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Why the School for Young Children?
An inside look into the institutional and parental motivations and expectations.

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Located in the Asylum Hill neighborhood of Hartford, CT., the School for Young Children on Asylum Hill (SYCAH) is a charter school serving birth urban and suburban children. As one of the early childhood programs provided by the Capitol Regional Educational Council (CREC), SYCAH provides its children from birth through age five with a full day unique state of the art education program designed for the students, and their families as well. Believing that a socio-economical setting is beneficial for all children, SYCAH's goals truly depict the high standards they have and keep in order to provide its students with such a unique environment.

Guided by their main belief that providing students with an integrated atmosphere will lessen the "achievement gap" that haunts the education system in the United States, will effectively be closed, SYCAH has four main goals. Firstly, believing that the community in which SYCAH is located is a diverse one, SYCAH strives to serve families and children who reflect the community's "cultural, racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity."¹ Secondly, in response to the rapid need for more quality early care and education programs in Connecticut, SYCAH believes that they can provide families, in and around Hartford, with the quality care they deserve. Thirdly, SYCAH believes that each child has their own unique needs and therefore, they base their teaching on the broad range of needs expressed by their students. Lastly, SYCAH hopes to provide the Asylum Hill neighborhood with great educational opportunities and services in order to strengthen the neighborhood.

¹ SYCAH website Capitol Region Education Council, School for Young Children on Asylum Hill, 14 October 2008
<<http://www.crec.org/ss/divisionunits/asylum/aboutus.php>>.

Through a partnership with the Asylum Hill Congregational Church, CREC, and St. Joseph's College in West Hartford, SYCAH truly provides a unique and effective environment. Each partnership provides SYCAH with different resources: their campus from the Asylum Hill Congregational Church, funding and planning from CREC, and excellent teachers from St. Joseph's College. The partnerships that created SYCAH is a true reflection into the dedication that was put in the creation of the school in order to ensure that SYCAH can, and will, seamlessly provide the best early education for its students.

Question

For urban and suburban families alike, SYCAH is truly a dream come true. Taking into consideration the mission of the school, I wanted to see why the parents decided to send their children to this particular pre school. I felt that it was important to understand what considerations parents made before they came to the conclusion that SYCAH was the perfect environment for their young children. Therefore, the main question asked throughout this project was whether or not the parent's reasons of sending their children to SYCAH differed from the goals of the school itself.

Another reason that there was an interest in the motivation of the parents, was due to my own experiences in a racially integrated school. From kindergarten up until eighth grade, I attended an international school, which prided themselves on the racially diverse environment they created for its students. Knowing that my own parents' motivation for sending me to such a school was to provide me with a good education, rather than to allow me to have the experience of attending a racially integrated school, I felt an interest

to see if the parents of SYCAH were similar to my parents, or viewed education from a different light.

Literature

With race and class interchangeably deciding the quality of education a child receives, it is no surprise the wide range of education that is available in the United States today. With some students attending schools that cannot provide books and others attending schools with seemingly unlimited resources, it has become evident that without a change in our education system, equality in our country will never be achieved.

Preschools are, to a certain extent, and were a sector of education that was given very little attention. Even today, only 0.4% of the nation's GDP is spent on preschool education.² Nonetheless, many recognize the positive effect preschool education has on children. Research has showed that "high quality early experiences promote children's short-term cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as their long-term success in school and later in life."³ With such research in mind, the main objective has become the necessity to develop an equal-quality preschool system that will not only benefit the child at the present, but in the future as well.

Without a universal preschool system, preschools in the United States vary drastically. With private preschools costing up to six thousand dollars a year, many low-

² Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care, 9 November 2006, 2 October 2008
<http://www.oecd.org/document/63/0,3343,en_2649_39263231_37416703_1_1_1_1,00.html>.

