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POSITIONALITY MATTERS: SCHOOL CHOICE DECISIONS BASED ON ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS

Dr. Stacy L. Thomas
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POSITIONALITY MATTERS:
SCHOOL CHOICE DECISIONS BASED ON ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS

Stacy L. Thomas

Curriculum, Advocacy and Policy

Doctor of Education

in the National College of Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

National College of Education

National Louis University

(March 2019)

POSITIONALITY MATTERS


SCHOOL CHOICE DECISIONS BASED ON ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS

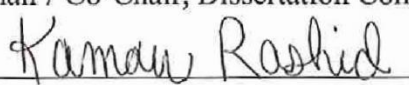
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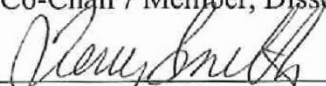
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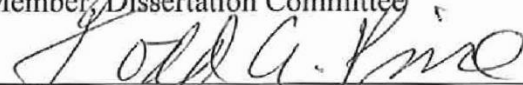
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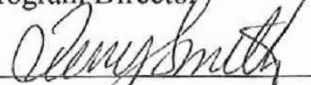

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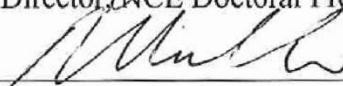

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Abstract

This research delves into experiences with reasoning and selected criteria for choosing the right school for their children. Beginning with a series of vignettes that assist with recognition of parental empowerment, this research archives acknowledgement of their own positionality when it comes to making life changing decisions. As selected parents of African American children grapple with the strategic balance and possibilities of educational outlets, family and finances, they offer ethnographic accounts of their successes and failures with school choice. Individual accounts of parental school choice decisions posing as data ascertained from interviews provided research that explored the critical frequencies and perceptions of many African American families that are deeply involved in their children's educational welfare.

Through the skillful use of aesthetics, this dissertation, is intended to show how the study of sociological inquiries, also known as ethnomethodology, can create culturally receptive and comprehensive spaces for empathy of natural human behavior with critical race theory overtones. This type of qualitative inquiry presented is an exemplar of narrative methods that approached relevant evidence in a compelling way to frame research that brought facts and findings to bear on people's sentiments and personal beliefs about diversity, fairness and equal education for all.

Acknowledgements

I want to extend my most sincere form of gratitude to Dr. Efrat “Sara” Efron, Director of Curriculum, Advocacy and Policy at National Louis University. She dutifully and humbly stepped in as my dissertation co-chair. I truly appreciate her prompt attentive feedback and gentle guidance. My appreciation also goes to my other co-chair Dr. Kamau Rashid who introduced me to term “auto-ethnography”. Many thanks to my committee at National Louis University: Dr. Terry Jo Smith, and Dr. Todd Price, both who have a special place in my heart for different reasons. A special posthumous acknowledgement goes to my uncle Dr. Charles R. Thomas. Through his love as a family member, his position as a retired superintendent of the district, where I currently teach, and as a professor at National Louis University until his final days, he encouraged me to get started and continue the Thomas education legacy.

In addition, I was blessed to be a part of a support group like no other; especially the “Dis Crew.” They know who they are. No matter where we were in our individual doctoral journey we always seemed to maintain a spirit of reassurance for each other. Through our unspeakable bond, there was nothing a simple text, talk, group dinner, trip to the ice cream parlor or a shared bottle of sangria couldn’t fix.

And to the participants of my research who were the catalysts of change that made me think, reflect, and realize my own self-worth, Patricia Darling and her husband, Letitia Shaw and her family, Duane Everheart and Chaneese Whitman, I will forever be in your debt. Thank you for your honesty, vulnerability, humility, and parental strength. Thank you for going beyond providing me with a good interview. Your encouragement gave me a sharper perspective on my own positionality.

*This body of work is dedicated to Nate, for being my true inspiration throughout this entire
doctoral pursuit. I love you, son.*

*I also want to especially thank Mom, God father and extended family for their motivation and
support.*

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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

I've learned that making a 'living' is not the same thing as 'making a life'. I've learned that whenever I decide something with an open heart, I usually make the right decision. I've learned that you shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands; you need to be able to throw some things back.

Maya Angelou, 1969

Food for Thought, My Motivation

It is my charge that the context of school choice should be extended to all families, particularly African American families. Race and status are major determiners of one's social position. These positions or dispositions "are shaped in the structured and social world denoted as objectively discernible social spaces where classes or groups of individuals occupy different and stratified positions depending on their possession of profitable objects, status, and/or properties" (Bourdieu, 1989, 2006/1986 as cited in Yoon, 2017, p.5). The groups to be included according to Bourdieu, would be privileged, more highly educated families from prosperous school districts who are entangled in the system of social stratification as well as less educated families whose school districts are in dire straits.

With contempt for the misuse of school choice by placing schools in the competitive market, author Michael Apple explains that the ultimate determinant of success in life extends from linkages of students' gains on achievements tests, a neutral curriculum, a neutral system of accountability (Apple, 2006, p.5) and a solid financial foundation. Supposedly, as Apple

disapprovingly notes, when it works well, these linkages guarantee rewards of merit. “Good” students will learn “good” knowledge and will get “good” jobs (p.5)

Parents that ponder the school most appropriate for their children's academic, social and emotional growth examine the levels of education that shape their notions of what must be done to ensure that their children are not hindered from achieving the ‘good life’ of individual comfort and security (Bellah, 1991, p. 86). Thus, this notion is tied to and defined largely in terms of the family’s economic and social position (Sikkink & Emerson, 2008, p. 270). Education and stratification set the social context in which parents’ cultural orientations toward schooling shape school choices. (Sewell, Hauser and Featherman, 1976). Education is a source of currency in systems of social stratification. It opens the opportunities for social mobility.

In the eyes of a long-term strategist, like myself, a good education offers good flexibility when considering career options. Good career placement brings forth good income and cultural capital. The focus of my inquiry is, do we, African American families, realize the power we hold? How do we justify the school choices we make once the opportunity has been recognized? Better yet, do we actually know how to recognize the opportunity?

To provide some context to the dissertation’s focus statement, allow me to introduce two vignettes involving African American parents that provoke introspection about the reasons and solutions for their plight.

Vignette Number One: Kitchen Table Thoughts

Maria, (not her real name) a single African American education paraprofessional (commonly known as a teacher's aide) worked thirty miles away from her home. Working through a legal separation from her military husband, she accepted the invitation for her and her infant son to move back in with her mother. Close to the end of one summer evening, Maria sat at the kitchen table mulling over her son's future as she had done many times before. However, this summer was different. She was reviewing the same facts she had researched since the day her only pride and joy turned five years old just 8 weeks prior. Her son was of kindergarten age. She had to determine if it was feasible to let her son attend a 2 ½ hour kindergarten class and pay \$300 a week for afternoon child care expenses in the hometown where they all resided. She contemplated looking for a job closer to their home with similar hours, so she would be available to pick her son up after school. An alternate consideration was to move to a location closer to her workplace. Each option sounded expensive and unlikely. The school district in Maria's community was known for its stellar test scores, academic excellence, up-to date technology and 21st century learning. On the other hand, the school district is also part of an affluent predominantly White community. The schools around Maria's workplace were considered part of a middle to a lower socio-economic society. However, various internet reviews exclaim how caring the teachers were and how they instruct with a high regard for ethics. They are also very resourceful with the materials. In addition, since these schools share the community with the largest military instillation on Illinois' North Shore, the population is extremely diverse, with children from virtually all over the world. Lastly, but certainly not least, this school district runs on a productive full day kindergarten schedule, with free after school care upon availability.

Since Maria and her son were still military dependents, (a contributing reason to why she and her husband simply did not divorce) childcare was also available on the base for a nominal fee. The hospital, commissary and other affordable military sponsored child friendly programs were readily available at their fingertips. The only hurdle to overcome was to seek permission to bring her son into her district, which is obviously not in the same township. Another alternative would be to take the advice of her friend, who lived in the distant school district, and use her local address for registration. That way they lived in that community, which was a requirement.

Vignette Number Two: Twin Decision

Sylvia (not her real name) was a mother of twin boys in the third grade. One of the twins periodically suffered from colds and earaches. Up until the spring of last year they lived in military based housing and attended the assigned public school for their area. Since school attendance and appointment is based on geographic location in the Chicago suburbs, the boys were zoned to an elementary school that was within their boundary lines. Incidentally, military families who live on federal property or an established base for housing are exempt from paying applicable local taxes, which subsidize public school funding, also referred to as Impact Aide. When Sylvia and her family decided to pursue the long-time dream of purchasing a home in a nearby town, she was faced with a dilemma of either notifying the current school authorities of her intent or remaining silent so the twins could continue learning in their school and complete a successfully established school year. Even though Sylvia still worked on the military base, she knew she ran the risk of having to withdraw her sons from the school since they no longer lived in the district or on the military base. Her boys had attended this school since kindergarten. Their

grades and behavior were exemplary. The school's state annual report card data reflected high achievement in many areas but also the need for improvement in others. Teachers and students alike, grew fond of the boys, perhaps in part because they were the only set of twins in the school.

After doing what she felt was right and just, Sylvia soon realized that sometimes doing the right thing has unintended consequences. She thought by notifying the school of her new address, both of her sons would be granted a pardon or be "grandfathered" into the system until the end of the academic year based on transparency and good faith. Instead, her undesired fear came true. She had to pull her boys out of the school district mid-year. Although the new area where the family relocated had nice neighborhoods and affordable housing, the unfortunate fact was it housed a very poor and failing school district. In fact, it was considered one of the worst school districts in the state. The Illinois State Achievement Test scores (formerly the state-wide exam known as ISAT) were low in all subject areas across all grades. The school was on the watch list due to not meeting AYP requirements (a mandated system where at least 95.0% of students in the All Group and the Subgroups must be tested in Reading and Mathematics). Since third grade was a benchmark year, Sylvia was concerned that a new school environment would not suit nor be beneficial to her sons. Her sons would be forced to adapt to a new environment. Doctor appointments, for the child that missed school often due to illness, required further travel adjustments. She regretted making the decision and often felt she should have kept her mouth shut.

Thoughts on Vignettes One and Two

A simple solution for *Vignette One: Kitchen Table Thoughts* would have involved Maria bringing her son to the school district closer to where she worked. Their day would begin and end together. Her son who is a military child, although estranged from his father who is the actual sponsor, would have the opportunity of earning good grades while experiencing the advantages of working in a functional, culturally diverse community. Additionally, Maria would be saving money, which ultimately could go toward the purchase of a new home for her and her son. Complications could arise if Maria discloses that she doesn't live in the same city as the school. If she had in fact, notified the school district of her actual address, she would have had to pay a hefty tuition in excess of \$ 7800 in order to attend the desired school of choice. Naturally, if she had the money, she would have placed her son in a private school of her choice, or she would have already moved from her mother's home.

If only Sylvia from *Vignette Two: Twin Decision* had not mentioned that her family had moved, then her twins would have been able to stay in the school district that satisfactorily accommodated their academic, social and geographical needs. Her children would have remained happy in the scholastic environment with the friendships built over the years. The upcoming preparation and testing season would not have been disrupted by the move. Proximity to nearby military facilities like the family doctor, would not have been as much of an issue had they been able to remain in the same community.

The mission of the Impact Aid Program is to disburse Impact Aid payments to local educational agencies that are financially burdened by federal activities and to provide technical

assistance and support services to staff and other interested parties. Of course, withholding information about the family move avoiding Impact Aid guidelines, would have compromised Sylvia's integrity, certainly, as a federal employee. She chose to err on the side of caution in search of consistency and transparency leaving her children's academic, medical and social connections at risk. In this case, they lost.

Perhaps if the parents of either vignette (and many others who face the same daily challenges) had researched and carefully pre-calculated the district's position, they would have been better informed and prepared to present a persuasive argument based on cultural, economic and political reasoning, as well as the best interests of the children. This might have influenced the district to consider an outcome that addressed the best interests of the children, rather than one that would adversely impact them and possibly lead to negative political consequences, such as a class action lawsuit. A need exists, in my view, for parents to acknowledge the power in decision making when it comes to selecting the type of education for their children. But first, we should all understand how this embodied empowerment develops and grows into the phenomenon it has become, as the next section illustrates.

Background of the Study: From Whence It Came

Periodical fireside chats with friends prompted me to reflect on my own scholastic journey as a youth. Developmental psychologist and prominent family expert (Sell, 1981, p. 44), Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner, created a theory that considered all the shaping influences on the development of a child. Recognized in his model of a system of ecology, there are many elements that help form a person's reaction to society even through an event experienced by

others outside of that person like that of parents, grandparents and peers. Other factors such as mentor/teacher relationships, media (TV, social media, music), online interactions, all have generational cultural influences on people.

Human development is the process through which the growing person acquires a more extended, differentiated and valid conception of the ecological environment, and becomes motivated and able to engage in activities that reveal the properties of, sustain, or restructure that environment at levels of similar or greater complexity in form and content. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 27)

The Bronfenbrenner Model in Relation to School Choice

Based on Bronfenbrenner's theory, Comer suggests that child rearing, development, learning and preparation for interaction and response connected to the social world begin at infancy and resonates into adulthood. Good relationships among and between the people in the institutions that influence the quality of child life, largely home and school, make good child and adolescent rearing and development possible (Comer & Gates, 2004, p. 2).

Children who are not doing well in school, or whose families are not well connected to the mainstream, view themselves as different from those in it- their teachers and fellow students with higher levels of achievement. When called on to achieve, they are being asked, in a very real sense, to be different from their parents and their own network culture. This eventually becomes a serious identity problem that must be worked through if they are to move into the mainstream culture (Comer, 1997, p. 90).

Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory is an attractive one for my work around school reform because it is expansive, yet focused; one eye is trained on the complex layers of school, family and community relationships, and the other eye is sharply focused on individual student development (Leonard, 2011). The explanation of the ecological systems composed by Urie Bronfenbrenner is introduced as many intra-familial and extra- familial systems that affect children's development.

The *intra-familial* system is the microsystem which embraces direct contact and interaction with immediate at home family members, mother, father and siblings. The *extra-familial* is a mesosystem, or the setting on which I want to concentrate, includes the micro system but also brings in the outer ring interaction from school and peer relationships.

Bronfenbrenner explains that throughout all interrelated ecological systems, children develop a complex social world. In order to introduce a child into the world of structured education, one must learn and understand a child's cognitive development and connection to the world outside of his domain. Figure 1 visually illustrates *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory*).

As shown in Figure 1, academic goals and objectives are embedded and accomplished in a bidirectional order of a learning environment according to the ecological systems approach. As the student progresses through a nurturing school – home environment, he or she utilizes formerly learned reactions and experiences to integrate with newly learned information. Since the child's development is mostly directly affected by the immediate family environment, or throughout the mesosystem, it seems appropriate to assume that the parent or caregiver is responsible for providing the link to the outside world such as choosing where their children

should attend school and social venues. Also referred to as the exosystem, the extended family and community, as well as the macrosystem, factors cultural influence into the decision process.

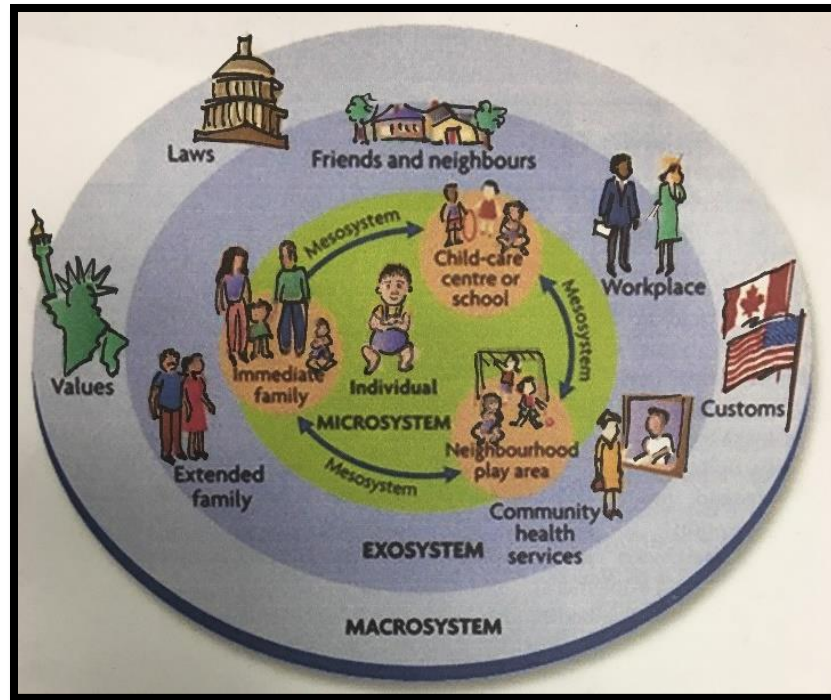


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory in Burke and Roberts, (2009), p.29 (colorization and enhancement by S. Thomas (2017))

In relation to school choice, Bronfenbrenner's theoretical perspective for the evolving interaction between human development and the scholastic environment also proposes that many parents do not feel that activities provided by the school constitute real opportunities for family participation. Many feel acutely powerless in the decision-making process (Wiess & Edwards, 1992; Williams & Stallworth, 1984).

As a parent who is the chief guardian of the environmental context, and who is cognizant

of the proximal process of my son's learning behavior, I feel that I am co-responsible for giving my child a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, also known as FAPE-LRE. While it is not noticeably acknowledged, parental involvement and advocacy includes school choice in many situations, especially when parents feel like they have no say or no outstanding results in their child's learning development.

With thoughts and support of the Bronfenbrenner Theory, the proposal for my dissertation leans toward capturing the interest of family and central school administration who lie on the outer rims of the circular model referred to as the exosystem. Beyond the circle of exosystem, the macrosystem, which encompasses the cultural and economic conditions of society, impacts the parents' line of thinking. It should also understandably be noted that many families, particularly African American parents of school age children, begin this thinking process of acceptance as early as the microsystem, (the innermost ring), especially when considering school choice. Positionality comes into play.

A person's positionality relates to the extent to which they are privileged, resourceful, powerful, and thus able to navigate and succeed within the dominant social structure [a typical comparison of Self to Other]. The notion of positioned school choice conceptualizes a highly subjective parental school choice process that is inextricably linked to [the] choice makers' race, class, and gender backgrounds. Positioned choices are emotional, value-laden, and culturally relevant. (Cooper, 2005, p. 175)

Following Urie Bronfenbrenner's address during the White House Conference on the Family in 1980, I recognize his claim that the future of the family lies in the relationship between

families and other institutions (Sell, 1981, p. 152). I would add that the future of families also partially relies on cultural adaptation.

We as a nation need to be reeducated about the necessary and sufficient conditions for making human beings human. We need to be reeducated not as parents--but as workers, neighbors, and friends; and as members of the organizations, committees, boards--and, especially, the informal networks that control our social institutions and thereby determine the conditions of life for our families and their children. (Urie Bronfenbrenner, found in AZQuotes.com)

Family, be it biological or surrogate, is the epicenter of all relationships. I recall learning from a very early age that the vernacular spoken or heard in my household or around grown-ups similar to mine, was not to be spoken in public, particularly around Whites. In my case while growing up, it was a matter of code switching or knowing when, where and how to speak and/or behave around certain groups of people in order to be accepted into their culture. Ironically, I also learned by the age of seven that code switching was necessary even within my own culture, especially at school. “Parents have an effective role to play in the process [of microsystemic social behavior]. However, their impact is greatest during the early years of development, when parental influences have less competition from such socializing forces as the school” (Spencer et al, 2001, p.22). Most of my “linguistic transition” occurred when my parents transferred me from a private to a public school, an experience I will expand on later in this chapter. I grew up learning from my parents and grandparents that my family’s social position was much like that of many Blacks during that era. We were bruised from racially charged incidents, some

historically noted, some personal encounters. However, my mother taught me to remain optimistic, yet, watchful. “Er’thang ain’t always what it seem”, my southern grandmother would say. Now, I clearly understand what she meant. Knowing that she was raised right in the middle of Jim Crow, I surmised she was referring to the assumption that even though an action or a gesture may have appeared innocent or without purpose other than an act of kindness, it may have been done with social or racial overtone. This too is a topic I will discuss later in the chapter when I describe the torment I went through as a child attending an all-white summer camp and the “kind” act of a camp counselor.

Foundation of Separate but Equal

The term “Jim Crow” refers to a series of law and ordinances passed by Southern states and municipalities between 1877 and 1965 legalizing segregation (the physical separation of individuals based on race, gender, religion or class) within their boundaries. It was a way of life where all “White citizens had the power, wealth and privileges while Blacks faced daily seemingly unending incidents of terror, humiliation, with hardly any freedom, very little wealth and absolutely no justice.” (Tischauer, 2012, p.1). Though there were laws that discriminated against African Americans throughout the country, the Jim Crow system existed primarily in the South.

By 1909 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was officially formed to lead the modern Black civil rights movement. The primary goals of the NAACP were to dispute and eliminate unfair practices such as public lynching of Blacks when accused of certain offenses, from criminal to simple public disobedience under the Jim Crow

system. Although the NAACP had difficulty building branches in the Jim Crow South (Tischhauser, 2012, p. 92), it still emerged to be the largest and most important defender of constitutional rights for African Americans.

Public places remained segregated well into the mid twentieth century. Schools restaurants, movie houses and even public transportation such as railroad lines maintained accessible areas for Whites while the unclean, often crowded areas or completely different establishments (less than obvious entrances) were reserved for people of color. Education of the United States was immersed in the era of the “separate but equal” Jim Crow laws, and the proclamation of civil rights. As Clifton Johnson, a White Northern travel writer, stated in one of his many essays about traveling through the south at the turn-of-the century,

What you see on the railroad is characteristic of the whole structure of the Southern states. The Negro occupies the position of inferiority and servility of which he is constantly reminded ...by restrictions, by discriminating laws and by the attitudes of his White neighbors. (Tischhauser, 2012, p. 69)

School aged children of that time experienced the sensitive effects of segregation most of all. As far as status within society, Blacks were placed at the very bottom. It was author James D. Anderson who wrote of the common practice for White children to attend nearby neighborhood, safely structured and well-maintained public institutions supported by local taxpayers to enhance and continue their education in the best way possible. Adversely, even though Blacks paid the same taxes, they remained dependent mostly on private funding and self-help. As a matter of fact, southern state school officials of that time, recognized and encouraged

Black citizens to willingly tax themselves voluntarily in order to obtain and maintain school buildings equipment and teachers (Anderson, 1988, p. 183) This double taxation of sorts allowed Blacks to keep their rural dilapidated schoolhouses and churches open so they could achieve a partial education designed by and for White citizens. Yet, after federal review there were no findings of racial discrimination.

1899, October 30: The Supreme Court decided unanimously in *Cumming v. Richmond County Board of Education* that the “separate but equal” doctrine did not require school boards to fund schools for both Black and White students if they had only enough money to fund one school system. If Blacks were denied a school, they had to prove that the only reason was due to “hostility to the colored population because of their race.” The ruling found there was no evidence of racial discrimination. (Tischauser, 2012, pp. xviii-xix).

By the 1950s, the NAACP was beginning to support challenges to segregation of schools. The *Brown v. Board of Education* case, where the following mandate: “We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place.”, (Ford & King, 2014), not only challenged the inferiority of the separate schools, but it also claimed that the "separate but equal" ruling violated the clause of the 14th Amendment which addresses the equal protection and rights of former slaves. The amendment also addresses what is called "due process", which prevents citizens from being illegally deprived of life, liberty, or property.

Under the leadership of NAACP Attorney Thurgood Marshall, school segregation laws were reviewed by the United States Supreme Court and deemed unconstitutional.

On “May 27, 1954, the Supreme Court issued its opinion, in the *Brown v. Board of Education*,

outlawing segregation in public schools. On May 31, 1955, in *Brown II*, the Supreme Court ordered that schools must begin to desegregate with deliberate speed.” (p. xxi). Even though desegregation was handed down by federal law, many southern states did not abide by the ruling. Racial segregation and the mistreatment of blacks and people of color extended well into the following decades.

Correlation to School Choice Today

Author Kevin Brown expresses that for the past thirty years, federal courts have shifted the background assumptions for interpreting the equal protection rights of school children.

Over fifty years ago, when the Court handed down its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, it viewed the equal protection rights of black school children with special concern about improving their educational environment. However, over the past three decades, the Court increasingly has embraced the view that the equal protection rights of Black school children—indeed, all school children—should be based on a notion that all public school students should be treated as individuals. (Brown, 2006, p.39).

Acknowledgment of this fundamental shift lends way to consequences of the Supreme Court interpreting the Equal Protection Clause toward the re-segregation of public schools. According to Brown, current educational policies and practices motivated by these so-called legitimate educational considerations, which, have unfavorable effects on the educational opportunities of Black and other racially or ethnically disadvantaged school children, do not actually violate the Equal Protection Clause. Throughout their study of charter schools, race and

integration, Frankenberg and Lee (2003) concluded that charter schools face high levels of segregation mostly due to high residential segregation created by neighborhood assignment and school district boundary lines. In many cases they are even more segregated than regular public schools

While the intent of school choice and the open market place is to give parents a choice among existing public schools, there are consequences that create racial divides as well as social stratification within the Black community. Although significant differences exist between public school choice and public funding of private education, both are born out of the same concerns. Studies show that “pockets of segregation” develop. (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003, p.12).

Cookson briefly defines a charter school system as “publicly sponsored autonomous schools that are free of direct administrative control by the government but are held accountable for achieving certain levels of student performance” (Cookson, 1994, p.15). This is an example of the discoveries of Frankenberg & Lee is further supported through the work of Renzulli and Evans (2005). Their study shows that charter school formation often results in greater levels of segregation in schools between whites and non-whites (Ballentine & Spade, 2008, p.367). Their findings imply that “integration” pushes Whites into charter schools just as integration or the threat thereof, increased white flight in the 1970s. Bearing in mind, this does not imply that minorities do not also make use of the school choice, but when they do, they do in segregated context (p.368). Sociologist Amy Stuart Wells (1991), in a study of an urban/suburban desegregation plan in St. Louis during the height of school desegregation, noticed a trend in

responses in her interviews with African American parents. When asked about their reasoning for not choosing one of the several predominantly White schools in the suburbs offered to their children, parents virtually gave the same answer. Even though many, if not all student interviewees expressed their dislikes and negative experiences about the inner-city high school where they attended (i.e.: fights, low morale and low respect for teachers), they still defend their decisions not to transfer with the “can-achieve” anywhere philosophy (Wells & Crain, 1999, p. 173). As cited in Cookson’s *School Choice: The Struggle for the Soul in American Education*, Wells concluded that “race is such an important issue that it often supersedes evaluations of academic programs; that is discrimination is so institutionalized in American culture that decision making process for African Americans are always bound by their perceptions of the larger society (Cookson, 1994, p.109).

Despite the lack of consensus about the academic benefits of increased choice, its supporters naturally link school choice to academic achievement. Advocates of choice in education such as Nancy Paulu and her colleagues, Seymore Fliegel and Raymond J. Domanico, who attribute substantial academic achievement among students in a Manhattan school district program, (Cookson, 1994, p.77) generally assert that it will improve educational success, particularly of low-income, urban, minority students, in a number of instances. One example of that, is the raising of math and reading test scores. Another way is improvement in attendance and safety.

Additional arguments claim that choice and competition- based reforms draw from a theory of institutional change that positions these [market style] mechanisms to leverage school

innovation and improvement (Lubienski, 2005, p.264). Adversely, the market-based selection process increases the need for schools to compete against each other. New innovative schools are literally converting, and in many cases, replacing the traditional public schools, thus creating a Darwinian competitive environment where schools that cannot demonstrate their ability to provide a good education will not survive (Brown, 2006, p.10).

Discussions with parents and friends revealed a commonality I had with many of them. We were all in agreement that parental decisions made through active involvement in school and family issues, which often included family history and personal sacrifice, were based upon our considerations of academic challenges and cultural acceptance of our children. Winston Churchill taught us that if we fail to learn from history then we are doomed to repeat it.

Relevance and Significance to “Choice”

The following vignette demonstrates how individuals would respond to a foreign environment with adaptation. Perhaps this scenario sheds light on my earlier reference to my need to code switch to feel comfortable in a different culture. After reading this piece, I would encourage a pause and personal reflection of what you would do in the same circumstance.

Vignette Three: Out for Lunch

A couple of neighborhood friends discuss how they both have time and about \$30 to spend on a good meal. They walk into a restaurant. One has on jeans and a nice shirt; the other has on a coordinated outfit with a designer bag. The host seats them at a table and offers each one a menu. The lady with the designer bag had a colorful menu with a display of many

tantalizing appetizers, delicious entrées and delectable deserts. She states, “My, there are so many wonderful choices!” Her friend received a menu with the Special of the Day in the middle of the page, nothing else. While the special seemed tasty, she remained quiet but wondered why she wasn’t offered the same menu as her friend. Not wanting to question it, she ordered the Special of the Day. When the friend with the designer bag noticed the other menu and her selection, she questioned, “Why didn’t you ask for a menu like mine?” The lady in jeans responded, “I didn’t think I had the option.”

Thoughts on Vignette Number Three

Obviously, this is a fictional situation. Depending on the reader, one may think that the handling of the menus was an oversight by the server. Perhaps if only the lady in jeans had asked for a different menu, she would have gotten it. By placing yourself in the position of the lady in jeans comparatively, you may have felt that you were underdressed. The host had no way of knowing or caring about your similar backgrounds. All that was noticed was the appearance. Slightly embarrassed by her appearance for the day, the lady in jeans felt that she was purposely not given the option to make choices. Personally, if I, an African American female, were to have had the same experience as the woman in the jeans, the woman in jeans, I may have gone as far to assume by observing the atmosphere and seated patrons, at first glance, that I would not fit in and therefore, not have chosen to stay. In turn, I would have suggested to my friend that we go to another restaurant more suitable for our attire.

State School Choice Comparison

I had the opportunity to witness the aforementioned situations, or a derivative of such, from Vignettes numbered One, Two and Three. In relation, many parents of Chicago suburbia are faced with many challenges when it comes to making sound decisions for their children in the current school system. I do, however, fail to see the flexibility or the provisions for these special situations on behalf of school administration or involved stakeholders. Of course, I do recognize the growing number of charter schools, some of which extend from the inner city chains out to the south, west and far north suburbs. Many of the charters run under the auspices of the Chicago Public School system with the minor requirement that students who attend the suburban charter must be a resident of the suburban city where the school is located.

Comparable to many states, enrollment into the Illinois charter school system, which is often embedded in our traditional public school system, relies on municipal boundaries. However, Frankenberg's (2003) study showed that charter schools have the potential to transcend high residential segregation created by neighborhood assignment and school district boundary lines. In many cases they are even more segregated than regular public schools (p. 36).

According to the National Alliance for Public Schools (2017), in the tri-state area of Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin, residence policies are clearly stated within their prospective legislative publications. Where Indiana law, the most liberal of the three in the tri-state area, offers scholarship and opportunity "for all children in the state to be redeemed at *any* school of their choice" (Cookson, 1994, p.143), Wisconsin law allows charter schools authorized by local school boards and other participating school systems within the consortium, to provide a

statewide voucher program and open enrollment to any student in the state (Witte, 2001, p.192). Subdivisions for Wisconsin include the City of Milwaukee and various satellite campuses of the University of Wisconsin throughout the state. School aged children must attend schools within their residential boundary zone.

To be more specific, The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools acknowledges that Wisconsin law also stipulates that only pupils who reside within or in adjacency to the boundaries of the Gateway Technical College district may attend a charter school established under a contract with the Gateway college district board.

The publication goes on to add that Indiana law provides that charters may have enrollment preferences for previously enrolled students. Different situations such as conversions, enrollment at the same charter school the previous year, enrollment at a different charter school held by the same organizer, and/or siblings of students enrolled at a charter school are acceptable allowances. These situations are acceptable and preferred but not *required*.

According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) website, laws from both states provide that a charter school governing board will provide equal consideration of all aspirants even in the excess of applications over available slots. They may not discriminate in admission or deny participation in any program or activity based on a person's sex, race, religion, national origin, ancestry, pregnancy, marital or parental status, sexual orientation or physical, mental, emotional or learning disability (NAPCS, "Wisconsin: Clear Student Enrollment", 2017).

The state of Illinois, whose charter laws are slightly more boundary specific, includes provisions for military families of areas similar to the school district where I teach. It allows a charter school located in a school district that contains all or part of a federal military base to set aside up to 33% of its current charter enrollment to students with parents assigned to the federal military base, with the remaining 67% subject to the competitive general enrollment and lottery requirements. It also provides that if a student with a parent assigned to the federal military base withdraws from the charter school during the course of a school year for reasons other than grade promotion, those students with parents assigned to the federal military base shall have preference in filling the vacancy. (NAPCS, 2017).

It should be reiterated, that while Illinois shares the same rules as her neighbors, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, prohibiting discrimination of constitutional provisions based on disability, race, creed, color, and so on, adversely, yet, lawfully allows priority and preference, for military families for up to 33% of student enrollment. This military preference negatively effects local minority families, some life-long residents, by significantly reducing their choices of being able to attend their charter school of choice. In a small and low-income school district such as the area where I teach near a military station, I have witnessed expressions of extreme discontent echoed through several town hall meetings and personal debates. Citizens against charter inclusion in a struggling school district feel the notion would create disharmony and societal division among local and transient residents.

Charter v. Choice

Personal contemplation and reflection after many town hall meetings has assisted me in forming an opinion on school choice. As a mother of a military child and as an educator, I have great respect for the school district families who are sponsored by military service members. However, I also stand beside the at-risk children of the community who deserve just as much of an opportunity for educational change as any military child. Because many of the previously mentioned examples clearly relate to charter school scenarios, I would like to highlight the significant comparisons and contrasts between the terms, “charter” and “choice”. The phrase “school choice” covers a multitude of student assignment plans that vary significantly in their underlying assumptions and operational procedures” (Cookson, 1994, p.14). Depending on the laws of the state, school choice provides the option for children to attend schools outside of their assigned boundary, or even outside his or her home township. The term “charter school,” Cookson states, is the most widely used term that describes a type of school choice, however it is among many types of educational plans for choice. In some states the plan involves a voucher to other participating schools. The definition of charter schools is “publicly sponsored autonomous sponsored schools that are substantially free of direct administrative control by the government but are held accountable for achieving certain levels of performance” (p.15).

I have observed that, however, that the concept of school choice has unfortunately taken on an anathematic connotation. In many cases, acceptance into a newly established charter system is through an organized lottery. Families of school-aged children beginning at age four and a half years old, fill out lengthy applications. Soon thereafter, in many cases, they attend a

lottery session where they sit for hours in an auditorium filled with hope, waiting for their number to be appear on the big screen. Once the fortunate news has been delivered to the parents, they are invited to complete the registration solidifying the entry into the charter school. The charter system, which is touted by some as a vast improvement over traditional public education, has the effect of educating students in isolation from others in their community, allegedly for their private good. One of the unfortunate outcomes of this isolation is “further stratifying students along racial and socioeconomic lines” (Cobb & Glass, 1999, p. 2). This type of restructuring is a precursor for social stratification and harbored feelings of discontent and unworthiness among the families and children who did not make it into the charter system. In small, middle to low income communities like the city where I have faithfully served as a classroom teacher for the last fifteen years, residents have faced the inevitable dilemma of what to tell their children when their lottery number was not drawn.

Strategically, charter school ideas are fostered in low- income communities. Lubieneski (2005) points out that while market based theory has maintained a global outreach, much of the focus on the public school systems who need reform the most, as is the case in many areas where minority and disadvantaged students attend failing schools, and choice is seen as a way out. Segregated schools, where minority (Black and Hispanic) students experience little interracial exposure, are highly correlated with schools of concentrated poverty. Eighty-six percent of the students in all public schools that have greater than 90 percent Black and Latino students of their total enrollment are also schools where at least half of the student body is poor (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003, p.8). The overshadow of the charter school epidemic within the inner cities places families, particularly those of color, in a social conundrum based on their positionality, or their

social connection to those outside their race and/or cultural identity. If every child is entitled to a free and appropriate education, how can low income, African American or Hispanic parents use school choice to their full advantage?

With much thought, I made school choices for my son by selecting the institutions and even teachers that I felt would be suitable for his learning style as well as our family disposition. I was afforded the opportunity to make favorable spaces through professional courtesy. I took advantage of the option to make choices. Admittedly, all parents do not have this advantage. So, the question remains for the families who live in educationally underserved communities. In small communities such as this, charter schools seem to be the only offer. However, does the discourse of the charter school “marketplace” truly open favorable spaces of educational agency for low income and African American families or does its grandiloquent representation merely create new setbacks or placement of social mediocrity for the less well positioned “consumers”? Again, the emphasis is placed on charter school phenomenon which mistakenly, but understandably, is synonymous with school choice.

Purpose of the Study and Topic Statement

Family school choice issues have become learned and a common household term initiated by participating school districts throughout the United States. Concerned African American families may be moved to compulsively act in hopes that a “new” system would improve the academic outcome of their children’s scholastic performance. It is my perception that many African American parents, like my own and myself, who took the initiative to research the often

community market-based school options and choices that guided their children's future, considered and compared the social propinquity (Schmitt, 2009, p. viii) to those of their own race, culture or social status. The purpose of this research is to explore how African American parents actually make these sense-making life changing decisions. Partially in reflection, the intention of this study is to ascertain whether or how much of my decision for each school placement was based on the academic track record, diversity, cultural acceptance or the high visibility of athletics for scholarship opportunities? I feel the better way to address this issue would be to begin with my experiences as a child and my interpretation of parental school choice assertions.

In a phenomenological sense, research is the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data in order to understand a phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod). Creswell (1998) points out that the essence of this type of study is the search for "the central underlying meaning of the experience and...the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on the memory, image, and meaning" (p. 52 as cited in Williams, 2007, p.69). With that duly noted and by applying the cognitive theory that personal experiences can influence behavior and environmental factors (Ormrod, 1990, p.153), I feel it is necessary to understand and to come to terms with the known general qualities and characteristics of parents, perhaps as a back story, in order to understand the meanings behind the things we consider when making potentially life changing decisions.

Involved parents who make rational, simple or likely school choices, display different sets of criteria and preferences from others outside of their race and culture. In most cases

throughout suburban and inner-city communities, children are assigned to their neighborhood school by default. Otherwise, there is limited space available in nearby public schools for either a selective-enrollment or specialty magnet programs, like literacy and fine arts. Most studies find that in such option-demand choice programs, parents of higher socioeconomic status (SES), as measured by education, income, or other factors, White parents, are more likely to exercise the option to choose. Evidence for this was supplied by research on a school choice program which found that the racial composition of the school overpowers the process for White applicants (Saporito & Lareau, 1999). This racial stratification of schools sets the context for school decisions by Americans of all races (James 1989; Armor 1995; Lankford & Wyckoff 2001).

Limitations stated in the aforementioned Ohio case study suggest that:

There is meaningful diversity in education today, but it may not always be found where one may expect. Parents in inner cities who seek traditional education may not find it in a nearby Catholic school; that may in fact be more progressive than the neighborhood public school. Independent schools tend to offer the most, [an eclectic mix of traditional and progressive practice] but these may be out of reach of parents with limited means. (Chandler, 1999, p.10)

By Chandler's explanation, my perception is that involved parents, some highly educated, middle class and/or White, seem more oriented toward "progressive type" school curricula, while lower SES, less educated and/or African American parents tend to seek and accept the assigned traditional school without question or judgement. Less educated families (or families in lower SES areas) may face more difficulties gauging the information required to make informed school

choice decisions, or have different preferences over school characteristics (Hastings, Kane & Staiger, 2005). School choice can increase differences between schools in terms of performance and socio-economic background, and in many countries these differences are significant. They can be exacerbated when parents lack relevant information and schools can select their students, vouchers are not available to cover the costs, or adequate funding mechanisms are not implemented (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012).

It is time for parents, teachers and participating stakeholders to acknowledge more of the value of education through the lens of positionality. In Cooper's article, which will be discussed in greater detail in the upcoming sections, "all of the 14 mothers stressed value of education and linked educational attainment to their children's chances for socioeconomic advancement" (Cooper, 2005, p. 179). My hope, as with all parents who send their children off to school, was for my child to succeed in receiving a good education and establish long-lasting, positive relationships with friends and teachers while staying connected to his roots.

