone directly about their ethnicity.) Although an argument can be made that this still represents my predominantly white city, in the end Port Townsend isn't entirely a monolith and I did leave out the stories and perspectives of an entire population of people within my location.

Similarly, none of the families I interviewed were below the poverty line (although, like I mentioned above I didn't specifically ask anyone about their socioeconomic status). This is an even greater issue than the lack of racial diversity because a majority of the focus of my essay is on the differences in the educational experience across class boundaries. So, by accidentally leaving out the perspectives of the 12% of Port Townsend that currently lives under the Washington State poverty line (Port Townsend, WA n.d.) I find that I am missing a chunk of important data. Instead I am continuing to focus on the families that already have a voice in the matter and are able to make decisions on their children's education that they are happy with.

Finally, I found that the only people I interviewed within any family unit was the mothers. This wouldn't be an issue per se if I went into the project asking what *mothers* want for their children's education, but I do say parents throughout my essay as though I were addressing the opinions of both sexes. While this might not be as big of a deal as the lack of diversity in class and race, it is important to address that fathers are just as involved with the raising of their children as the mothers are, and I simply had an easier time contacting and interacting with the family mothers because of my own gender.

On a different note, I would like to quickly acknowledge some of the biases I held prior to and during this project. As I have mentioned at the very beginning of this essay I attended a number of these different school programs when I was a child. As a result, I developed opinions on how effective the different teaching styles each school employed really were. While I did try to come back and look at these various programs under a new light, I find that I still hold strong opinions about them. Also, it should be mentioned that many of these programs remain in flux, and the learning environment that I was exposed to in my youth may be very different to the current situation that I came back to research.

Lastly, I should point out that while I talk unfavorably about alternative and private schooling, I would be remiss to not point out that both me and my family have benefited greatly from attending private schools. While I may get up on my soap box and proclaim that the community would overall benefit from the removal of private school options, I am ultimately being hypocritical. I would not be where I am today if my parents hadn't made the choice to sacrifice comfort for me to get a private school education. While I wish that all families had this option, I recognize the current realities of the Port Townsend education system and cannot fault any family for choosing to send their child to a not traditional program.

Looking only at Port Townsend I would say that a good amount of future research can be done on the minority groups that I listed above. While I think that was overall able to get a fairly good picture of the overarching educational landscape, interviewing these missing populations could bring the last bits of clarity to fully complete the portrait. On a slightly larger scale I think it would be interesting to do a similar in-depth analysis of a different community's education system. Perhaps even looking at a dramatically different population, like mono-class wealthy suburban neighborhood, or an inner-city school district. It would be interesting to see what

different factors influence these diverse families, as well as what factors remain the same. Maybe the burning desire for choice isn't the same for all American communities as I have claimed. Conceivably, the overwhelming desire for individualized education could be shared across community lines. While understanding this issue, of educational desires, and how they affect district policy, on a micro level is helpful to the community in question; it is ultimately the comparison and analysis of these deep dives that will provide insight into what the American education system needs on a national level.

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