³ Michelle J. Neuman and John Bennett, "Starting Strong: Policy Implication for Early Childhood Education and Care in the U.S.," Phi Delta Kappan (2001). 246.

income families have had to rely on lower quality programs.⁴ As a result, children from lower income families were subjected to an unavoidable barrier, even before beginning grade schools, and therefore were at a disadvantage.⁵ Considering the fact “differences in children’s early childhood experiences play a formative role in shaping school readiness and largely explain the skills gaps at school,” many have suggested the urgency and necessity to provide a universal preschool program for all families.⁶

Understanding the importance of early education, advocates of providing a racially and economically integrated preschool classroom has begun to grow. In terms of an integrated economical setting, studies have concluded that children, especially those from low-income families, in an integrated preschool made significantly greater gains than students in a racially and economically uniform setting.⁷ Such gains were a result of the fact that children from a higher-income family- who already had greater language abilities than their low-income counterparts, were able to serve as a “language model” for those from low-income families.⁸

Racial integration, on the other hand, is thought to not only benefit minority students but white students as well. It has been suggested that multicultural education will not only allow minority students to fully comprehend who they are as an individual, but also allow white children to “reinforce...[their] inclination to understand and learn from

⁴ Katherine A. Magnuson et al., "Inequality in Preschool Education and School Readiness," American Educational Research Journal 41.1 (2001).

⁵ Deborah L. Vandell and Barbara Wolfe, "Child Care Quality: Does it Matter and Does it Need to Be Improved?," 2000, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1 10 2008 <<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/ccquality00>>.297

⁶ Magnuson et al.,

⁷ Carolta Schechter and Beth Bye, "Preliminary evidence for the low impact of mixed-income preschools on low-income children's language growth," Early Childhood Research Quarterly 22 (2006): 143.143

⁸ *Ibid.*, 143

the self-interpretations of cultural ‘others.’”⁹ Such education will develop students and ultimately adults who are tolerant and more willing participants of society.

As evidence shows, the importance of preschool education, and subsequently the importance of an integrated environment, it is crucial to see how students begin to attend the preschools they are in. Due to their young age, the preschool a child attends is almost entirely based on the parent’s decision. Parents state that the most important factor in selecting schools is academic quality, and the least important is the demographic makeup of the school.¹⁰ Nonetheless, we find our schools, from preschool up, to be commonly divided by race and class.

According to Garcia’s theory of “charter school specialization,” parents choose schools for their child on the basis of the decisions other similar parents have made.¹¹ In the case of Garcia’s research, the yearning for similarity, ultimately, resulted in segregation. Simply put, parents chose to send their children to the same schools that their associates sent their children to. Although such segregation may not negatively affect a child from an affluent family academically, children from low-income families are thrust into a vicious cycle of being in an environment where they are surrounded by other disadvantaged children, who, from birth, are more likely to make smaller strides in their learning.

It is important to understand the motivations of parents sending their children to preschools before developing plans of reforming early childhood programs. Why do

⁹ Robert Gooding-Williams, Race and Racism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).441

¹⁰ David R. Garcia, "Academic and Racial Segregation in Charter Schools: Do Parents Sort Children Into Specialized Charter Schools?," Education and Urban Society 40.5 (2008): 592.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 593

parents send their young children to a specific preschool? It is obvious from the evidence that an integrated setting for young children is beneficial not only immediately but in the long run as well. Through the analyzing the interviews, it was interesting to see whether SYCAH's parents fully comprehended the advantageous environment SYCAH provides for its students.

Method

Letters were sent out to SYCAH parents, outlining the purpose of the project. Parents who were willing to be interviewed expressed their interest by email. Those who wanted to participate were given the option of having a phone or face-to-face interview. Most of the parents who were willing to be interviewed opted to be a part of a phone interviews. Before and during the interviews, the parents were repeatedly assured that their names, or any facts (such as name of their town) would not be used for the purpose of their own confidentiality. Consent forms were also sent to the parents so that they had a copy of the ways in which I would keep their information confidential.

Preconceived Notions

Although, as mentioned above, there are abundant amounts of literature that proves that a socio-economically integrated setting resulted in the lessening of the achievement gap, I felt that many parents, like my own, had more individually guided reasons for wanting to send their children to SYCAH. Taking into consideration the lack of pre-schools within Hartford itself, I believed that the main objective of the parents was to find a decent pre school for their children. It was my belief that parents wanted to send

their child to an academically guided school and that the unique environment SYCAH created was simply another positive aspect that helped them make their decisions.

Findings

One of the first questions asked to parents, was why they decided to send their child to SYCAH and what type of research, if any, helped them make their decision. Surprisingly, none of the parents interviewed admitted that they had researched into SYCAH before applying. Rather, the majority of them stated that they had begun their research *after* their child had gotten accepted into SYCAH. Some parents, who already had children in other charter or magnet schools stated that they based their decision on their other child's experiences in those schools.

The responses given by the parents made it apparent that the need for a preschool was the main motivation behind sending their children to SYCAH. It was surprising, given SYCAH's list of unique missions and goals, that none of these parents had taken this factor into consideration before applying. It seemed as though the parents were willing to send their child to any preschool that was available. Multiple parents noted SYCAH's specialized curriculum for preschool-aged children, and their appreciation for it.