We are each entitled to our views and opinions concerning school choices, especially when it comes to the welfare of our families and communities. We should also agree that there is no "one-size-fits-all" answer. It is hard to reconcile given the complexity of family positionalities in any way without risking harm to the most valued and often forgotten participants, the children of our families that schools, be public, private or charter, serve. I am confident of the position I held as my son continued his attendance at the school of our choice. I believe if we follow and review agreed-upon personal and academic goals set with realistic vision, they can be achieved. This is my pledge, and I encourage my son to maintain the same just stand.

The Significance of the Study

A standpoint is achieved rather than obvious, a mediated rather than immediate understanding.

Nancy Harstock, 1998, p.110

My Selection, His Choice: Next Generation

Much of this research has been drawn from my son's and my own life experiences. I learned through my recollection and conversations with my son and close friends who have school aged children that the meaning and significance of our stories, is far more than I had imagined. Over time, I attempted to gain understanding of the motivation and reasoning that influenced my parents and myself to make decisions for school choice. As I entered motherhood, I began to seek options for my own child as he began his school career at the age of four. My search for specifics led me to read academic literature and other articles to inform my decision-making. An article titled "School Choice and the Standpoint of African American Mothers: Considering the Power of Positionality" (Cooper, 2005) mirrored my perspective in several ways, its utilization was required to delimit my discussion in the remainder of this paper.

Following analysis of in-depth interview data from low-income and working-class American mothers, the Cooper article acknowledges the merits of school-choice reform. African American mothers' educational views, experiences and choices reveal that race, class and gender factors are critical to their school decision making in which the mothers perceive traditional public schools as sites of social, political and cultural resistance. Moreover, the "salience of mothers' positionality reinforces their tendency to make positioned choices rather than rational

ones” (Cooper, 2005, p.176). I feel that this article pertains directly to my proposed dissertation topic of school choice. Specifically, information from Cooper’s interviews suggests several points of educational awareness I would like to raise for our suburban communities in this dissertation research. The stories of participating mothers showed that their positionality, meaning their race, gender and socio-economic status within their communities, had a strong influence on the educational choices they made for their school-aged children. I can identify with the mothers in the interviews. Many who were heads of single-parent households, like me, sought alternatives when they felt the stress of the weakening structure of the incumbent public school system; a system that was slowly failing their children. All the while, participants were holding reservations of the possibility of total success and scrutinizing the opportunities offered in the educational marketplace, such as charter schools and vouchers.

In this research, I would like to paint a vivid picture of my position as a recently separated single mother raising a boy during the first years of the millennial decade. My son and I lived in a predominately White northwest suburb of Chicago, with my mother. At a young age, my son, Nick had the privilege to learn among an economically, racially and ethnically diverse school population thirty miles away, on the military base, which was closer to my place of employment on the North Shore. In fact, it was as a professional courtesy that we were afforded the opportunity of a public school choice outside of our appointed school district. Given that their kindergarten programming was only a half-day long and I would have faced child care expenses outside of my budget, Nick’s attending a full-day Kindergarten only minutes away from the school where I worked seemed highly feasible.

My son was content and performing well as a student who remained in the north suburban district for several years with my hand-selected colleagues. Even though the superintendent had granted permission for my son to attend any one of the elementary schools under his jurisdiction, my critical selections of the actual school and teachers were based on my knowledge of the curriculum, results from teaching, learning and assessments, work ethics and the potential personal relationship between the teachers and my son.

Each school year I reviewed and charted my son's educational success, failures and "in-betweens" which led me to making calculated decisions on my preferred school and teacher for the following year. Together we evaluated the pros and cons of advancing to the next level within the school district. By 2009, a few years after I purchased a home ten miles north of the area school district where I worked, I determined it was time to move my son into his new home district in the city where we resided. We made the choice to finish the last of his elementary schooling in our hometown so he could develop new relationships with peers and teachers from his hometown. Such relationships would last into junior and senior high school. At the time, I felt I was making appropriate decisions based on facts and the reality of *our* home life and the school situation.

As my son prepared to enter high school, the option of school choice was placed in front of us once again. I believe my search sprang into action when my son came home stating that he wanted to attend a nearby Catholic high school with a hefty \$10,500 annual tuition. This seemed like history repeating itself, however this time it was initiated by the child. His argument came from his fear of joining in with the wrong crowd, particularly those who attended the other

middle schools within the township that also fed into our designated high school.

He had heard of gang activity, weekly fights and high truancy rates. In fact, he was once approached by a gang member who was interested in recruiting him. Data supporting my son's often-correct fears and assumptions were later retrieved from the 5Essentials Survey, which is administered to students, teachers and participating parents each year by the University of Chicago-Urban Education Institute (<https://illinois.5-essentials.org>). By using a form of the Likert Scale, responses reflecting teachers' familiarity with each topic were tabulated and reported on the 5Essentials website for public view. This information is displayed in Figure 2, which contains two charts (left side and right side) comparing the results from 2014 and 2016.

Also shown in Figure 2, statistics from the categories listed under safety (such as disruption in the classroom, student respect toward teachers, and physical conflict among students) appeared to be on the decline over the two-year period, even though the percentages are still alarmingly high. The explanation for the lack of data in Gang Activity 2016 is that there was not a large enough response from teachers to report. I find it hard to believe that there was absolutely no known gang activity; nor do I believe that all teachers taking the survey in 2016 "overlooked" that particular question. I strongly suspect that students and some teachers alike know more than what they are willing to openly share. As a parent and an educator, I respected my son's plausible reasoning. We were at a crossroads once again. While I explained to him about our facing challenges and temptations daily,

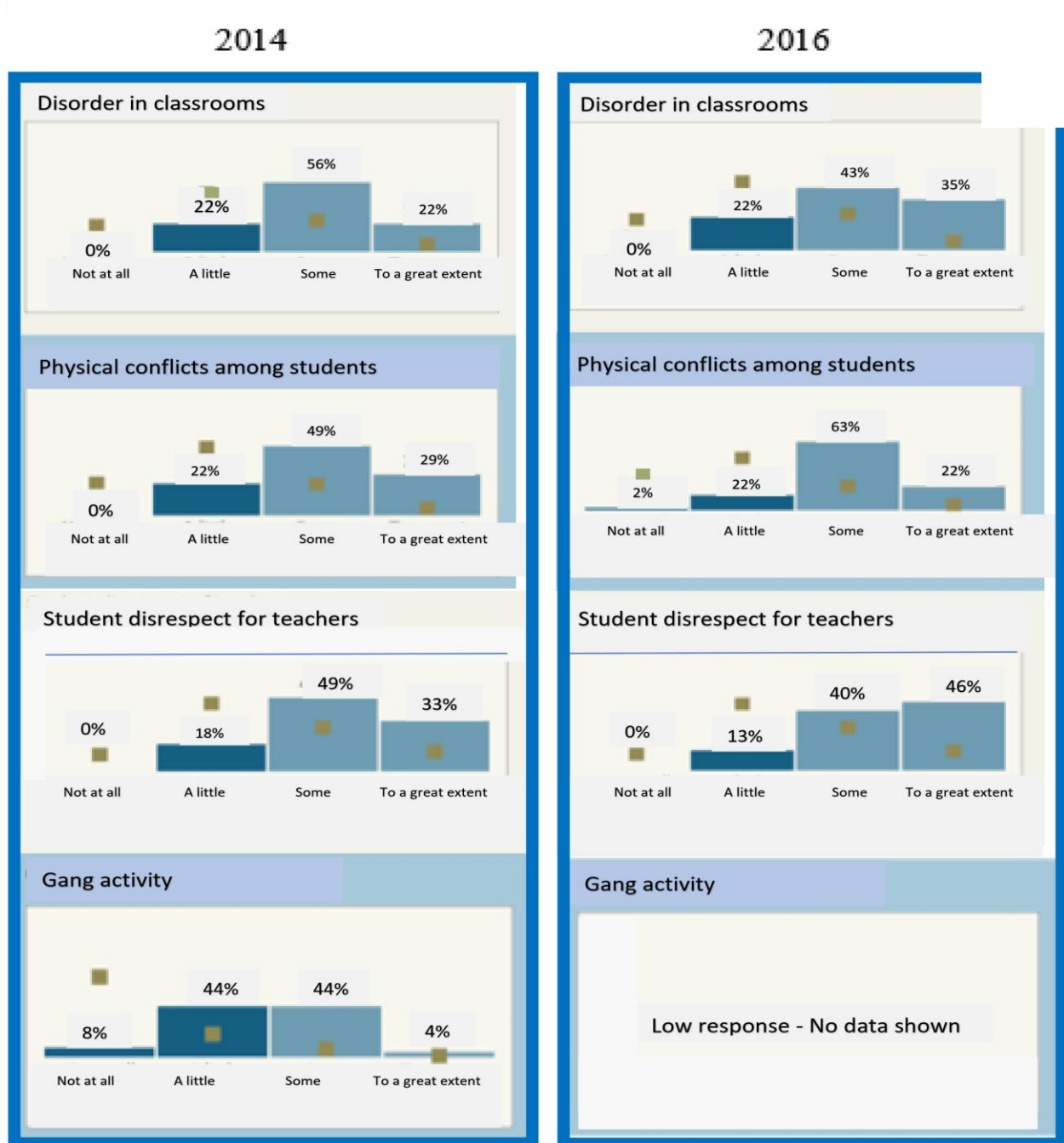


Figure 2. 5Essential Survey for Central Middle School, Zion, IL. Note: The 5Essential School Reports for Effectiveness

I reminded him of the importance of staying clear of situations that are potentially dangerous and harmful to our well-being. On the other hand, I completely empathized with him. In fact, I was quite impressed with his outlook. This was slightly reminiscent of how my mother must have felt when I was about to enter high school over three decades earlier, except in that case, the parent was the one enforcing the school-choice decision, rather than an insightful teenager. If I had a third “other hand”, I was intensively concerned with the demographics and the Catholic culture of the school.

Yes, there were grants and financial assistance available. However, thoughts of Grandma’s saying, “Er’thing ain’t always what it seem”, stayed with me. I didn’t want my son to be one of the few “respected” Black athletes of a predominantly White institution. Nor did I want him to lose his identity just as my mother said I lost mine when I attended private school decades earlier.

I addressed my son’s concerns to the best of my ability. However, the reality was that paying the equivalent of an in-state college tuition for a high school education on a single parent’s teacher salary was unforeseeable, even with financial assistance. We examined the pros and cons by comparing the situation to our assigned school’s main campus curriculum, demographics and athletic visibility for future college recognition. We decided to take advantage of the 21st-century plan that the public high school’s satellite campus had to offer.

In the fall of 2013, my son became a member of a local high school network through the central public school system. New Bethesda (not its actual name) serves a diverse community of students in a variety of settings. The network works with public school districts, charter organizations, and independent schools throughout the U.S. to implement the New Bethesda

approach. Urban (40%), suburban (20%), town (20%), and rural (20%) (Illinois Board of Education, 2014) communities, rounds out the demographics.

The network is as diverse as the states, communities, and schools in which they grow. Fifty-two percent of students in our local NB network schools are students of color and just under half (47%) qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The small unfortunate detail was, he was under a four-year contract. This type of choice seemed to carry a different weight. My son's successful high school career depended on his choice to make it a positive learning and social experience for himself. The consequence was, if he failed a grade or simply changed his mind, a transfer to the local main campus would mean a small to no chance for return to the New Bethesda in the future.

His freshman year was rocky. There were times when he was ready to give in and ask to be transferred to the main campus, where most of his middle school friends attended. By midterm, I convinced him to stay at New Bethesda at the time, but I suspected that wouldn't be the last time he would make a similar plea. As he matriculated toward his senior year his grade point average improved. My son began to understand his true strength in character.

With his credible academic standing, I occasionally feared that he would try to persuade me to allow him to go to the main campus, just as I transferred to MTHS based on the "A" in Algebra. I prepared for the same courage and strong will as my mother had up to the point when she finally let me transfer. She knew what was best for me at the time. I knew what was best for my son. To my pleasant surprise, my son chose to ultimately stay at New Bethesda for the remainder of his high school career. He had the competitive spirit, most likely through athleticism. His positionality led him to confront his academic challenges head on and overcome

the obstacles. As a reward to himself, unlike my decision decades before, Nick pursued academic and social challenges; each time more equipped to handle the setbacks. To this day, I often admire his calm, “level-headed” approach toward academic expectations.

My son and I had an incredible support system. With their help, including that of my mother, I successfully raised a teenaged son in the 21st century. Many things had changed, yet some things remained the same. Like my situation from years ago, he faced the challenges of his decision of school choice. When he was offered the opportunity to attend a charter- like school at the end of his eighth-grade year, he willingly accepted. There were times throughout his tenure when he had regretted making that choice. He had expressed his dislike and loss of interest several times in the past. Ultimately, he reviewed his priorities and delivered his first-time achievement of an outstanding GPA of 3.0 on his report card and a wonderful high school career in track and field.

This study is significant for families of color and/ or low-income households to understand parental responsibilities related to advocating and negotiating the possibilities of educational choice:

1. There is a need to identify and aid in reflection and analysis regarding school choice offerings in their community.
2. It is necessary to acknowledge the presence and/or campaign for functional school choice options in nearby districts.

3. Even though dynamics change constantly, it is vitally important for heads of households, particularly those of color, to stay informed and strongly utilize this information while developing educational paths and commitments on behalf of their children. School choice should be considered a long-term investment for the family first and society second, not the other way around, which is (in my opinion) the educational marketplace's primary goal.

Personal Ties-Reasons for Chosen Methodology

Not only does my dissertation highlight some of the similarities and differences by comparing the offerings of school choice in a large city to that of neighboring suburbs, but it contributes to the field of knowledge by shedding light on the family's reaction to the exposure of societal hierarchies through a Self/Other dichotomy, including my own. In terms of race and socio-economic status, Whites (and some minorities who live in upper class society) are the "Self" and people of color (those of middle to low economic status) are the "Other". Further, the "otherizing" of groups extends into hierarchy within the African American community separating the privileged middle to upper class people being the "Self" and the lower class, as "Other". This knowledge is an important contribution to the field of education and society at large. The following acknowledgement found in Cooper's article explains the influences of the Self/Other dilemma through the lens of positionality.

While growing up, I recall whenever my mother or grandmother referred to the words "us" and "we" or "they" and "them", I automatically knew what it meant. Depending on the context, it could have meant Blacks, where "*us*" and Whites or uppity Blacks were "*them*". As mentioned earlier in this chapter, interaction between human development and the potential

scholastic environment begins in the inner ring of the microsystem virtually at infancy, particularly for people of color.

Considering many scenarios, I suspect we African American parents face the same hesitations based on social status or foreseeable repercussions in the two different academic systems, public and private/charter. As an educator, I have an advantage to the inner happenings of the scholastic environment around me. I know the jargon and I am familiar with the system. Throughout my son's matriculation, I considered myself a conservative advocate for school choice because I exercised my right as an informed parent within the public school system. I have been prone to lend my few and far between personal opinions to perspective school choice parents, realizing it could prove detrimental in my line of work. My personal life is intimately attached to my professional life regarding the calculated choices I make. It defines who I am.

Research Questions

The major question that remains challenging is: Where does one draw the line between notable circumstances such as choosing high academic performance and mandatory expectations over special circumstances, personal sacrifice and equality for all? The specific research questions (presented as sub questions) that guided my study are the following queries:

- “How could positionality inform or influence African American parents’ use of school choice?”
- Are all options offered presented as a “marketplace” of favorable spaces of educational agency for African American families in low-income suburban areas and in larger cities or does this rhetoric merely create new pitfalls for “consumers”?

- Lastly, how does my research through my family life experience, along with similar recorded episodes of my friends, illustrate the disparity to the degree to which positionality matters as an aspect of agency in contexts of school choice?

Simplified, through the vignettes presented, parents in both scenarios had to make extremely tough decisions when it came to the wellbeing of their children. Should parents have to compromise their integrity by concealing the truth about where they reside in order to keep their children in a suitable educational environment? In either case, school choice was not solely based upon seeking a better curriculum or a move from a poor functioning school district to a better one, which is *usually* the common reason. Since the pragmatic truth, especially that of African American parents, is based on the world in which we live, shadows of racism encompass each family situation. Outside influences (of the previously mentioned exosystemic realm of the Bronfenbrenner model) shape the parental decisions we make based on truths that range from geographical location (which extends into a financial need) to the need for diversity, down to simple preference.

Summary of Chapter One and Beyond

Chapter One offered a brief background regarding elements and types of school choice and the aspects of positionality that impact it. Chapter One also explored the complexity of parental decision making through certain aesthetics such as vignettes, and my own connection to the topic. My intention is to research the parental reasoning of African Americans and selected criteria for choosing the right school for their children. Particularly, Chapter One shed light on my interest in gaining the insight of perspective and logical thought process when it came to the

management of seemingly appropriate educational decisions of parents for African American children. By sharing my own personal experiences and that of friends and family members, along with the use of aesthetics, I am optimistic that Chapter One successfully launched an impactful message often spoken through an ethnographic lens.

Chapter Two, the literature review, takes a more thorough investigation into parental decisions made through “positionality”, a term that describes the nature of one’s reflexivity, recognizes forces of socialization and alters their place in the social structure through stories of history, social and political issues. Positionality offers a perspective on how we face societal challenges to the point where it creates legitimate meaning and purpose. Much of Chapter Two is laden with a closer look at selective school criteria and implementation of the Chicago Public school system and how it compares to school choice offerings in the suburbs. There are also discussions on the evolution of the Elementary Secondary Education Act and No Child Left Behind federal interventions and how they lend support to educational standard reform, rigorous assessment and teacher accountability through neoliberal ideals.

Chapter Three acknowledges the methodologies of utilizing an autoethnographic narrative research design. It also compares the behavior or personal reaction of a school choice paradigm among African American parents to an interpretive critical race paradigm involving theory through positionality. In addition, Chapter Three highlights participant selection in my interviewing process. I provided an Interview Guide to assist in the control of my conversation with the interviewees. Data analysis methods for interpreting the research will be explained along with my interim reflections as researcher presented throughout the dissertation.

I feel that the best way for me to identify, understand and even connect with the ideals of school choice for our children would be to conduct personal interviews with African American parents who have been through similar situations. Perhaps there is a common ground. My intent is to find out how deeply they consider their positionality when deciding to place their children in a scholastic environment. Accompanied by personal testimonies in the form of spoken word, the chapters beyond will host interviews with four chosen families, three mothers and one father. Following each portrait and interview with my participants, is a summary embedded into my reflection on the experience. Historical contextualization is often necessary for personal narrative analysis (Maynes, Pierce & Laslette, 2008, p.60). I felt a suitable account of life experiences that laid the foundation to a deeper understanding of my positionality could best be described through an autoethnography. Therefore, Chapter Five will present personal and collected histories. The last chapter offers a culmination of the presented qualitative data. Chapter Six is a conclusive effort to recap the positions expressed and defended by credible resources, narratives, and ethnographic accounts related to the studies in the field of education, school choice and the parental decisions of my African American participants.

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a type of unity, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs.

My Pedagogic Creed, John Dewey, 1897, p.77

The literature review chapter represents a gathering of supportive and contextual information that emerged while framing my research on family decisions and school choice. Even though the premise of this study is school choice, this chapter offers an invitation for the reader to reflect and consider his or own positionality in life circumstances in making societal and sometimes life-changing decisions. There are interconnections between neoliberal urban policy and large city educational systems, such as Chicago, based on ideals embedded in critical race theory. Chapter Two is set to inspire interesting thoughts and declare empirical and factual data that “serve as evidence for the arguments and assertions” proposed throughout my study (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 21).

In Chapter 1, as I discussed in my purpose statement, I declared the motivation for this literature developed from my perception that many minority, specifically African American parents, myself included, took the initiative to research community market based school options and choices that guided their children's future. We considered safety, race, culture, social status, proximity to home and athletic visibility (for scholarship potential) just as much as, if not more than in some areas, curriculum, policy, test scores and academic potential.

The United Negro College Fund (UNCF), a deeply rooted legacy organization whose primary focus is to make a difference in the educational lives of African Americans with the mission of sending African American children to and through college (Bridges, Awokoya & Messano, 2012, p. 5), conducted a focus group research project with Black low-income parents of school aged children. Among the key findings, UNCF acknowledged that parents who supported school choice felt that the choices for high quality schools were limited (p.10). *Figure 3*, below, illustrates the priority level of the factors that low- income African American parents consider when making school choices for their children.

If you recall, in the previous chapter, *Figure 2* (the 5Essentials survey listing our family's local public middle school's categorical statistics under safety in the classroom, student respect toward teachers, and physical conflict among students) displayed as a reference supporting my son's concern for attending the central neighborhood high school. Considering his (our) developed positionality and upbringing, he simply did not want to go to that high school due to the rumors of high perilous activity and low productivity. Much similar to *Figure 2*, where considered annual comparisons of elements displayed per participants' response via the 5Essential Survey, here, in *Figure 3* we see much of the same concern that involves a significantly higher priority of safety over standardized test scores and graduation rate. Understanding that the propinquity in social psychology refers to the interactions of people in close proximity to each other (Schmitt, 2009, p. viii) the connection is drawn between my research topic and our positionality otherwise known as our presumed placement in society.

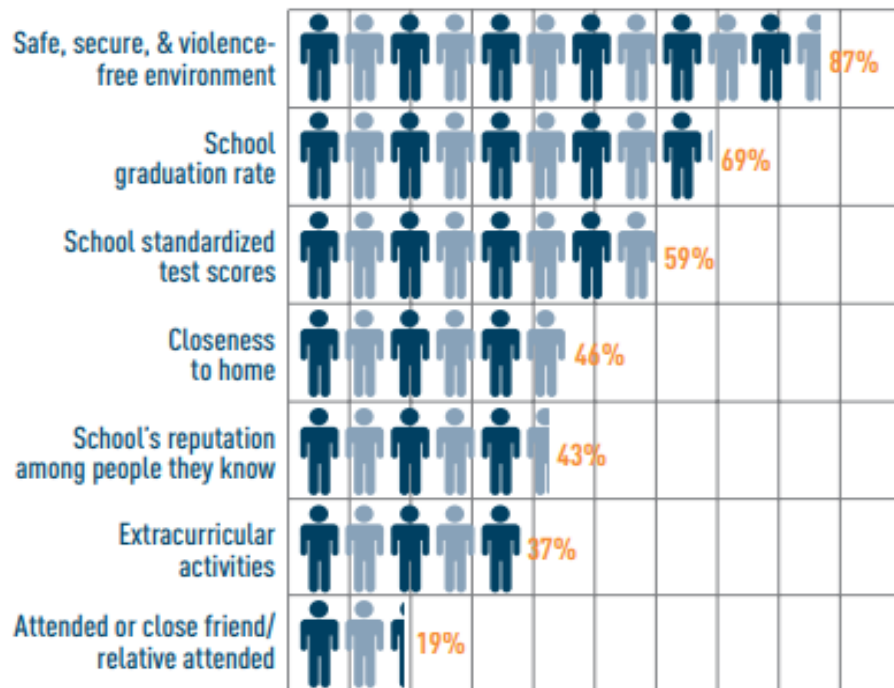


Figure 3. Percentage of Low-Income Parents Who Cite the Most Important Factors When Choosing a School for Their Child, 2011.

Although parents of school aged children as well as educators of inner city and suburban school districts are the preferred audience more likely to relate to my position, the reader does not necessarily have to be either to receive the message of social identity and awareness. This chapter offers thought-provoking ideas as it “highlights controversies or points of agreement between researchers” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 227), especially when referencing the connotation of Vignettes One, Two and Three from Chapter One.

What most parents seek, regardless of where they live or their socio-economic status, is illustrated by a quote from a Sundance Award winning film, *American Promise: Thirteen Years in the Making*. The quote reads: “To give their children the opportunity to succeed. But the truth

is, opportunity is just the first step particularly for families raising Black boys” (Rada Film Group & Brewster, 2013). Director Brewster goes on to explain the intent of the documentary by acknowledging, “Our goal is to empower [boys], their parents and educators to pursue educational opportunities, especially to help close the Black male achievement gap” (2013). Although the focus, here, is on Black males no matter what gender, race, religion or creed, purposeful or subliminal positionality aids us in making informed decisions.

Theoretically Speaking, Setting Goals

One's positionality is also referred to one's social location or one's “recognition of his own space in relation to others” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 16). It is a mindset that developed from experiences through social identifiers such as race, culture, religion, gender, abilities (disabilities), sexual orientation, and so forth. The definition of positionality, as used by Merriam et al. (2001), is “status as used in relation to where one stands in relation to ‘the other’ and regarding the politics of knowledge construction”. It is noted that researchers must especially take account of their own position in relation to the research participants and the research setting.

Positionality, as it relates to beliefs that affect life choices, level of motivation, quality of functioning, resilience to adversity and vulnerability to stress and depression (Bandura, 1997, p. 14-15), also describe self-efficacy, which is the actual belief in one's abilities to act in ways that will produce desired outcomes (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Self-efficacy is a significant factor in decisions about the goals parents, especially those with a background in higher education, chose to pursue in working toward the accomplishment of the academic goals of their children. Bandura's theory asserts that parents develop behavioral goals through their involvement and

awareness based on the evaluation of their children's capabilities, and how it meshes with a foreseeable outcome of the situation, such as school choice. Parents who are secure in their parenting efficacy shepherd their children adequately through the various phases of development (p. 13). Although self-efficacy is a characteristic that can be obtained by anyone regardless of race, age or religion, there are different routes influenced by these principles that individuals take to achieve self-efficacy. Thus, it is my personal and professional opinion, based on positionality, which is governed by these principles, that parents high in efficacy and awareness tend to make calculated decisions about active engagement in their child's education in hopes of a positive outcome by their standards. Further, they are likely to persist, or even change direction in the face of challenges and work their way through difficulties toward anticipated successful outcomes.

Word Choice and Positionality

The words "option" and "choice" in many ways could be interchangeable in the English language. For example, in reference to Vignette #3 presented in Chapter 1, with the two patrons in the restaurant (one fashionably dressed holding a designer handbag and the other in casual wear) the sentence, "*There are many options on the menu*" could have the same basic meaning as "*There are many choices on the menu.*" However, there are also ways where the meaning could be separated by interpretation.

My interest in connecting parental positionality with the options of school choice works similarly to the given example. In this dissertation, the words "school *choice*" refer to any student assignment policies that permit parents and children to participate in selecting a school

(Cookson, 1994). There is a common practice, especially among minorities, when we often seek environments that are closer to a level of social acceptance. Even in scholastic environments, parents often make assumptions based on demographics and popularity before the attraction to a school's academic offerings. With hopes of constructive societal gain, schools work around the clock to build educational programs that out power the bias and cure the insecurities of perspective parents.

“We cannot know the world as it really is but only the impressions made upon the mind” (Dewey, 1922, p.342). Dewey asserts that practical individualism, or struggle for greater freedom of thought in action was translated into philosophic subjectivism. Positionality, the adoption of a particular position in relation to others, usually with reference to issues of culture, ethnicity, or gender, plays an important role in school choice.

Unpacking Cooper's Article

To examine more closely the situational familiarity with the participants of the Cooper (2005) study, I first had to identify the language and intended message of the author. The purpose of her article appeared once I decoded the introduction. The author pointed out that citizens, like the African American participating mothers, who live in low-income and underserved areas, often make life decisions based on positionality. According to Cooper, “Positionality, is a term that comes from feminist scholarship and refers to how one is socially located in relation to others around them” (2005, p. 175). Thus, the African American mothers' positionality is derived from (given) their backgrounds, race, gender and or cultural beliefs. Simplified, the rationale used when making family decisions, even as small as what to cook for

dinner could be influenced by their (our) positionality. For example, where many average suburban, middle to higher -class consumers prefer to drive distances to shop at reputable brightly lit shopping areas, others of lower- income households, especially minority, prefer to stay closer to stores near their home or perhaps shop at higher end stores with slight paranoia of being under constant surveillance.

Cooper (2005) argued that parents' subjective positionality has a stronger influence and often overrides their objective rationality when it comes to school choice. Parents are inclined to make positioned choices based on their social structure, judgment, instinct, opinions, feelings and standpoint, rather than noted facts and open-minded ideas with good reason and sense. Communities, just like the one where I serve, are torn between seeking new answers to age-old concerns; they are crying for school reform and trying to remain loyal to the public-school district that is one of the few last-standing foundations.

Now educational reform and marketplace arrives on the political and educational scene (Cookson, 1994, p. 9). CEO's and charter school executives turn their attention to communities that appear hopeless and desperate for change, calling this the alternative, while subliminally indicating the objective. Cookson describes the market model of educational reform as a created image of a cool and dispassionate world of so-called rational choosers (p. 119). In my opinion they prey on the weakening structures, like buzzards, hovering over crumbling public school systems that survive day to day with loyal teachers and administrators depending on state funding, facing insolvency if it is not received. Charter school solutionists arrive as the cavalry prepared to save the future of their children, leading them to the "utopia and educational

wonderland” (p.119) that provides equality for all. As Forester (2013) noted, when referring to a similar school choice method of the voucher system, its “empirical evidence consistently shows that choice improves academic outcomes for participants and public schools, saves taxpayer money, moves students into more integrated classrooms, and strengthens the shared civic values and practices essential to American democracy” (p. 1). Cookson argues, however that market solutions to educational problems would not lead to educational wonderlands but could possibly lead to educational wastelands (p. 119).

As a parent and educator whose son benefitted from school choice before it even became a “thing” in Illinois, I felt it necessary to attend town hall meetings and listen to the protests as well as the testimonials from students who went to the LEARN Charter school that was already established in this small city. The Cooper article has given me insight and a strong preface for my dissertation topic. I now realize that I am much like these African American mothers. I, too, often perceive “traditional public school systems as sites of socio-political cultural resistance” (Cooper, 2005, p. 176). This is why I took advantage of the self-made school choice options. While I thought I was solely concentrating with an open mind on the facts, from my son’s Kindergarten year up through high school, I based much of my decisions on race, socio-economic status, cultural beliefs, experience and judgment. I must point out, however, I had social and professional advantages.

I became a teacher hired by the superintendent, a family member, who was well admired and respected throughout the district, even posthumously, I exercised what privilege I was granted. I learned to think smart and tread lightly through my son’s school and teacher selection

throughout the district asking and receiving permission every step of the way. I managed my parental decisions with professional bias. I privately utilized my subjective reasoning often more than objective rationale. I did so privately and cautiously as not to affect my actual position as a veteran employee and supporter of the original public school system in the very city where the encroaching charter schools now exist, to the dismay of many of my colleagues. I dare not say that I was in favor of the *concept* of school choice (not necessarily charters) in our midst, in fear that they may not understand my perspective and hurl negative feedback. There I go with my subjective thinking again. I do, however, take personal pride in how I stayed the course, stayed well informed and made conscious decisions for the welfare of my son, just as my mother did for me a generation ago.

Subjective v. Objective Reasoning in Positionality

Cooper's article, referenced earlier, also relates to my study as I view it from my personal standpoint. I am an elementary educator in a northern Chicago suburb. Its small low- to middle-income community happened to go through the struggle of whether to accept two charter school campuses into the neighborhoods. Much of the community is now divided. While parents want their children to succeed in the existing public school system, of which I am a veteran employee, they also considered the incoming charter schools as a sort of refuge and provision for school reform. Parents who still face the said dilemma might agree with Cooper's claim that, "Charter schools and vouchers are popular and controversial school choice measures that rely on rules of supply and demand and view parents and students as the education consumers" (Cooper, 2005, p. 174). At the risk of getting too involved with rationales of neoliberal ideals of consumerism and

the marketplace, or what is known as the “market metaphor”, I point to limitations heavily considered by less informed parents faced with making critical decisions for a valuable education. The theory behind a market metaphor is the comparison of what is seemingly difficult and unfamiliar to a notion that is more comfortable and familiar to the consumer. For example, Americans like to shop for goods and services in search of the best affordable deal. School reform strategists appeal to the existing unifying experience of the American shopper (parents) to demonstrate the benefits of school choice. A second function of the market metaphor is to link or prove the proposed panacea as evidence to alleviating the problem. Lacking any working examples of a truly market-based system of school choice, proponents have based their claim to empirical support on the implied analogy between certain existing practices and free-market models. “They assert that existing practices incorporate elements of choice -such as magnet schools, district-wide arrangements for public school choice, and state initiated open enrollment options- are like free markets, only a little less so” (Henig, 1994, p. 13).

When analyzing the charter school system, Henig concluded that, over time, factors such as competition among public and other charters, operational constraints and costs along with the expectations of what a charter school is “supposed” to do for the community, may force charter schools to revert to the original structure of their public school counterparts. I believe he was explaining that parents, who become more involved in the school marketplace, would be headed for future disappointment, expecting improvement, change with successful turnover; only to find a move toward a “new normal” of ultimately the same issues (and then some) with “different packaging”. In his “research based” opinion, it would be best for parents (especially those of

lower SES who have gone along with public neighborhood assignments) to sit back and let the policy makers and political stakeholders continue with the implementation of charter schools.

Some families consider themselves more informed than others and still choose to enroll their child in the appropriate school, based on the good will they saw in the charter school structure. These families could ultimately play into the hands of the educational consumer marketplace, finding themselves back at ground zero. More colorfully stated, “In a system with no options, ignorance might be bliss. In a system based on choice, ignorance is [ultimate] ruin” (Yettick, 2014, p. 5). As an alternate look, I would suggest that ignorance is ultimate ruin if parents sit back and let the policy makers control school decisions. It is practically an insult to all those involved, specifically in lower-income communities with school-aged children, to withhold the option to make decisions for themselves.

A Neoliberal Approach on Education

According to Britannica’s definition, neoliberalism is an ideology and policy model. David Harvey (2005, p. 2) defines neoliberalism as, “A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”

I would emphasize at this point, that the neoliberal approach which induced privatization and the value of free market has resulted in the near-global establishment of competitive markets in public services such as education (Hill & Kumar, 2009, p. 1). It has contributed to the

competition among schools in the U.S. and abroad. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (p. 2). The remainder of this section briefly describes the neo-liberal economic policies as they pertain to social services such as education. Education is a key target of the neoliberal project because of market size (Ross & Gibson, 2006, p. 4).

According to in Kilebard, Franklin & Bellack, editors of *Curriculum & Consequences*: The seemingly contradictory discourse of competition, markets, and choice on one hand and accountability, performance objectives, standards, national testing, and national curriculum on the other hand have created such a din that it is hard to hear anything else. These tendencies oddly reinforce each other and help cement conservative educational positions into our daily lives (Apple, 1996, as cited in Kilebard, Franklin & Bellack, 2000, p. 57).

Although the alarm for economic crisis and call for school reform dates back to earlier days during the Great Depression, the recent history provided by the initial Ronald Reagan administrative report “A Nation at Risk” asserted that American schools were failing.

Each generation of Americans has outstripped its parents in education, in literacy and in economic attainment. For the first time in the history of our country the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach those of their parents (Gardner, 1984, p.19).

The Obama administration brought on hopes that the end of the previous Bush’s administration would bring forth possibilities for a new progressive educational agenda (Russom

2010, p 109), an even “newer” neoliberal approach. As pointed out in, “A Nation at Risk” there was a fear that a poorly educated workforce would make the U.S. economy less competitive (Bale & Knopp, 2012, p. 117). The same sentiments were strongly acknowledged and expressed in Obama’s first major speech on education, “In 8th grade math, we’ve fallen to 9th place,” the president remarked. “Singapore’s middle-schoolers outperform ours three to one... It’s time to prepare every child, everywhere in America, to out-compete any worker, anywhere in the world.” (Rossom, p.114)

Doctrine upheld by the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) transformed into “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) during the Bush administration, and then on to “Race to the Top” (RTTT) developed in the Obama administration, lends support to educational standard reform, rigorous assessment and particularly increased standards for teacher accountability, all major items in the neoliberal’s agenda. Authors Chubb & Moe assert that:

It is no accident, for example, that a considerable amount attention in both the academic literature and policy making process has focused heavily on teacher professionalism.

True professionalism requires not only that teachers be experts in their subject matters and the methodology of their learning, but they also have the autonomy to exercise discretion in applying it to the infinitely varying individuals and circumstances that make up their jobs (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 36).

In reality, the outcome of school reform has led to the closure of many failing schools in lower income areas. All the while, skill levels rise with scholastic program implementation in the successful and well-funded schools in more affluent areas. As stated in recently published six-

year research study on 26 states in the U.S. including Illinois and Wisconsin performed by CREDO, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University (2017, p. 4), “closures of low-performing schools were not blind to socioeconomic status or race/ethnicity of the students who were enrolled.” It goes on to explain, that in both the charter and traditional public school sectors, and particularly in the lowest area of achievement, low-performing schools with a larger share of Black and Hispanic students were more likely to be closed than similarly performing schools with a smaller share of disadvantaged minority students (Han et al., 2017, p. 4).

Clearly with philanthropists (such as the Gates and Fordham Foundations), charter school operators, business federations (such as Chicago’s Commercial Club), and politicians of both parties, deployment of enormous economic, political, and symbolic resources can be achieved to promote educational markets and performance. They are able to pay for their own teachers as an alternative to struggling with [salary scales in] neighborhood public schools, (Lipman, 2011, p. 121) thus providing motivational support.

However, Lipman explains, “neoliberal policies are not simply imposed from above. They also materialize through the actions of parents and teachers navigating a disinvested, degraded, and often racist public school system” (p. 121). From this point of view, neoliberalism is a process that works its way into the practices of schools, through the actions of not just the privileged, but also the marginalized and oppressed people acting in conditions not of their own making. These observed inequivalent tendencies raise the issue of equity in decision-making about school closures, thus leaving parents in a state of flux. For schools in more affluent

districts, although the struggle, no matter how minor, is evident, this developmental constructive theory of knowledge and learning, survives.

Mark Olsen (1996) states that neo-liberalism has come to represent a positive conception of the state's role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation (as cited in Apple, 2004). The increasingly neoliberal approach to educational funding and organization are creating new structures and conditions of education. The normalization of school choice is purported to provide more schooling options for all families, particularly those who do not have the means to move into affluent areas with 'better' schools (Adamson et al., 2016; Forsey et al., 2008). In the most oppressed communities, where schools are more likely to face stronger challenges of persevering through a weakened economy, oversight and financial hardship, it is Russom's challenge that this agenda is so punitive that it is likely to fail even on the narrow terms of test scores. "These children are being prepared for occupations where higher skills are not necessary—or for prison" (Russom, 2010). In addition, it is Apple's concern that in practice neo-liberal policies involving market "solutions" may actually serve to reproduce—not subvert—traditional hierarchies of class and race (2004).

Many large city school districts in the U.S., that serve vast majorities of inner-city youth, have systematically developed programs that provide opportunities for college preparatory experience. Urban education born from economic and political structures, and ideologies (much to do with familial positionality) are easily intertwined in these large cities. Chicago is an exemplar of the logic of disinvestment and privatization that is playing out in urban school districts (Lipman, 2011, p. 120).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1998) argued that education policies and practices in the United States often contributed to inequitable educational outcomes for students of color and was a logical consequence of a larger inequitable social and political system that is premised on the subordination of people of color and people who live in poverty. Moreover, they argued that race was undertheorized in education (Dixson, 2018, p. 233). Ladson-Billings' article, that was initially published some two decades prior, firmly lead the charge of cultural awareness and racial identity as it pertains to neoliberal reform in education today. This article assisted in connecting Critical Race Theory (CRT) to education by allowing it to emerge as a full-fledged subfield (p. 233). Be it a CRT specialist in legal scholarship providing notations of societal inequity or a CRT specialist in educational leadership and policy, all roads of race, racism, classism and positionality lead to the fight for social change in our communities.

Critical Race Theory

In order to understand the importance of recognizing our positionality, we must first examine its relation to the Critical Race Theory (CRT) and how we apply it to our everyday lives. As it pertains to our education system in the United States, Critical Race Theory is a comprehensive movement of constructive frameworks that result from the radical critiques of the prevailing paradigms (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller & Thomas, 2010, p. xi) that binds people of color and normatively measures, directs controls and regulates the terms of proper...behavior (p.318). Breaking it down even further by viewing education through a CRT lens, it is the act of learning from a social perspective. As students, teachers and families engage in discussion and social interaction they construct their knowledge by considering other peoples' opinions and actions.