One Hartford parent even went as far as stating that her child "needed" to attend a charter and/or magnet school. For this parent, it was not a choice, but a necessity for their child's success. The suburban parents, on the other hand, as stated above, simply needed an adequate preschool for their child to attend. One parent, however, did state that

their child needed special education, and that was why they had made the decision to send their child to SYCAH.

Another set of questions that were asked was about the parent's need to send their child to a charter and/or magnet school. For parents who were currently sending their child to a charter school, the majority did not seem to think that such a specialized school was very important. Two suburban parents stated that they would be more than happy to send their children to their local public school after graduating from SYCAH. They didn't feel that there was anything wrong with their local schools and therefore did not necessarily feel the need to have their children continue in a specialized school system. However, these parents also stated that they would consider specialized schools when the time comes.

A Hartford parent, as mentioned before, was very keen on making sure that their child would continue to attend specialized schools. They believed that this was the only way of ensuring a "great education," and stated that Hartford schools would not "challenge the child early enough [for] preparation for success." This same parent, in their answers, went as far as stating their goals for their child up to college. The parent stated that they were "excited about helping my child achieve," and continued to state that the need for success in their children was the reason all three of her children (including the one at SYCAH) were currently attending charter schools.

Seeing as how SYCAH's mission continuously states the importance of integration, it was felt that the parents' responses to the need for integration would be crucial. All the parents stated that they were aware of SYCAH's mission for socio-economical integration. Strangely, integration was only mentioned towards the end of the

interview when the parents were asked what kind of an environment, they felt, SYCAH provided for their children. Such finding was strange especially since it was felt that they had abundant opportunity to mention integration and its role in SYCAH earlier on in the interview when asked questions about their motivation for sending their children there and what they believed was SYCAH's main mission.

SYCAH prides itself on its integrated setting and therefore it was assumed that there would be abundant conversation about integration, and its importance on children. However, although all parents agreed that integration was good for their children, none of the parents went further to explain why they believed integration was good. On the other hand, these parents were more than happy to share their beliefs on the importance of an academic setting for their children, as it was an important key to their children's success.

Challenges and Limitations

The methods used for this research were drastically different from the initial methods that were proposed. Initially, it was proposed that five Hartford parents, and five Suburban parents would be interviewed. Due to confidentiality issues, it was impossible to obtain the list of parents from SYCAH. Therefore, the only choice I had of gathering parents were to send out a hundred letters to parents through the students asking them to be a part of my project. The letter outlined, the importance of confidentiality, my research question and purpose of the project. They were asked, as stated before, to contact me either via the phone or email.

Of the hundred letters that were sent out, only five parents responded. One parent never responded to a response email I had sent out, leaving me with four possible

interview subjects- one Hartford parent and three suburban parents. It was initially feared that the lack of parent response would cause an unfair assessment into the parent's motivation of sending their children to SYCAH, however, after analysis, it was felt that the information gathered was adequate.

It was also initially proposed that members of SYCAH (teachers, principal, and staff) and the director of CREC would be interviewed. However, due to communication problems, and change in positions (the principal of SYCAH left in early November), it was felt that their response, which would have been including in evaluating what SYCAH's mission truly was, was unnecessary. Since the research was more focused on the parent's view of SYCAH and its missions, it was felt that their responses would no longer be necessary for a conclusive analysis.

Conclusion

It seems as though the motivation of parents for sending their children to SYCAH, as initially thought, was mostly driven by personal reasons. All parents repeatedly stated the importance of academics and success, whereas the mission of SYCAH was barely mentioned. Especially seeing as how most suburban parents were willing to send their children to their local schools after graduating from SYCAH, it seemed as though the lack of quality pre schools in the area was more important than the unique environment and curriculum that SYCAH provided.

A more conclusive analysis of the parents through more interviews may have resulted in a drastically different outcome. However, seeing as how we do live in a society, which applauds individuality, it was not surprising to see the parents' responses

and it is believed that more interviews may have concluded in the same results. The few interviews that were conducted, however, seems to show the importance, and need, for more quality early education programs in our country. Obviously, all these parents were not content about the choices, or lack thereof, they had when it came to choosing preschools. Perhaps, these parents would value the need for an integrated education when the burden of finding a quality early education program, with ease, is accomplished.

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