In relationship, more recent movements of today like #BlackLivesMatter, primarily based on race but could also include gender and age, critical race theory interweaves its way through methods of expression and interpretation. These and other movements evolved from two previous movements decades earlier involving critical legal studies and radical feminism.

It [Critical race theory] draws from the American radical tradition exemplified by such figures as Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. Dubois, Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Power and Chicano movements of the sixties and seventies. European philosophers and theorists such as Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault and Jaques Derrida (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 4) also lent great contributions to the philosophy behind these movements.

Critical race theory expresses skepticism of the common historical educational narrative including the celebratory insights of *Brown vs Board of Education* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2015). In the early 1970s, during the Vietnam War era, critical race theory reorganized. A number of lawyers, activists and legal scholars across the country, assert Delgado and Stefancic (p.3), realized that the power of the movements and fights for civil rights spread throughout their last half a century was weakening and the racial divide was getting stronger. Remnants from earlier litigations re-segregation in public places, especially in the schools, were resurfacing. Even several years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was handed down, the Equal Protection Clause and “Separate but Equal”, both derived from the railroad segregation case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, a new breed of segregation was apparent. The case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* was a landmark decision of the U.S. Supreme Court issued in 1896. Plessy, a Black man had challenged a railroad’s rule prohibiting him from riding in a car reserved for Whites. The railroad

had replied that it had set aside identical cars for Black passengers, hence, its practice did not violate the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. The decision upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation laws for public facilities as long as the segregated facilities were equal in quality, a doctrine that came to be known as "separate but equal". (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 103)

A notable theme of critical race theory was (and still is) based on the social construction which holds that race and races are products of social thought and relationships (p.7). This of course ties in to one's own development of positionality, or how he or she is perceived in society. This social thought is linked to categorizing people of similar common origins and physical attributes such as physique, skin color and hair rather than biology or genetic reality (p. 7). This CRT theme claims that judgments automatically cast on brown skinned individuals have little or nothing to do with distinctly human higher order traits such as personality, intelligence or moral behavior (p. 8).

Subliminal traits of racism were often expressed through comparison of intelligence between Whites and non-Whites (Blacks and Hispanics). Critical race theory espouses itself in *Cultural Politics and Education* (Apple, 1996a), the most powerful social movements redefining education today (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, p.211). It calls attention to the cultural politics focused on what Blacks were denied, the knowledge, skills, contacts, power, and information that could only be gained through interaction with mainstream political and economic networks ("A Strategic Action Plan for the Education," 2007, p.4). Author Ladson-Billings expresses that race has become metaphorical- a way of referring to and disguising forces, events classes and

expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological “race” ever was (p.50)

Positionality Developed through CRT and Storytelling

Critical race theorists argue that political and moral analysis is situational: “truths only exist for this reason in this predicament at this time in history (Delgado, 1991, p.111). For the critical race theorist, social reality is constructed by the formulation and exchange of stories about individual situations. These stories serve as interpretive structures by which we impose order on experience, and it imposes order on us (Dixson, Anderson & Donner, 2017, p.21).

Obviously, I could reach as far back to the story days of slavery in order to take account of the many struggles of racial inequality. In fact, Dr. James Comer’s (1997) talks of the devastation of Blacks’ experience of slavery and the effects it had on today’s Black community has not fully been understood. However, in the interest of remaining close to the more modern use of racial subordination, I rely on bringing the conversation into the 20th and 21st century by my earlier mention in Chapter One, of *Brown v. Board of Education* and how it connects to Comer’s claim. We need not be reminded that there was once a time when it was against the law for Blacks to be educated in America. Black Americans have since experienced the devastating shock of disruption of a close- knit African kinship structure that was at the core of political, economic and social functioning (Comer, 1998, p. 113). Due to the constructed societal concepts of inequality inherited from previous generations, economic and social progress for minorities,

today, continues to move toward full and equal access to a quality education (“A Strategic Action Plan for the Education,” 2007, p.4).

The similarities, such as subjective reasoning, feelings about our children’s success, claims, preferences, opinions, household judgments and values, particularly those of middle-class and middle to low wage-earning minorities, were constant among my friends and myself. In an extensive study of family psychological consequences of social class as it impacts family life performed by sociologist, Melvin Kohn, he concludes that it is widely agreed that children's life chances are significantly stratified ...and the parents' social location (alternatively known as positionality) shapes family dynamics (Weininger, Lareau & LaRossa, 2009, p. 693).

Moreover, our positionality with subjective thoughts and stories about race, family financial class, societal status, and/ or experiences were all considered when we, as actively concerned parents, began to seek solid educational opportunities for our children. Among non-white parents, for this study, African American parents, in particular, our ideological concept of a racialized society (a society that compares *all* non-whites to the “norm”, which is the White male) impacts the discussions we have and the decisions we make in our every-day lives. Our notions through [positionality based on] race are so complex that even when it fails to “make sense”, we continue to employ and deploy it (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Household decisions are often based on developed notions of conceptional whiteness and conceptional blackness (King 1990). Conceptional categories like “school achievement”, “middle classness,” “beauty,” and “intelligence,” become normative categories of “whiteness” (Ladson-Billings, p. 9) while categories like “inferiority,” “stupidity,” “darkness” and “welfare recipient” become narrow

minded and bogus categories for blackness. This notion was expressed through the stanzas of my African American son's poem, entitled "My Perspective" when he quoted:

"People killin' out here like it's play tense I don't judge much, but I am aware. Because there's some people that don't care- if I'm a top teen or a crack fiend, cuz all they see in me is fried chicken wings and collard greens or the saggin' jeans- that I don't rock!" By standards of CRT and his gifted ability of storytelling, my son acknowledges that his positionality is developed from his perception of his world and how he feels the world perceived him.

These insights prompted me to reflect on my scholastic journey as a youth and the supposed positionality of my family.

For the first two years of high school, I attended a Catholic academy on the far north side of Chicago five square blocks away from the northern suburb where I lived. Since there were no alternative public high school options within my town, the parental decision was for me to attend a private school across the city boundary with a 1981 tuition surpassing \$4000. It was a parental choice made in order to avoid my attending the local suburban high school. The political reality for Chicago, unlike most of her suburban communities, is provisions were made for school choice within the city. This, however, did not occur without controversy. The next section discusses relevant aspects of school choice in Chicago.

Connectivity: Political Reality and CPS with CRT Approach

It is important to note that corporate interest has attempted to influence public schools in Chicago publicly since 1877 (Shipps, 1997). The governance of the public school system in Chicago and its rate of growth have been intimately connected since 1906 to the interests of the business community. In fact, the executive committee of the Merchants Club called for a closed meeting where the main agenda items were: (a) the Chicago Plan; and (b) the reform of the public school administration (Johnson, 2005, p.25). The Merchants Club, which was the predecessor of the Commercial Club, forming the Commercial Club of Chicago (CCC), organized in 1896. The two groups were united in 1907. The CCC was an elite group of successful Chicago businessmen that promoted the economic development of the city. The club's most active members—men like George Pullman, Marshall Field, Cyrus McCormick, George Armour, and Frederic Delano—were the same men who forged Chicago into a leading industrial and commercial center. The club held regular meetings to discuss pertinent reform issues of the day. During the height of the Progressive era, circa 1890-1920, the club took a particular interest in developing vocational training programs for youngsters entering the wage labor force. (Encyclopedia of Chicago).

Brought forward, some 100 years and virtually twenty mayoral administrations since the turn of the 19th century, Chicago school reform remains pertinent, each new administration seeking a panacea better than the last. Positive examples were the actions of the late Honorable Harold Washington. Washington, Chicago's first African American mayor, had only served in office for a brief time, up until his death in 1987.

However, during his tenure, he made quite an impact by his willingness to make school reform a priority and to invest his leadership in the effort. A well thought out plan for the engagement of the stakeholders in the city education summit planning group assured the mayor of the leadership role. This united front of political, economic and community interests provided redistribution of power in an urban school system. (Gittell, 1994, p.141).

In the fall of 1986 Mayor Washington convened an education summit with the support of forty representatives of business, local universities and junior colleges to develop a plan to both improve the quality of high school graduates and guarantee them jobs upon their graduation. The following year, he reconvened the summit, appointed a parent's community council, and placed parents alongside business leaders with the task of restructuring the public-school system (Shipps, 1997; Lipman, 2006). For the years following Washington's death in office, the next administration(s) (special mayoral elections were held to properly fill the vacancy) supported the state legislation's move for school reform with the same momentum that Washington had begun several years earlier. The 1988 Chicago School Reform Act (P.A. 85-1418) was a result. It was an example of radical decentralization in school governance, taking community control further than any school restructuring efforts in U.S. history (Epps, 1994; Shipps, 1997). The Illinois State Legislature approved an extensive plan which shifted decision making from the central city school bureaucracy to local school councils in each school (Gittell, 1994, p. 139). For the first time in the history of Chicago schools, schools became legally accountable to economically disadvantaged children of color, their parents and their communities and therefore parents and communities were legally empowered (Epps, 1994). With the passing of the Chicago School

Reform Act, the Illinois State Legislature, headed by then Education Secretary William Bennett, established what he referred to as “one of the most far reaching displays of democratic participation by ensuring neighborhood control” (Johnson, 2010, p. 35).

In 1995, with the second Mayor Richard Daley serving his sixth year in office, the Illinois General Assembly reversed Chicago’s radical school reform, and seized control of the public schools from parents and community members. The highly racialized political struggles within Chicago have largely contributed to current school reforms, which are fairly complicated expressions of ethnic competition, power, and control (Wrigley, 1997). The Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act of 1995, which brought an abrupt end to any semblance of power for Local School Councils (LSC’s), placed Chicago Public Schools back under mayoral control. Mayor Daley, in turn, promptly passed the reigns over to the business sector, exchanging the superintendent title for Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

The Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act of 1995 would dramatically shift power over the school district back to the mayor. Among many, most key features of this act pertaining directly the outcome of public school retention are: 1. It gave authority back to the mayor who then had the authority to appoint all school members and top administrators, thus decreasing the number of central board members to five. 2. It created “corporate style” positions. Top administrator titles changed from “general superintendent” to “chief executive officer”; 3. It gave district flexibility in utilizing private agencies to provide certain services and 4. It gave the CEO the authority to place poorly performing schools on remediation, probation, reconstitute or close them.

In June 2004, Mayor Richard M. Daley launched Renaissance 2010 (Ren2010), a bold initiative whose goal is to increase the number of high-quality educational options in communities across Chicago by 2010. New schools are created through a competitive, community-based selection process which establishes a set of high standards to which every new school will be held accountable (“Renaissance 2010”, 2011)

Mayor Richard M. Daley introduced and revealed to the world Chicago’s Renaissance 2010 (Ren2010) public education policy on June 24, 2004 at an event hosted by the Commercial Club of Chicago. Renaissance 2010 provided charter schools and contract schools to be consumed (Lipman & Haines, 2007). Inclusively, one third of the schools, CPS performance schools, were to be governed under Renaissance 2010 policies (which undoubtedly were hinged to academic performance and assessment) and funds. Each were given five-year contracts, which came with the benefit of the loosened restrictions for unions and LSC’s (Lipman & Haines, 2007).

Choice, Educational Theory, Socio-Spatial Perspective and CPS

Educational policy author Pauline Lipman argued that initiatives, such as Chicago’s Ren2010, were strategically linked to the neoliberal development of the city and the exclusion of working class and low-income people of color (2011). Ren2010, facilitates dispossession and dispersal of low-income African Americans while a new University-affiliated charter school network rounds out the appeal of the new Midsouth to African American professionals who comprise much of the initial wave of middle-class home buyers. (Lipman, 2011, p. 120). Lipman

adds that student's academic progress is complicated when using neoliberal rhetoric that equates buzz words like 'accountability' and 'testing' with justice and equality (Lipman, 2011).

Synthetically speaking, there is existing research that references certain aspects of a family's positionality and its relation to their overall mindset as it to pertains to school choice, academic selective enrollment and its operation, albeit in Chicago or the suburbs. The mindset involves a sense that one has an equitable place in an academic setting. Accordingly, parents, particularly African American parents, take on the humble yet strategic task of seeking an institution where they "feel as though [their children will] belong to a community of learners and that their academic self is a "true self". (Harvey, 1963)

Yoon & Lubienski (2017) agree with Butler & Robson (2003) in that the importance of geography as space and place among middle-class families is not simply an economic decision, but also reflects social group affinity, feelings, and behaviors of group belonging, as manifest in urban geography (Bell, 2009; Butler & Robson, 2003). Author of *Waiting for a Miracle: Why Schools Can't Solve Our Problems-- and How We Can*, James Comer gives an account of his parent's philosophy on child rearing, setting personal goals and achievement:

My parents believed in their right to opportunity and to belonging to America as African Americans. My father said to us on many occasions, 'Prepare yourself. Your time will come.' While this belief did not appear realistic, we accepted his admonition with the blind faith young people often accord with parental advice. And there was just enough evidence that he might be correct, in school in particular, to keep us hopeful and motivated.

James P. Comer, 1997, p. 22

A long line of research shows that having a sense of belonging in a positive school setting or classroom improves a student's academic performance. As young people seek belonging beyond their family, their groups become a significant factor (Comer, 1997, p. 90). In turn, students reach high levels of achievement leading them to two and four- year colleges and or respectable trades. Educational theorists have long held that learning in the classroom is preceded by family cultivation and social activity that is constructed through interaction with others (Dewey, 1958). Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky argued, "Learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human psychological function" (1978, p. 90). In line with Marx and Hagle, Vygotsky adds that learned instruction and personal reaction to proposed situations rely on culture and society at large which in turn impacts learning. Through Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development, from birth into adulthood, one's obtained knowledge comes from a scaffold of objective and even learned subjective interaction with others. As American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey concluded, for a child to name or interpret the quality of something, it is through "direct interaction, mental growth and observation" (Dewey, 1958, p. 260). Subjectivism "is

equivalent to the emergence of agencies equipped with special powers of observations and experiments with emotions and desires that are efficacious for productions of chosen modifications of nature” (p. 13). Often family decisions, which include cultural, ethical and social connotations, depend on the psychological abilities of the subjective mind, especially when it involves race relations and a social sense of belonging. This understanding connects and perhaps offers justification for my reactions when considering the earlier discussion of my son wanting to attend a predominantly White Catholic high school. I wanted him to feel safe and comfortable in a diverse academic setting. Sending my African American son to a Catholic predominantly White institution (by the way we are not Catholic) as a distinguished athlete, on financial assistance, nonetheless, sent up too many red flags. I did not want him to be targeted nor treated differently because of his status. I also didn’t want him to relive the less than pleasant experience I had, as a high school freshman, decades earlier.

In relation to direct effects of school choice in the Chicago Public School System, statistics show that the gap between non-charter/non-selective enrollment (or traditional neighborhood) schools and selective enrollment schools, has closed over time.

In 2014, the graduation rates at non-charter, non-selective enrollment schools caught up to charter schools so that both have high school graduation rates of 71 percent. The pattern in four-year college enrollment is different; selective enrollment and charter schools have seen larger increases than other schools. The four-year college enrollment rate for selective enrollment graduates increased from 68 percent in 2006 to 78 percent in 2014. The improvements in the key milestones in educational attainment by CPS

students are encouraging and represent real progress in the life outcomes of thousands of young people in Chicago. (Nagaoka & Healey, 2016, p. 6)

The trends across school types suggest that creating a dialogue among selective enrollment, charter, and other high schools may be productive for increasing the educational attainment of students at *all* types of schools, as well as create a safe and comfortable learning environment for Chicago children of all races, creeds and genders.

Many times, family sacrifices are made upon acceptance of a selected school of their choice. As an example, during a conversation with the daughter of a parent who lived on the south side of the city and attended high school on the far north side, she admitted that it is a struggle to wake up early enough to sustain the one-hour ride on public transportation to school. She, however, does not seem to mind because it was her choice.

After providing so many details of the CPS school process, offerings supported by applicable research, one would assume it as an endorsement. However, as stated earlier, my intent is to share and address the school decisions children and parents make based on successes as well as disparity. Choosing CPS as a mega- model was a show of comparison to suburban public school models that do not have the same options. In reference to the restaurant scenario, where the lady dressed in fancy attire could make a menu selection among many offerings placed before her, households of many (not all) Chicago schools have felt the same way about options for school choice. In comparison, suburban families (not all) are much like the lady in jeans who received the menu that offered the Special of the Day and nothing else. The marginalized spatial [and familial] positions and dispositions of low-income families are likely to further shape and

constrain their choices. Low-income families' participation in school choice is lower than higher income groups, the distance their children travel is shorter, and their choice tends to be limited to cross-boundary rather than competitive/selective choice programs. (Yoon, E., & Lubienski, 2017, p. 17).

In fairness, I acknowledge that family sacrifices come in all shapes and sizes, throughout big city and suburban lifetimes. My personal experiences growing up a Black north shore (an area of Chicago that was considered "*affluent*" by the locals) suburban girl in the seventies and eighties taught me how to make calculated decisions as a grown single African American mother raising a son in today's world. Although it may not matter, I had traveled and even lived in many interesting places from Charleston, South Carolina, and the shores of New London, Connecticut to the beautiful island of Ohau, Honolulu, Hawai'i. Yet, after my journey as a Navy spouse, I chose to raise my son in the same north shore area where I was raised. Like my parents, many of my social and scholastic decisions were based on my positionality.

Local Context: CPS Neoliberal Approach through Selective Enrollment

The Chicago Public School System, which houses nearly 400,000 students, founded Selective Enrollment High Schools where "each of the participating schools offer a rigorous curriculum with mainly honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses." (CPS Office of Access and Enrollment, 2017). This program is offered to all high school aged children throughout the city, across assigned neighborhood school boundary lines. However, it was not implemented without strong controversy.

After lengthy decades of arbitration between CPS and the United States Department of Justice, mainly over integration, in 1980 and revisited in 2009, a federal judge enforced the out ruling of race being the single factor to admission to selected schools throughout the city, that would otherwise seem discriminatory toward non-white students. Rather than race, Chicago Public Schools' Board of Education adopted a policy that would take a student's family and neighborhood socio-economic status into consideration for admissions (Karp, 2009).

Under the principles of demographics and gentrification, "the Chicago Public School System is the third largest school district in the United States and includes over 600 elementary and secondary schools. Chicago holds 17% of Illinois public schools and serves about 400,000 students" (Stephens, Marter & Nagel, 2015, p. 2). Most Chicago schools are conventional neighborhood programs, but there are also several non-traditional school options. Many types of high schools, including neighborhood schools, career academies, charters, contracts, magnets, special education, international baccalaureates, and military academies (p. 2) throughout Chicago's 200 plus neighborhoods cover her 234 square miles (City of Chicago, 2017).

three-hour comprehensive exam, are the considered criteria to round off the final best score of a possible 900 points. “Applicants who attain final scores above the cutoff score established by the CEO or designee will be selected through a system that affords applicants two opportunities to be chosen for enrollment at each of their preferred selective enrollment schools or programs (Chicago Public Schools, 2017, p. 5). Applicants to each selective enrollment school or program are first ranked based solely on their composite score results from applicable testing and/or academic criteria.

As the CPS website guidelines relate, the entry exam is required as early as the seventh grade. The significance of the geographic location of the family home is so CPS can place potential students into tiered levels. Tier placement is based on socio-economic status, family income, education, home ownership, knowledge of the English language and family structure. The scores are then reviewed by a panel of administrators and used to determine the eligibility of placement into the school of choice, even if it is outside of the student’s neighborhood or tier. The higher the score in each of the three divided categories (maximum 300 points), the broader the offering.

Despite the predetermined percentage set in place for admittance under each tier, CPS created a monitoring system of fairness and equality throughout the city that accompanies the selective enrollment process by limiting student competition within their own tier. In other words, a Tier 3 African American student with outstanding test scores and high future academic potential from a lower socio-economic neighborhood, would be afforded the same access and opportunity to a fair competition for a seat in a preferred school as a student from a more affluent

neighborhood on the other side of the city with the same academic attributes from a high-income family with college graduate parents (Quick, 2016).

Applicants who did not meet requirements for selective enrollment still have accessible options. Upon school board consideration of the implementation of an updated mobile- friendly application for neighborhood school and selective enrollment families, Chief Executive Officer for Chicago Public School's Janice Jackson stated, "We want the neighborhood schools to be successful, we want children to see that as a choice. But we also know that in cases where children are not choosing their neighborhood's school, we have a responsibility to do something about that as a district"(Perez, 2017). CPS expects to roll out the centralized process for students who will become high school freshmen in the 2018-19 school year.

The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) operates the following types of magnet, selective enrollment and other scholastic choices defined in the system of Options for Knowledge. They are collectively referred to as “magnet and selective enrollment schools and programs” (Chicago Public Schools, 2017, p. 1).

Recently, the Options for Knowledge and Selective Prep programs, which are considered extensions or precursors parallel to Chicago's selective enrollment in high schools, are now available to eligible participants in elementary and middle schools. Northwest Evaluation Association™ (NWEA™) is a global not-for-profit educational service organization known for interim academic assessment. Schools use results from the NWEA™ Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP®) for any or all the following: as a component of their teacher evaluation system; to determine whether a student advances to the next grade; and/or as an indicator of

student readiness for certain programs, certain schools, or interventions, such as special education or gifted and talented programs (www.NWEA.org). Acceptance into these participating schools relies heavily on students' NWEA/MAPS test scores.

Each of the selective enrollment high schools and grammar schools give consideration to students who are self-driven and have high engagement. Classes develop students' critical and analytical thinking skills and promote diverse academic inquiry by bringing together students from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences that promote 21st-century learning in courses including honors, Advanced Placement (AP) classes and a variety of specialty programs that meet the needs and interests of students and their families.

Rationale and a Question of Comparison

Neighborhood Options and Choices

While the center city, Chicago, and her suburbs have much in common throughout the scholastic communities, both have sets of limitations when it comes to options and eligibility toward school choice and learning opportunities. Specifically, megalopolitan residents are afforded the options of many school types, from neighborhood types to military academies. Some require entrance exams and above par test scores, while others simply require residency within geographic boundaries. Comparatively, in a far north suburb of Chicago, where I have taught for over a decade, and many other suburbs like it, accept only one type of school choice, charter. I might add, the word “accept”, at least in our school district, did not come without heavy controversy. Public school teachers feared a reduction in funding and less accreditation for

the non-charter schools in the district; thus, creating a greater division and stratification within the community.

In the arena of education, the push to privatize or involve market-based opportunities is the politically charged move toward educational choice:

Educational choice involves expanding the freedom of families to send their children to schools other than public schools in their assigned attendance zones. They may allow parents virtually unconstrained freedom to select the school of their choice or they impose a complicated regulatory framework on both parents and schools. They may permit parents to select a school or they may *force* parents to select a school. (Henig, 1994, p. 4)

The question remains: Do privately ordered, publicly funded schools in a predominately African American or Hispanic community really offer the solution of choice? Does the discourse of “the marketplace” open favorable spaces of educational agency for African American families in low-income suburban areas like in larger cities or does this rhetoric merely create new pitfalls for less well-positioned “consumers”?

In response, and in the name of reform, policymakers and stakeholders of public school districts around the nation have placed a moratorium on community traditional public schools. As an alternative, charter schools are converting the physical brick-and-mortar spaces of traditional public schools, revising curriculum, structures and amenities as well, just as they did twice in the small school district where I teach.

Charter schools represent a form of educational choice. Just as in large cities, charters, in many cases, offer an alternative to families that have school-aged children. Depending on the marketing strategy (charters are a business, after all) they are offered, mostly to families in low income and impoverished areas, as the *better* choice. The Wall Street Journal stated that the voucher plan in Milwaukee represented the best hope for American children (Cookson, 1994, p. 66). We must remember as mentioned earlier, charters are only part of school choice, which is *an* option for school reform, not *the* answer itself. Unfortunately, like the much-hated aforementioned specter of the voucher system - where the government would provide funding directly to the students in the form of vouchers to spend on a school in the private or public sector of their own choosing (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p.217), -the term “charter” and other types of reform are synonymously connected to the overall misinterpretation of school choice. Yet, choice, itself, is “a self-contained reform with its own rationale and justification” (p.216). Once the option for choice has been established within a school district totally free (or at least some variation of liberty) from full government control, and placed more in the hands of school patrons, parents, teachers and students, stakeholders will be able to “define what constitutes a public school under the *new* system” (p. 219). While I believe as a parent, this was the intent of the charter school placement in our north suburban community, I do not believe as an educator that it was the right fit. I, like many others who opposed the decision, believe if a choice such as this were to work, a larger city where there are more choices besides the charter, perhaps with different disciplines, such as literacy and fine arts, academies or math and science would be more appropriate. This would involve the foundational support expressed in Chubb and Moe’s proposal to begin restructure from within the system instead of automatically replacing it with

outside corporate assistance. A successful progression would ultimately lead to state wide school wide choice, like in Indiana, where each student would be able to attend any public school in the state, regardless of district, with relevant scholarship consisting of federal, state and local contributions flowing to the school of choice (p. 221).

In conversation with my public and charter school parents, close colleagues and friends, including one whose suburban daughter entered a public high school as a freshman in the CPS, last year, I acknowledged the bond I had with them when facing similar issues. Whether the parent was an educator, corporate professional or a daily wage earner, the agreement of the necessity for becoming actively involved in school choice issues and policies driven by the overseeing of equality and the well-being within a healthy learning environment was evident. Author Stephen Macedo states in Alan Wolfe's book, *"School Choice: The Moral Debate"* that equality is indeed crucial for assessing school choice proposals (Wolfe, 2003, p. 51). He also argues that over-obsession with the perfect answer for equality could be a least defensible approach when debating school reform or school choice. Where the "stronger arguments of school choice are based on improving the education of the most deprived children in the worst performing urban schools" (p. 52), the arguments over publicly funded school choice based on fairness and equity of parents with differing cultural values are weaker arguments. Translating this to a parent who stands firmly by family core values and remains uncertain of diversity and cultural acceptance in a reformed school system means they either have to walk a fine line in voicing their preference, pay for private school, or take "back door" actions to enroll their children in a school of their choice, which often involved crossing district boundary lines. If parents' decisions to consider such actions to this extent, is necessary, I have no doubt that

positionality played an important role. Acknowledgement of positionality allows diligent parents who remain involved and connected to the academic policies and happenings within their communities to become aware of possible outcomes of open enrollment and school choice, be it beneficial or adversarial. No matter what color or cultural background, positionality influences our public choices.

Revelation in My Research

When I decided to continue my educational journey in the Curriculum, Advocacy and Policy (formerly known as Curriculum and Social Inquiry) doctoral program at National Louis University I had also decided to remain intimately familiar with my master's thesis topic of school choice. Building a sound literature review allows me look at work of others recognizing that not all experts think alike.

The express purpose of Bloom's Taxonomy was to develop a codification system whereby educators could design learning objectives that have hierarchic organization (Marzano, 2001, p. 1). Wanting to continue and further explore the study of school choice at the doctoral level, it was necessary for me to increase the volume of critical thinking toward the upper level of the Bloom's Taxonomy Model of high order thinking skills. This literary review walks my research topic through all categories of the model from the lowest on the chart, *Knowledge* and *Comprehension* of the topic up the increasingly difficult stages of *Analysis*, *Synthesis* and *Evaluation*.

This chapter has provided a closer look at the application and interpretation of positionality utilizing and examining my thoughts and decisions of school choice compared to

the findings of how others do the same with their children. In-depth research in the sociological aspects of this subject in the highest order of critical thinking required me to organize, classify, compare and explain the concepts and practices of theorists and interviewed participants. Synthetically, the objective for Chapter Two was to create meaning and bring awareness of the plight of African American households when facing the challenges of seeking out (their/our definition of) a successful educational outcome for their children.

Thus, I acknowledged, through my readings, comprehension, observation and actual reflection on personal experience, that there are gaps between theory and practice. Those gaps, I hope, were related to my research questions. I specifically noticed the similarity of the same “gaps” among family generations. The following chapter discusses the methodology and the process of how I carried out my research through an ethnographic lens.

Carrying into the remainder of the dissertation I walked through personal stories and confirmations of African American parents who constantly sought new educational avenues for their children in Chapter Four. Their remarkable acknowledgements and revelations easily allowed me to reflect and translate some of the similarities into my own experience growing up and raising my only African American child. Chapter Five offers a rationale and significance to why and how I relate to this study from a personal perspective.

CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

When people ask, 'How are you?', have the nerve to sometimes answer truthfully. You must know, however, that people will start avoiding you because they too, have the same ailments and they don't want to know about yours. But think of it this way, if people avoid you, you will have more time to meditate and do fine research on a cure for whatever truly afflicts you.

Maya Angelou, 2008, p.35

Overview Design

Essential to my research is the application of theory and how it influences or interacts with the experiences and interpretation of positionality when examining thoughts and decisions of school choice. A closer look at the discourse of the marketplace for academic reform targeting specific consumers is also tied into my research. I am interested in created spaces of educational agency for African American families in low-income suburban areas compared to that of larger cities. In addition, I would like to compare the findings of how other parents of African American school aged children utilize positionality when making familial decisions that involve societal interaction, such as school choice.

Voice: Significance to My Audience

The ability of a researcher to share his or her own experience with participants and readers represent an important aspect to scholarly writing. In doing so, the researcher openly shares and concedes his or her own personal biases, values, and beliefs extracted from such lived experiences. This ability to position one's self within the writing reflexively is crucial. (Creswell, 2013).

John W. Creswell stated:

How we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on the cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics that we bring to research. All writing is ‘positioned’ and within a stance. All researchers shape the writing that emerges. (p. 215)

The majority of fieldwork for this study is my own life as a middle-aged African American mother and educator within a low-income school district. I’d like to be the voice of those who don’t have either the knowledge, courage or stamina to hold out for the best educational path or any vital path that leads to satisfactory outcomes for themselves and their children. As a single mother, two-time breast cancer survivor, student and educator, I have a story to tell. The path of my research begins with the exploration of my research questions through key stories from my life as a child and a mother. Reflection and conversations with my mother will provide clarity and perspective.

As a writer whose muse and literary motivation draw from traditional hermeneutics, that according to Merriam-Webster dictionary is a method or theory of interpretation, I am partial to the practice of qualitative researchers who use alternative texts to dramatize their research (Pelias, 2000; Pelias, 2003; Richardson, 1994; Richardson, 2000; Richardson & Lockridge, 2002; Spry, 2001). Utilizing a combination of third person vignettes as ways to paint imagery provides food for thought. “Embodied narration can give ethnography more evocative power and encourage empathy and engagement on the part of its audiences” (Bochner & Ellis, 2002, p.3). This type of aesthetic approach encourages the epistemological openness to thinking, knowing and methods of inquiry (p.4). Ethnomethodology is the study of sociological inquiries of the

common-sense world of every-day life (Garfinkle, 1967, p. 36) in any actual, concrete, and not hypothetical or theoretically depicted setting (Maynard & Kardash, 2007, p. 1483).

By interpreting its etymological break down we find that the Greek origin the prefix “*ethnos*” means a *combined multitude* when referring to a race, nation or culture. The remainder of the word “method” derives from the Greek and/or Latin origin “*methodos*” which means systematic course. This is variably equivalent to “*hodos*”, meaning the way through or out as in “*Exodus*”. Coined by sociology professor Harold Garfinkel, *ethnomethodology* means the path taken to research the study of the dimensions and interpretations that include Marxist based framework supporting culture, gender and social class (www.en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Sociological_Theory/ Ethnomethodology).

In order to expand my own understanding, I focused on my memories and consciousness through the guidelines of autoethnography. By a colorful medley, if you will, of created vignettes, spoken word, paintings (from my personal collection) and offering of personal reflection, I intend to provoke thought on how confidence, identity and positionality impact people’s thinking when making social or academic choices for their families and thus will draw on ethnomethodology.

This recent revelation came to me when I started putting my qualitative research together for my autoethnography chapter. “Now what should I do?” I thought to myself. I was going to begin my bricolage with a personal collection of tangible items that would perhaps assist me in recalling some of those memorable moments to include in my writing. As the autoethnographer of this project, I realized that I must speak through my own recollection and the trusted resource

of my surviving parent, my mother, for my family's account of our positionalities while growing up. Speaking through personal memory is a major component of my study. It allowed me to gain new understandings by revisiting scenarios that I experienced first as a child and now are reconsidered as an adult with a broader and more sophisticated interpretive frame. Understanding one's own positionality allows a researcher to give empirical narrative accounts through an autoethnographic lens. When describing an author's reflexivity in qualitative writing, John W. Creswell stated:

The inquirer reflects how their role in the study and their personal background, culture and experiences hold potential for shaping their interpretations such as the themes they advance and the meaning they ascribe to the data. This aspect of the methods is more than merely advancing biases and values in the study but how the background of the researchers actually may shape the direction of the study. (Creswell, 2014, p. 186)

I reviewed one of many interpretations and definitions of qualitative research. In the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2017) Denzin and Lincoln pointed out its characteristics. It is choice of practice, that is, being pragmatic, strategic and, most of all self-reflexive. Fundamentally, writing an autoethnography, in the name of pragmatics is also engaging others through an ethnographic kind of interview. Thus, I emphasize the "entho" in ethnographic accounts as it concerns with connections between meaning and culture. It also connects with the study of positionality.

Bearing all of this in mind through suffering the loss of my family albums and scrapbook recordings, I had to choose a different route of sorts to aid me in connecting my personal experience with theory. I decided to adopt a new plan of recollection. My challenge was to view myself as an outsider considering intimate situations of my life and to observe how they impacted my educational journey, my personality, character, my knowledge and form of critical thinking. As an extension, I was also curious to find out if others with lifestyles similar to mine viewed certain similar situations the same way.

Authors Ellis and Bochner (2002) defined the term autoethnography as “one’s biographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 164). Since bias remains a naturally occurring human characteristic, positionality, which typically fuels an ethnography, is often used in the context of the inductive approach to social science inquiry. It serves as an exploration of the investigator’s reflection on one’s own placement within the many contexts, layers, power structures, identities, and subjectivities of one’s viewpoint (England, 1994). This explanation defines the essence of sociocultural theory, which has evolved to represent a view of learning as a process involving situational involvement.

Lave and Wenger (1991, p.142) conceptualize learning as a “process of participation in communities of practice.” When an individual joins a community of practice, he begins an apprenticeship in which he or she engages in the actual practice of the community, to a limited degree and with limited responsibility. Lave and Wenger define this as *legitimate peripheral participation*. In this framework, participation is based on situated negotiation of meaning in the

world (Fleming, 2008, p.25). Ethnography provides introspect, motives of realization and clearer understanding of my and other parents' positionality, outlook and response toward societal issues that involve academic and social placement for our children. This is explained in further detail in the following sections in this chapter.

The telling of my story and ultimately that of others willing to share, provides me with the ability to examine my own positionality, and my pedagogical research practices from my lived reminiscent experiences. The essence of my literary work is to seek the nexus between an ontological stance (the way I view the world) and the methodology I choose to apply.

As I think back to the few choice "situations" that occurred through the decades of the seventies and eighties that required reflection and introspect, I now have the answer to some of the "whys" and "how did we?" questions. Therefore, I see this combined approach of ethnomethodology in which I embrace both my autoethnography and focus ethnographic interviewing to understand others' experiences as the perfect opportunity to explore, perhaps interrogate or tease the views and opinions of my friends, family and myself -with a little faint humor.

Organizing Methodical Thoughts and Techniques

The topic of this study is central to my research questions. I chose to explore personal family thoughts and influences toward school choice. The rationale behind this entire dissertation focuses on the highlight of the previously mentioned Cooper article. Cooper (2005) argued that parents' subjective positionality has a stronger influence and often overrides their objective

rationality when it comes to school choice. For a single African American divorced mother, head of household decisions are challenging at times. They are specifically challenging, when making academic and social contemplations for my one and only son. Any parent would agree that many of our joys and afflictions come from the knowledge we get from our children or past experiences as a child. Our positionality or social placement in society along with observation and encouragement of maximum potential often governs how we view life.

Necessary for my research, in connecting the above reflection on parenthood to methodology and design, is the application of theory and how it interplays with the experiences, the joys and difficulties of custodial parents, especially those of Black children. These may be parents who, like me, had been inclined to make positioned choices based on their social structure, judgment, instinct, opinions, feelings and standpoint with good reason and sense rather than noted facts and open-minded ideas. My ability as a researcher to exchange personal experiences with other chosen participants and share with readers represents an important aspect to scholarly writing. Positionalities are expressed in dynamic interplay between individuals because it is central to the situated-mediated identity theory (Murrell, 2008, p. 91), which distinguishes identity by defining it as our agency in activity-who we are is what we chose to do and how we chose to invest in that doing (p. 32). Ethnomethodology is a path that allows me to explore positionality in school choice through the lens of intra-personal phenomena. Thus, I am able to self-engage and more clearly recognize my own personal biases, values, and beliefs extracted from such lived experiences. The ability to position one's self within scholarly writing *reflexively*, is instrumental.

Sources of Data and Methods of Data Collection

Qualitative Data

Autoethnographic [and ethnographic] research employs a variety of methods which imply the humanistic stance in phenomena when under investigation are examined through the eyes and experiences of individual participants (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). It is because of this particular approach to inquiry that I must become involved with the individuals in a personal manner. I believe semi-structured in-depth interviews would satisfy the inquiry.

The data for this dissertation was obtained through personal accounts based on recollection of notable experiences and the periodic diary entries I kept from childhood. I attempted to recreate events, locales and conversations from my memories of them. In order to maintain their anonymity and to protect the privacy of individuals, in some instances I changed the names of individuals and places. All identifying characteristics and details such as physical properties, occupations and places of residence was replaced with a pseudonym. Seeking assistance from my family members for clarification or parts of memorable events that I remember happening during my childhood, would access knowledge, perhaps a different perspective and insight as an adult.

My investigation through interviews with four close parent friends of school aged children in central urban public school districts as well as connecting suburbs would allow the possibility of learning about their motivation toward the decision on school choice. I plan to collect data samples until I sense I have reached a level of theoretical saturation that matches the

knowledge with which I am familiar in personal comparison. French sociologist, Daniel Bertaux, who has used biographies in his study of social mobility, describes “Saturation of Knowledge” as learning a great deal from the interviewees within the first few interviews. Then after several interviews, the researcher recognizes patterns in the interviewees’ experiences (Bertaux 1981, p. 37). My ultimate goal by way of this theory is to achieve saturation of knowledge from interviews that confirm what I, the researcher, have already sensed through my realization of personal validity and comfortability.

I have chosen participants who agreed to tell their stories via rich narrative description (p. 99). My hope is to find patterns connecting the social endeavors (Johnson, 2002, p. 104) as a means of expanding my understandings of how people make sense of school choice. As sometimes nonverbal communication is just as telling as speaking, during the interview. facial expressions and mannerisms of my interviewees were observed and encouraged my interpretations of their responses. I maintained descriptive and reflective notes, where the research recorded their own subjective reflections and insights about what was happening in the setting, (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 90) while I observe, converse and interact with the participants “without inferring feelings or responses to what is (p. 88) being said.

Narrative Research through CRT: My Chosen Form of Inquiry

CRT finds that racism is often well disguised in the rhetoric of shared ‘normative’ values and ‘neutral’ social scientific principles and practices (Matsuda et al., 1993). However, when the ideology of racism is examined and racist injuries are named, victims of racism can often find their voice... They become empowered participants, hearing their own

stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments against them are framed and learning to make the arguments to defend themselves (Yosso, 2005, p. 74-75)

Under the qualitative form of social inquiry, much of my data rely primarily on approaches through ethnomethodology. This method is interested in how people accomplish the interactions we take for granted in everyday life (Schwandt, 2001, p.81). For this study, I felt the best way to involve implicit and explicit comparisons of data through personal experience supported by *verstehen*, or the empathic understanding of natural human behavior, was through qualitative inquiry with CRT overtones. To call a research *activity qualitative inquiry*, Schwandt asserts, broadly means its aim is toward understanding the meaning of human action or reaction (p.213). My qualitative research compared to factual data from a quantitative perspective, is based on exploration, reflection and contextualization of personal experiences.

The underlying assumption of qualitative research is that reality and truth are constructed and shaped through the interaction between people and the environment in which they live (Bhatta, 2014). Patterned response, whether it is from continuous observations of group social behavior or derivations of personal reflection, likenesses form into questions of “why” or “how” this phenomenon came to be? “Several follow up or sub questions, such as “why is there such a negative reaction to this phenomenon?”, are used to orient the researcher in collecting data and framing the results. Pardon my use of the assumption that the questions surrounding proposed phenomena are based on negative experiences. However, if it were not for our humanistic ability to recognize and compare our thoughts and reactions to societal issues and the happenings, especially involving race all around us, then we would basically be living in a naïve state of

utopia. Broadly understood, the term *human agency* is the sociological version of free will (Schwandt, 2001, p.4). By contrast, *structuralism*, like functionalist models, aims to seek and explain societal human behavior via rituals, customs and family (p.103). A common criticism of structuralism, however, is the lack of free will decisions and continuous acceptance and response to maintain stability and harmony. Thus, it also includes failure to address conflict (p.103).

Ethnomethodology and Triangulation

For the ethno-methodologist ...human action and interaction do not just tumble from the sky ready formed. Instead, even the most mundane of actions have to be produced somehow, somewhere, sometime (Rouncefield, M., & Tolmie, P, 2013, p. xix).

Triangulation in qualitative research reflects the multiple ways of establishing truth surrounding key words like reliability and validity. Triangulation is a means of checking the integrity of inferences one draws (Schwandt, 2001, p.257) even from the smallest response or action.

To thicken one's interpretation and *meaning making* through the aesthetic voice, a triangulation that involved the use of my different points of view, multiple data sources, and multiple investigators was formed by my participants and myself. I believe by offering small evocative accounts of experiences through a triangulated series of vignettes, interviews, excerpts and poems followed by reflection and relative substantiated research. I would also, in some way, bring forth the validity by sensitizing myself and my audience toward the acknowledgement of our experiences with the occurrences from the past up through current daily situations that still remain personal challenges.

Chapter Four analyzes the data obtained through personal narratives and interviews of four participants of this study. Excerpts from my fifth participant, my mother, will be discussed in the following chapters. The method of narrative analysis was most suitable for me, the researcher. It allowed me to approximate the experiences of the study's participants through intuiting and rigorous examination of their feelings, perceptions, behaviors, actions (Irby, 2007, p. 90) and reactions.

By mediating and organizing the interview data, I separated them into subthemes of each parent's individual story. In my analysis, I employed "thick description" to capture the participants' (including my own) lived experiences, highlights, (outliers) in their own words (and significant statements or quotes). In turn, they developed into clusters of meaning categorized by themes, patterns and structures (Creswell 2013, Hess- Biber, 2011), that showed commonality with each other.

Participants

The selected participants of this study are four African American parents of school aged children who range from ages five to eighteen. The families live in different states, Illinois and Texas. At the risk of involving a full-blown analysis of what could be misconstrued as a switch in methodology, an exploratory dip including a realistic approach by way of the paradigm of assumption, should be considered as a complementary asset. Realism promotes the findings of one study [that] are extended by analytical generalization that shows how the empirical findings of a research project nestle within theories. Thus, the aim of realism paradigm is to generalize to theoretical propositions and not to populations (Yin, 1989, p. 21). By selecting a more narrowly

defined [sample of] population, my results and data would be generalized (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 167).

The McDonalds (not their real name) have a seven-year-old son who is rather shy and soft spoken, but extremely alert and smart. He attends a private school that offers numerous scholarships to those who cannot afford tuition. The McDonalds, to avoid public acknowledgement, pay full rate. While both parents work full time, even side jobs as on-demand private drivers, they often struggle through their monthly finances, but they seem to make it work for their son. Up to this point, public school for their son was not considered an option.

The next family I would like to interview is the Thompsons (not their real name). This loving family has a strong disciplinarian as a father and a determined mother. They have two daughters. Their youngest, who is five years old, is a juvenile diabetic who needs close medical monitoring. The oldest is eight years old. They live in Texas, a state that gave an emphatic “NO” to Common Core State Standards. The Thompson girls have attended private Christian schools literally since infancy. The girls were practically raised by three parents, mom, dad and Ms. Tema (not her real name) their African teacher and caregiver. The girls stayed with Ms. Tema until kindergarten age. Their dad, who is gainfully employed with a full-time job, found time to be the school’s handy man in order to barter his service in exchange for a trusting and caring education. I had the pleasure of visiting the Christian academy where they attend. I was quite impressed with their daily schedule and curriculum. The school nurse was well acquainted with the youngest daughter. Their mother always talks about the plan she has for her daughters that includes public schooling, but certainly not until high school.

The following interviewee for my study is a single father of three. My choice of this family was conceived as a result of my acquaintance with the father and his commitment toward finding the most appropriate education for his children. Over the decade that we have known each other, I have grown to understand his dedication to the welfare of his children and his struggle with finding the appropriate education within the city of Chicago. Some might acknowledge that he has gone above and beyond the call of duty when it comes to the determination of carrying out the right educational choices for his family. In preparation for this interview, I found it necessary to research the City of Chicago's scholastic selective enrollment process. That way I would be more familiar with the terms, conditions, settlements and challenges they faced when making school choices. Having this background knowledge would assist in future conversations with parents that raised or are currently raising their children within a large metropolis such as Chicago.

I took the opportunity to examine a key component of the Chicago Public Schools and its system of scholastic programs offered to Chicago students. Comparatively, these types of options are hardly offered in the suburbs that surround Chicago. My growing up in the north suburban town and school system helped form my positionality, reactions and behavior.

My last and final interview was the family of a student I once had as a fourth grader. I recently reconnected with his mother, Mrs. Whitman (not her real name) who reminded me that I taught her son several years prior. I recalled her son being quieter than most. He made valiant efforts with his assignments. His father met him every day after school on the corner. Each day he asked about his scholastic performance. I remember the conversations being short but encouraging because he was a typical C average student.

My collection of data through life interviews (conversations that would contain inquiries about childhood up to adulthood) with heads of inner-city and suburban households in comparison with my own values and positionality would allow me to gain a better comprehension of how positionality influences our decisions with school choice.

Interviewing Process

Further clarification of how positionality influences school choice of others compared to myself come in the form of structured interviews. The four planned in-depth interviews will again be with African American parents concerning their childhood, their position on today's community matters, which, currently, are *very* prevalent, and their influence on family educational decisions. The parents I have chosen were based on familiarity with their plight. I have been fortunate enough to be a part of each of their lives, either through friendship or professional circumstances. Each participant has an individual story to tell, yet the stories all have something in common.

Major data for analysis and interpretation was attained through the interviews as well as the data learned from previous conversations, observations and self- reflections unscientifically correlating the responses of parents with similar demographics, propositions and mutual sentiment. Once again, this would employ the method of triangulating the interview data with data gathered through other methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 151) as well as comparing key information obtained from my participants as well as (when it the time is appropriate) my own experience.

Interviewing can be examined as a set of techniques for generating and analyzing data from structured, semi- and unstructured conversations with participants (Schwandt, 2001, p.135). I chose the semi- structured method since I have several leading questions that could lead to free, thoughtful and connecting responses that may require follow-up questions for clarity and correspondence. Depending on the length of time and depth of casual conversation, I may have more than one set of interviews. This way, if necessary, the break in conversation would allow to modify or add questions for clarification after analyzing the first interview transcript. I do not, however, want to extend any interview beyond two sessions.

I particularly would like to interview the single father, mentioned earlier who was raised on the south side of Chicago. From a brief discussion about his family, I learned that this sought and selected participant comes from a middle income, south-suburban community of Chicago. I anticipate that ethnic background, family principals, level of education and household income will have a strong influence on much of the thought process throughout the interview.

I also became reacquainted with the mother of a student I taught six years ago. At the time, her son was in fourth grade. I specifically remember her frustration over his grades and inability to “blend in” with the group. His grades were hovering around a C average. I then encouraged her to look into the charter school that had just moved into the district. Perhaps there would have been better structure and favorable results. During our most recent conversation she informed me that he was in his first year of high school after several years of home schooling. Obviously, I wanted to know more about the point of disconnection. As this method of research allows the participant to voice their ideas, opinions, and knowledge (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p.

98), I believe an in-depth interview would be the perfect provision for a better understanding of her experiences.

The one common factor I had hoped would bind all questions for all participants was the familiarity with the home school district, the options of obtaining access to school choice and results and decisions based on full awareness of their positionality. I felt my respondents would have been treated as “experts” in the field their own field. Since in-depth interviews range in length, (but usually between thirty and sixty minutes) I conducted my interviews for a minimum of thirty minutes, especially those of new knowledge and connections that proposed new topics of conversation. Time allowed the interviews in one sitting. Various breaks in the interviews were necessary. Resumptions of the conversations occurred within one week in order to preserve the spirit or momentum of the discussion.

The semi structured interviews of my participants were digitally recorded on a newly purchased recording device for analysis. I also had a second recording device of my Toshiba laptop for clarification and as back-up in case the first method failed. The laptop also doubled as an automatic transcription with the assistance of useful technology offered through a free on-line transcribing application. With the aid of the on-line application, the entire interview was interpreted, fully transcribed and edited by me. The research that guided this project were

- When considering a choice for your child(ren), do you consider the cultural make-up?
- What kind of mental path did you take that led you to your position of career as well as parental choices for your child (ren)’s education?

Since interviews often had the tendency to branch into other subjects, I was prepared with transitional sentences that lead the discussion back to the original stream of thought. In the essence of time and remaining on track for a clear transcription, I carefully worded my questions with mental preparation to find the value in each response that pertained to my inquiry. As taught, I remained attentive and took anecdotal notes for clarification. If I sensed an occurrence during the interview that requires a need for reference, quick review or recall of something previously stated or written in my notes, for either my benefit or that of my participant, I gauged the rate of the conversation to the point where I could respectfully interject with phrases such as “You mentioned...” or “Can we revisit or expand on...?” Asking for clarification would provide the opportunity to rephrase or explain a subject in further detail with a level of comfort. My objective was to come as close as possible to being concise, yet casual in a conversation between friends. Although, my interviewees were hand selected, based on my recognition of their family values and backgrounds, which can easily be identifiable through my autoethnography, I was careful maintain neutrality and not to express verbal or nonverbal judgment toward my participant’s contributions.

Setting the Scene for Interviews

To prepare for my investigative yet casual interviews in nature, I developed appropriate questions that embodied the purpose of my project as well as those I felt would gain the most mileage in response. With clearance from the Institutional Research Review Board (IRRB). I explained my role and intent to my interviewee expecting full cooperation and participation. I asserted my intention of the interview and it was made clear that participation was strictly

voluntary. My participants had the right to review and assist in editing any time during the interview by asking me to stop taping or ask that they speak “off the record”. I explained to each participant that he/she had the right to terminate his/her involvement if necessary. Once the drafted consent form was signed by my interviewee, the recorded discussion process began.

The interviews I conducted consist of a conversation between myself and one other participant. The interviews took place in environments that were quiet and/ or conducive to successful recording on my hand-held recorder. To assure confidentiality and anonymity for those who required it, I conducted the entire interview in audio form.

Interview Analysis: What it all Means

Since the intent of interviewing is to collect data, I am counting on my respondents’ narratives to prove complementary to the overall project—that is capturing Black families’ conception of how positionality influences their choice in schooling and social connections. The qualitative analysis of data is comprised of examination for similarities, differences and constant comparison (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p.202). By using the constant comparative method, once the interviews were transcribed, parts of the conversations were noted for correlation to my autoethnography. I also added my personal thoughts and reflection from an autoethnographic perspective. To show that the criterion of validity has been met, data drawn from the interviews were categorized and formed in order to establish a triangulation back to the inferences made in Cooper’s article titled “*School Choice and the Standpoint of African-American Mothers: Considering the Power of Positionality*,” where “all of the 14 mothers stressed value of education and linked educational attainment to their children’s chances for socioeconomic advancement”

and “positionality reinforces their tendency to make positioned choices rather than rational ones” (Cooper, 2005, p. 179). Respondents’ narratives may prove complementary to the overall project—that is capturing Black families’ conception of application of choice in schooling. Qualitative data analysis is an open-ended inductive process of moving from particular categories to general patterns (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p.169). My analysis includes my recorded experiences as they pertained to the positionality of my family and my friends who shared some of the same experiences. After reviewing the interview transcripts and anecdotal notes I maintained throughout the process, I compared, internalized, interpreted, coded and categorized the common threads of lived experiences between my participants and myself. The themes shared created a filter built from my own language and culture undoubtedly applied; thus, weaving together their stories and integrating my own reflexivity as researcher, a woman, and a social change agent (Riessman, 2008).

Realizing that only some information and parts of stories shared with me may be relevant to my research, I used the Interview Guide questions to serve as my compass to determine the breadth of the integral parts that will help establish the noteworthiness of my participants’ perceptions of self and world as it pertains to familial decisions in school choice.

Obviously, my childhood through parenthood experiences naturally provided background knowledge, especially with woven components of my autoethnography. With that said, some predetermined categories had already been set prior to the interviews such as: racial identity, urban culture and power. As expected, the more in- depth my conversations became, the more they turned into topical categories. Thematic correlations such as: empirical knowledge, racial

influence and self-efficacy, and many more references in the previous chapter, surfaced as a solid collection of data for a culmination of the analytical process.

Ethics in Research and IRRB

Ethical issues are relevant to research in general and are faced in every stage of the interview research process (Flick, 1998, p.48). Ethics involved research acts as a moral guide of beneficence for the inquirer to consider the welfare and the effects studied issues have on the people about whom he or she researches.

With qualitative research, trustworthiness (credibility) is what gives the study merit (Lukenchuck, 2013, p. 110). The issue of subjectivity is an important part of an ethical discussion in ethnographical research. Subjectivity is compatible with realism and acts as a pathway to deeper understanding of the human world in general as well as whatever specific phenomena they are examining (Patton, 2002, Lukenchuck, 2013, p. 145). For a critic, the subjectivity of the researcher, no matter how idiosyncratic it may seem, is assumed and accepted as the value of autoethnography. Bochner and Ellis (1996) consider that a useful aim of personal narratives "... is to allow another person's world of experience to inspire critical reflection on your own" (p. 22).

I could not naturally be a neutral spectator. This is why I felt it necessary to officially include accounts of my personal experience through autoethnography. This way my personal reflexive thoughts would be categorically placed with other data determined useful for the overall study. Nonetheless, there lies the question of ethics in assuring that the reality expressed

is accurate. In conjunction with triangulating data sources and research techniques (p. 110), I also made use of member checks (the central procedure they argue) after the interviews were transcribed. This is a process that invites the participants to confirm one's findings.

The ethical standards as set by the Institutional Research Review Board (IRRB) at National Louis University for conducting research involving human participants were followed with fidelity. As outlined by the IRRB, all participants were provided an Informed Consent form with the option of complete anonymity or agreement of disclosure (i.e., name, affiliate organization or institution, and other identifying pieces of information shared through interviews). For the participant who chose anonymity, a pseudonym was given to protect their confidentiality. As ethics in research primarily concerns and controls the tempo of the procedures that is applied toward protecting those who participated in the research, participants, were made aware that alternatively, had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason, if so desired. (Schnell & Heinritz, 2006, p.17).

Vulnerability to Criticisms of Autoethnography

The concept of writing an entire dissertation with an autoethnography as its foundation does not come without criticism. "The emergence of autoethnography and narratives of self...has not been trouble-free, and their status as proper research remains problematic" (Sparks, 2000 p. 22). The most recurrent criticism of autoethnography is of its strong reliance on self, which develops into resistance toward accepting it as a valid research method. Thus, autoethnographies have been criticized for being privileged kinds of data with different or special claims for authenticity. (Atkinson, 1997, p. 342). In a critic's eye, invaluable or invalid research through

personal narrative translates into exaggeration and fiction. As Atkinson states, "Narrative does not provide a hyperauthentic version of actors' experiences or selves. A back door smuggling in of romantic constructions of the self will not do." (p. 343).

For many, writing an autoethnography is a personal challenge but it also allows emancipation for those aimed at addressing the power imbalances associated with race and class that have a space in postmodernity (Wall, 2006, p. 148). It enables researchers, like me, to acknowledge the impact that their own identities, beliefs and values have on research as well as seeing the same in those who may be participants (Adams et al., 2014). There is no request for objectivity in my research, so my conclusion basically describes the revelation and the edification of self-awareness as the result.

Limitations

The goal of my inducting the ethnographic interview process as well as my own autoethnographic account is to provide a venue for the right to tell our truths as we experienced them. Notwithstanding the advantages of autoethnography and expression of culturally lined methods of research mentioned above, I must also acknowledge a few limitations. For example, since the connections readers make to narratives cannot be predicted (Bochner & Ellis, 1996), depending on the audience, the feelings evoked in the minds of readers may be unpleasant.

Using highly publicized current events in the media as an example, patriotic citizens who sincerely believe in standing during the national anthem expressed emotions ranging from apathy to outrage, toward those who expressed their discontent with the enforcement of acknowledging

a symbol (the United States flag) that is supposed to represent fairness and equality to all. The act of purposely “taking a knee” during the playing of the national anthem by one minority individual NFL football player at the beginning of a globally televised sporting event to protest widespread abuse of the rights of African American males by law enforcement officials, inspired a movement among all who supported the cause. With the lightning speed of social media and global news coverage the world became an audience as well as participants in voicing their heart felt positions on screen and the Internet. Admittedly, worldwide coverage opens a floodgate for severe criticism and even (executive) threats through senseless rhetoric. Nonetheless, most comments, actions and reactions, no matter how benign or harsh, were more than likely composed with reflection on his or her positionality toward race relations, patriotism and civic responsibility.

Another limitation is the implication of exposure of innermost feelings, thoughts, and reactions, which require introspect and self-discloser. This limitation also entails many ethical questions that sometimes may be very difficult for the interviewee to answer or the researcher to address. In a few cases within my interviews, recollection of tough times brings up old wounds, certain responses and backlash through difficult times. They tread the thin line of interpretation of what was moral and what was perceived as moral by the storyteller. The reader or the hearer of the author’s personal testimony may automatically employ self-semantic thoughts, thus making the reading through an ethnographic lens a difficult method to follow.

Preparing for Insinuation

Author Laurel Richardson (2000) is an advocate of such autoethnographic practice, referring to it as a “creative analytical process”. She argues that “self-reflexivity brings to consciousness some of the complex political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing” (p. 254). However, it was necessary for me to bear in mind throughout the entire process that communication through autobiographical terms is just that. It is neither scientific nor experimental.

Autoethnographic research is the cultural study of one’s own people (Schwandt, 2001, p. 13). The aim of composing an autoethnographic account is to keep both the subject (knower) and the object (that which is being examined) in simultaneous view (p. 13). Pointedly, viewing this study through an autoethnographic lens, is a matter of expressing my personal “involvement and intimacy” (Conquergood, 1998, p.26) to the point where personal choices and declarations supersede academic policy. It provides an opportunity to use my experience to exemplify how vignettes and autoethnographic accounts can “illuminate the culture under study” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740). During the remainder of my study, you will delve into my own memories as well as explore the perspective of other African American parents who share the same sentiments.

An autoethnography is a personal account and representation of *my* social world, which could be interpreted in many ways. Hermeneutics, the nature of interpreting a text is a “ubiquitous and inescapable feature of all human efforts to understand. There is no special evidence, method, experience, or meaning that is independent of interpretation or more basic to it

such that one can escape” (Schwandt, 1997, p.112) the read and response process. Depending on the standpoint of the reader. These interpretations range from apathy or neutrality to disagreement or disbelief.

Summary of Methodology

The chosen method for this project involved a predominance of research performed through a personal account of culturally significant events as well as through an ethnographic lens of friends and family. These methods of data collection are viable uses for expressing broad suggestions about the role and position of chosen African American families, including my own, presented as an autoethnography. Ethnographic research enables us to speak of real experiences to be brought into the light so that they can be discussed and better understood (Smit and Fritz, 2008). Supported by bibliographical research, creative license through poetry and small vignettes, I offered an accomplished justification of empirical knowledge using these methodologies as the best way to help my readers understand the topic as it had been lived by my participants.

CHAPTER FOUR – PAINTING THE PORTRAITS

*The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.
Intelligence plus character — that is the goal of true education.*

(Martin Luther King, 1948)

The remaining chapters embody a culmination of my inquiry into the educational choices that parents made for their children based on their positionality. Their decisions derived from personal experiences and observations. Presented ethnographic stories from the past, present, and structured plans for the future, accentuated the investigation of their perspectives on school choice. The study also enlightened my autoethnographic path as it related to my educational journey as well as determining the choices for my son.

The Interview Process

Of course, it was a job to interview each of my participants. However, in the manner that we communicated and exchanged ideas, it was more like a meeting of old friends. Outside of the closer affiliation with my single dad participant and my own mother, the other relationships with my participants, from origin cities of near-by and as far as the great state of Texas, were either rekindled or newly established. We met in crowded restaurants, health offices and private living rooms. Wherever and whenever they wanted to meet, I readily appeared with my digital recorder and consent forms tucked away in my worn tattered backpack. I looked forward to the multiple face to face meetings and phone conferences. I can honestly and humbly say, that there wasn't one time when I felt my participants were tiring of the process. They were always ready to respond, explain and assist in any way possible.

Interview Type

I had the pleasure of having semi- structured conversations with five parents with outstanding character. Each participant was interviewed in person at least twice. There were multiple successful follow up phone conversations that were needed for clarification, especially during the transcribing through inaudible sections of the interview recordings. Although it did not seem as long, each of the initial interviews added to the follow up conversations easily divided into sixty-minute intervals.

Data Retrieval

For qualitative research, the main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say (Kvale, 1996, p. 32). According to Kvale, qualitative research aims to cover both factual and meaning levels alike. The meaning level implies that it is necessary for an interviewer to listen to the explicit descriptions as well as listening to what is said “between the lines” (Lovo-Henriksson, 2007, p.6). The open dialog took place in areas that I found familiar yet interesting enough for me to seek further details for my true understanding of their plight or perhaps success with school choice. While it was easy to engage with my interviewees, I had to learn how to extract information without becoming too close with the subject. It was their story after all.

The informative conversations with my participants which included my family, and other interviewees that have become my friends, provided data that co-designed the

personal and positional input into their character. In fact, some powerful personal stories inspired me to write poetry and include the poems written by my son, specifically for this study. For personal enjoyment and complementary source of data, I chose to offer the art of spoken word as part of the introduction of two of my portraits as a profile and attribution to the person I have come to admire. I offered each art piece as a depiction that best described their presumed positionality. The other portraits of my participants typically began with quotes that I found to present or amplify the mood of the narratives yet to be told. At the close of each interviewee's portraits, I provided my reflections and experiential accounts that lead to the concepts outlined in the previous chapter, the literature review. A poem embedded in the final chapter embodies and summarizes my autoethnography..

Interview with the Participants

I'd like to introduce the participants of this study, who are parents that had to make school choice decisions for a better education for their children. In respect to research ethical rules (the guidelines of IRRB), all names and identifiable attributes have been changed.

Patricia, my first interviewee, entered into her second marriage with a relative of mine. Together they had an awesome son who attends private school. Letitia, my second interviewee, hales from the state of Texas by way of Louisiana. Her two daughters have a carefully planned educational path. Duane is a single father of three who have estranged relationships with their mothers. He appears to be the only constant

authoritarian in their lives. Chaneese, my third participant, is a health professional whose son was my former student six years ago. Many changes occurred throughout her son's matriculation since he left my classroom including efforts to be home schooled. Agnes, who will be discussed in Chapter Five with my auto-ethnography, is a mother and grandmother who believed in the traditional values of child rearing. She also believed in exposing her children to new ideals even if it meant acknowledging your cultural and/or racial identity. The last of my narrative accounts is that of my son and myself woven throughout and carried into my auto-ethnography posing as my self-portrait.

Portrait of Patricia Darling

Renewed, Ride or Die Mom, Keeper of the Chair

*Patricia Darling, you had to leave your brief marriage to that Gulf War veter-an
to seek a life less stress and better than-
the call of duty, threats of infidelity, the moodiness the attitude-iness
The continuous moves from state to state, holding down the fort in a
lonely state- of mind
Constantly seeking gainful employment, throughout his long-term deployments. Little
time for enjoyment, often struggling just to STOP... and smile.
This ole military dependent life, part happiness- part strife became too stressful for you
and your unborn child.
Patricia Darling, you knew this lifestyle wasn't preferred.
You're no dependent! You're a born leader not a follow-er
So, to get your attention, Divine intervention had to step in
and show you how to begin again.
How to review, renew, rebuild, reboot and re-root your faith in God and find life's new
meanings*

*Patricia Darling, your sign from God allowed you to close that chapter of your life,
come back home to your humble beginnings.
God had a plan. He provided you with a good man
He placed you in the right hands. He placed you in the right setting.
Gave you the right marriage following the right wedding
He gave you the right family the right child.
He even gave you just the right amount of stress. Not too spicy- not too mild.
Patricia Darling, you've come a long way. Many challenges have been met.
And now you realize by looking through your baby boy's beautiful brown eyes, That God
ain't through with you yet.*

Patricia recently divorced herself from a suffering marriage of two years. He was in the military and she was what is commonly known as his *dependent*. It's true. Even though she was his wife, Uncle Sam recognizes spouses and any children of their union, as stated on her ID card, "DEPENDENT". She returned to her home town to start a new chapter in her life. She no longer wanted to be a dependent, in any sense of the word.

Pat and I first met in 2007 when she started coming to our family gatherings as the new girlfriend of one of our family members. We didn't know of her past nor if the relationship was serious, so we remained cordial. It wasn't until four years later when we connected for the first time. Both sides of the family formally united at Patricia's baby shower. She really was "the one". It was then that I also realized that I had already known members of her family through local church and community outings. I had just never put two and two together. Once we learned the pleasant happenstance and our connected relationships, we became more familiar with each other.

With busy schedules and Pat's new beginnings into motherhood, the first few holiday dinners with our side of the family were the only times we actually got to see each other. She still seemed shy yet confident-always added to the conversation at the opportune moments. Once she grew more accustomed to the family, she became one of us, active, lively and ready to assist when and where ever needed. Christmas holidays were the best times to catch up on all events missed through the year.

One thing that was noticed for certain was her extreme love and protection for her only son, Jason. Like me with my son, Jason was her first and only child. Her husband had a son from a prior relationship. Although Patricia loved her step-son like her own, it obviously wasn't the same. The moment they welcomed Jason into the world, they welcomed an overflow of love, prayers, plans and dreams filled with hope and determination. Pat, like most parents, dreamed of offering her son the same wonderful childhood and more than what she had when she grew up. Her priority focus was on his education. For this reason, I felt it was ideal for me to learn more about her chosen path for her son. Since the decisions parents make often connect to their childhood memories and upbringing, it made sense to begin the interview with conversations about Pat's childhood.

Childhood in Black and White

In the far northern suburbs of Metro, Patricia, grew up in a quiet community known for being "dry" which meant unless consumers were patronizing the local watering hole or licensed restaurants there were no alcoholic beverages sold within city limits, not even in grocery stores.

She lived in a full house of brothers and sisters in a predominantly Black neighborhood. She was the youngest girl. They were mostly raised by their mother after the divorce of a seventeen-year marriage. Pat described her young life with her mother and siblings as, great! “Momma tried to do her best. She wanted us all to go to college.” Pat replied when I asked her about her mother’s management over the family. Surely, it was tough, but Pat acknowledges that her mother did a fine job in raising them on a sixth-grade education.

Pat’s childhood was embraced with love, school, church and fun. She always had playmates whether they were siblings or friends from the neighborhood public school. “I never thought about any type of private school,” Pat exclaimed. “I didn’t even know what that was. We did what every kid did on our block did. We all went to the *same* school, *same* block, *same* friends.” When I questioned her about extra- curricular activities (referring to ballet or sports) she paused as if she was searching for an appropriate answer. She then began to speak about attending church. “Well of course you know growing up Baptist you had to go to church,”- she said chuckling. “There were tons of churches in that little city.” Much of the city’s streets refer to names and events in the Bible. “Some of my friends went to different churches but we all usually saw each other again after dinner or at school.” After conversing about memorable Sunday experiences, I wondered if it made sense to redirect my original question about extra- curricular activities. I decided to work it back into the conversation. I wanted to know if she had a “hang out” besides being on the block, at school or church. “Oh yea, we hung out at the Lester Center.” As soon as she said that I must have given a look of uncertainty because she quickly followed up with a more familiar term. “You know the white center” she confirmed. She reminded me of something I had learned from my teen aged son years earlier. The Lester Center, its actual name,

is referred to as the “white center” by younger minority town residents. The renaming wasn’t due to a notable community resident as I had once thought, like “Mr. Lester White”. Nor was the new name befitting for the description of the exterior color of the building. Rather, it was renamed for the color or the race of occupants inside the building. I found out the Black kids from Patricia’s era while growing up, referred to the Lester Center as the “white center” because more White people attended and participated in the activities, like ice hockey, a very expensive sport that many Blacks had little interest in. I will expand on that notion in my reflection.

Pat’s educational journey extended from high school with great knowledge and certification in business, customer service, sales and marketing. Due to the constant change of living arrangements as a young adult and first marriage as a military wife, she didn’t have the opportunity to finish college, however, in many of the job positions she held in her field of expertise, she was a natural. Her current husband was also in sales and marketing. His job often kept him for long hours and out of town. Together, however, they set time aside to start a new family.

The Chair

My acquaintance with Patricia grew stronger when she became part of the family. After my observance of the dedication to her son’s education, I knew she was a primary candidate for my research. The beginning of a sisterhood began with a chair. As a gift to our newest addition to the family, I refurbished a small reading chair passed down from generations, once owned by my aunt in 1956. I adored it as a child. I read and took naps in it often. By the time my little brother got through with it.... well let’s just say he wasn’t much of a quiet reader. I recall him

using the chair as a rocket launch pad more than a quiet respite. Somehow the chair survived. When I was expecting my son, I made a point to search through my mother's storage area in the basement to dig up the chair. I found it disassembled with springs rusted, but salvageable. It just needed a little tender loving care. It was nothing that a trip to the nearest hardware store couldn't handle. I was determined to bring that chair back to life. It was a matter of holding on to a tradition. When my son was born, he was next in line. I made sure the chair had a solid foundation as well as new sturdy, yet welcoming, pillows for comfort. In my quest for a new pillow pattern while thumbing through story books, I came across the most perfect little face of a brown baby boy framed with blocks, crayons and books. I transferred it onto a piece of fabric and lovingly ironed it onto the denim pillow to rest on the back of the new varnished chair frame. "That way", I quietly figured, "every time my little guy headed over with his little picture books and crayons, he would see his likeness looking back at him welcoming him to have a seat."

It was time to pass the torch on to Patricia and her son. I wanted the present to be more than just a useful toy or item from the gift registry at the nearest big box store. The chair that once donned the worn and tattered pattern of paisley from the fifties had been revitalized and handed over as a new acknowledgement of a true acceptance into our family. Patricia was humbly overjoyed to the point of silent tears.

Discovery, Reflection and Summary

I too, was faced with the same dilemma of glancing at the marketplace when my son wanted to attend a Catholic high school. His reasoning was plausible. He didn't want to consort with the wrong crowd. What makes a school good? Schools are not only sites for learning they

are also sites for living. When one-hundred young people and adults unite to create a learning environment, a dynamic is created. If the dynamic is positive the school can be an oasis; if it is negative the school can feel like a jail (Cookson, 1994, p.87). I applauded my son's positionality however, I just couldn't see past paying a college tuition for a high school education. We compromised. He attended the satellite branch of the public school that offered a smaller population, smaller classroom size and a more controlled environment. Like Patricia's mother, the choice of private school was not considered for long.

Like most suburban schools in our area, home streets and addresses determine the family's school zone. The condominium of Patricia and her husband was situated very close to the boundary line of two school districts, one more preferred over the other. I was actually excited to hear that Jason had the possibility to attend an elementary public school of the city where some families had been known to fake their address to claim eligibility for acceptance into that district. Pat, however, had different plans. Gone were the days while growing up oblivious to the fact that there was a market place for education. Recalling back to our interview on the topic of private school she claimed she and her brothers and sisters didn't even know there were private school choices. She firmly but slightly regretfully proclaimed, "We did what every kid did on our block did. We all went to the *same* school, *same* block, *same* friends." Remembering that she said her single mother provided the best for her children on a sixth-grade education, I would imagine that the household income was pretty low. She said her mother wanted them to go to college, however, considering a choice of shopping for a private education simply didn't seem to be a priority. I automatically empathized with her on the low priority to seek a private education on a low income, which is why I probably didn't pry further into the conversation

about their level of poverty. With all circumstances, I assumed they were a happy family with a mother who knew how to make the best out of dire situations.

From infancy up until the age of two, Patricia worked with Jason in between part- time jobs, household chores and sleep. Every day they worked on the early basics that included story time, music, letter and number recognition, and colors. When Pat felt the time was right for more socialization for her son, she enrolled him in a learning daycare. Over time, Pat was noticing unfavorable results with her child. Here is an excerpt of our interview regarding her observation:

PD: I felt like this (sending him to learning-daycare) was a right way of pushing him. But when we would pick him up, every day we would ask him “What did you learn today?” and he would say, “My colors”. “Ok, I said, well you already know your colors. What else did you do today?” “My colors, mom, that’s it”. We knew that he knew his colors, his ABC’s and numbers. He knew that stuff going in. If we’re paying this learning daycare all this money, then I felt he needed to be more stimulated than just reciting his colors. So, I discussed it with his uh- teacher.

Me: And what did she say?

PD: She didn’t really help much or offer anything different.

Me: Right, Right, and what age was that?

PD: That was at two or three, so after a year, we talked about it and we were like, we need to get him out of there and put him in a real learning facility. So, we looked up a few and

decided to put him in the private Crusaders Academy. And within two weeks after he got started, my three-year old started writing and spelling his first and last name.

Me: Wow, so he was doing kindergarten level work at the age of three?

PD: That's, right. That, there.... was an eye opener. And the fact that it took people like us (hand gestures rubbing on her skin, which implied Black people) to recognize that was an eye opener as well.

By Patricia implying that it took “people like us” to recognize her son’s potential and “push” him to higher levels, it led me to look more into the school’s demographics. I wanted to know exactly what she meant by the language and gestures. Homophily is the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001, p.416). By theoretically identifying Patricia’s specific expressions toward our African American race and culture during our conversation, I recognized her acknowledgment that mostly everything or anything that we experience as a result of our positionality can be communicated and naturally understood. In fact, I am certain that if she had not verbally communicated her preference but had simultaneously rubbed her fingers on the back of her hand while describing the type of school and preferred interaction with others, I would have easily understood the denotation. Either way I accepted her use of typifying “people like us”.

Indeed, it was an eye-opener after finding out more about the student-to-teacher ratio (figuratively 8 to 1) and the demographic breakdown of his new school. While the Crusaders Academy “offers a comprehensive pre-K through sixth grade program curriculum for students of

all ability levels” and is open to all children regardless of “sex, religion, race, color, national or ethnic origin, or handicap,” the African American demographic is clearly the dominant population at that school. Out of the fifty-nine students enrolled in 2016, *Figure 5* shows demographics of the Crusaders Academy where Jason attends, a predominant 80% were African American. The second highest population with up to 10% enrollment was Hispanic, leaving the smaller fraction of Hawaiian- Native and Pacific- Islander to close out with a combination of 10%. There is an obvious category of less than 1% for Whites.

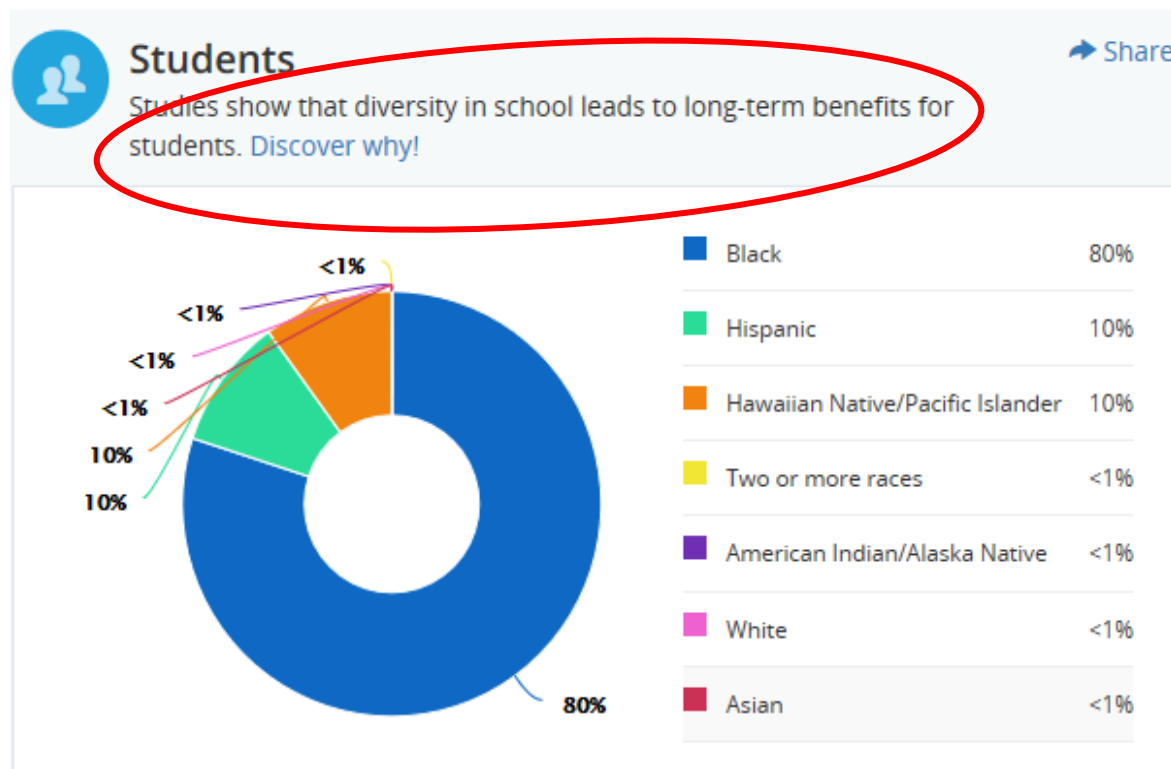


Figure 5. Ethnicity profile data provided by National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016.

To me, this chart shows that Patricia’s homework may have included investigating not only the curriculum but the type of encouraging personalities of the teachers and co-learners that

would have influence on her son's education. Another excerpt from our interview explains her satisfaction after transferring him to the community of learners at the Crusaders Academy:

When he moved on to 1st grade, his teachers *saw* how far they could push him. Now he's in 2nd grade doing 3rd grade work. They (the teachers) work one on one. They contact us. Teachers pull up aside us and say, "Can we meet with you?" They discuss, "This is what we see in your son", and they don't wait for parent conferences to do it. I feel like they're giving more. They allow us (the parents) to push him. Which is another way to help him learn from all of us without breaking his spirit.

Interestingly, when I viewed the demographic pie chart of the Crusaders Academy, I noticed an accompanying statement at the top of the page quoting, "Studies show that *diversity* in school leads to long term-benefits for students, Discover why!" Instead of cropping it out in order to keep the focus on the pictorial representation of the school's actual population displayed in *Figure 5*, I chose to keep it in tact to make a point or rather, an inquiry. I am not sure. I wanted to humor myself by following the lead from the statement and *discover why* and what type of long term benefits could be gained from diversity in schools. Of course, I knew why. I anticipated seeing a list of articles referencing the need to diversify by including more *minorities* into predominantly White institutions. However, in this context, it was clearly the opposite where there seemed to be a need for more diversity in a school where a predominance of African Americans already attended. I was intrigued by the use of this statement adjoined to a Crusaders Academy. I wanted to know to whom the opening statement was directed. Did the publisher really want the viewer to consider more Whites to help diversify this school? "Clearly", I thought, "they didn't realize the struggle the founders of this school went through to create a

special place for Black and brown children, as a response to the perception of negative or lack of attention in predominantly White schools.”

Reading further, the content satisfied my inquiry. Most of it was as I suspected. The research was correct, but laughable due to the fact of its simple placement on the page. I can imagine one not seeing the humor in it all. Thus, my use of the word “laughable” indicates my cynical response toward the lack of understanding and/or simple knowledge of the history of this academy and many others following the same format. This academy was created by community educators. These activists saw a need to provide an educational and social space for a group of people who historically had been ostracized and minimalized among the general population because of their race. An educational and social movement such as this upholds the pervasive fact of homophily which implicates and tends to localize cultural, behavioral, genetic, or material information that flows through networks (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001, p.416).

This created space (educational setting) based on sociodemographic and behavioral dimensions provides an arena where most people spontaneously recognize that similarity breeds fellowship (p.428) and a willingness to collectively obey certain fundamental dynamics as it interacts with other social entities in an ecology of social forms. (p. 416). For this, (and I understand that it was probably a simple oversight in web design and misinterpretation of relevance) I subtly shake my head and chuckle thinking, “they just don’t get it”.

“How ironic”, I thought. Here is an African American mother who found dissatisfaction with her son’s first social learning experience outside of the home. The learning-daycare that according to her intent, was diverse. Therefore, diversity (by its definition), in this case, was not

the reason she pulled him out of the program. She felt it was necessary for him to be in an environment that would recognize his achievement level and encourage him to learn more. Patricia referred to it as “pushing”. They found a more nurturing, caring and student-targeted learning environment at the Crusaders Academy, a private, institution that required more money, but is considered money well spent. One may think, “So what? It’s no wonder that a private school with a pricey tuition would offer a more targeted curriculum.” However, in the case of Jason and his classmates, their targeted curriculum is being taught by and learned by people who look like them. That explained why Pat rubbed her arm indicating “people who are African American” like us. Is this a matter of self-segregation? Perhaps, it is a matter of a parent’s positionality driving the realization that race continues to have social significance as part of our racial common sense (Buttny, 1999, p.249). Omi and Winant (2015) declare that identity is socially constructed, where the content and importance of racial categories are determined by social, economic, political and in this case, educational forces. This theory offered as racial formation, was a response related to a development dated back to the post-Civil War era’s understandings of social relationships and racial inequality (Winant, 1994, p. 115); thus, causing voluntary separateness to be justified and necessary.

This notion, of voluntary separation, is comparative to the aforementioned community center. Its nomenclature, which was labeled decades ago, is still comfortably and presently identified by the neighborhood kids as the “white center”. By the way, there are quite a few more recreation centers throughout the small town. One in particular, Hebron, is named by theological reference. Unlike the full ice arena, basketball courts with retractable bleachers, state of the art exercise studio and meeting rooms at Lester, a much smaller Hebron Center has less. Housing

one elementary school sized gymnasium with a 3-foot perimeter and a newly painted work out room of ten exercise machines Hebron is more commonly and comfortably known by the minorities as, you guessed it, the “black center”. Research suggests that people of color may experience a different type of “normal” life and that excellence can and does emerge in multiple and varied forms (Milner, 2007, p. 389).

All scenarios, regarding the “white center” the “eye-opening” observations and the hand gestures, shed light on deficit discourse and beliefs. In the study and representation of people and communities of color, Haberman (2000, p. 203) stressed that “language is not an innocent reflection of how we think. They are terms we use to control our perceptions, shape our understanding, and lead us to particular proposals for improvement” (Milner, 2007, p. 389). Through trial and error, it was Patricia’s positionality that played an important role in her finally finding a suitable education plan for her son.

Portrait of Letitia Shaw

Beautiful, Innovative, Pathfinder Around the Tree

If our children are to approve of themselves, they must see that we approve of ourselves.

(Angelou, 2014, p.5)

My second interview was with Letitia Shaw, a caramel colored Creole lady from the south. This interview differed from the others because it captured the essence of her state of being when growing up in the bayou. The way Letitia explained her life experiences, (or left expressions without an explanation) brought me to possible connections that thread into the positionality that she holds today.

When Letitia was in town with my brother and the girls earlier in the summer, she and I met for lunch. I enjoyed our first interview over pasta at a semi crowded Italian restaurant. The additional questions were conducted by lengthy phone conversations and a few texts, for quick clarifications. In total, I would say, we conferenced for three hours. Obviously, not all conversation was specifically on school choice due to my love for hearing about my nieces. Since we are both working mothers, and her husband, my brother, toggles with the demanding schedule of a fire fighter, coordinating quiet time over the phone was difficult.

Letitia works out of her home office, so she doesn't get out of the house much. She is extremely disciplined when it comes to her uninterrupted work schedule. I recall visiting in past summers during the week. The girls, who are age eight and five, know that when the office door is closed, mommy is at work and she cannot be disturbed unless it was an extreme emergency. For that I applaud her and the girl's discipline, especially since the youngest often required close monitoring for medical reasons. Had I been in that position, I would have been easily distracted.

A medical supply customer service representative for a reputable distribution center of the southwest, forty-year old Letitia is committed to designing the appropriate scholastic paths for her two daughters. When asked how she based her decisions and how she became so knowledgeable of the public and private school systems in her area, she acknowledged that her mother who raised her in a predominately White community alongside Lake Ponchartrane in Louisiana, taught her everything she knew. She also knew that research was necessary along with communication with other parents. Outside of occasional date nights, Letitia's recreational time is spent with the Parent Teacher's Association and team moms of whatever the sport in

which the girls participate. Last summer, they were involved in cheer and softball. This year I believe it's volleyball and track.

Our in-person interview was semi-structured and informal. I believe I was more nervous than Letitia. I didn't want her to think I was being judgmental simply because I was a school teacher and the aunt of the two best nieces in the world. All bias aside, Letitia was cool. She spoke with a very quiet yet sensuous southern drawl, which offered a sense of confidence and comfort when she answered my questions.

The Tree

All the hallmarks of the traditional school district had been eliminated after Hurricane Katrina. Prior to statewide school reform and charter systems, the city was divided into attendance zones (Harris & Larson, 2016, p. 3), where like in many other large cities throughout the U.S., the family home address determines where children would attend school. In search of a demographic breakdown of her neighborhood schools back in the late seventies, I asked Letitia for her home address. Once I located it on a geographic map website, I took a photo of the front of her home and showed it to Letitia for confirmation. It was a typical quaint but smaller single level brown brick house. The front door had a beautiful hand-made wreath that offered a warm welcome to visitors. I recall Letitia saying that her mother loved to make them. In the front yard stood a pond pine tree. Its trunk had already surpassed the height of the house leaving its full green piney branches cascading over the roof offering partial shade to the front of the house. When Letitia looked at the picture, she had a brief look of amazement on her face. "Awww...Yep, that's my house." Then I noticed somewhat of a solemn look downward. She

must have seen something in that picture that reminded her of something about the house. I let her reflect for a moment and then she spoke. “I remember that tree. It was an itty-bitty plant when we first moved in,” she said quietly. I once again, thought she was going to talk about how she played or ate lunch under her favorite tree. Instead she offered quite a different recollection:

“I was only about five or six, but I remember waking up to my dad yelling something about ‘those damn white boys.....’ When I came out of my room, I noticed dad cleaning up cracked eggs from the front of the house. I guess somebody drove by and egged our house the night before. Looked like a whole carton of ‘em. Windows, door, sidewalk...everything.”

I gasped and shook my head remembering that my research showed that she lived in a predominantly White neighborhood. To add to that, she was in the South in the 70s and 80s, but I said nothing. Letitia continued.

“.... So, I remember my mom saying that she was gonna call the police and daddy said ‘what for? They ain’t gonna do nothin’! I don’t know if they called them or not, but I was just trying to figure this all out. I mean.... I knew what they did was a bad thing, but I really didn’t understand the meaning behind it all, you know? So, I just kinda stayed out of it. I wanted to help clean up, but they wouldn’t let us.”

Looking for a connection to the pine I asked, “What happened to the tree? Was it egged too?” She paused for a moment as if she lost her place in the conversation and responded, “Oh! So, the tree didn’t come ‘til later.” I was puzzled until she explained that a few days after the incident, their next door neighbor (a White gentleman) came to their house. “I remember him

talking to my parents about the eggs and stuff. Next thing I knew there was this little Charlie Brown lookin' tree in our front yard. The White man had planted it there as a welcome. I guess it was to help us feel better. I mean I knew it grew over the years. But I guess I just didn't pay attention to it until now. I mean, I remember when it was just a little bit taller than me. Now it's bigger than the house!" The two of us discussed what that conversation between her folks and her neighbor must have been like.

Growing Up in the South

Letitia and her only sister grew up on a quiet street in the red sticks of Louisiana. She fondly remembers a happy normal childhood. With the egg incident a distant memory, normal for her was a single parent household with a mother who had a municipal job. Her father had since moved deeper into the city. Letitia said he was always a phone call away.

Her mother hired a van service to pick up the girls from their respective schools. She recalled many times after school, when she boarded the van to take her to her grandmother's house. The daily regiment was to start doing homework and play in the front of the house until her mama came to pick her up. Her sister, four years older, became a latchkey kid by fifth grade, so she came home straight from school. Letitia credited her sister with knowing her way around the kitchen at an early age because their mom taught them the basics. By the time their mom swept up Letitia from grandma's and got home, dinner would be almost ready, and homework would be ready for an overview.

Letitia was happy in her own little world. She had a few neighborhood friends. Most of them were White. She and her sister did not attend the same neighborhood elementary and

middle schools as their neighbors. In our interview, Letitia explained the type of school choice available to families in her neighborhood:

“I went to a public school. Even though I lived in a middle-class neighborhood, mostly White. I didn’t live in a bad neighborhood, but I didn’t go to school in my neighborhood at *all*. My school was a *blue ribbon* school. I didn’t even know what that meant. Maybe the school was a big deal?”

I asked about how the city determined where children attended school:

“You are supposed to go to the school in your neighborhood, unless it’s a magnet school, like mine. You have to test to get into it. Down there, magnet schools are the only schools where outsiders can get in. And to be honest with you, I think it was a matter of clout, to be honest. I think I had an advantage because my sister went there.”

Knowing the rhetoric of “neighborhood schools” (versus campuses in outlying communities) masked a deep commitment to segregation (Rickford, 2016, p. 39), I wondered if there was a reason why their mother felt it was necessary for her daughters to travel longer distances by car and a paid van service to and from school. There were suitable schools just minutes from their home. Our brief conversation on this topic caused me to relate to my childhood of attending a school where I felt comfortable, but my mother had grown a distaste for my adaptive behavior. The following is an excerpt from our talk about Letitia’s White neighborhood friends and school:

Me: Did they go to the same schools that you went to?

LS: They did not. I don't know what school they went to... but they didn't go to mine. (she said with a sense of gladness)

Me: Were you comfortable in your school setting?

LS: Oh, I was *very* comfortable. I mean, I went to a mixed school. It was like a first come first serve and you had to test to get in. I would remember that vaguely.... but... people would line up. I mean, I don't know where my neighbors went to school, but I was happy where I was at. (again, she spoke with a smile as if she was thankful for the childhood separation)

She said she was comfortable and she prided herself on living in a middle-class predominantly White neighborhood, yet she attended a school across town. Perhaps her mother felt differently like mine once did. I felt this was a notion worth expanding in my reflection.

Shaw's Adulthood

Although, once again it was not in her neighborhood, Letitia had successfully graduated from a chosen high school closer to the inner city. Letitia offers her best recollection during our second interview:

LS: My elementary school was mixed but my high school was all Black. I honestly didn't know, at all, what the high school system was like in my home district. I am not sure why my mom sent me to a school outside our neighborhood...except for maybe its reputation (not being a good school).

Me: Was your high school located in a Black community?

LS: Yes... it was in the hood in the heart of the city. But it was a really good school back then. It was a college preparatory school and you had to test to get in.

Me: Was it a long way to your school?

LS: They were about a 15 to 20-minute car ride away. My mom dropped me off in the morning and I took public transportation home.

Letitia's family was satisfied with the successful matriculation of both sisters from this near inner city high school. Even though, she beamed with pride talking about her good grades and awesome experiences with her classmates, she also shook her head in slight antipathy as she pointed out the irony of attending that particular school. She mentioned that she had learned somehow during her senior year that her predominantly African American populated high school was named after a wealthy slave owner. History recorded that he supported the American Colonization Society, an organization of the mid 1800s that promoted emancipation of the enslaved and efforts to colonize Blacks back to Africa. Some considered it an act of philanthropy by sending them to their home continent, others, primarily African Americans felt it was a way to rid their race from the United States. Through his Last Will and Testament, he expressed an eccentric change of heart by providing land and education grants for freed people of color in Louisiana because he correctly anticipated that most Blacks would not be sent to Liberia, Africa (Ciravolo, 2002, p.9). To Letitia, it probably wouldn't have made much of a difference back then. Now that she understands the full connotation as an adult, she doesn't seem as proud.

Katrina

By the time Hurricane Katrina had ravished her homeland, Letitia was long gone. She had attended and graduated from college. Her sister had already established a life in Texas. In early 2005, she moved to live with her sister. By August of the same year, their lives turned upside down. Katrina struck with a vengeance leaving many of her family members with very little. Letitia and her sister knew that the only option was to open their two-bedroom apartment to their family. Within days after the storm, family members started filing in. Letitia gives an account of that fateful experience.

I'm just glad that I had already moved and had a place to stay. I mean I was constantly calling my mom and asking her how high the water was getting'. Each time, it sounded worse. She finally grabbed what she could and came to stay with us. My cousins came after that. We had folks sleeping in every corner. Pallets made on the floor. We took turns using the beds. We took turns cooking. I mean, it was pretty rough for a while. There was eight of us and three of them were my little cousins 10 and 12 years old. I mean, at first it was like a big ole' sleepover. But then you're like, ok it's been a month already, when y'all gonna go home? Then I had to take a little pause and remind myself that this is family and they probably don't have a home to go to. So, I got my head back in the game and we started looking for -schools for the kids cuz it seemed like it was gonna be a while longer.

Eventually, Letitia's family got enough government funding and charitable contributions needed to return home and pick up the pieces. Her mother was the first to return home to inspect the damage. Letitia remembers her mother saying that the water had receded but the interior of

their one level ranch style home and all of its content which was completely immersed under four feet of water was destroyed. The project of gutting the house down to the frame and rebuilding took a total of 48 days of agony. Since her mother was a state employee, she was able to work at satellite and remote locations. She spent time between her girl's home and relatives who lived more inland.

Letitia admitted she learned a valuable lesson about family. She was glad she could be there for them. Even though all of her high school and college photo albums left at her mother's house were gone, she was thankful that her mother and father survived. Many people had not. Coincidentally, I pointed out to Letitia the significance of something else that survived the wrath of Katrina. There seemed to be a quiet point of revelation when I drew her attention back to that same tall aged tree in the picture.

Finding Paths

The devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina had been a long road to healing and recovery for many families. Twenty-five-year-old Letitia came to understand, from a contextual standpoint, that many of her family members felt like they were forgotten by their elected government officials. Perhaps there was a looming cloud of injustice hanging over the black and brown citizens of the areas hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina. African Americans were much more likely than White Americans to experience feelings of anger and depression in response to the events surrounding the hurricane. In addition, most of these feelings stem from the perception that Hurricane Katrina from its impact

through its media coverage, and governmental response was viewed as a racial event (Allen, 2007, p.467).

However, at the time racism was the least of Letitia's concern. She was more concerned about providing and managing a temporary home for displaced family members. "It was an act of God" she kept telling herself. So as a response to a natural disaster, she offered what she had. "It was a 'What would Jesus do?' moment for me and my sister". She said to me. Of course, there were times when, Letitia questioned the significance of her opening her life and home to relatives and acquaintances, some she barely knew. Daily news broadcasts updated the grueling rescues, recoveries and political charges against President Bush's slow response to Hurricane Katrina and her victims. This horrific natural occurrence turned into a racially charged world-wide social conundrum. The despair, the relentless efforts of maintaining what little dignity survivors had left and the entire phenomena hit close to home when Letitia's own mother showed up at her doorstep. The strongest role model in her life was left without shelter, clothes, food and safe drinking water, basic things we all take for granted.

Through steadfast prayer and patience and the sharing of survivors' rebound stories Letitia slowly convinced herself that her efforts did not go in vein. Some of her house guests returned to their homes with aspiration to rebuild. Others sought a new life elsewhere. Whatever the outcome, Letitia felt she fulfilled a family obligation.

As far as the thoughts of school choice (if one would call it that) during the time of turmoil under catastrophic conditions, Letitia and her family members were grateful

for the public schools near her home. Many local school districts, as did many around the nation, made special provisions to children evacuees of Hurricane Katrina by enrolling them into school and providing transportation without required proof of residency.

The thoughts of lengthy reconstruction of her home town left her with the desire to stay in an area where she felt safer and more appropriate for her life style. She decided to give the Midwest a try. She moved to Illinois to live with my brother, who was then her long-distance boyfriend. Soon to be engaged, they ventured in sharing a small one-bedroom apartment on the north side of Metro not far from our family home. After two years of a growing indeterminate relationship, she decided to seek a new path to personal happiness by moving back to Texas.

Letitia had no problem finding employment. She reconnected with her family, mainly her mother who rebuilt the family home after returning to the bayou. The only component she felt that was missing at the time was her fiancé. She convinced him to pack up everything and move down south to start a new life together. They married in 2008 and had their first daughter, Jillian, a year later. When Jillian turned four, she met her newborn sister, Cara. It seemed that genetics and fate combined producing two sisters four years apart just like Letitia and her sister decades earlier. However, there were obvious differences. For one, the girls were being brought up in a safe, loving two parent household in a diverse neighborhood suburb of Dallas, Texas. Secondly, the younger sister was born with an autoimmune disease in which the body attacks the cells

that normally make insulin, otherwise known as Type 1 juvenile diabetes.

Each time coming home from extended visits from the hospital during the first three years of her life, Cara and the family did their best to create a new normal. Since both parents, Letitia and her husband Tim, had full time jobs they were adamant about finding the proper daycare and schools for their daughters. To this day, Cara's diet and insulin intake requires close monitoring. Letitia researched and interviewed many caregivers before she found someone who was a teacher, disciplinarian and most importantly, board certified to administer medication. Connected to the family's church, a Christian team of two ladies from Nigeria codirected the learning daycare center. Ms. Eli was their primary caregiver. Letitia's reflection of Ms. Eli:

She taught the girls so much. She was like a second mother or an auntie to them. They learned a lot from her in school and she was a good friend of the family that we could trust for babysitting as well. Eli encouraged us to go on date nights! She did a really good job with Jillian. When it was time for Cara, we had no problem. They prepared each of my girls and me, for that matter, ready for regular school.

By the time the youngest daughter came of school age, they both attended the same Christian academy which was recommended by Ms. Eli. Jillian had already attended the school since kindergarten. Governed by affiliate church's Board of Elders, the Christian academy is one of the largest minority (Black and Hispanic) non-denominational bible fellowship congregations within the state of Texas.

Both parents were very happy with Jillian's educational plan and were looking forward to Cara following her footsteps. Letitia, spoke highly of the school and how well the curriculum fit into the scheme of her desired learning path for her children:

Me: How do you manage their schooling now? Where do they go to school?

LS: They go to private school... They go *there*... because they get a good education. I want them to flourish. That's the bottom line. It's a place where I know they are going to excel. What they're getting now, is what's going to help them get into a really good high school and college. They're well rounded because my kids have extra-curricular activities- out of school with other kids.

Me: Ok stop right there. What kind of outside school activities? Church?

LS: The things they interact with – like in dance, softball... and cheer. Of course, church. But like... Remember when I said that I really didn't play with my neighborhood friends growing up because we didn't go to the same school? (I nodded) So, that's where they interact with other kids who don't go to their school, in all these activities.

Me: Ok so what kind of school do they attend now?

LS: My kids attend a private Christian based school. It begins from 18 months up to 8th grade.

Me: So, in your city, is it the same principle where if you live in an area, you go to the school that was assigned to you?

LS: Correct

Me: Would you have considered putting them in public school?

LS: So, I think with me, my kids started in day care with a Christian education. They were pushed. Like when they were 2 years old, they were *learning*. They were *knowing* things that I don't think a public education would have taught until first or second grade.

Me: Not only a Christian daycare but an African American Christian daycare.

LS: Yes, but actually they were *African*. There's a difference in the way they teach and the way they expect their children to learn. My kids were pushed. (We both chuckled)

But seriously, the Nigerians are intense with their children. Like now- I have a friend who is Nigerian. I remember the time when she was upset when her child came home with a 92% and I'm like 'It's an A' and she says, 'she should have gotten 100'. So, this is what they were raised on. Education is stressed so they have it in their brain. So, at that point, once it was pushed in them, they have the foundation to keep on going and building.

Me: So, you wouldn't consider public school for them at this age in the foundation stages?

LS: I feel like if I sent them to a public school.... (she seemed to have a loss for words)

Me: They would regress?

LS: Yea. That's how I feel. They would have flattened out. They would have gone backwards.

Me: So, you had to keep the momentum....

LS: Exactly.

Me: ...and perhaps the standards wouldn't have matched up to what they already knew if they switched to public school?

LS: Exactly, Exactly.

Discovery Through Reflections on Letitia

Letitia grew up in a southern public school that was not in her neighborhood. The only apparent reason her mother went through the changes to send her and her sister to the public school across town was because it was a highly acclaimed “blue ribbon” school. Perhaps private school tuition may have been too expensive for a single mother back then. Perhaps her mother preferred to send her daughters to a more diversely populated school considering the growing internal distrust stemming from the egging incident years earlier. Letitia and I agreed to consider that her mother preferred to send her and her sister to a more culturally diverse school rather than subject them to potential mental and physical harm with racial undertones from a predominantly White neighborhood school. The point was, based on her positionality and research of near-by school choices, Letitia's exercised her right to make seemingly practical decisions based on suggestive evidence in research, positionality and simple hearsay. Letitia and her sister were accepted and appropriately placed in an academic setting by choice.

Letitia and her husband wanted better for their daughters. A private, predominantly African American Christian based education was the “better” they wanted. Rightly or wrongly, many Americans see public education as having failed. In

this sense school choice grew out of anxiety concerning our economic competitiveness (Cookson, 1994, p.69). Even though the school attendees need not be congregants of the church directly affiliated with the Christian academy, they are welcomed with a great advantage toward building moral character.

As implied in Letitia's interview, her mother in the 1980s and then Letitia in present day, allowed their positionality to help determine their school preference based on "practical and ideological grounds" (Rickford, 2016, p.32). One couldn't help but think that the incident with the eggs being thrown at their house was a contributor to the growing distrust of Whites in their neighborhood. For this reason, Letitia's mother had to send her children outside of their community to a place where she felt they would be sheltered from racism.

My additional questioning followed while writing my reflections to Letitia's interview. I wanted to know if she felt or at least empathized with her houseguests during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. I wanted to know if she defined certain government supports (or lack thereof) as acts of favoritism toward a certain group of people. I wanted to know of her impression of the new school structure. Here was her response:

"I really didn't know what to think. The lower ward, a predominantly Black area is still not "back" ... but I think it is because the residents didn't have the funds to rebuild. People had issues with downtown and the French Quarter being rebuilt for tourists but neglected the areas that needed it the most. Post Katrina I

heard charter schools were taking over and a lot of public schools were closing their doors. They (I would assume she was referring to reform groups) tried to make my high school a charter, but the alumnae fought tooth and nail to keep it public. It went all the way down to a referendum during the next election to keep my school public. But now, some twelve years later, I hear it's not doing well. It's no longer known for being the blue-ribbon school I knew and loved."

I understood Letitia's frustration and how it gave her the mindset to become extremely cognizant of her daughter's educational path just as her mother was with her and her sister's path. Letitia was extremely proud of the schools where she attended. During the interviews, she always placed an influence on the word "*my*" when she spoke about her blue-ribbon school as if there was an ownership. Even through the disappointment of knowing the news about her home public school failing in many aspects in today's world of charter schools, she still used the personal pronoun "my" to distinguish it from the rest.

The difference now that Letitia oversees her daughter's matriculation, is she has chosen a private academy. Perhaps there was a small distrust of public schools lingering from the disappointment of the falling status of her school from back home when she was a child. Even though they lived in a neighboring state, they still lived in the south where pockets of modern day racism still exist. In this case it was a matter of "chosen segregation" where they preferred their daughters are educated within a positive and productive society of African Americans, people who looked just like them. Historian

Richard Kluger argues that “Separate schools for Negroes carried with them a legacy of social untouchability and psychological inferiority (Kluger, 2004, p. 512). On the other hand, “segregated” Black schools often played essential social roles and cultivated rich cultural traditions within Black communities, and thus, could be simultaneously a source of pride (Rickford, 2016, p. 32). Letitia felt comfort in knowing that her children were and still are obtaining their potential on an educational path rich with 21st century learning skills that go beyond the three R’s (reading writing and ‘rithmetic). Their curriculum includes innovative and critical thinking skills through biblical application, connections to worldviews and every-day life.

As a disclosure, I feel it is necessary to point out that the Christian academy where the girls attend, prides itself in providing a solid education based on the core values derived from biblical scripture. Its mission statement implies that the school is open to *all* children regardless of race. However, the culture of the school lends support to families of color, a demographic whose children have been historically made to go to an inferior school; thus, branded in their own minds as [they would be] inferior (Kluger, 2004, p. 364). The legendary academy nurtures the ethos of self-efficacy to children of families who have generationally been excluded and or denied fair and equal education compared to privileged White Americans.

Portrait of Duane Everheart

Father Knows Best

Just like the blue sky when obscured by rain clouds, your powerful positive influence can be obscured by indifference or ignorance. Or you can choose to be the blue skies behind the rain clouds offering your presence, your time your unconditional love.

(Michael Smith, 2015, p5)

We had a causal friendship. Duane was like no other man I had ever met. We talked about almost everything, mostly about our kids. He fully supported my doctoral endeavors. At times I felt he was more interested in my studies than me. Our engaging conversations about education covered a broad spectrum from academics and behavior to athletics. My quest for a parent of multiple school aged children who faced daily challenges of school choice became short lived the moment I thought of Mr. Everheart. Estranged from the mothers of his three children, Duane resides in the far southern suburbs of Metro, where most school assignments are predetermined according the geographical location of the school aged child. For all practical purposes, Mr. Everheart is a single parent who once headed his household with his youngest daughter and shared custody of the older two from a previous relationship, with his wife up until the divorce in 2012.

As a former school board member, leader in parent organizations and community volunteer, Duane has gained a lot of experience in school policy, protocol and procedure. Not only did he seek quality assurance for his own children, but also for the common good of the

school aged children in the area in which he served. Duane has the gift for conversation and is very frank, which is why I selected him for an interview on school choice.

Foundations

Everheart grew up on the south side of Metro. Unlike many Metro inner city blocks today, his neighborhood, which was also shared by the world-renowned family recording artists, Poppa Stamps and the Stamps Sisters, was considered a safe place. For the most of his childhood, he was happy living in a single parent household. His parents divorced when he was eleven. With his father living nearby and his maternal grandparents a short distant car ride into the neighboring state, Everheart grew up with strong family values, particularly when it came to his education.

As an only child in his mother's home Duane learned independence at an early age. His mother worked long hours with Metro's largest newspaper. There were days when she would leave soon after he awakened in the morning and not return home until long after school hours. Often Duane went to a caregiver's house up until he was responsible enough to walk the short distance to and from school, with access to his house. He was one of the first latch key kids on his block. Duane was very responsible at an early age. He didn't remember getting into trouble for not completing his homework assignments. Nor did he remember either of his parents visiting his teachers or attending conferences due to poor behavior or class performance. Excerpts from our interview explain his interpretation of school life.

Me: Did you go to the same school in your and the Stamp's neighborhood?

DE: Yep, my school was in the neighborhood.

Me: Were you comfortable where you went to school?

DE: Yes, I was.

Me: Did you feel safe? Did you...

DE: Yes, I felt safe... uh yea, but being an only child... like, you know how you wish you had somebody to hang out with... I didn't have siblings to walk me home. Sometimes a friend or two- but I was pretty safe, even by myself.

Me: Yea, I see. What about your mom or your parents? You mentioned them earlier.

DE: My parents divorced when I was 11. My mom worked primarily during the day. I walked two and a half blocks every day to and from school... let myself in the house...uh...grabbed something to eat out the fridge....and I did my homework. I can't remember my dad ever being involved in my education.

Me: Okay. What about your mom and education?

DE: Well my mom... I remember her being involved in my education -but not to the point to where she was always at the school or to the point to where arranged for tutoring or different services that are offered now. She knew I was a pretty good student. Not a lot of behavior issues.

Me: What kind of grades did you have while...

DE: Sometimes B-Cs but, I normally got A's and B's.

The oldest, Percy who is now twenty-three years old, is a DePaul alum. During his adolescent years he lived with his mother. From high school into adulthood he moved between his father's home and the homes of relatives. The oldest daughter, Tawny, lived between households as well. Her reasoning, most likely the shared reason for both, was due to the dissatisfaction with their mother's choice of gentlemen friends. Duane was never happy with the

parental role of their mother. With knowledge and tips from family acquaintances about their mother's perilous lifestyle, he often begged his children to come live with him. Even though he lived further away from their schools, he knew he could provide a more loving and stable household, free from unsafe conditions, psychological warfare and problematic régime. His daughter welcomed the idea but told him that she feared for her younger siblings who also lived in their mother's home. She didn't want to abandon them. Duane accepted their decisions but always left the door open. The youngest daughter, Dejah who after a turbulent relationship with her mother, his ex-wife, decided to live with her dad in the suburbs. She attends the neighborhood high school.

Duane's children have benefitted from his innate attention to their familial needs, learning abilities, athletic abilities, interests and talents. When I asked of his children's schooling and extra-curricular activities, he responded, "I always encourage them to try new things- to explore new ideas."

The Right Fit

Duane was always successful in finding the right schooling for his children. He felt it necessary to send his son to the local public math and science academy in his son's mother's neighborhood. Duane successfully found a Montessori school located in the western suburbs that taught Japanese to their youngest students, for his first daughter, Tawny. Tuition for the Montessori and fee schedules throughout most of their elementary matriculation were offset by Everheart's school board membership, a second job, volunteering and barter of service. Special school arrangements were medically necessary for the youngest who was diagnosed with

epilepsy. Both Duane and his then wife worked in law enforcement for the County. Their headquarters was miles away from the family home. In fear that they would not be close enough to the suburban neighborhood schools to reach their daughter in case of an emergency, they considered placing her in a school closer to their place of work. By the time Dejah came of school age, she attended school near her grandmother's house on the south side, twenty minutes down the expressway from her parent's place of employment. Duane proudly explains:

"I had to do what it took to keep my kids in a good school. I had no problem working extra hours, especially since I was the one who asked for it in court. Usually it's the mother who fights to keep the children in private school on the father's dime. But I was the one who insisted. I mean, she (referring to the older two children's mother) doesn't work so by my stating that to the judge at the child support hearing- that I wanted to them to stay in a private school or a good public school, I knew I would be the only one paying for it. I also knew that I would probably be the one parent to make sure they got to and from school. So, I didn't mind volunteering to work additional hours to keep everybody in their right spot. For Dejah...that was just common sense. I wasn't gonna put her somewhere I couldn't get to her if she got sick. If we needed to, we'd ask her grandmother to get to the school first and either her mother or I would meet her there."

The Montessori eventually closed due to low funding. That's when Everheart went back into a search for a comparable replacement. He was satisfied with both of his older children attending the school where his son had been going and continuing into his middle school years. This was the first time he found satisfaction with all three children in the public schools of

Metro. Although the school choices for his first two required much time, balancing of schedules and decent cooperation with their mother, which was slowly deteriorating, Mr. Everheart did what was necessary to offer them the advantage in becoming successfully educated, cultured in foreign language, fine arts and athletics. Duane went on to say...

“I wanted to put my children in a school where they were able.... Where my daughter was able to learn languages. I had both of my daughters in piano. I wanted to make sure my children were well diverse. Not only did they have a good education, but they had music and other types of things to keep them with options...I gave them what I felt was the best chance to succeed.”

When I asked him about athletics and extra-curricular activities besides piano, he conveyed that his oldest daughter also played soccer for six years, much of which was through a community youth league. He regretfully stated that his son, tried to go out for football only to impress his dad and ultimately quit so he could continue to do what he was comfortable with, which was reading and technology.

Many Are Called but ...

Along the line of discussing the appropriate type of education for Mr. Everheart's children in the interview, we ventured into decisions for high school. Tawny, the middle child, had been accepted and was already attending her choice public school on the north side of Metro. Percy was out of high school and attending Pope John University. We discussed how his family completed their second bout with the process of applying for what Metro Public Schools called

Selective Enrollment for his youngest daughter. This is a process, referred to in Chapter Two, where the students and parents fill out applications complete with grade point average, accomplished curriculum, family's educational history, background and household income. The point system for entry is weighted by grades and performance, a possible 300 points; previous standardized test scores, a possible 300 points and a three-hour comprehensive exam, the final best of 300 points, totaling a possible perfect score of 900 points.

“This lengthy process is not typically for the faint at heart.” Duane continues, “We went through this before with Tawny. It was a little easier because of her circumstances. But with Dejah, it's a little different with her grades, which were significantly lower than her siblings. She also had a two-parent income.”

Because Everheart's first daughter lived with her single mother at the time, and her mother did (or could) not work, her mother's minimal head of household income was taken into consideration. Despite the family situation, the young lady was quite bright and had no problem getting accepted into the Selective Enrollment program. Even though she lives on the southwest side of the city, she chose to attend a school on the far north side. Since school busses are not provided for selected enrollees, it is up to the families to find reliable transportation. Sometimes the young lady's travel time on public transportation approached ninety minutes both ways. To her, it was worth it. If she was unable to get up in time to catch the first bus of her scheduled public transportation, her dad had no problem driving her to either the connection point for the second bus or all the way to school, even if it meant late arrival to his workplace.

Two Down and One to Go

The older two benefitted from public and private school in the big city. Their choices to continue education were favorable at first. However, not exactly as their dad had expected or intended. Yes, Percy was an alum of the highly esteemed Pope John University located in the heart of downtown Metro, however, he dropped out without so much of a word to his father until a month after he withdrew from all of his courses and gave up his dorm room assignment. Duane eventually forgave his son for his blatant omission, but he obviously was hurt that his son chose not to continue his college education.

The oldest daughter, Tawny, graduated from the selective enrolled high school with a barely satisfactory grade point average in advanced placement coursework. She fell in love with a young lady classmate. Shortly after Duane had gotten accustomed to his daughter's sexual orientation, the couple broke the news to both sets of parents about their plans to seek a life as an official domestic couple in the state of California. Taken aback by the news, he conservatively agreed to partially support her move. The contingency for his participation, however, was that once they were settled on the west coast, Tawny would agree to enroll in a community college and work part time to support her own tuition. They made a pact. Currently, Tawny is holding up her end of the bargain by working her way through junior college with the aspiration to become an event planner or personal assistant to a professional actor.

The youngest daughter, Dejah is entering her third year at the public high school just minutes from her father's home in the south suburbs. Since her home of record is within that school district, she is now close enough to become more acquainted with after school activities

like band and athletics. These connections help build relationships with fellow students that live nearby.

Despite the turn of events and the multiple number of times Duane felt he had to push the emotional reset button, he has accepted the successes and challenges of each of his children, like a champion.

Reflections on Duane

Growing up as an only child in his mother's home brought on great responsibilities and prepared him for life choices at an early age. Now, a father of three, from two estranged relationships, he has chosen to include a tremendous amount of responsibility to his character by finding the appropriate education for his children. Everheart is driven by the determination of school choice, but not necessarily the way that I suspected. He explains:

“... a lot of times we are more reactive than proactive. With my children, I try to be more proactive in trying to pick a school that in the future, will give them the best opportunity to succeed. Since I was the closest one to the school district, I had a better inside idea of the schools and what they had to offer.”

Some preliminary questions in casual conversation, which led to a request for a full interview, referred to parents preferring school choice. Duane agreed that often we define school choice as making personal educational decisions of our own cognition even if our thoughts are influenced by society. Duane stood behind the philosophy that school choice is not simply an economic decision, but also reflects social group affinity, feelings, and behaviors of group

belonging (Yoon, E., & Lubienski, 2017, p. 5) Our positionality, or the consideration of how we manage our self-to world relationships has a lot to do with how we make decisions. Duane reflected by telling me that he feels comfortable in admitting that he believes in exercising the liberty to choose an appropriate education plan for his children, regardless of the need. Be it, a school with an outstanding Advanced Placement program or simply a school within proximity to an affordable daycare provider or family member, it should become available for all those who apply and meet certain, yet liberal, criteria. Regardless of the geographic location and zonal boundaries, more than the public schools within one's neighborhood should be on a list of availability for parents to consider. Duane feels perfectly justified in using specific family addresses outside of his designated area in order to find the *right* schools for his children.

Everheart states in a rather irritated manner:

“We should be able to attend any school in any area where parents ... [feel it would] provide a sound education. The parent, the child, and the teacher invest in the education. You don't get what your taxes pay for! You get what you invest as a parent or as a teacher in your child. In turn, the school district should invest in your child. You will *never* get the education that you want for your children if you believe that the education is only based on where you live. You have to take an active role in your children's or your child's life. Find out what their strengths and weaknesses are and find a school that's suitable.”

School Choice Defined by his Positionality

Duane was a father who believed in total immersion when it came to the social and educational welfare of his children. His mother worked during school hours and many evenings. Aside from his classmate companions, Duane didn't have many friends outside of school. "I didn't have a house full of brothers and sisters to learn from like my friends did," Duane responded when I asked about his childhood.

"I mean I had a buddy or two, but after school, I came straight home. By the time I was in middle school I had the routine down. As long as I was in the house by a certain time, I was good."

It seemed as if Duane did not have an extremely disciplined life style growing up other than doing mostly what his mother expected. He knew just about everyone on the block and they knew his mother. "I knew the minute I was seen doing something I had no business doing, my mother would know about it before she got home from work. I guess that's why I am the way I am today", Everheart surmised. The quasi-structure Duane grew up with helped build his character into adulthood. Duane's growing conscientiousness of neighborhood surroundings, assisted by his educational attainment and strong support system were all direct predictors (Hampson, Goldberg, Vogt & Dubanoski, 2007, p.123) of his current status. He acknowledges that the experiences of his childhood and relationship with his mother made him all the more aware of the happenings in his children's lives.

Duane continued by comparing his days playing on the block to the perilous conditions in

the inner city today. African American clusters have been pushed into ghettos as entire multi-generational groups. Even as some African Americans have achieved middle-class incomes, they have tended to stay within segregated residential boundaries (Kellogg, 2015, p. 183)

“Sure, we pulled a couple of pranks, tried to step to a li'l hottie (talk to a girl) or instigated a couple fights, but who didn't? My block was pretty tight back in the day. I obviously moved to the suburbs after I got a job with the force but my mom and some of the families I grew up with are still there.”

Because Everheart had shared custody of his older children during his marriage and then all three after the divorce, he considered himself a full-time single dad. Duane made additional efforts to be active in their school life regardless of their residence for the week. On many occasions before they considered attendance into a new school, Duane made a point to stay ahead of the curve by searching for and investigating the type of school environments and curriculum. Our conversation about school choice and exposure to new curricular ideas and challenges traced back to his childhood and how he wanted to do more for his children as his grandparents had intreated of his mother decades earlier.

ST: What made you come to the decision for your kids to go to these particular schools? Was the academic component like what you found in the Montessori school, something you searched for in the public schools for your other two children or was it about the diverse makeup?

DE: No, I think I attributed my choice and selections based on the account of society being more reactive rather than proactive. Choosing the school that would give them the best

possibility to achieve is something you do before not after you realize the school they're in is terrible. Montessori taught Mandarin and other languages that many African Americans and Hispanics would not have access to in a local public school. That's why I took a strong role at that time. I wanted to put my first daughter in a school where she was able to learn languages outside of Spanish, which she can learn from the Mexican side of her family.

ST: When you referred to your grandparents, the children's other side of the family and their support, would you say that that's what also contributed to you giving them the best education possible? Would you consider without their words of encouragement or support they otherwise would have just gone to the assigned public school around the corner?

DE: "I guess you could say that. "I remember my grandparents stressing education to me. They also continuously encouraged my mom to take more active roles in my education."

Duane agreed, to my surmise, to points from our conversation that he was a self-sufficient young man. He attributed his autonomy to the discipline taught by his maternal grandparents, whom he often visited on the weekends. Not having much of a strong educational background themselves, they encouraged Duane to go as far as he could in school. Duane instinctively knew that his mother tried to attend school activities including parent teacher conferences. There were occasions, however when she had conflicting schedules. He explains,

"My mother couldn't take the active role that she really wanted to, based on the fact that she had to work a lot to support me. She was then a single parent and she had to maintain

the house.” It was then that Duane understood and accepted his mother’s positionality of having to pick up overtime at work to keep a roof over their heads.”

Her positionality called for her to work harder and longer to be better (Esnard & Cobb-Roberts, 2018, p.164) Duane knew that his mother relied on her family for moral and sometimes financial support.

Everheart recalls applying the social skills he learned as a child toward his decision making as an adult and a parent. He is not afraid to confront, ask questions and respect cultures and concepts from different people. This fresh outlook, in my opinion, is an attribution to his personality. His desire has always been to encourage his children with the same demeanor throughout a healthy academic career just as his grandparents did for him when her was younger. When I asked him about the qualities he looked for in a new school home, he gave an anticipated response.

ST: Considering your children’s race, Mexican/ African American for the two older ones and African American for the youngest, would you choose academics over racial make-up and cultural diversity even if the school that you're looking at was predominately of one race or culture?

DE: Could you clarify?

ST: Would you overlook diversity as a contributing factor and still send your child there because of your attraction to their academic strategy? Would you ignore the diversity? Or the lack thereof?

DE: I would look at the academics first. The diversity can be found in other types of programs that you could provide for your child... like dance, music lessons, sports or church. You know on the outside.

ST: Yes.

DE: You see, on the outside, if you have to, you can balance out whatever they are missing socially in school. The priority for me is I want them to have the best education possible no matter what- no matter what.

Mr. Everheart and I had much in common when it came to our children deserving a quality education. The level or the actual definition of what is deemed “the best” is left up to interpretation. Perhaps, that juncture is where our similar positionalities deviate.

Connections and Conclusion on Duane

Duane and I had one important thing in common. We both agree that parental decisions and sacrifices like the ones he made were based upon the needs and consideration for the academic challenge and the cultural acceptance of our children. Upon further shared conversations with co-workers and close friends, who also live in Metro suburbs, the similarities remain the same with an influence on middle class and middle wage earners. Family finance and cultural diversity were factors that had to be taken into account as well.

Duane’s and my connections to family, social circle, and religious spiritual upbringing (Busacca & Reh fuss, 2017, p.317) were similar as far as the structure was concerned. We respected our parents. We had neighborhood and school friends. Sundays

were days of morning worship followed by anticipated mouth-watering family dinners with enough leftovers to last through the next week. Homework and play time usually followed dinner. An awesome bubble bath and bedtime story with mom or silent reading from a chosen book from the public library would close out my evening. Duane recalled similar Sundays with his grandparents as well as with his mother when she was not working.

My growing up in the multicultural northern suburbs, however, created a different type of discovery of cultural ideals than Duane's growing up in a predominantly Black neighborhood of inner city Metro. Ethnocentric monocultural bias is a reality in most formal systems in the United States (p.317). As described through the Bronfenbrenner ecological model noted in an earlier chapter, our intra- familial and extra-familial systems affect children's growth, intellect and development. Cultural competencies increase over time when focused (Leach & Aten, 2010, p.8) within the family structure.

Not to say that I did not recognize my own race and cultural identity among my White friends during my early elementary days in private school, but it did take the outside influences (that Duane previously mentioned) like church and sports to teach me to consort with other children like me. As a middle-class Black girl from the suburbs, it was natural for me to determine my position among my White private school peers by recognizing the differences in our home and school life. I grew up learning that privilege was a social arrangement that depended on which category we happened to be sorted

into by other people and how they treated us as a result (Johnson, 2006, p.15). Up until I had the eye-opening experience of being teased by a racist White boy at summer camp in 1974, I was quite comfortable with my positionality. Duane, on the other hand, was immersed in his own culture and race because he and his friends all lived in the same lower- middle class neighborhood and attended the same public schools and churches. Although exposure to life outside of his domain, was rather limited, he too, considered his childhood a happy one.

As not to offend or affront the integrity of the interviewee, I had to strategically remain emotionless, as not to coerce, show approval or disapproval of Duane's answers, especially if they didn't coincide with my beliefs or teachings. Just as my being an educator of a less popular and impoverished school district and a parent, I often have to withhold my opinion of my dissatisfaction of curriculum and policy in fear of the loss of job security. While I am extremely happy for those students, who make the best of it by managing to beat the insurmountable odds and succeed through their assigned neighborhood schools under the watchful guidance and care of their parents and teachers, I am just as happy to hear about the families, like his three children, who either move or have enough gumption to do what it takes to seek another school district. I am often faced with the challenge of publicly showing parental support of school choice but not to the point where I offend my own administration.

I believe the situations and needs of this family were and are currently valid. Metro suburban families should be afforded the option to rightfully elect the appropriate type and place of public education for their children without the worry of facing scholastic eviction or a

financial penalty, not to mention, the moral guilt component of divesting in their own community.

Parents of Metro suburbia are faced with many challenges when it comes to making sound decisions for their children in the school system. I do, however, fail to see the flexibility or the provisions for these special situations on behalf of school administration. Of course, I do recognize the growing population of charter schools, some of which extend from the inner-city chains out to the south, west and far north suburbs. However, many of them run under the auspices of the Metro Public School system with the minor infraction that students who attend the suburban charter must be a citizen of the city where the school is located.

Perhaps if either of the parents (and many others who face the same challenges) had carefully pre-calculated and then proposed an influential argument based on cultural, economic or political reasoning, the fear of rejection would not have been as prominent. Had it not been for the strong support of my family, my educational background, family values very similar to my guest interviewee, and school choice, my family would probably be facing an entirely different outcome. I am appreciative of the options.

Our sons and daughters are faced with academic and social challenges every day. I for one am proud of my parental instinct. I am also proud being a good listener and interviewer. I listened to Mr. Everheart. I listened to my own child. I listened to his teachers and fellow role models. I listened my son's friends and most importantly, I listened to my conscience. Though this practice that requires much time, balance and patience, the bottom line it was our choice.

**Portrait of Chaneese Whitman:
Nurse by Day, Teacher by Night**

My Perspective
by
T. N. Mosley

Im'ma start slow, like it's basic.

I got on a coat, but I stay sick.

Heard some news today- that don't make sense. People killin' out here like it's play tense.

I don't judge much, but I am aware. Because there's some people that don't care-

*if I'm a top teen or a crack fiend, cuz all they see in me is fried chicken wings and collard greens
or the saggin' jeans- that I don't rock!*

Low fade, twist top, with my wrist cold, but I spit heat like a crock pot.

Some folks still think I'm not cool, cuz I don't wear Jordans and I don't wear "Trues"!

I don't take political views. I don't intend to watch the news.

Cuz all we hear about is the Black kids getting' shot dead by the dark blues.

*Then the whole world is a real lie. Because if what really matters is Black lives,
then tell why's it's ok to kill one another on the south side?*

Social media can't even stand ground. Now, I'm really about to get profound.

They always cryin' put the guns down but up next is the gun sound!

I call it how I see it. I do what I believe in. World peace is the main objective.

Everything I see is collective.

This is all... my...perspective.

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I chose to introduce the portrait of my next participant through a different lens. Chaneese Whitman, a strong minded African American mother had a son who faced daily challenges of his own identity and coping with the situations around him. Part of her story reminded me of a poem that my son wrote when he was sixteen. Many parts of the poem still ring true today. As a poet, he spoke as a young Black male who faced daily challenges of social survival of the fittest. He felt no matter how well-groomed he appeared, (referring to his “low fade, twist top” which is a trimmed hair style for Black males) or how appropriately accessorized (referring to “my wrist cold” which means a nice watch) most people, White people, who didn’t know him, only saw the negative connotation or representation of a deviant Black male. In his eyes, he felt that he was stereotyped as a drug dealing wanna-be who delves in foods of high calories and cholesterol. He felt, perhaps, that he was viewed by his peers as one who nerdlly schleps around in sagging jeans (symbolizing prison attire) without much of a fashion sense because he didn’t wear high end name brands like leather Jordan shoes or \$100 True Religion jeans. The connection to the portrait of Mrs. Whitman will emerge as you read further.

To my son it appeared that it did not matter that he was a law-abiding citizen. It did not matter that he was a good student-athlete and a teen community leader well respected by peers and adults alike. Political parties did not matter to him because most of the repeated news was about gun violence and the growth of non-partisan untrustworthiness Blacks had for the men and women in law enforcement. Not just reports of police brutality were flooding the soundwaves throughout the city, but there were countless stories of seemingly defenseless Black people around the nation being gunned down by the ones who were sworn to serve and protect. On the other hand, as the poem points out, even though we seek justice against the heinous act of police

brutality by investing in the cry out movement of Black Lives Matter, Metro city still holds an alarming rate of Black on Black crime including murder.

Poetry is an outlet that my son found to express his frustration. He had been writing in his journal since middle school. After having a very in-depth conversation with Chaneese Whitman about the social and academic struggles of her son I recommended a therapeutic method that I thought attributed to my son's moral character. Poetry is an aesthetic creative process that involves conscious reflection. It is a way to articulate feelings and create an aesthetic stance to internal questions like, "What do I believe in? and how will I live my life according to my beliefs (Diaz & McKenna, 2004, p.215)?

I recommended to Mrs. Whitman what I felt helped my son deal with peer pressure and temptation. I recommended poetry. The following except from my first interview with Whitman explains the challenges her only son, David, faced on a regular basis, which led to his change in school settings.

CW: I noticed a little rebellion, you know, like teenager stuff. I'll tell you. Like, he came into the house. I got on him about not returning when he was supposed to. He started crying and he just let it all out. I'm like what's wrong? I was basically scared at this point.

Me: Wait, this was recently?

CW: Yes, like just a couple weeks ago. He just came to be so frustrated. I mean I was really concerned and I was asking him over and over, "What's wrong? Then he finally said looking up and basically yelled out:

‘I looked at all the superheroes and looked at all the people around me and I really felt like this is the world I can grow up to be whatever I want. I can do whatever I want.’

“I didn’t know what to do but I was attached to every word he was saying- tryin’ to figure out if he had been hurt or somethin’. He calmed down but was still very frustrated and continued:

‘I’m just really noticing how this world is nothing like what I thought. It’s scary. You send me to the store and I know I’m not doing anything wrong and I see the police passing by and’....

(she paused to shake her head and look downward as she relived the moment)

“And then he said, ‘Dudes on the block that’s not doing nothin’ but jus’ hangin’ out always wantin’ me to run with them and stuff. But then I come home and...

(she paused briefly and quoted her son once more)

‘I’m trying to find a way out and I don’t know my way out!’ ”

Me: Wow. (I replied in a low whisper) How did you respond?

CW: I said, “So, why are you mad at me?” And he said:

‘I’m not taking it out on you, mom. I’m not trying to be disrespectful. It’s just so hard and I have to have my guard up all the time outside the house and when I come in the house I have to shift gears and go back to being humble and being a child- and it’s just a lot.’

Me: Where was Dad during all this?

CW: Dad spoke to him about it. He was actually walking in when we were arguing. I turned to him and said, “You need to talk to him” cuz I don’t really know how to handle this.”

Me: Yea, this is a man to man conversation.

CW: Yeah, so I let his dad talk to him and they went out. I learned my son had a lot of anxiety and stress.

Me: So, what are you doing to help him deal with the stress?

CW: Well my husband and I have a membership with the local health club. So, they gave us a really good deal for him to join

Me: That's wonderful.

CW: Yea, he goes there on a regular basis to work out.

Me: Might I suggest another avenue that may help release a little stress?

CW: What's that?

Me: Well when you mentioned how David couldn't really walk to the store without being contacted by others, probably gang bangers, soliciting him, I thought about how my son told me how he had been approached by a GD (Gangster Disciple) in a middle school locker room with interest in recruiting him. This was in a school setting, but apparently there were no boundaries. While cleaning the basement one day a few months later I noticed a journal full of poems. It was all in his hand writing. Some poems were about love and religion, but quite a few of them were about social action and dealing with society and life in general. I was scared at first and took a screen shot of one of them and showed it to a family friend who is a psychologist. He ended up counseling him on some of the important issues that warranted attention from his writing. He also counseled me on allowing him to continue to express himself in this manner because it seemed to be a good outlet. To this day, he writes, reads and recites his poetry in front of church congregations and youth conferences. He's even entered his talent into contests and

walked away with prize money. Maybe this is something David could think about. He seems to have so much pent up anger.

CW: Yes, he does.

Me: Maybe he needs to just put pencil to paper.

CW: That sounds like a good idea. Thanks. I'll talk to him about it.

### **David's Return to School**

I had been a teacher in my district for over fifteen years. While the majority of my elementary teaching and expertise was founded in kindergarten, the school district saw the need in 2012 to place me in charge of a 4<sup>th</sup> grade class in a predominately Black-Hispanic neighborhood. Most of the students in my mono-lingual 4<sup>th</sup> grade class spoke Spanish as a first language. One of the four Black students under my supervision, whom I had become most fond of, was David. He was a C student but his continuing effort and love for learning kept the both of us motivated though out the year. I particularly appreciated the open communication with his father who met his son at a designated corner every day after school.

Fast forward into the beginning school year 2017 as I walked through the halls behind the front office of a different school building. I passed the nurse's office and noticed an unfamiliar Black woman sitting at the desk. As a courtesy and out of curiosity, I stuck my head in the doorway to introduce myself. She acknowledged me and asked, "You don't remember me, do you?" I politely replied, "No, I don't think so. Should I?" She went on to explain that she was the mom of a boy I had in my 4<sup>th</sup> grade class six or seven years earlier. Quickly realizing the only time, in recent history, when I had a 4<sup>th</sup> grade class, I only had two Black males. The other Black

boy had moved to another state. So, by quick deductive reasoning I blurted out, “Oh my goodness!”, I exclaimed.” How is David? He must be at the high school by now.” As an afterthought of my haste, I hoped I had the right name. I did. But the response was not what I expected. This is when I began to learn of David and his family’s turbulent journey through North Metro school system. Listening to Mrs. Whitman tell only part of her story which involved changing his educational path from public, through charter and then to home schooling, had me fearing that I may have contributed to their plight.

At that moment, I couldn’t have felt more relieved to see a student appear in the nurse’s office requiring service. That was my reason to politely excuse myself from our conversation. I went home that day thinking more about David’s family. I actually wanted to know if, somehow, I helped remedy or added to the family’s frustration with school policy. One thing was for certain. We worked in the same building and would cross paths frequently. Nurse Whitman had a story to tell. As her son’s former teacher, I had a desire to find out my level of influence in the decisions the family made that shaped their story. The family’s indirect return into my teaching profession and my doctoral study on school choice was quite timely. The obvious notion was to propose an in-depth interview with Mrs. Whitman about their issues with school choice.

Since ethnography does not come without consideration, there was one critical feature that I had to maintain throughout this interview process, in particular. I needed to exercise the ability to be a part of the conversation yet remain apart from the true sentiments or the content of what is said by the other parties. In other words, I had to maintain the balance between the researcher and researched (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 100). The caveat for me was to form

questions and accept responses with neutrality and professionalism. Two days later I approached Whitman with my proposal for an interview. I explained my position and requested her assistance in understanding how her positionality effected David's matriculation into his middle and high school years. She eagerly accepted my request by congratulating me and setting up a scheduled time to talk.

### **Chaneese's Interview on her Childhood**

Since school days are filled with classroom instruction for me and medical necessities for Nurse Whitman, we agreed on a time after school to conduct the interview. Knowing that Chaneese, as she insisted I refer to her during "off the clock hours", had to get home by a certain time to begin home school for her two youngest children, I tailored my questions toward specific answers, rather than general questions that required much thought and open ended lengthy responses. Since my classroom was further from the front of the building, the nurse's office was a more convenient setting. I wanted Chaneese to be as comfortable as possible and close to her personal belongings for departure in case the interview ran into overtime.

My perception on Chaneese was strengthened by learning how she developed into an advocate parent who saw school choice as empowering her children to be successful (Cooper, 2007). I recognized that her strength grew from humble beginnings and emulation of her mother's devotion to qualified academic achievement.

Chaneese was raised on a beautiful treelined street on the far west side of Metro that was mostly African American families but was progressively changing as families of different races



moved in. Her neighborhood was just a two-minute drive from the nearest suburb of streets adorned with large two story Craftsman and Tudor model homes. As a matter of fact, if one drove down her street close to the Metro city dividing line today, the change in atmosphere would be quite noticeable. The further west you traveled toward the Maple Parks edge, the further away you were from Metro's boarded-up buildings and the desolate neighborhoods of crime and despair. It's like night and day.

She described her elementary school years as average. I must admit I wasn't as intrigued in Chaneese's and my conversation until we ventured into her quest for a compatible high school. Chaneese grew up in a two parent household with her siblings. Her mother was very much involved in her schooling. In fact, much of Chaneese's behavior toward her children's education is based from her mother's love and need for inclusion. An excerpt of our interview explains her mother's type of involvement in further detail.

Me: Do you think that your social connections or your parents had influence on you when it was time for you to make school choice decisions for your children?

CW: Absolutely.

Me: How so?

CW: Because my mom was very involved in our education while growing up. It was like a no brainer for me. She was like a volunteer at the school always participating in PTA and everything like that. So, when I had children and they became school age and it was time

for them to go to school, I definitely wanted them to experience some of the things that I experienced.

Me: Is your mother still with us?

CW: Oh yes.

Me: Is she an involved grandparent or did she turn over the reign to you?

CW: My mom definitely, influenced me and my kids out here. She still lives in the city, but she came out here when I first enrolled them in school because she wanted to check out everything. My friends, from growing up, actually helped me too. We actually talk about things all the time and bounce things off each other.

Me: It sounds like you have quite a village.

CW: I definitely do. We share our experiences that we had while growing up and compare them to how we deal with our kids today. And my mom she contributes so I get a lot of support. I think one of the biggest things that stood out from my mom is that she wasn't afraid to have a conference with the teacher at any given time. But some of the people that I knew - didn't have that. For instance, my mom taught me to never disrespect an adult with an argument. If a teacher or principal says something to you that seemed unfair, untrue or discourteous, you talk to me and I will come up to the school to handle it. There's no need for a child to try to handle this type of situation on his own. There was a difference from the way she was back then and the way some parents are today. They

believe everything their child tells them. They haven't gone to one parent-teacher conference and want to come out swinging before they address all of the facts.

I silently agreed thinking back to times when I had been questioned over misinformation from parents I had not even met until a complaint.

### **Chaneese's School Days**

"I was brought up to believe from my parents and my teachers that achievement was a good thing. We competed for good grades," Chaneese told me when recollecting her school years. The closest elementary school for children in Chaneese's neighborhood was within blocks of her home. Students who attended were mostly African Americans from the west side. However, in attempts to presumably secure a better education for their children and to escape unsafe conditions in their local neighborhood (Mehan, H., Hubbard, L., Villaneuva, I., Lintz, A., & Okamoto, D. (1996, p. 120), Chaneese's parents managed to find a way for their children to attend a grammar school outside of their boundary lines in a Polish neighborhood. As far as acceptance, Chaneese seemed quite comfortable in her setting. "I would have never had the foundation if I had gone to my neighborhood school," she claimed. Whitman stayed ahead of the curve all through grammar school. When the time came for high school registration her family did not have to concern themselves with an informed search. Chaneese's elementary and grammar schools were actually considered natural feeder programs into the high school where she wanted to attend, which was also a few miles on the northwest side of Metro several miles outside of her neighborhood. In her technology classes her high achievement level actually

placed her in an advanced placement program with part-time employment opportunities through the high school's counseling services. Whitman reminisces about the highlights in high school.

“There was just so much to do at my new high school! Opportunities that I wouldn't have had if I went to my neighborhood high school. I mean, from the time I was a freshman, I will never forget this class and my teacher, Mr. Jackson. It was called TTS Motivation. It was an hour-long class strictly devoted to technical thinking skills and how to think outside the box.”

Another good point discussed was of a co-op program that permitted students to work under the license of the Secretary of State. Her mother obtained her work permit. Chaneese was the only freshman who was accepted into this program because of her advanced preparation in computer technology which was something she figured she wouldn't have learned at the neighborhood school.

“I know this for a fact because my friends on the block didn't have computer technology classes. I was happy and prepared to work at the age of fourteen. I worked in the registration office. And it wasn't just me it was just a whole group of us. We were taught professionalism all the way through our senior year. I will never forget that experience. I loved Schubert High.”

### **Thin Line Between Advocacy and Hovering**

As a mother of four including a set of twins, Chaneese has her hands quite full. She and her family moved 40 miles north from the west side of Metro to the northern suburb of North

Metro in 2011. Her son, David, was nearly eight years old and began his 2<sup>nd</sup> grade year in a new north suburban public school. From that point of new beginnings, it seemed that David was struggling with the transition. Despite the moral and academic support offered by his family, even his grandmother who voluntarily drove to the suburbs to assist with school, there was still sort of disconnect between David and his teachers. Chaneese's experience with David's scholastic journey was explained in a statement she made during our interview.

CW: I started teaching my son from a very early age. My teaching him at home and public Pre-K easily brought him up to a kindergarten level by the age of four. He began public school for kindergarten on time. First grade public school was off to a good start, but I started noticing, which actually shocked me, was the bullying. The bullying wasn't coming so much from the kids. I wasn't expecting it, but the bullies were actually the adults! What I was noticing from my friends that had their children previously in home school, was the possible reasoning behind it. It seemed like our children were being singled out. Their children like mine seemed to be bullied by the teachers to the point where the kids were made to feel inferior even though they knew the content of what was being taught.

“My son was actually referred to as a know-it-all by his 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher. To me, she was undoing everything that was instilled in him prior to him coming into school. I felt like instead of challenging him and giving him work more appropriate to his level, she was cowering him down to the level of first grade with everyone else. It was like she was penalizing him for knowing more than the rest of his class. He knew the answers. He always raised his hand.”

Me: I'm curious. How did you know he knew the answers and raised his hand?

CW: I worked close with the teachers and I came to every conference. I knew my rights and I made periodic observations. I sat in his class during a lesson and I noticed that he purposely gave the wrong answers. After school I asked him why he answered those questions wrong when he knew the answer. He said, "because sometimes if I answer it right all the time then it gets worse on me". So, it became like they made him lazy and appear unintelligent. They made him think that achieving success was a bad thing. This was something I wasn't used to because when I was young, I loved school and we congratulated each other when we got high marks. That response, alone, put me in a different state of mind. I felt it was up to me to define the curriculum. Not only that, but I had to rebuild David's confidence and give the foundation that reinforced the high self-esteem he once had.

After his 4<sup>th</sup> grade year with me as his teacher in a public North Metro elementary school, mostly populated with Hispanics and African Americans, Chaneese decided to move her son to the newly renovated charter school located on the military base just a few school bus stops from their home. There had been so much controversy over the charter school coming to the community. Parents were in search of school choice and public school teachers were in search of adequate funding for the existing public schools so their families wouldn't have to look elsewhere. Since David's younger sister was already at the charter school, he was automatically positioned to receive priority on the waiting list to join his sibling the following semester.

## **Bad Charter Experience**

David entered charter school for his 5<sup>th</sup> grade year. His family was expecting a new beginning, once again. He and his sister were together at the same institution. Chaneese thought this was the better choice for the both of them. Additionally, once again, according to mom, the year was off to a great start until mid-year when an incident occurred involving her son. Throughout the entire ordeal, Chaneese learned that her son was being bullied, this time by fellow classmates. Perhaps, he had met his intellectual match. Teachers and even administrators were involved in a very publicly recognized incident which allegedly led to the non-return of the charter school principal for the following year. Whitman recalls the incident involving her son at the charter school, which supported her theory of the school system's "pre-school to prison pipeline". She explains.

They are just basically holding our children in a sub-par, unsafe school or pattern of unwelcomed environments, just like a holding cell. They live in this blocked mindset of survival of the fittest at home and school until their poor choices land them in the penitentiary. They are conditioned to not know any better. When they are faced with confrontation, they are taught to handle it themselves because they are afraid of administrative repercussion. Worse yet, they are afraid of the punishment from home. My husband and I constantly tell our children to let us know if there is ever a time they feel uncomfortable at school. David, for one, knew I meant business, but he also knew I was his advocate.

The interview continues:

CW: I remember a time when my son got into trouble at the charter school. He was called into the office. From previous conversations, he knew any time he got called into the office, he was supposed to notify me. At that time, he did try to call me on his cell phone. Unfortunately, he didn't get a chance to talk to me by the time he went into the office, but he left the phone connected and, in his pocket, so I could hear the conversation. As soon as I understood that the conversation was taking a turn for the worse with the principal yelling at my son, I immediately came up there. As soon as I arrived, I asked to join in the meeting. I told the principal that while I was not trying to be intrusive, I reminded him that this was an institution for learning and not bullying. The principal was shocked that I even knew that my son was in his office. He wanted to know why I was even there. I let him know that I didn't like the way he was yelling at my son. I then asked him what he thought the likelihood was that my child would get stopped by the police with no one to advocate for him and his reason for being on the street.

Me: Was this a White administrator?

CW: Of course. So, I continued. I told him that there is a strong likelihood that my child will be stopped by the police in this neighborhood for no apparent reason but for racial profiling. So, if he gets in trouble at school, then he needs representation immediately. You shouldn't get into the practice of teaching them that a reprimand that requires a visit to the principal's office for questioning without parental consent or at least proper notification is okay- especially if the child knows he has a right to contact his parent.



Shouldn't you have at least allowed him to make a phone call? He knew he wasn't obligated to say anything until he had fair representation.

Me: Was he being accused of something?

CW: No, but he was involved in an issue with classmates bullying him. For whatever reason my son always attracted more female friends versus male friends at school. He had a so-called friend at the charter. This guy, who I assumed was jealous of my son, apparently set him up where he was surrounded by other boys. David was thinking nothing of it. He said he thought because they were with the one common friend, it was all good. When they all walked past a certain point beyond the teacher's area of supervision, they jumped him. Older kids from the 6th grade were laughing and talking about it being a set up. Dave added that the guy that was walking with him, his supposed friend, punched him in the face. At first David thought it was an accident so he didn't react right away. Before he could recover from that hit, a kid walking on his left side punched them and that's how he knew he was in a fight. Of course, the officials ran toward the fight and everybody else started running in opposite directions toward the schools. The fight was broken up. The principal came toward everything without knowing any of the details and he went straight for my son. He accused my son of antagonizing a fight saying that there is something he must have done to have four guys jump on him.

Whitman continued her story.

CW: I heard him over the phone ask David, “What did you do?” He said he could understand how one person would be upset but how did all four of them jump on you for no reason? He was just drilling my son and all the while he was drilling and talking to my son (and remember the cell phone was still on) I heard every word when I was on my way over there. Apparently, the kids conjured up a story as if my son was talking about a “rape victim” or something. This principal was yelling at my son and forcing him into admit something that he did not do. It wasn't until my husband and I both showed up and then the principal changed his tone. He was in the middle of the process of trying to suspend my son. I said, “No you will not suspend him-not for defending himself.” And then I asked the principal, “Did you even ask the boys what was said that was so.....

Me: Offensive?.

CW: Yes! And he really couldn't come up with an answer. Then he went over to talk to the other boys to ask them why or how this all came about. Get this. The kids said they simply just don't like him and that he thinks he's smarter than them. I found out later that the school called the boys' parents and low and behold, the parents admitted that their kids had had problems in the public schools and ended up over at the charter school as a result. They had previous encounters with fighting. My son had no history of fighting.

Me: You see? Many people think that the charter school is the dumping ground for students with bad behavior. Like it's a boarding school for discipline.

CW: Yea, and I was basically saying behind this whole incident that we need to place our kids in environments where they are going to teach them the truth as well as the curriculum. And that includes how to handle life situations starting with authority. They need to know their rights as students and as human beings. Just as my mother taught me, you must respect authority. However, that's very hard to do when that authority figure is responsible for harboring an unsafe environment.

Chaneese decided she had had her complete fill of public and charter schools by David's seventh grade year. She and her husband did not have the resources to place their children in private school. While his sister was able to sustain further tutelage from the charter school, David returned to home school. By the time David turned fourteen, he convinced his mother to let him enter public high school as a freshman. Against her better judgement, she allowed him to attend North Metro High School. It seemed as history had a way of repeating itself. This time for a reason less clear than the earlier transitions, David returned to the home school structure. His sister joined him as she was going through her middle school years.

Home school for the two younger siblings is the family's current position. Mother Chaneese and her husband work opposite schedules during the week. In fact, during both of the lengthy mid-day interviews she and I had, she informed me that the moment she walks through her back door, her work day ends as a nurse and begins as Mrs. Whitman the teacher until nine o'clock pm. She affirmed that while she was at work her children, whose school day is typically reversed, would have already awakened, eaten lunch and are mostly likely preparing their homework assignments under the guidance of their father.

## **Personal and Selected Reflections on Whitman**

Meeting Mrs. Whitman for a second time under the circumstance of being in the same workplace brought back quite a few emotions. I won't tell a lie. I was originally apprehensive about our meeting. I often thought, "What if she blamed me like the rest of the public school teachers for her son's complications?" I remember going to bed worrying how uncomfortable it could be to remain professional around someone that may have included me in the blame for the school district's failure in her son's educational success. Student behavior, be it due to the lack of interest or acting out, that causes stress in teachers is related to teaching and learning. Students' lack of desire to study, low grades acceptance of mediocrity in participation in the classroom is often perceived by the students and parents as the teacher's failure (Evertson and Weinstein, 2011, p.963). I definitely felt partially responsible. David did transfer to charter school after his fourth-grade year with me, after all.

When I discussed this notion and sense of guilt with a colleague she helped me realize that the charter school was the newest and shiniest thing out there, at the time. It turned the heads of a lot of parents. Some were truly looking for a better educational solution and others just wanted to jump on the band wagon. No matter what the outer appearance may seem, the underpinning of most parents' desire for varying kinds of school choice is one consistent theme: their search for a 'school of hope.' Parents want their children to have a successful life and career. (Yoon, E., & Lubienski, 2017, p. 11) There was one certainty, however. My colleague asked me, "And where did they end up?" "In home school", I answered. "Exactly. So, even after they left you and went to charter, they still were not satisfied", she rebutted. I didn't know if the unfortunate lesson of "the grass is not always greener on the other side" completely eased my

concern, but it did cause me to look at the situation from a different perspective. It also inspired me to follow up with further inquiry. My interview with Mrs. Whitman was insightful in a way that I hadn't considered. Not only did I receive affirmation that Chaneese did not blame me in any way for the figurative hurdles in David's educational journey, but she thanked me for being one of the teachers who kept open communication with her family. Although I did not feel totally exonerated I humbly accepted her acknowledgement.

### **David's Connections to Past and Present**

"How did he do today?", his father would ask. Most days I gave it to him straight. There were times when I felt David did not do well on a test and he was given homework to make up for the grade. His father responded with assurance that he would do better. Many times, Dad was right. However, the pattern of falling back into a slump would soon return. Patterns such as this, reminded me of the same that my son and I experienced around the same age. My choice at the time was to detach from the previously permitted enrollment of the North Metro school district and move him to the home school district of our residential area.

The public school teacher's greatest fear about charter or open school choice is the "form of competition between schools that will allow those with the most valued cultural capital to commodify it in the educational marketplace, leaving those whose cultural capital is less valued with far less market power" (Wells, Lopez, Scott & Holme, 1999, p.181). As a public school teacher in small community of the same district that administratively supported the charter school inclusion, I had my private thoughts about a charter school absorbing the students that would have come to us but for the lack of funding and lesser appeal. I recall a brief but impactful

conversation with David's father on the corner where we met after school. He specifically asked me what I thought of their decision to send him to the new charter school across town. With reservation, I acknowledged that while our public schools are still quite suitable, it may not hurt to see what the charter school has to offer for their son. My position then and of course now, is I am in favor of school choice as long as public schools and teaching jobs don't suffer.

Chaneese, personally felt that there was a growing disconnection between public school teachers and the communities and children in which they serve. She wanted her son to experience some of the same things she did during her middle and high school days. The difference, however, was that David didn't grow up with the same advantages. Chaneese was given opportunities by attending an elementary preparatory school that naturally fed into an awaiting high school of the same caliber, Whitman was a product of a successful program that involved a migration movement of Black and Hispanic students to a predominantly White school. She and selected students were part of an educational transitions that serve as key points and placement process that moved achieving minority students on a track from middle school to high school (Gamoran, 1992, p.185). David, growing up in a different place and time, obviously didn't have the same advantages. Chaneese explained her reasoning for preferred school choice based the appearance of oversight or lack of investment in her son's educational welfare and her positionality.

My opinion is, that parents should have the options to send them wherever they want to go without limits. That that would raise the bar for every school to be on one accord.

Right now, you have certain districts or teachers that really could care less about the kids

and the areas where they teach. Half of the staff don't even live in that district, so they don't care. I mean... it's not their tax dollars. Is it fair that because my husband and I don't have a certain income that my child deserves less of a quality education?

Authors Yoon and Lubienski (2017) summarize this notion by stating that “parents imagine particular schools through their dispositions (*habitus*), which are shaped by their spatial locations in a broadening spatial hierarchy as families seek their schools of hope.” In terms involving the Whitmans and families like them, this meant that the question of societal placement, feeling left out, being overlooked or treated as second class citizens (family), positioned and linked them to a level of distrust for the public school district within their own community. In fact, in reflection to her question, I felt it necessary to reexamine my relationships with certain students in my school. Even though my tax dollars go toward the school districts several miles up the northern shore, I feel I still have an obligation to reach out to as many students who cross my path in the low-income school district where I serve. By recognizing some of my student's behavior and learning patterns that my son had while growing up in the same school district, I chose to embrace the nurturing image by teaching with maternal sensibility (Beauboeuf- Lafontant, 2002, p.72). This is a natural method that is particularly visible in the pedagogy of African American women teachers (p.72). I often found that different approaches coming from me, sometimes with more stern expectations, were well received by my minority and even some White students. Perhaps this is a connection to the assertion made by mother Patricia Darling where she felt that it took “people like us” to look beyond the discrepancies, seek the potential and “push”, nurture or encourage them to higher levels.

Black service providers and community activists alike have long recognized that their own destiny was inextricably linked to the destiny of other Blacks, and that in forging ties of mutual support, collective survival and racial progress would be achieved (Ward, 1995, pp. 176–177). As long as, there was a level of understanding among my parents, administration and most of all, the students, teaching with encouraging words and a little tough love developed into a respected attribute to my character.

### **Chapter Summary**

The data that I gathered proved to be thought-provoking, thus creating the insightful task of correlating the narratives of the speakers into specific categories. I then had the arduous mission of organizing the patterns categorically. To create a composition, I had to find a visual common thread that linked words often spoken by each participant. The coding and formats were inspired by similar words, phrases and positionalities that were expressed by my contributors. As a reminder the research questions, which lead the columns in *Tables 1 and 2* below were as follows:

The summaries embedded at the close of each portrait illustrate themes and patterns in the data related to my original research questions:

- How could positionality inform or influence African American parents' use of school choice?



- Are all options offered presented as a “marketplace” of favorable spaces of educational agency for African American families in low-income suburban areas and in larger cities or does this rhetoric merely create new pitfalls for “consumers”?
- And, how does my own story as a researcher illustrate the degree to which positionality matters as an aspect of agency in contexts of school choice to share and address this disparity using episodes of experiences of friends and my own family life?

Table 1

*Targeted Responses Related to the Guiding Research Questions through Positionality*

|                                                              | <b>Patricia</b>                                                                                | <b>Letitia</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <b>Duane</b>                                                                                                                                                               | <b>Chaneese</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <b>Agnes</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Positionality inform or influence school choice</b>       | *And the fact that it took people “like us” to recognize that was an eye opener as well.       | *“I went to a public school. Even though I lived in a middle-class neighborhood, mostly White. I didn’t live in a bad neighborhood, but I didn’t go to school in my neighborhood at all.<br><br>*Eggs thrown at the house and neighbor planting a “forgive us tree”<br><br>*She had a single mom | *Grandparents low education, high expectations<br><br>*Only child<br><br>* latchkey kid with single mom<br><br>*Grew up in all black neighborhood<br><br>*now a single dad | *” Right now, you have certain districts or teachers that really could care less about the kids where they teach- because staff don’t even live in that District, so they don’t care. I mean... it’s not their tax dollars. | *” Where there were houses, there were black families. Some of us were related, some of us close friends. But it was a safe place to grow up in a time where I didn’t really have to worry about ...uh” (classification)<br><br>*” Your dad kept asking me “Did you do the homework? How many blacks go there?” (in a gruff voice) I told him that didn’t matter”<br><br>*” Mama had a way with words, especially to white people.” |
| <b>My personal connections to responses on positionality</b> | *I preferred that my son went to a school that was more diverse with black and brown teachers. | *I attended a PWI private school for K-2 <sup>nd</sup> that was considered a very good school.<br><br>*My experience with predominately white population (summer camp “n” word) made more aware and protective.<br><br>*I am a single mom                                                        | *only child for 7 years during private school.<br>*latchkey kid with working parents<br><br>*now a single mom                                                              | I was her son’s 4 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher. Daily communication with his father after school.<br><br>*I stay close to many families even though I live 2 towns away to keep mutual family respect.                       | *I was more comfortable playing with my black friends in my grandmother’s neighborhood- even if they were all boys<br><br>*The way I was raised and treated in my private (mostly white) school I didn’t think being the only black at summer camp would matter either.                                                                                                                                                             |

Table 1. Combines both the categories and the themes that were delineated from the narratives of five of my participants, Patricia, Letitia, Duane, Chaneese and Agnes (featured in Chapters 4 and 5). Inferences of positionalities were extracted. Personal correspondence and connections were formed.

Table 2

*Targeted Responses Related to the Guiding Research Questions through Views on School Choice and the Market Place*

|                                                                                  | Patricia                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Letitia                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Duane                                                                                                                                              | Chaneese                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Agnes                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Recognition of choice-offerings (market place) as a child and as a parent</b> | <p>*private school growing up- "I didn't even know what that was. We did what every kid did on our block did. We all went to the <i>same</i> school, <i>same</i> block, <i>same</i> friends.</p> <p>*So, after a year, we need to get him out of there and put him in a real learning facility. So, we looked up a few and decided to put him in the private Crusaders Academy.</p> | <p>*My school was a <i>blus-ribbon</i> school. I didn't even know what that meant. Maybe the school was a big deal?</p> <p>*My kids started in day care with a Christian education. They were <i>pushed</i>. They were <i>learning</i>. They were <i>knowing</i> things that I don't think a public education would have taught until first or second grade. I wanted to keep the momentum</p> | <p>*seeking Montessori And select enrollment</p> <p>*used grandmother's address to attend school in city closer to his job for medical reasons</p> | <p>*" I was noticing from my other peers that had their children in homeschool was the reasoning behind it which was it seemed like our male children were being singled out."</p> <p>* " . parents should have the options ...that would raise the bar for every school to be on one accord</p> | <p>*" Back then there wasn't much of a choice among grade schools. There was basically one- at least that I knew of and I went there."</p> <p>* "The public high school was shaping up its image and I chose to send you."</p> |
| <b>My personal connections toward choice and other offerings</b>                 | <p>My son wanted to attend an unaffordable Catholic high school. Because he didn't want to consort with the wrong crowd. Gang affiliation. I put him in a "charter-ish" school.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <p>I compromised with my son to send him to a satellite school that offered a smaller population, better student-teacher ratio, safer, and project-based learning</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <p>*I got permission to enroll my son in a school closer to my job for safety and inexpensive daycare through Navy</p>                             | <p>I increased my son's hours with an outside learning facility to assist with classwork and test preparation to beat the peer pressure and "dumb athlete" mentality.</p>                                                                                                                        | <p>"ibid"</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

*Table 2. Combines both the categories and the themes that were delineated from the narratives of five of my participants, Patricia, Letitia, Duane, Chaneese and Agnes ( featured in Chapters 4 and 5). Inferences of their use or views of offerings of school choice and the market place were extracted. Personal corresponding connections were formed.*

*Tables 1 and 2* display targeted responses related to the guiding research questions that materialized in the interviews of each of my participants. The visual chart I drafted was divided into columns presenting each participant's position on the major themes as expressed by their interview answers. Within these thematic categories, I summarized the comparisons I experienced with each of the participants' responses. By populating the designated spaces with comments from the participants and my shared thoughts in comparison or reaction, I was able to connect the findings which led me to the appropriate analyses.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### My Positional Identity

*A personal decision to continue to teach and learn in the same diverse community of which I consider myself a member, is a part of my global identity.*

*I want to give back.*

*It is not just because I am a minority, nor is it because I pledged to belong prominent African -American sorority.*

*This ongoing story is what I am coming to be. This is part of my life, a chapter of my autobiography, clarifying my positionality-that I may simply title*

*“My Positional Identity”*

*This- is my auto-ethnography.*

Life experiences “through the networks of relationships that are constructed by people and by social groups do not happen in a void” (Pascal-de-Sans, 2004, p.349). They serve as moral and foundational paths woven into the fabric of one’s personal and collective histories that make us “who we are and in part color and define our destinies” (Attig, 2000, p.32).

My mother’s basement was flooded in 2007 when the Des Plaines River crested and spilled into the streets. The relentless rainfall brought the underground sewage system to and screeching halt and then reversed the waters back into the beautiful homes of the surrounding area. It took three weeks for the standing water to recede, so we could survey the damage. Much had been lost. Some items were rescued, other items simply recovered and thrown into the neighborhood dumpster. Among those items, so went many of the family albums that dated back to my early childhood. There were photos of happy occasions and experiences that I had while growing up. There may even have been images of me when I appeared happy only for the camera. Gone.

This recent revelation came to me when I started putting my qualitative research together for my autoethnography. Now what should I do?" I thought to myself. I was going to begin my bricolage with a personal collection of tangible items that would perhaps assist me in recalling some of those memorable moments to include in my writing.

I reviewed one of many interpretations and definitions of qualitative research from different sources including *Understanding and Interpreting Educational Research* by Ronald Martella, et al (2013), and *Designing Qualitative Research, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition* by Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman (2016). The distinguishing characteristics of the autoethnographic approach involves all self-reflexive form of qualitative research where the author and her or his voice are central to the narrative (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p.279). The author represents her or his own story through exploring anecdotal and personal experience while studying its meaning "which is contextualized and inextricably integrated with wider social and cultural practices" (Jenson & Jakowski as cited in Martella, Nelson, Morgan & Marchand-Martella, p.297, 2013).

During each interview I recalled connecting to so many aspects, usually acknowledged with exchanging a similar experience or a simple nod and a smile. For example, I was familiar to Chaneese's worry over her son David being approached by mischievous individuals in search of expanding their gang membership since my son had a similar experience in a middle school locker room. I was somberly reminded of my connection to leaving a toxic military dependent lifestyle for the sake of my child and a healthier state of mind when Patricia Darling told her story. Sadly, her life in that dismal past was so stressful it led her to the miscarriage of her first child. The heartfelt accounts of both of these mothers resonated with me so much that I was

inspired to write or resurface one of my son's poems in attribution and recognition to their individual heroism.

Baring all of this in mind, I had to choose a parallel route of sorts to aid me in connecting my personal experience with theory.

When we teachers have wanted to believe that education has been a means of giving every living person access to any sort of discourse that person might prefer, when we have wanted to believe that literacy is a personal achievement, a door to personal meaning, it takes an effort for us to realize how deeply literacy is involved in relations of power and how it must be understood in context and in relation to a social world. It is evident enough that people are born into a culturally defined literacy... which some acquire in the course of growing up and which some may never fully grasp.... Many of the alienated or marginalized are made to feel distrustful of their voices their own ways of making sense yet they are not provided alternatives that allow them to tell their stories or shape their narratives or ground new learning into what they already know (Green, 1995, p.110).

My challenge was to view myself as an outsider looking into intimate situations of my life and observe how they impacted my personality, character, my knowledge and form of critical thinking. I had to learn how to trust my voice, which comes through my memory, my mother's trusted resource of recollection, accompanied by inspiration through my poetry and artwork as presented throughout my writing.

In retrospect to the few choice “situations” that occurred through the decades of the seventies and eighties that required reflection and introspect, I now have come to a closer understanding of the “whys” and “how did we?” questions. I am a woman with a strong interest and ever-growing talent in fine arts.

Although I am competent, forthright and sometimes analytical in my decision-making, I often learn from situations with more of a right brain dominant emotional and passionate perspective. I find it therapeutic to discover the balance between logical thought and emotional input through artistic expression. Employing aesthetics by use of neuroscience as a point of reference explains many of the approaches to art therapy ( Malchiodi, 2003, p.22). Because actions are the heart of identifying and identification processes, writing an autoethnography always realizes the cultural- historical possibilities in the biographical genre and the biographical plot (Roth, 2005, p. 4). Therefore, I see this autoethnography as a perfect opportunity to approach my realistic views, opinion and faint humor through arts therapy as the inclusion of ...art, music [musical lyrics], and poetry/writing (Malchiodi, 2003, p.104). This chapter invites the reader into my personal life experiences. It offers a deconstruction of my own positionality as means of a story told by a highly educated, spiritual African American woman, and an educator , raised in a middle-class society. It explores my experiences from childhood through young adult into a governing role as a single mother with school choice issues. My autoethnography give insight as to how my positionality impacted my own advocacy for my only child.

## **70's and 80's Black Suburban Girl**

### **Wellsmore, No More**

1973. A year synonymous with Vietnam, Watergate and Super Bowl VII. I was six years old. I combined the Super Bowl with my age because that's usually how my dad remembered how old I was. I came into the world the same year of the very first Super Bowl in 1967; Dolphins -14, Redskins- 7. Obviously, the score was and is purely trivial. It was important to my dad, though. He was a FAN-atic! He was also a former professional football player for the New York Giants. When he got hurt during a game, there wasn't much administration could do. They didn't have sports medicine and technology like they have now, so he got cut. My parents packed up and we moved back to his home town of Evanston, Illinois. At least there, he was still considered a hometown hero. I have pictures of our family of three happily sharing one of the bedrooms in the house where he grew up. By the time I was about two or three years old, we moved into a two-bedroom apartment on the predominantly White side of town.

Both of my parents were career minded. My father worked his way up to the position of a director of a community center on the urban (Black) side of Evanston and my mother was in law school. I spent many weekends and summers with both of my grandmothers. They were the primary disciplinarians at that time in my life. I could remember when I listened and followed the directions from my grandparents over my own mom and dad. Spankings were far and few in between.

From the school age of five I attended a private Kindergarten through 12th grade school,



Wellsmore. I recall my mother bundling me up in winter attire while the Volkswagen was warming up in the driveway behind our garden level apartment. The moment I saw those chrome wheels of the orange beetle roll up in front of the kitchen window I knew it was time to get my coat and head out with my school bag in tow to make my way to the castle like structure, three blocks from my house. I attended Wellsmore from kindergarten to third grade. Each day as I entered the building, I had a sense of ownership. I remember being sociable. There was a handful of us Blacks, but my best friend was Rachelle, a little German girl. I absolutely loved my kindergarten teacher, but I had a rather likable personal relationship with the lunch lady, Ms. Mattie and the bus driver, Mr. Brown, both who were Black. In my opinion at the time, I was in a good setting. I learned at an appropriate pace and worked well with other children. I didn't see color or notice race.

The summer of 1974 was an eye opener for my family. I attended camp in Southbrook, IL, an affluent suburb of Metro. I went with an open mind looking to make friends. I once again, developed a close relationship with a little White girl, Amy. This time, however, the demographics were different. Out of the 200- some campers there, I was the only Black. I definitely, faced daily challenges. I was teased and looked at differently. Amy suggested that I borrow the white paint from the Arts and Crafts table and paint my face, so no one would think I was Black. Of course, I knew better than to do something so ludicrous, so I gently declined realizing she may have only been trying to help.

Mom had stripped my hair from the press n curl style and kinked it into an afro. She also let me get my ears pierced. She called me her African princess, and for the first time, I felt like it.

I wouldn't say that I was acting like an heiress, but apparently the kids and perhaps some of the staff from Sandy Shores, summer of '74 begged to differ. I couldn't ride the camp bus like everyone else. My family was apparently told that we lived outside of the bus route. So, a friendly counselor came by the house each day to take me to camp. I remember being constantly harassed by a little boy who frequently referred to me as "nigger girl". The day came when I was so fed up with the little boy's teasing I decided to do something about it. During swim time in the outdoor pool, following his splashing and yelping out obscene words in my direction, I swam over to him, grabbed a hold of his shoulders and pushed downward trying to hold his little ass under water. When he came up for air he was still yelping alright. This time it was for help. I couldn't explain to my mother why I did it. I was immediately pulled out, or expelled from the camp (to this day, I still don't know which) and spent the rest of that summer with my grandmother in the house where I once lived as a baby.

### **Private, Public, Private Again**

The question of my identity began when I was in the middle of third grade; about a year after the summer camp incident. After Christmas vacation I no longer attended Wellsmore. I was enrolled into the public school, closest to my paternal grandmother's house in her neighborhood. I didn't complain much. I got to see many of my friends from my grandma's church. Seeming that her house was in the hood, the same area where my dad directed the youth center, there were definitely more Blacks at that school. I adapted well. Rachele and Amy, who were once household names, became a blur of memories from the past.

Looking back on my early school years, I often wondered why my parents kept pulling me in and out of private school. I seemed to have decent grades. My behavior was adequate. The subject came up in a conversation with my mother. I asked her flat out. “Mom, why did you pull me out of Wellsmore?” Was it the money? She replied, “You were coming home each day as a different child. You compared your personal belongings to the things your school friends had. You were turning too White.” Then I reminded her about the “N” word incident at Sandy Shores. We both chuckled, and she said “Then, you were acting too Black.”

While I had my circle of friends, they really didn’t include boys. I was too worried about trying to fit in. It always seemed like the cool kids, boys and girls were the ones who lived on the same block in the hood. The closest I had gotten to hanging out with boys was after school on my grandma’s block when I was in third grade. I had great times riding my big wheel up and down the sidewalk with Hanky, Cobby, Jeffy and Dan back in the day. I know it’s not the same, as keeping company with boys in a puppy love, or cool kid sense, but I was okay with that. I could climb a tree and skin my knee with the best of them. I often stuck out from the crowd...of girls that is. I didn’t have a sibling until I was seven. When my baby brother came along, I suddenly realized that I had better find some business outside of the home or else I’d get stuck babysitting him.

By the late seventies my mother was a U.S. Assistant Attorney and my father was a city official. I came from a family of athletes, educators, law enforcers and high learners. My home town knew last names, especially the second and third generation names. They certainly knew our family name. From the time my mom, dad and his siblings worked their way from high

school All- State athleticism, college and/or higher paying respectable jobs our family was well respected in the community.

Middle school age was pretty.... well....middle. There was nothing too exciting nor completely boring. School life was average but not as important as my growing life in the church. I followed my father's side of the family and left the Methodist church to become a Baptist. It seemed like the right thing to do. I found a greater desire to participate more in the Sunday school and Youth Action Ministry of the Baptist church. I felt more comfortable there. My mother decided to convert, if you will, when I announced to her at the age of twelve that I was going to be baptized. From that point, we all attended the Baptist church on a regular basis. I was very active in the choir, youth ministries and the junior usher board. This was my closeness to my culture and my God. My little brother was at the age where he was just allowing the older church ladies to pinch his cheeks.

I maintained a reasonable balance between public school and church all the way until eighth grade. I had one best friend, Karen. She was Black. We were partners in crime. We couldn't wait to get to the high school. Karen went. Back to private school for me. I was absolutely shocked when my mother dropped the news that I was going back to into a private school, a Catholic school, none-the-less. This time, unlike when I was five, I was able to acknowledge the pros and cons of my life as I considered a change in schools. Not only was I, a proud self-proclaimed Baptist, going to attend a Catholic school, but I was leaving all my friends behind. I remember conversations with my friends about their readiness to be a part of the fantastic life at Marren Township (MTHS).

At the time, I could feel the pity through the comforting words like, “Maybe we can still hang out on weekends or something.” My mother claimed that the reason she didn’t want me to join the ranks of the Marren Township Wildcats was because she didn’t think I could survive. She expressed that she had been looking for a better alternative for quite some time. She determined that smaller class size in a more of a scholastic environment was suitable for me. Personally, I feel she had an instinct that one of my long –time middle school friends, Karen, along with other *undesirable* classmates were leading me down the wrong path. Not once did she listen to my plea and defense through the standpoints of *my* moral character which, in many cases, differed from that of my counterparts. In fact, teachers asked me to talk to Karen on several occasions about her poor choices. They wanted me to encourage her to take education a little more seriously.

Apparently, my mother saw far more into our acquaintance than I, so she created a plan to separate us at school, permanently. The drive to St. Benedictine for my entrance interview was somber. I sobbed during the car ride there. “Why did my mother have to be so damn righteous? Surely, the family doesn’t want to spend all of this money on tuition just to make a stupid point”, I thought. I didn’t think she was actually going through with it until we pulled into the parking lot.

By 1983 the ethnic and more politically correct term “African American” was replacing “Black”. My sophomore year of a four-day attendance schedule at the all-female high school was touch and go. There was a hand full of us, African Americans from frosh to the senior class. We stuck together during free periods and lunch breaks. I definitely had my share of the “Mary

Katherines”, “Mary Elizabeths”, and every other Mary, but not the way most would think. It seemed at least at that high school, the more angelic the name appeared, the wilder the personality. Just because they were named after the Virgin Mary, did not necessarily mean they were little cherubs. I tried my first cigarette behind the school with Mary Kate, the most thuggish, heavyweight looking Catholic White girl you’d ever want to meet. If the nuns had seen her, she probably would have gotten doused with some Holy water on the spot. Rumor had it that the nuns carried a small supply under their habits for situations just like this. In many of my classes throughout my first two years at St. Benedictine I along with (perhaps one other) was the only African American. In reality the lighter brown Latina population was higher than ours, but we Blacks still considered them part of the general mass of Catholic girls.

During the summer of 1983, I took a trigonometry course at the local junior college. Mr. Arnold, a math teacher from MTHS was also a good friend of my dad. He tutored me on the side and helped me get an A in the class. My mother said it was because I showed discipline, received an A in the class, and per recommendation of Mr. Arnold, that she allowed me to transfer to MTHS in the fall of 1983. I say it’s because after paying two years of tuition, mom finally noticed that there wasn’t a dramatic change in my academic and social behavior, as she was expecting. It also could have been a decision made after my parents decided to divorce from a twenty-year marriage.

The departure from the Catholic institution probably had nothing to do with my old-time friend, Karen, dropping out of school while pregnant with her first child by the age of fifteen. She also stopped going to church. Perhaps my mom felt that since she was so far down the path, she would be too far gone to come back to get me to travel this so-called path of destruction. As I

mentioned earlier, like in '74 when Amy suggested I paint myself White to blend in with the other whites, I had better sense than that.

I was very comfortable in my new setting. There were students much like me with the same values, temperaments, likes and dislikes. There was diversity. My favorite teacher was my junior year English teacher, Mrs. Oberman. She was actually the first one who encouraged me to write. Unlike my St. Benedictine teacher two years prior, who often referred to me as the “1% minority” statistic during his anthropology lectures, Mrs. Oberman was attentive to my needs as a student and an aspiring writer. I proudly earned A’s in her class. I graduated from Marren Township High School with high academic achievement awards as well as the American Legion Award for demonstrating strong qualities of character and good leadership. This is something I don’t think I would have achieved had I stayed at the Catholic high school.

### **Adulthood, For Real**

#### **NIU**

I didn’t get into the university the traditional way because my ACT scores were poor. My report card grades were very good. Thanks to classes like English with Mrs. Oberman and my newfound love of art classes, I managed to raise my cumulative GPA to a 3.0. Unfortunately for me, many colleges and universities consider more than just grades. I needed better SAT or ACT scores to shore my strengths and weaknesses in areas such as math, reading, language arts and writing. However, there was a saving grace. Northern Illinois University sponsored an outreach program that assisted youth who needed a second chance for acceptance. In fact, the program is

called <sup>1</sup>CHANCE. Since English and Language Arts were among my better subjects, it was easy for me to write the required essay for consideration. I wrote an autoethnography, of sorts about my life as a teen getting accustomed to private schools, my parent's divorce and my little personal triumphs through it all. NIU granted me permission to take an entrance exam and I was provisionally accepted through the CHANCE program with close monitoring.

I loved my independence. I was a carefree art student who lived in an all-female dorm. This time being around all girls was by choice because Saturn North was considered the "Hilton" of all dorms. The rooms there were more spacious than the rooms in the tower dormitories, referred to as "the projects". The common areas at Saturn North were perfect for studying. I made friends with my neighbors. We were a mixed group with different backgrounds from different corners of the state. I was the only one out of our cluster who sought solace in joining the NIU Black Choir. It was the closest thing to finding a church home in the middle of the corn fields.

One of the drawbacks of entering through the CHANCE program was the need for additional English and Math semesters of classes that normally only require one. In turn, along with my change in majors, this meant it would take five years to graduate. Once I made the choice to transfer from a fine arts major to a general art major, I was required to pick up a foreign language. I had the option to select Swahili. It actually took me one registration and two attended sessions of Swahili to realize that no matter how close to my culture I would appear, the language

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<sup>1</sup> The guiding mission of the CHANCE Program is to identify, recruit, admit, and assist otherwise capable students whose pre-college education has not fully enabled them to take maximum advantage of their potential and the opportunities of higher education at NIU. <http://www.niu.edu/chance/about/index.shtml>



would not be very useful to me once I graduate. On the last day of the add/drop period, I withdrew from the class and picked up Spanish, the second most popular language in the United States.

By my fourth year I moved out of the dorms into my very first apartment. I couldn't afford the rent alone, so I went in with two younger floor mates. Annette and Lupe (not their real names) were of Mexican and Puerto Rican decent respectively. When our White friend, Katie came to stay over, we called ourselves the United Nations. We made it a cultural experience. I would occasionally help host meetings or parties for their Latin American friends just as they would support my Black Choir events. I can recall certain Saturday nights when we were all in town; taking turns shopping and cooking or baking ethnic dishes from home. My specialty was spare ribs, mac n cheese and my Aunt Becky's peach cobbler.

Before you think I had built in tutors for my Spanish homework, Think again. You couldn't be further from the truth. They knew the standard Spanish, but once the vernacular kicked in, there was no need to follow them in an academic sense. I learned that even among Mexicans and Puerto Ricans many words of the Spanish language can be pronounced and interpreted differently. I picked up a lot of slang, *potty* words and phrases that would probably be useful in social settings, but I chose to keep the formal lessons between my instructor, my study groups and me. Of course, we had the typical roommate arguments, but overall, I enjoyed the time we spent together. Living with them was a wonderful college learning experience outside of the academics. They were a year behind me, so they extended their tenancy at the apartment while I cleared out my belongings two days after receiving my bachelor's in visual arts. I had absolutely no idea where I was headed.

## **Have You Ever Considered Teaching?**

The Family events, weddings, birthdays and holidays brought us all together. It was my uncle's turn to host the 4th of July BBQ in 1991. He always had stories to tell about his district. For as long as I could remember my father's brother was the superintendent of North Metro School District 64. I vividly remember often visiting his office at the Board of Education when I was around four or five years old. The secretary always had a little treat for me from her colored candy dish. His bookshelves and walls were loaded with various trophies, certificates and awards. The most noticeable of them all was the perfectly framed Doctor of Education degree hanging on the wall above his tall leather chair. I'm not sure why, but I was fascinated by the golden embossment and fancy border laced throughout the parchment under glass. It was as if it sparkled every time I glanced at it.

Just as we were piling our plates high at the family dinner, Unc turns to me and asks, "Have you ever considered teaching?" I told him, "Not really". From that point on we talked about the endless possibilities of teaching. Based on my perceived level of interest, he convinced me to come into the office the following work day to sign up for a substitute teaching position. I followed his advice and began substituting the following week. Unc was right. It felt like I had a calling to be a teacher. Though, there was one small problem. I didn't have a degree nor certification in education. I came to realization that as long as I was in the teaching environment with an administrator that supported my endeavors, I couldn't go wrong.

Once again, the family name paid off. This time I had learned to take full advantage of it. I was blessed to have the support from some of my uncle's constituents who helped me in the field.

Upon a promise to my uncle who had since retired from his twenty years of service in the district, I went back to school in search of a degree in teaching. I went from being a substitute teacher to a regular full-time position as a teacher's aide within three short months.

All though some envision the north suburban Lake Michigan shoreline as an affluent cluster of communities, North Metro, which is nuzzled in between Lake Grove and the county seat of Wilmott, couldn't be farther from this notion. The city practically relies on the existence of the nearby military installation. Many school aged children, mostly African American and Hispanic, of North Metro live in deteriorating underserved parts of the community. While I would not like to seem boastful, I had been told by many fellow veteran staff members that the school district began to lose its motivation and popularity as the bright spot of an otherwise dismal community ever since my uncle had retired from his post as superintendent. With his encouraging spirit, I was moved to consider a career in teaching. As I reveal in the next and final section of my autoethnographic account of valuable life experiences, you will find that my journey through obtaining my teacher's certification was extremely difficult.

## **Military Life**

Life happened. Celebrating my obtaining a bachelor's degree and landing my first job as a substitute teacher. I fell in love with a Navy guy who was training at the base just a quarter mile from my school. He swept me off my feet with his southern charm. I was surprised that my mother had accepted my relationship with a sailor from Texas. Perhaps she figured it was time to marry me off. Maybe she was considering it a patriotic duty to allow our courtship while he was away from home. Whenever, my boyfriend didn't have boot camp, he spent time at our house; this

(amazingly) included overnights. My mother allowed it as long as we promised that he would sleep on a couch in the basement while I retired to my bedroom. I'll leave it at that.

I wasn't far behind my boyfriend when he relocated to South Carolina. I quit my job and moved into a one-bedroom apartment with him. I held down three jobs, one of which was a substitute teacher in the County school district. Our relationship blossomed into a marriage in 1993. Everyone came to my hometown for the wedding. By this time both of my parents had been remarried; Each one arguing over top billing on the wedding invitation. We were forced to put both sets of my parents on our invitation to keep the peace. Had I taken a page out of their book back then perhaps, I would have remained single.

Being a military wife wasn't easy. Some say it's a tougher job than the one who's enlisted in the military. I had to face long separations while my newlywed husband went underway for months at a time. Sure, I had jobs and friends to keep me busy, but we all know it wasn't the same. I often endured quiet days and lonely nights. Three-year rotations moved us around the U.S. Each time I thought things would get better in a new city. The marriage actually worsened. Poor choices and bad habits got the best of my husband's moral character. I, being the doting supportive wife (with low self-esteem) tried my best to keep the marriage together. I didn't want it to turn out like my parents, who divorced when I was in high school. We tried counseling for a period of time. Change was minimal. We attempted at learning to listen to each other instead of trying to out yell the other to make a point. We went through bull crap exercises where one repeats the other's concerns, like... "What I hear you saying is..." Knowing good and well no matter what the other said still didn't mean that we were just going to switch gears and

immediately reconcile our differences. I especially wasn't going to let him redeem poor excuses for his deplorable and emotionally hurtful actions.

Somehow through a couple more turbulent years of financial stress, arguments, infidelity, fights, sleepless nights and relocation to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, our son was born. The year 1999 was the best year out of the entire relationship. I brought my son into the world. My husband was out to sea during the birth. My son was born in a bright pink hospital on one of the tallest hills in Honolulu, Hawaii. I couldn't have been prouder. My mother who had been with me for the last three weeks of the pregnancy brought us both home from the hospital. I was ready to begin a new life,

Not only did I have a decent job with Child and Family Services, but it also came with benefits. I was able to take off for the full maternity leave, something that does not come easy for even the locals in Honolulu. Although, I loved bonding with my first born, I missed going to work. Once I found the perfect care giver, I was back at CFS. Each morning I looked forward to waking up with my little guy, getting him dressed and carrying him to Mommy Hazel, a grandmother whom I befriended through church. I was confident that he was in good hands. When I got off from work, I headed straight to the babysitter. Sometimes it was hard to pry my son out of her hands, she loved him so. She took care of the both of us. She also encouraged me to stay by my husband's side. I usually smiled politely and dismissed the thought.

## **The New Millennium**

### **Starting Over**

My husband had strayed too far from our marriage. It was evident he was no longer happy. He had become an adulterer and I had run out of ways to try and “fix it”. We lived in what the rest of the world to as “paradise”. But for me, I was stuck on a rock with an infant son. There really wasn’t anyone else to turn to outside of gossiping military wives. I kept my head up. I had to be strong for my son. I made the decision while my husband prepared for his next long-term deployment out to sea, to leave the island. I arranged, through military benefits, for a moving company to pack up all my and my son’s things, generously leaving behind only a few pieces of furniture. I headed back to the mainland with baby in tow. My mother welcomed us into the suburban home that had once been occupied by her second husband of fifteen years. They had since divorced in 2001, just a year after they closed on the new house. Mom, alone was left with a beautiful four-bedroom house, equipped with a finished basement the size of a small apartment. The back yard had a swing set and jungle gym just waiting for my little guy to climb aboard. Perhaps it was a time that my mother and I needed each other. I considered it a blessing. I graciously accepted her offer promising to do whatever I could to pay our way. Mother, however, didn’t want much other than to see me and her grandson rise from the ashes of a shambled marriage.

I had a job lined up at the Navy base in Great Lakes, IL. Daycare was provided for my little one while I worked for four years as a banquet hall manager late nights and weekends. In the mean time I was replaying the question in my uncle put in my head, “Have you ever thought

about teaching?” I revisited that notion and took a leap of faith and went back to the district that I had left years before. I asked for my job back. Since my uncle had retired, I didn’t know if I could do it on my own. God is good. The door to the district was left open just wide enough for me to step in and become a para-professional librarian. I wasn’t making as much money, but I was back to doing what I loved. Before I accepted the position, I made sure I placed my son in a learning day care. The military base, which was close to where I worked had a wonderful child care center. I kept personal contact with his teachers. Together we all monitored his progress in learning and socialization.

My son stayed in the learning center until he was well ready for his first year in school as a kindergartener. Once again, I came to the district where I worked to ask for another favor. Since I had become personal friends with some of my colleagues, I also knew much of their curriculum. In many cases I was part of it as their librarian. I asked the superintendent if he would allow my son to be accepted into the North Metro School District. Permission was granted. Packed with all of the knowledge of emergent reading, primary math and technology learned from the age of three, my son was ready to make a smooth transition into kindergarten. I have his teachers, Ms. Tina and Ms. Barbara, two strong minded African American mothers, to thank for his bright start into the new millennium.

### **“It’s Not Supposed to Hurt”**

After my morning shower one fall Monday morning I noticed a lump under my armpit as I was putting on deodorant. “Huh”, I thought. “Never noticed that before.” I got dressed and went to work to prepare myself for a day of planned library lessons and creative story telling.

The closer I got to the school, the more awkward I felt. Once I entered the building, I put my bags down and paid a visit to our school nurse who was also a trusted friend. I showed her my arm. She examined it and then pardoned herself to ask the secretary to find a substitute to cover the library for me because she was sending me to the doctor for a closer examination. I kept telling myself, the lump and the area around it doesn't hurt so it can't be all that bad. I figured she was a school nurse so maybe she just wanted to send me to an actual physician for precaution.

Since my estranged spouse at the time was in the military, I took advantage of my medical benefits and went to the Navy hospital. I didn't have an appointment, so I went straight to the emergency room. I spent several hours in the ER putting up with doctors, nurses and lower ranked health aides, military and civilian coming in and out of the room poking, prodding, asking questions, taking notes and walking away. The redundancy of it all seemed ridiculous and I grew more frustrated by the minute. I felt like a lab specimen. No one had answers. As time crept into the afternoon hours and it seemed like I wasn't going to get out of ER any time soon, I informed my family so someone would pick up my son from kindergarten. Within the hour my family joined me while I waited in the ER. We joked, we worried, but most of all we prayed. Sadly, and oddly after an entire day spent at the military hospital, we were told that there was no answer for us that day. The biopsy specialist wasn't on duty, so there was no way to give a definitive answer of what the lump was under my arm. We went home after damn near ten agonizing hours, perplexed and still filled with worry and suspicion.

More concerned and disenchanted with the poor attendance and casual uncertainty of the



staff at the Navy hospital, my mother decided to take things into her own hands. She told me she knew a friend whose husband was a specialist at one of the most prominent university hospitals in the country. “A specialist of what?”, I asked. Mom paused for a moment and said, “Well, if it’s a tumor of some sort we want to rule some things out, that’s all”, she said matter of fact.

We arrived around 6 pm to the hospital’s main campus which was located on the west end of downtown Metro. Since the doctor’s medical group was outside of my military health insurance network, my mother’s friend agreed as a favor to examine me after hours “as a friend”. This time the wait after examination was a mere fraction of the time that I spent at the military hospital, less than one hour. He, my mother and I met in his office adjacent to the examining room. I expected him to sit behind his big oak desk and deliver whatever news. Instead, as we sat down in our coffee brown leather upholstered chairs, he sat beside us and turned his chair in a group formation. Quite simply, Dr. Wyatt, quietly yet affirmatively stated, “It’s definitely a tumor and it appears to be at Stage 2.” He didn’t wait for it to sink in. I remember looking down the whole time, saying nothing. Dr. Wyatt continued with his suggested plan of action as though we were discussing what to wear for a rainy day. I was actually okay with that. As long as he kept talking and answering my mother’s questions. I felt a calmness. Perhaps it was because I knew there was really was no need for sudden alarm. I wasn’t extremely religious however, I knew that God was in control no matter what. When I mustered up enough courage to break my long silence, I asked the doctor the one question that had been on my mind ever since I walked into the military hospital earlier that week. I inquired that if I had this large obstructive thing in my body that had matured to a Stage 2, why didn’t I feel any pain, tenderness or discomfort particularly at the site? What happened to Stage 1? He casually explained that a cancerous tumor

can be like the iceberg in the movie (and real event) Titanic. The ship sails into the unsuspecting foggy night and all of the sudden, without notice or warning it slams into an iceberg. “It was just sitting there all the time. You just didn’t notice it until now. Many times, there are no indications like pain. In other words, it’s not *supposed* to hurt,” he explained. After hearing his explanation, a second quite noticeable lump formed, that time it was in my throat. We departed his office with a plan of action that included his recommendation to seek consent from the military health insurance to pay for all connecting medical service outside of their network. We figured it was the least they could do considering that they sent me away without so much of a prognosis due to unavailability and unpreparedness. I can’t say it enough, God is good. The consent was given, and my medical benefits were extended to pay for any and all treatments and surgeries connected with my illness.

On a personal note, I figured this was a debt that was owed after all of the trials and tribulations I went through with the man I married. Even though it is a double-edged sword, for the reasons of maintaining my sole primary medical benefits and commissary privileges for shopping at a duty-free facility to feed my son, I am thankful that I did not divorce my military husband right away. Even though we had been estranged for many years, I felt his allowance to continue the marriage in order for him to provide for me and my son was the least he could do.

A lumpectomy, chemotherapy and radiation treatments were part of the plan of action for the next several months. On top of that, I had to balance work and raising a kindergarten aged son. I’m not exactly sure what inspired me to stay in school at that time, but I did, in the midst of it all. My uncle who had become an adjunct professor at National-Louis University, once again,

encouraged me by asking, “You haven’t given up teaching, have you?” He reminded me that his first wife, my Aunt Marie had taught for years while battling cancer. He advised me of the different programs at NLU and put me in touch with some of his colleagues. Before I knew it, I was enrolled in the master’s elementary education program. Because of the illness, it took me a little longer than some, but in 2005 I graduated and became a kindergarten teacher in the very district that I had visited as a child and admired the degrees and certificates decades earlier. I wanted to make a difference. Surely, I could have gone to many other school districts. I had offers. However, I felt the need to stay in North Metro and serve the students whom I felt needed it the most. Some may call it a legacy. I call it fulfilling a promise.

### **Today, Now and Forever**

#### **Reflection on my Autoethnography through Survival**

I am not afraid to tell my age. I wear it well with the battle scars to prove it. Having reached the mid-centennial point in my life I’ve been able to reflect upon what I have become morally, spiritually and academically. I have concluded that I am truly blessed. Everything happened for a reason; be it earthly or divine. Dad died a year after he walked me down the aisle. At the age of fifty-one the big and tall home town hero, the man I most admired and often emulated had fallen due to heart failure. My uncle, who encouraged me to become a teacher began to lose his speech after my third semester at NLU. His brilliant mind had succumbed to Alzheimer’s Disease. He passed away in 2010.

Survivor is the operative word when describing my positional identity. Today a wonderful redeveloped support system remains. For example, the school district once headed by the man who

gave me my first real job, had its share of bumps in the economy with enrollment and provision of qualified teachers accepting lower pay. However, through the toughest times of facing insolvency it still survived keeping me gainfully employed. I survived as well, even though a second occurrence of breast cancer in 2009. It was just four years and nine months inside the predicted five-year window of remission from my first ordeal when the doctors thought it best to remove all related ailments by order of a mastectomy. Reformation of my physical and psychological well-being forced me to develop and cope with a new normal for myself and my child.

### **Mother's Support Through my Journey**

My mother, who happened to grow up in a predominantly White and affluent northern Illinois suburb of Metro, was and is my role model and my strongest supporter. During my elementary school days, my mother, a college graduate and accomplished city attorney, managed to balance a loving household and a demanding career. Before my brother was born, she and my father, who was a well-respected city official in his own right, were considered one of the city's prominent power couples, plus one, me. Sadly, their marriage did not survive. But for many years through demonstration and reminders of cultural identity, tenacity and moral character, they taught *this* young Black girl (me) how to break through the glass ceiling to reach her goals.

Throughout this entire dissertation process of interviews and an autoethnography the questions of "whys?" and "How could we's?" continuously came to mind. I particularly needed clarity on some of the decisions my parents made for me, particularly my mother, Agnes.. During a series of conversations along with a personal interview with my mother I addressed

those inquiries applied to different experiences, for clarification. The interview guideline was virtually the same as the template for my other participants, however since I was dealing with my mother, I chose to highlight the points in our conversation that spoke directly to my need for answers. Let us now turn to the kitchen table conversation revealing the true thoughts, on the specific answers that helped define my reactions that supported the concept of my positionality in this study.

I started with key questions from as early as I could remember a turnaround or a disposition in my life.

Me: Mom, why did you really pull me out of Wellsmore? Was it the tuition?

Agnes: Your dad and I transferred you because you were starting to act too act too *White*. You were a good student, but you were losing some of your cultural identity. That's why I gave you an afro and sent you to grandma's church. You also seemed too comfortable there. Ever since kindergarten, I saw the first indication that you were not focused on school. I remember checking on you in your class with a surprise visit. It was during "choice time" when your teacher gave the class the option to either play or learn a math or reading lesson. All the little smart White kids were at the math stations and reading little books. You were in the play kitchen. When I inquired, the teacher said you always wanted to go to the kitchen like it was a funny occurrence. It didn't seem like the teacher cared enough to encourage you to choose anything different.

Me: So, what was your response?

Agnes: Well, I wasn't happy. I wasn't paying for my daughter to learn domestic work. I can teach you that at home. I had plenty of chores for you to do in and out of the kitchen. (she said with a smile and a small chuckle) I had a discussion with the headmaster and from that point I believe you were encouraged a little more often to focus on reading and math.

Me: I know you remember the incident at Sandy Shores back in '74.

Agnes: Oooh yes. Your father wouldn't let me forget it for a very long time. When I first found the camp, it seemed like a wonderful idea. Your dad kept asking me "How many Blacks go there?" (in a gruff voice) I told him that didn't matter. We came to find out it definitely did matter. We should have known when the camp bus driver refused to pick you up. They said it was outside of their boundary, but later we came to find out that another camper got picked up just blocks away from us. I arranged to pay gas money for a counselor to take you each morning in her car.

Me: I didn't even know there was a bus.

Agnes: Yep, as far as you were concerned your buddy was coming to give you a ride.

Later in the conversation regarding my middle school childhood.

Me: I didn't know you felt that strongly about Karen, mom. Did you really think I was going to follow her footsteps?

Agnes: Stacy, I didn't know what to think. You two were like peas in a pod. I only pretended to like Karen because she was your friend. But she had some terrible habits. You see how she ended up, right? Didn't she have a baby in jail down there at the women's prison?

Me: Yea, I think her oldest is in his mid-thirties now. She had three more after that. She's even a grandmother. But you know I wouldn't have done half the stuff she did, right? So, after she was out of the picture, is that why you let me come back to the high school?

Agnes: Like I told you before, you earned your way back to the high school because you got that A in Algebra. You proved to me that you could make it over there.

Me: One last question. Dad was a prominent figure in the community. You retired from the bench with the same name you kept even after you divorced dad and remarried. Do you really think I, ...we could have made it through much of the accomplishments as Black women like me becoming a teacher and going back to school without the support from my last name?

Agnes: Well you know in politics, if you change your name in the middle of a campaign, you may as well commit suicide, because no one will know who you are. That's why, even though I got remarried, I held on to the name when I ran for the circuit court. You, on the other hand, were born into that name. Your education, experience and talent got you to where you are today- but don't forget the foundation. Don't forget whose shoulders you had to stand on to keep you on top.

I realize that growing up in a two-parent household, both professional, offered advantages such as the affordability of private schooling and yearly summer camp. However, I still believe

that all parents should take advantage of, or at least recognize such decision-making opportunities when they are presented. Regardless of a parent's motivational readiness or a head of house hold's own worth of self-efficacy, when it comes to the educational welfare of our children, we should have some level of alertness and preparation.

When my mother extracted me from the private school as a young child, it was because she noticed a change in my behavior that was more favorable to the Wellsmore culture to which I had become accustomed. That home bred form of positionality guided me as I chose to remove my son from a talented and gifted (TAG) 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom headed by a sometimes-arrogant White teacher, who taught her students to consider themselves better than everyone else. They weren't necessarily smarter. They just learned from the same curriculum with different approaches. At my request administration moved him to a more structured and traditional 2nd grade classroom under the supervision of a no-nonsense African American teacher who was a friend of the family and was happy to have him under her instruction. In his new class my son began to understand his genuine self-worth in a nurturing academic environment.

Analytically speaking, apparently, my mother judged with subjectivity by witnessing or noticing the effects of the objective reality of what actually occurred. The notion of her noticing her daughter, me, straying from the essential ideas and skills basic to our Black culture, was brought on by her giving me extreme exposure to people outside of the Black culture. She felt the only way to correct the problem was to expose me to a more diverse atmosphere like the Baptist church or a public school on the other side of town.



History seemed to repeat itself when I happily acknowledged that my son was recommended to a TAG class back in 2008. But as I mentioned earlier his personality changed. I assumed his undermining tone and conceited behavior shown by use of flippant remarks, phrases and actions were connected to the influence of cultural ideals placed on him by his White teacher and other predominantly White classmates. As a correction, I too had to take necessary action by removing him from that environment and placing him with a teacher who did her best to stay in sync with all of her students, especially the African Americans. High expectations were placed, but the child was not shunned if he didn't reach his potential.

I can't explain the similarities between my mother's and my definition of cultural acceptance in the academic setting but for the inherited terms and conditions formed into our shared positionality. Even decades apart, we often experienced or we received information with similar intuition usually extending from a perspective of race, fairness or equality. Simply stated, we didn't have any problem pointing out apparent injustices when it came to the welfare of our children. Once the problem was acknowledged, as it was during my school years and later with my son, we parents made the choice to move our children to a more suitable environment.

Just as the acknowledgment of our positionality was important in the academic setting, it also served as the guiding force that possibly saved my life. Reflecting on my dismal visit to the military hospital with (unbeknownst at the time) a life-threatening illness and a mountain of worry, I realized that I was in incapable hands from the very beginning. I remember for an instant, I considered seeking consultation from a nearby reputable civilian hospital two towns away. I changed my mind when the thought of health care costs came to mind. The only full

medical benefits I had at the time was through the military. With dutiful intent I went the closest and primary military medical treatment facility. Much like the neighborhood institutions to which a school-age child is zoned to attend by geographical location, this Navy hospital was where military personnel and dependent family members report for medical treatment. I thought, at the very least, I would receive adequate medical care. To my dismay, what seemed urgent to me and my family was of low priority to the medical staff at the hospital. We all left that day with feelings of despair. It was my mother who took it upon herself to find answers to the multitude of inquiries we had concerning my well-being. Had it not been for her immediate recognition and positional distrust in the less than adequate service received from the military facility on that day, she would not have gone on a quest for more appropriate medical attention. Incidentally, during recovery several weeks after my mastectomy which was approved, financed and performed at a highly acclaimed hospital outside of network , I received a letter from the chief of surgery at the military facility requesting a core biopsy for an official prognosis. My mother and I could do nothing more in response but shake our heads in disbelief.

The edification I received through the portraits of Chapter Four spoke to me as a vibrantly painted image on canvas speaks to an artist. This is, in fact, why I titled them “Portraits of...” followed by demonstrative adjectives and phrases that described their portrayed character throughout the interview.

It is my opinion that involved parents who make rational, simple or likely decisions, mostly utilize empirical knowledge, personal criteria and preference along with hard data before making that final choice. This notion serves as a foundation for school choice as well. Often, we parents make preliminary assessments from what we see (or don’t see) particularly among others

outside of our race and culture. I firmly admit that I seek out the location and the demographics of an institution before I consider a school's academic track record or graduation rate. In other words, we "size up" the situation before we try it, just as my father did when he asked my mother about finding out how many Blacks went to the camp before she sent me there for an entire summer. Sometimes the decisions we make reap the assumed benefits. On the other hand, decisions that seem innocent enough may end up having an erroneous outcome. Had my mother paid closer attention to what my father was requesting, perhaps that summer incident in the swimming pool could have completely been avoided by my parents agreeing to find a summer camp that had a more equal distribution of minority children and staff members.

In reflection throughout the writing of my autoethnography in Chapter Five, I was inspired to accentuate my own story through spoken word. An excerpt of my poem was featured at the beginning of this chapter. As cited in an article entitled *Explicating Positionality: A Journey of Dialogical and Reflexive Storytelling* (2014), authors agree that a researchers' own story, expressed through creative writing facilitates an awareness that is needed to "seek and understand the stories of others"(p.363).

Linked to historical contextualization of personal narrative, as introduced in the opening chapter by authors Maynes, Pierce & Laslette (2008), reflexivity among researchers and participants is an "intersubjective achievement" (Stronach et al., 2013, p. 291 as cited in Carter, Lapum, Lavalleye, & Martin, 2014, p.363) in which self and other are integral to self-understanding (Frank, 2002; Stronach et al., 2013). 2014). Sharing our reflective voices deepened my understanding of the role of positionality when I considered choices for my son's education.

“Revealing self through storytelling is a vulnerable, but valuable act (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Pithouse-Morgan, Khau, Masinga, & van de Ruit, 2012), which can unearth the researcher’s positionality and inner self (Frank, 2002). By making the substance of one’s self and story explicit, we better understand how the researcher approaches research questions, interactions with participants, and data (Collins & Cooper, 2014; Frank, 2002), all of which ultimately shape emergent findings and discussions (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012)” (Carter, Lapum, Lavallo, & Martin, 2014, p.13).

The name of the piece is titled My Journey, My Identity.

*My Journey, My Identity*

*Am I a model citizen? Am I a single African-American woman who tries to  
look beyond the tall walls that help contain, restrain and maintain  
my so-called life?*

*I think it’s time that I try to define, to take an account and survey how  
little or large the amount*

*of effort to consider my understanding of the 21<sup>st</sup> century ideals  
demanding -my contribution-*

*Where do I begin? Perhaps from the beginning within-*

*I was raised in a middle-class family during the seventies. I was happy with  
who I was. As an only child for the first seven years of my life, I had no  
complaints, no restraints, no worries no stress-*

*For you see, I was daddy’s little girl and I was mommy’s African princess-*

*I can recall early childhood school mornings. My mother preparing me to go  
to the private school, mostly White school three blocks from my home-*

*I was content, I felt safe. To me it was all good.*

*Until that following summer of '74 came, and my life changed -  
And then I understood.*

*I was sent to summer camp -and Mommy was excited for me, despite the  
damp-end spirit that daddy had harbored.*

*"How many Black kids go to this camp?" Dad would question. "Did you do  
the homework when I gave the suggestion?"*

*"What difference does it make?" mother replied. Our baby has a sparkling  
personality and she has God on her side."*

*First day, I didn't question why I couldn't ride the school bus to the  
campsite. It was explained that I had a "special friend escort" and to me that  
was all right.*

*When I first arrived, I was nervous about new friends I could find. My skin color  
and my three-inch kinky afro were the furthest things from my mind.*

*The summer went by and I hadn't a care*

*Til the day a little White boy confronted and explained that out of aaalll  
the kids and counselors in the camp, I was the only nigger there.*

*He continued to taunt me and call me names day after day. Even with my  
mother's interference, nothing changed. She encouraged me to stand my ground,  
be courageous, use my words, not my fists*

*I heard what my mother said but many of her words were deafened by  
my growing desire to HIT!*

*I was ultimately expelled from that summer camp. You see the devil got a  
hold of my sparkly personality -*

*and I became more envious of the people around me.*

*I had also decided that I was tired of being the object of torment.*

*So, for that temporarily insane moment,*

*While we were having a splash battle in the pool, it turned into a physical release of aggression as I attempted to repeatedly and continuously dunk that little fool -into the water.*

*Each time the hold under was a little longer than the last as he reached up to grasp- and breath.*

*Each time he came up I was reprimanding and demanding an apology.*

*Suffice to say all I got was yelps for help. They came to his rescue, I guess just in time. While others, by my actions, were obviously traumatized and horrified, I couldn't help but feel slightly satisfied.*

*~~~~~*

*As I became an adult, a college student a navy wife and a mother, I understood cultural differences and acceptance like no other.*

*You see being married to Uncle Sam through your military spouse has its small privileges as you move from country to country, region to region and house to house.*

*I considered it a small privilege to meet and greet local families of different cultural backgrounds who invited us over for an authentic dinner.*

*Discussing family, politics, encouragement, supporting the most inner-thoughts of our relationships among ourselves and the community.*

*I've learned a lot from my Japanese, Guamanian, Samoan, Latino,  
Hawai'ian, Black and White brothers and sisters.  
I have learned tolerance and acceptance.*

*I have learned to advocate and speak out for what is right.  
Just as I have learned to when to simply remain quiet after realizing  
it's just not my fight to fight.*

*~~~~~*

*Raising a son in this 21<sup>st</sup> century world with his supposed answers to  
everything literally at his fingertips, isn't easy.*

*I tried to introduce him to multicultural engagement.  
I arranged for him to attend a school of children from all over the world and of  
different environments.*

*It seemed to work for him for a while,  
until the bike riding, playing tag, camp nights and sleepovers went out of  
style.*

*Technology crept in and took the place of real friends.  
To this day, I continuously challenge my young man, on his positional identity,  
which is not an easy task.*

*I remind, encourage, sometimes harp that he too, can look beyond the tall  
walls that help contain, restrain and maintain his life by staying active in  
organizations that contribute to global causes.*

*I remind, encourage and yes, sometimes harp on him to stay on top of his  
academics and athletics. His dream is to travel and compete worldwide in his love  
of track and field.*

*It is my responsibility, as his mother, his manager, his personal counselor,  
to advise that his ambition yields-  
to spiritual well-being, and the awareness of faith and Divine sacrifice.*

*As he cherishes the family's beloved bible verse of Philippians 4-13,  
" I can do all things through Christ-  
who strengthens me."*

*~~~*

*I am thankful for the voice and I appreciate the choice to use the soulful  
talent of spoken word to reflect, review and even "stew" in my own conscience.  
Poetry expression is an outlet that allows me dig, research and to  
Explore*

*As a woman who holds a degree in Visual and Performing Arts, I embody-  
the craft of poetry as an artistic, linguistic creative license to communicate the  
effective incorporation of self-reflection enhanced by rhythm, rhyme and  
Metaphor.*

*A personal decision to continue to teach and learn in the same diverse  
community of which I consider myself a member, is a part of my identity. I  
want to give back.*

*It is not just because I am a minority, nor is it because I pledged to  
belong prominent African -American sorority.*

*This ongoing story is what I am coming to be. This is part of my life, a  
chapter of my autobiography, clarifying my positionality-that I may simply title*

*"My Positional Identity"*

*This- is my auto-ethnography.*



## CHAPTER SIX : INSIGHTS AND CONCLUSION

*“My mama couldn’t get through to me. I’m on tv talking like it’s just you and me. I’m just saying how I feel, man. I ain’t one of the Cosbys, I ain’t go to Hill-man. I guess money should have changed him. I guess I should have forgot where I came from.”*

*Kanye West, 2007*

### Revisiting the Research Questions

In this study the inquiry which inspired my research was guided by the questions stated in Chapter One.

- “How could positionality inform or influence African American parents’ use of school choice?
- Does the discourse of “the marketplace” open favorable spaces of educational agency for African American families in low-income suburban areas like in larger cities or does this rhetoric merely create new pitfalls for less well-positioned “consumers”?
- Lastly, how does my own story as a researcher illustrate the degree to which positionality matters as an aspect of agency in contexts of school choice to share and address this disparity using episodes of experiences of friends and my own family life?

### Final Reflection

In many circumstances, if only for a moment, most parents contemplate the most appropriate school choices for their children based on academic, social and emotional growth. In fact, in my humble opinion, it would seem unnatural and imprudent not to do so. In Chapter Two I forwarded a synopsis on the filmed documentary of two Black boys raised in different households under different circumstances yet, briefly attended the same private school in New

York City. A quote from the director's cut edition rang a sense of clarity with me. The parent/director stated, "Our goal is to empower their parents and educators to pursue educational opportunities, especially to help close the Black male achievement gap" (Rada Film Group & Brewster, 2013). I came to understand that my research was not just for simple data collection. The research gave me a deeper understanding of the underlying messages told through the stories of my participants and how to maintain open lines of communication.

As I reviewed my reflections expressed after each interview of my contributors, I discovered a commonality between their personal and parental lives and my own. I learned that even with the limitation in the study which included the sentiments of middle-class professional participants, we all enjoyed the privilege of exercising school choice and our ability to navigate it.

I learned that many of our school choice decisions were affected by the positionalities formed from our families and childhood interaction with the world outside our homes. By applying the critical race theory as explained earlier in Chapter Two, I found we had a joint consensus in the depth of our conversations. Black British feminist Heidi Safia Mirza explained it best. Although she speaks through feminist values, the same lesson in her proposed scenario can be applied to people of color and educational decisions for their children.

What is clear from all the studies on race and education is that ...in order to overcome obstacles in racism and sexism, large numbers stay on [in school] in order to get the opportunities that enable them to take a backdoor route into further and higher education. They do this by rationalizing their educational opportunities and opting for accessible realistic careers (racialized jobs). Their career aspirations were tied to their educational

motivation and by the prospect of upward mobility.

(Gilborn & Ladson-Billings, 2004, p.202)

For example, while it may appear that young Black women chose realistic careers that they knew to be accessible and historically available to them ...such as ...social work and other caring jobs or office work, they are also giving in to the reproduction of “stereotypes of ‘black women’s work” (p.202). In turn, they are expressing their mediocratic values within the limits of opportunity allowed to them in a racially and sexually divisive educational and economic system (p.202).

I recall strong expressions as well as non-verbal inclination where my parent participants felt that their children deserved more than what was offered or expected from their local schools. That was something we all could agree on. We did not want to settle for societal planned mediocrity over choice and opportunity.

Chapter One opened with a series of vignettes. If the thought has not yet come to mind, I will admit the story in Vignette Number One: *Kitchen Table Thoughts*, where Maria was faced with the dilemma of school choice for her kindergarten aged child, was what I went through in real life. In fact, I am Maria in the story. Much like Pamela Darling who shared the same type of experience of a stressed life as a military wife, my son and I had moved across the Pacific Ocean back to the mainland to start a new life following a separation from my military husband. We moved into my mother’s home. Even though I felt blessed to have a job with a school district, thirty-some miles away, I knew I would not be able to afford a hefty monthly expense toward in town childcare on a measly hourly wage of \$12.50 an hour. I knew my mother would have offered financial assistance. However, my son was my responsibility and I had to make a way.

My positionality and level of societal comfort resurfaced from my childhood years once I understood the climate of the residents around us in the city where my son and I lived during his early elementary years. An example of this revelation began when my son and I met a few of the neighborhood children at the park. I noticed how the White children didn't seem to want to engage with my son who had made several attempts to play with them. On one particular occasion, he found a little buddy, I would assume the same age that would play with him. All seemed to go well until I witnessed them both agreeing to swap bikes for a few minutes (so he thought). At first, I was apprehensive as I watched from afar. I thought,

My son has a nice bike of his own. All I need is for the little boy to run home telling his parents that a little Black kid rode off with his bike. But on the other hand, I guess there's not much harm done if it's only for a couple minutes. Maybe this could be the strengthening of a little friendship.

When my son went over to pick up the little boy's bike to ride, the boy said out loud, "Wait! put it down! My mom doesn't like it when other kids use my things." And there it was. I surveyed the area for his guardian. I also noticed other kids looking at him. Since I didn't see anyone who appeared to be watching the little boy, I called out to my son and told him it was time to go home. Slightly confused, he questioned why, and I simply told him that we didn't want his mommy to get mad thinking you took his bike even though he said it was okay to trade for a couple minutes. I was expecting a couple of "But moms..." from him. Instead, that was pretty much all I had to say. He seemed to either immediately accept my explanation as the final word or he was smart enough to realize that the kid faked him out. That, I believe, was one of the first of many lessons to be applied to the formation of his positionality. Without so much of a word he turned and ran

back to get his own bike and we headed home. The kid even had the nerve to yell out “Where you goin’?” Slightly disgusted by shaking his head, my son didn’t even look back in the boy’s direction. I felt since there was no need to tell him how I felt, (and I was simmering mad) I left it alone. If he asked later, I would have told him the truth about fairness for some did not mean the same fairness for all. I think he got it.

This occurrence obviously stuck with me when I thought about him attending the elementary school down the street as a kindergartener. I wondered if all children were like that little boy in some way or another. Had they even seen Black kids before? It didn’t matter anyway since I couldn’t afford the daycare. I figured other families probably had stay-at-home moms and au pairs. Both my mother and I worked. I consulted with coworkers and the principal of my school/workplace eight suburbs away. The secretary, a middle aged African American woman who, later I found out had been in a similar situation, worked out a way for my family to use a local address in that school district so he could attend school closer to me.

The move was beneficial in many ways. We began and ended our school days together. After-school programs, that helped my son form better relationships with children of all colors, were provided for a fraction of the cost. Since our adopted school district was close to the military base, it was easy for me to schedule and keep doctor’s appointments. Not to mention our close proximity to the commissary which was open to all military personnel and their dependents. Grocery shopping at a duty-free facility on a low income came in handy.

This post reflection set the premise for the study of personal school choice decisions concerning myself, my son and my participants. The theme is revealed and appropriately adhered

to through my research questions. Looking for how life experiences and personal preferences had an impact on our school choices, I began with exploring the core of my personal life. I was also privileged to witness some of the reactions as my contributors recalled or realized teachable moments for the first time. For instance, in my interview with Ms. Shaw highlighted in Chapter Four, my showing her a picture of her childhood home, brought up a memory that she then realized how impactful it was in her life. I unsuspectingly thought the memory came from viewing the house. Instead, it came from the tall flourishing palm tree in the front yard of the house. When she noticed it, she somberly paused and remembered an incident that occurred when she was a child sparked from an act of racism. Brief reminiscence during my interviews and reflection afterwards, confirmed that my parental decisions were (and are) indeed, influenced by personal and moral values, acquired through life experiences.

### **Made Me the Mother I am Today**

I pondered on how to answer such a loaded question until I stumbled across a lyric in one of Chicago rap artist, Kanye West's songs, *Can't Tell Me Nothin'* (2007). Rap music lyrics can promote critical thinking and awareness (Herd, 2009, p. 404). Music, television, theater, and other aesthetic outlets suggest that "interrogating and decoding elements of popular culture can empower audiences by increasing awareness of how media messages are socially produced and how they affect social perceptions and relationships "(p. 404). In the song he artistically explained, in retrospect, how he had made some poor decisions with irrational patterns of thought. Some thoughts and actions were based on expectations through instant fame, other decisions were based from struggles with his cultural identity.

This specific song was created on the heels of a comment West made to the media during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. He spoke out about the slow federal response of then President George Bush to the helpless and devastated victims of the hurricane like Letitia Shaw's mother. He expressed his dissatisfaction by exclaiming that the president didn't care about Black people. The episode (of West's verbal retaliation) exemplified all the ills of the Bush Administration. Poverty, racism, cronyism, underinvestment, inequality, militarism, ineptitude, dissembling, sectarianism, cynicism and callousness—all the hallmarks of Bush's tenure—were on display (Younge, 2015, p.17). West received a lot of backlash from Bush supporters and politicians from both sides of the isle. Aesthetic experiences require conscious participation in a work, a going out of energy, an ability to notice what is there to be noticed (Green, 1995, p. 125) through performance. In West's song, he unapologetically defended his actions by attributing his demeanor toward societal expectations and his positionality.

With the world as a stage, West was so deeply rooted in his brutal honesty and call for social awareness that even his own mother the main contributor to the micro-system of his humble childhood on the south side of Chicago, couldn't get through to him. In fact, he compared himself to the characters on a popular tv sitcom from the 90's, *The Cosby Show*, by conveying that although he admired how the sit-com creator portrayed a successful functioning modern age Black family, his family life was nothing like it in comparison. The cultivation theory would assert that television can influence personal values as well as societal perceptions, as dominant program content becomes assimilated into personal value structures over time (Srum, Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2005, p.474).

The lyrics in West's music and many artists' lyrics of the like, had an effect in my upbringing and mold into motherhood. The "knowing about", even in the most formal academic manner (Green, 1995, p.125) gives way to my accurate perception and connections with the same tv situation comedies. I was a college student in the late eighties when the world was introduced to the Black sit-com family on the *Cosby Show* and its spin-off *A Different World*. The Cosbys were a New York upper-middle class African American family of five children, ages ranging from six to twenty, growing up in a two-parent household. The mother and father had successful careers, an attorney and obstetrician, respectively. The oldest daughter was a student at Princeton. The daughter next in line to go to college was considering attending her father's alma mater, a historical Black college (HBCU) in Virginia. By the time the spin-off came out that daughter attended the HBCU, Hillman.

I remember each Thursday night, most of the girls, minorities and friends, on our floor would be glued to our television sets. The channel was locked on NBC from 7 to 8 p.m. We were ready to be "edutained" through the funny, yet realistic fictional lessons in life with which we often identified ourselves in the same scenarios.

Obviously, the one size did not fit all, as Kanye implied in his song, but for many moments I reflected back to how the parents on the program handled the discipline with their teen-aged son. Although I didn't attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), I developed a sense of fun responsibility with my floormates. I also developed a more serious obligation toward my studies as I viewed the problem-solution scenarios proposed by the female collegiate characters on *A Different World*. The six-year run of this situation comedy was so popular to families across the globe because it focused on Black college life and social issues



that were (and in many cases still are) relevant. Regardless of the more recent denunciation of its primary actor and contributor, for which the show is named after, the program's content had a historically rich and positive impact on me as an African American woman.

“What is said and done at home has an impact on the type of attitude that a child has towards school” (Smart Guide, 2012). I wouldn't continue without paying a tribute to my own parents who had a strong hold on fun responsibility and stern discipline when necessary. Like, the mother on the sit-com, my mother was a lawyer. She spent many days at work. Even on some holidays, her explanation for heading to the office was the need for a quiet enough environment to get her work done without interruption. As a little girl, I sometimes didn't agree with her being gone so much. Later, I surmised that she often had to work twice as hard as her counterparts in order to keep up with her caseload. I was somewhat of a “daddy's girl” anyway so I didn't mind as I got older. I learned that there was a time and a place for everything. When it was time to complete a task like homework assignments, I sometimes secluded myself free from distraction, with the exception of the soft playing of jazz music of Grover Washington, like it was featured in the background on the Cosby Show. No Kanye West until the project was complete.

My autoethnography described my childhood through the private and public school years. Surely, so many transfers between schools would have seemed cumbersome and taxing on a young girl. Not to mention, the moves based on racial tensions, like the summer camp incident. However, the reasons that are now clearer for the moves back then helped me understand why I was able to make the school choice decisions, today, for my son.

There is consistent, positive, and convincing evidence that shows that families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life (Henderson & Map, 2002, p. 7). From my parents I learned the educational benefits of parental involvement, which is important. My parents were very much involved in my schooling and extra-curricular activities like the Brownie troop to which I belonged while attending Wellsmore. Their support encouraged me to approach or accept more challenging academic tasks. In connection to the earlier mention of blacks naturally honing into racialized jobs was earlier captured in the interview with my mother in Chapter Five's autoethnography. She intervened when she witnessed my domestic decision in the play kitchen during "choice time". She firmly pointed out to my white private school teacher and me that I should be given more opportunity (in fact, directed toward) the math and science stations on the other side of the classroom. My mother did not appreciate the teacher's explanation which essentially was placing the blame on me, an impressionable little Black girl, for always choosing the kitchen area.

In turn, I took on a more active role when it came to reviewing my son's high school assignments; especially group projects. I encouraged him to think outside the box. Examples during his junior and senior years in high school. Oddly, again, it was an assignment that involved the use of a kitchen. This time, however, it was a lesson requiring an instructional demonstration (like in a You Tube presentation). Given that preparing a traditional Italian dish was the assignment the three boys chose, I supported it by offering our open-area kitchen, to my son and his project partners for the setting of a cooking demonstration for their media class. I also arranged for an amateur videographer and funded the composition of a musical playlist to accompany the demonstration. On a different occasion I offered to take him and a few classmates

to the Chicago Art Institute to cover an assignment for an art appreciation term paper. My son was the only one who gladly accepted the offer. While we turned our visit to the downtown museum into a fun responsible lively experience of viewing the masterpieces of Renoir and Picasso up close, all but two other classmates utilized the alternative assigned method by finding two- dimensional works of art on the internet. Evidence shows a dramatic drop in parental involvement as children get older (Rapp & Duncan, 2011). However, I feel because of the foundational support from my parents both my son and I are appreciative of the bond that was created though parental involvement throughout his school career.

### **Useful Research Framework**

A conceptual framework is the result of bringing together a number of related concepts to provide a broader understanding of a phenomenon of interest (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019 p.165). For many qualitative researchers it is their general framework or paradigm that is most important (Willis, 2007, p.247). I found that the idea I wanted to research began with a simple parental feeling that developed into a need for corroboration. By recognizing the existing implicit or explicit propositions of the small theories expressed through ordinary language (Nye, 1980, p. 479), in conversations about school choice. I employed these mini-theories into the concepts and theoretical propositions of positionality. The intent of the framework was to seep into the agency of the active critical consciousness (Murrell, 2008, p.101) by understanding the dynamics of power relations in everyday lived experience of self and others (p.101).

The framework of this study was significant in that it helped me anchor the reflections of my participants by gaining insight in the complexities of African American family life outside of

my own. On a broader spectrum, school choice and other acts of familial decision-making have a deeper meaning founded on the principles of local, national and perhaps even global socialization. Interconnections have to be understood as historical articulations of particular sets of social relations (Newell, 2005, p.86). The individual's location in civil society corresponds directly to his or her political status or as Marx put it, 'his separation and exclusion from other elements of society ' (Rupert & Smith, 2002 p.259).

Additionally, the framework was useful in a way that it allowed me to view my personal and professional life by exploring the process of gaining experience, confidence, social and self-awareness.

### **Implications and Justification for this Type of Study**

It is not a method or technique that determines whether something is qualitative research; it is how the study is conceived, what is to be accomplished, and how the data are understood. The question of what constitutes qualitative research is made more complex by the number of paradigms that can serve as foundations for qualitative research (Willis, 2007, p.250).

I along with other qualitative researchers have to face the critics that acknowledge that our work is hard to measure in terms of authenticity. Often, I thought throughout the entire dissertation process about what made the research study of my participants and my autoethnography credible?

The growing emphasis on the power of research to change the world creates a space for the sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allows us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned (Wall, 2006, p.148).

It wasn't as easy for me, a novice researcher to declare my positionality, like Kanye West did through his lyrical rant of an unjust society. When it came to recognition of apparent ignorance (intentional or not) and disregard of African American acceptance in schools of choice, particularly in the suburbs, the question of my being taken seriously came to mind. In simpler terms, it was hard to attest that the negotiation of school choice, with motives that I claim to be valid, such as a search for teachers who invest in children like "us", was a real *thing*.

In juxtaposition to pedagogy, perhaps the connotation of "us" refers to author Mwalimu Shujaa's collection of work that emphasizes the differences between schooling and education. Shujaa asserts that, as opposed to schooling, all educational ideas are about culture. The process of education is the process of socializing students into a particular social culture (Shujaa, 1998, p.394). Schooling's definition, as interpreted by Shujaa, is a process intended to maintain the status quo. Schooling seeks to transfer the core (facts) knowledge of the American culture to students so they will share a common background, basic vocabulary, skills, history, etc., and will enable them to negotiate with/within "the system (p.395). From an Afrocentrist's point of view there is:

..an interest in certain kind s of knowledge that might be useful for the advancement of the education of African American children...in the place of knowledge from observation

and experiences. Using this method [one] is able to determine what is and what is not on the basis of the evidence and not from some form of intuition or mysticism that might or might not be possible for the next person to catch (Shujaa, 1998, p.39 ).

Notions like this should be considered by all, parents, teachers, administrators and stakeholders alike. What's more, the task of finding parents who share the same values and finding the right approach to get them to open up about personal thoughts, family backgrounds and insecurities was also a sensitive task.

Based on these chosen principles, I opted to move forward with a successful search for willing participants. I conducted in-depth interviews with parents who were not only willing to share the choices they made for their children's education but were interested in a constructive dialog about their decisions. Many school placement decisions were based on their childhood experiences growing up, which had influences on their positionality now, as adults. My auto-ethnographic reflections contributed to this concept which, in turn, helped form a uniqueness in my research. Understanding that "it is possible to gain and share knowledge in many ways" (p.147), I felt it was necessary to reciprocate by in conversation with my fellow participants and to include in this study, my lived-experience as a daughter, a student, a teacher, and a mother. These data, through personal accounts and reflections brought my and my mother's voice toward the center of the research pertaining to understanding the social world through multiple points of view.

In preparation, I did actually read and reported from several articles containing quantitative evidence of school choice policies and programs to further support my study . It

was necessary to do so and familiarize myself with the history of school choice and the lengthy selective enrollment process as I reported in the literature review of Chapter Two. Without this understanding I would not have been able to give a fair analysis involving the comparisons, advantages and disadvantages between large inner city and suburban school choice options. I did, however chose to maintain a qualitative property.

Researchers must acknowledge their own personal values and how these values shape their perceptions and interpretations (Efron, & Ravid, 2013, p. 41). It was necessary to gain that familiarity, trust and the right comfort level of my participants, as well as my inner-self, in order to find the legitimacy of this study.

### **Overall Conclusion and My Take Away**

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, it is common knowledge that throughout suburban and inner-city communities, children are assigned to their neighborhood school by default. There may be other nearby public school choices through selective enrollment or charter, however, space available is quite limited. Most studies find that in such option-demand choice programs, parents of higher socioeconomic status (SES), (as measured by education, income, or other factors) or White parents, are more likely to exercise the option to choose. For some White American parents, it seemed apparent that the higher percentage of African American attendance in a school, the lower the status of that school. There is also a likelihood of a greater perceived competition for valued resources, such as college preparatory classes in STEM, fine arts, and extracurricular clubs/activities such as chess or a full athletic department offering an array of competitive sports beyond the traditional and highly visible basketball and football programs.

The parents that I chose to write about were on the “other side” of the spectrum. I interviewed parents that noticed the struggle of choice in their school system and felt the familial pressure to find a solution for their children by utilizing the market- based theory to their advantage. Just as I have done in the past, my participants’ ushered feelings of positionality or thoughts of social placement in society influenced their perception of injustice in the scholastic environment. As a response, our children were strategically moved to schools where we thought we would find solace and a well-deserved aboveboard education. Among my participants this meant taking entrance exams or utilizing a relative’s address for public schools across town like Everheart did for all three of his children in the inner city. For the suburbanites like myself, the Darlings and the Whitman family, we extended toward different measures. Whether it was seeking permission from the superintendent, taking on extra jobs to pay for private schooling, trying charter, or ultimately splitting career time to open a home school, we did what it took to assure a valuable education that suited our personal and positional needs.

Reaching out to my participants, who I now consider part of my support group, is a constant for me now. Since the beginning of this research two years ago, our children have satisfactorily managed through the school systems that we developed into their lives. My son is a stellar example of how parental intervention involving the insistence of school choice outside of the proverbial box, produces great outcome. Currently, he is attending his second year of college at a school of his own choice. As products of planned individualized paths of matriculation, the children of my participants are becoming productive citizens living by the principles farmed from their upbringing and positionality.



## **Contribution to the Educational Field**

There is no surprise that we live in a market-based educational society. Above all considered, the welfare of our children whose young minds will soon help shape the future of America is at risk. From birth, parents and caregivers face daily decisions that involve molding their children's placement in society through rearing and different practices of lessons in life. School choice is no exception. At best, the contribution offered through this study is the expression of the necessity to make today's educators, school boards and parents more aware and familiar with the phenomenon of family positionality and its impact in parental school choice.

In past decades, children's understanding of emotions or emotion knowledge has emerged as another source of individual differences that correlates with social behavior and adaptation (Izard et al, 2001, p.18) to school settings and the world around them. Positionality, specifically of families of a lower socio-economic status, has a noticeable direct link to parental consideration of placement in a school setting which is emphasized in the research performed by Carroll Izard (2001) and her colleagues of the University of Delaware and Case Western Reserve University. Results of empirical research derived from children of economically disadvantaged families, suggest that deficits in emotion knowledge contribute to the causal chain from the child's characteristics, to teachers' impressions and expectations, to the child's actual academic performance (p.22).

As for parents, like myself, who sought placement in schools of choice and the search was actually for a panacea to reduce poor "relations at school, that may affect their child's morale, concentration, and motivation to perform well academically" (p.22).

As a non-educational parallel, I would consider the summer camp experience explained in my autoethnography chapter. While my mother felt my personality could charm any audience no matter what color or background, my father had a different outlook. In the interest of my emotional knowledge and social adaptation, my dad was the one who asserted from the beginning to “do the homework” by finding out the demographics and overall “vibe” of the clientele prior to sending me to the camp. Unfortunately, we found out after I had attended for a few weeks that that setting was an emotionally negative environment that shook my foundation.

This notion along with examining the curricular outline of schools of choice is part of our homework prior to making ultimate decisions. It is necessary for administrators and stakeholders to facilitate the development of empathy when constructing policies that support the culture and climate of their schools.

## Recommendations for Future Research

### *School Choice*

*by T. N. Mosley*

*I was confused as hell. Didn't know what to do  
Just knew was I was gonna end up wit' a "W".  
Either way the wind blew I knew, this is what it was coming to*

*I had voices making different noises, I had choices, I was chosen  
Eighth grade year my position was frozen*

*Catholic high school was better, but it cost more cheddar.  
Plus, that climate change woulda changed up my weather*

*To go from a place where the windows be tinted to a place where people see  
my skin and get timid*

*I'd rather get my ass beat on the block  
than to have people make me believe I'm something I'm not*

*You see my stomach ain't meant for the violence.  
I don't kill, I don't steal. I can't live mindless.*

*But now we goin' through all the options. Gotta make a quick decision  
Without packing up them boxes.*

*You see we moved out my mama's mom's house from Then Glen.  
When I say "we" I mean me and my mama, my dad was gone with the wind.  
Another father figure following trends.*

*Don't know why but I was scared of the 'Z'.  
East Prairie was one of the three. The other two were meant to be a "B".*

*Looking back, I was over reactin'·  
If I woulda' just stayed away from the fuss and the action,  
I could have cut the suffering down by a fraction·*

*I'm not a preacher but I'm speakin' the word·  
Middle finger to the school on 23<sup>rd</sup>·*

*So now in school I was coolin· Still stuck in confusion·  
Was I in prison or in school? Well, they're both institutions·*

*In the middle of it all I made a decision· My mama wouldn't pay for tuition·*

*On the track I was blessed with a skill·  
TSU noticed and they brought me down to the 'Ville  
Not to mention they picked up the bill·*

*I was the city's truth· I coulda been its menace·  
I'm still cool with the folks who tote, they just know I'm about my business*

*School choice is a mutha'· I lived through it, you see?  
I was blessed to have a school choose me for being me·*

*~~~*

In conversation about the steps toward completion of the dissertation process, I communicated with my committee co-chair, Dr. Efron, that I was considering further research into a follow-up article concerning school choice. As it was poetically expressed and performed by my son, the entire idea of this research was inspired by our school choice and his matriculation through schools primarily based on curricular programming, affordability, and positionality.

As implied in the poem, he received a full ride scholarship through track and field to Tennessee State University. At the time we received the wonderful news that “his mama wasn’t paying for tuition” we couldn’t have been happier. His dedication and our school choice to position him close to a consortium of teachers, coaches and supporters that had designed formulas for his success as a student-athlete finally paid off.

There is a possibility of a follow up article that would focus on my son’s choice of colleges between historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and predominately White institutions (PWIs). Things did not turn out as we thought, even with the offer of a full scholarship. In addition to an invitation down to “The ‘Ville”, slang for Nashville TN, home of HBCU Tennessee State University, he had a partial scholarship offer from Loyola- Chicago. He also had both official and non-official sponsored visits to Oklahoma, Michigan State University, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and Florida. Additionally, in receipt of a congressional letter of recommendation for an appointment, my son attended a sponsored weekend visit to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. After consideration of all offers and possibilities, he humbly accepted the Division I full scholarship offer from Tennessee State University. The family and church community were extremely proud of him and the fact that he would be supporting a historically Black college.

After his first semester on the new campus, I’d say he got a “reversed culture shock”. Growing up in a diverse high school atmosphere with mixed SES, had not prepared him for a monoculture of his own kind, African Americans. We had numerous phone conversations, mostly centered on his disapproval of the condition of the school facilities, the mentality of some

of his teammates, and coaching staff. I explained to him that the typical expectations of administration and their attitudes with a certain level of school pride, to which he may not be accustomed, should be tolerated to a degree. After all, it's an HBCU in the south. His responses usually echoed phrases like, "If I had chosen to go to Loyola things wouldn't have been like this." And he's probably right. Schools like Loyola have large contributors, more money and better facilities. Since he has been at this university, his positionality has shifted. The question remains, if he will see this tenure as a learning experience that widens his horizon, or will he seek options for a transfer to a school that he feels would be less disturbing?

I believe this phenomenon is worth continued research into my son's continued collegiate journey, and that of all participants, for that matter. Simply stated, it would be interesting to see if our strategic educational planning paid off.

Coincidentally, I had an engaging conversation with one of my participants Patricia Darling and her husband, over Christmas dinner. The updates on their son's academic progress was encouraging. To this day, even though they both work long hours and often second jobs to cover their son's private education, they are happy with the outcome. Patricia is considering a transition by 2020 into the public school system. She wants to be certain of her son's academic foundation and social skills for and easier adaptation when the time comes. She and her husband also frankly stated their plans to do the homework with visits to the public school, personal references and internet research.

After our discussion, a number of questions for future research came to mind. Has the climate and control designed by school policy makers changed? Has our perception and

positional evaluation of fairness in the classroom changed? These are all questions I feel are worth investigating with my participants over time. Perhaps providing a sequel of theoretical framework that tracks the academic progress supported by the implicit and explicit application of verstehen on the sorts of social theory connected to positionality over the next decade would see this project to an end.

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## APPENDIX A

The Interview guide is as follows:

### Interview Guide

1. Tell me about yourself. Where did you grow up? What was your home life and neighborhood like?
2. Did you go to school with the same kids in your neighborhood?
3. Were you comfortable in your school setting when growing up? Why or Why not?
4. What about your mom or parents? Were they satisfied? Do you have any stories that would speak to that?
5. How many children do you have? (share parent division)
6. How old are they now?
7. How did you manage their schooling?
8. What made you come to those school choice decisions? Was it academics? Was it diversity? Was it a combination of both? Influence? Convenience?

I'm going to read some statements from a survey that I distributed three years ago to black and white parents of school aged children. I want you to tell me if you agree or disagree and why:

9. "School choice within the same or nearby city (public, private, parochial or charter) should be available to all children regardless of reason (academics, safety, high visibility athletics, extra-curricular, cultural make up etc....). For example, my son is an accomplished swimmer and the high school closest to my home has no pool. Or – I would like my child to be on the award-winning chess team at the high school 10 miles away. Or we want to find a good culturally diverse STEM program." What are your views?
10. "It is necessary to choose academics OVER school choice when seeking out a school for your child. For example: I would prefer to send my child to a mono- cultural school with high academics and upper Social Economic Status rather than send them to a multi-cultural with middle to low SES and average academics." When considering what you

think is the most important when making decisions in school choice, how would you respond? Tell me your story.

11. "Schools in poor (city or suburban) neighborhoods naturally inherit uncontrollable community problems- leaving the schools in an unsafe, under prepared and low achieving environment. Just as schools in affluent areas naturally inherit wealthy partnerships thus lending services to higher academic achievement and better preparation for a 21st century learning." Your thoughts?
12. Would you say your joint (or single) parent average salary is between \$100 thousand? higher or lower?
13. Tell me about a time ( if you ever had one) where you wished you had more time or money for a different type of schooling than what you have now for each of your children?
14. One last statement: How would you respond to one saying that "A school is just as good as the neighborhood where it stands. You get what your tax dollars pay for and parents need to accept that as a reality."  
Should you? And what would YOU do about that?

## APPENDIX B

Stacy L. Thomas

---

11265 Howard St. Beach Park, IL 60087  
847.331.0824

July 17, 2018

Dear Mr./Mrs./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_

You are invited to be part of a qualitative project on school choice conducted by Stacy Thomas, a doctoral candidate at National Louis University in the field of Curriculum Advocacy and Policy. The completion of his interview process will go toward the fulfillment of my dissertation on school choice.

The purpose of this project is to explore the qualities and characteristics of parents who are extremely knowledgeable in the field of education. I am particularly interested in researching the following interests: parental reasoning and selected criteria for choosing the right (type) school for their children; When considering a choice for your child, do you consider the population, safety, curriculum or cultural make-up? Do you consider one factor over others?

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you can withdraw from it at any time, holding you harmless. This study is specifically used as course work and there are no potential risks.


You are invited to participate in an individual semi-structured interview that may last between 45 minutes to an hour. The interview times may be divided into more than one session at location of your choice. You will be asked a series of questions pertaining to your educational background and the path, position of career as well as parental choices for your child (ren)'s education.

The interview will be audio recorded. (pending your consent) and transcribed by myself, professional use of digital software or applications installed on my personal laptop.

For confidentiality purposes of this case, anonymity is assured. All transcripts of this interview will be stored in my laptop under a secured password.

If you have questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me at: 847.331.0824.

Respectfully,



Stacy L. Thomas

x \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to participate in an audio recorded interview

x \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

I give permission to audiotape this interview

## APPENDIX C



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June 28, 2018

Stacy L. Thomas  
11265 Howard St  
Beach Park , IL 60087

Dear Stacy L. Thomas:

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) has received your application for your research study “POSITIONALITY MATTERS: A Personal Comparison of My Campaign on School Choice”. IRB has noted that your application is complete and that your study has been approved by IRB. Your application has been filed as Expedited in the Office of the Provost.

Please note that the approval for your study is for one year, from June 28, 2018 to June 28, 2019. At the end of that year, please inform the IRB in writing of the status of the study (i.e. complete, continuing). During this time, if your study changes in ways that impact human participants differently or more significantly than indicated in the current application, please submit a Change of Research Study form to the IRB, which may be found on NLU’s IRB website.

All good wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Sincerely,

**Shaunti Knauth, Ph.D.**  
**Chair, IRB**

