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The Idea of the Charter: One Community's Perspectives on the Shifting Nature of Public Education

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THE IDEA OF THE CHARTER: ONE COMMUNITY'S PERSPECTIVES ON THE
SHIFTING NATURE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

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by

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Dedicated To
Susan Kelly Senechal
October 1, 1945 – April12, 2013
whose passion for teaching inspired me

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ABSTRACT

This study considers the contested meaning of *public* education through a qualitative investigation of Patrick Henry School of Science and Arts, a charter elementary school in Richmond, Virginia. The central research question that guides this study is "How do parents construct the idea of public schools as they explain their choice of Patrick Henry Charter School?" To answer this question I conducted a constructivist inquiry that involved a series of 16 semi-structured interviews with a maximum variation sample of Patrick Henry parents concerning their ideas about the school and about public education. The analysis of these interviews led to a grounded theory of the parents' ideas as well as a case report constructed from the categorized units of data that explores the core themes of the theory. This study also addresses two sub-questions: (1) "How do the parents' ideas about *public* schools reflect the logics embedded in the larger policy discourses concerning charters and the reinvention of public education?" and (2) "How do the parents' ideas about *public* schools reflect the local public discourse around the public-ness of the school?" To answer the first sub-question I use my review of literature to develop an understanding of the reform debates around charter schools and their relationship to the contested ideas of public education. To answer sub question two, I present an adapted constructivist qualitative analysis of the public discourse that surrounded the school from April 2007 – when the idea of the school was first proposed at a school board meeting – until December 2011 – a year and a half after the school opened its doors. To capture the public discourse I collected and analyzed articles, editorials and letters from six local print publications (newspapers, weekly magazines) as

well as the public comment portion of the minutes from Richmond School Board

meetings. This analysis resulted in the construction of two competing narratives about the

school, the juxtaposition of which shed light on the how idea of public-ness was

constructed in the public discourse.

CHAPTER 1

Since the first charter law was passed in the early 1990's one of the central debates around the movement has been whether charter schools are truly *public* schools (Lubienski, 2001). On one side of the debate is a long standing anti-charter argument that frames charters as a "quasi-public" or "public-private" reform project that is meant to weaken the foundations of public education (Lipman, 2011; Ravitch, 2010, 2013; Saltman, 2005, 2007; Shanker, 1994). On the other side is an argument that presents the movement as the reinvention and strengthening of public schools (Allen, Chavous, Engler, Whitmire, Williams, & Casey, 2009; Fuller, 1996; Hill, Pierce & Guthrie, 1997). Nonetheless, over twenty years after the charter movement began, it is hard to identify a consistent idea of what exactly charter supporters mean by the "reinvention" of public schools. There are several reasons for this.

The first reason relates to the nature of the charter movement itself. As a number of analysts have pointed out, the charter school movement has been influenced by a wide-variety of often conflicting, school reform discourses (Darling Hammond & Montgomery, 2008; Henig, Holyoke, Brown, & Lacireno-Paquet, 2005; Murphy & Shiffman, 2002; Rofes & Stulberg, 2004; Wells, 2002). Charter logic has roots in the democratic language of the small-schools movement (Meier, 1995; Sizer, 2004), in the push for free-market choice in public education (Friedman, 1962; Chubb & Moe, 1990), in the accountability for results logic of the Clinton-era (Osbourne & Gaebler, 1993; Furhnam, 1993), and in the fight among African-American and Latino families for community control and educational options (Fuller 1996; McCoy, 1970; Podair, 2002;

Stulberg, 2008). This has led analysts to characterize charters as the "all things to all people" reform (Bulkley, 2005), or the "empty vessel" of school reform (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Wells et al. 2002), or – in a less flattering light – the "garbage can" (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002). The tensions between the competing discourses of charter schools raise critical questions about the form that public schools take – for example, whether they have a common or specialized curriculum, whether they are publicly governed or privately managed, whether they are accountable to bureaucracies or families. This tension is reflected in significant differences between the 42 state-level charter laws that have been enacted (Bulkley, 2005; Witte, Shober, & Manna, 2003).

The second reason that it is difficult to assess how charters are reinventing the public school is that while the forms that public schools take are shifting quickly and in radical directions (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002; Sarason, 2002), this shift has been accompanied by a less noticeable shift in how we understand the idea of "public" in public school. The idea of "public" in public school has had a wide array of associations and meanings through the history of education in our country (Kaestle, 1983; Lubienski 2001). For example, Higgins and Abowitz (2011) and others (Feinberg 2012) have suggested the label "public" in public schools can signify both generally accepted bureaucratic meanings (e.g., funded through tax dollars, overseen by elected officials, open to all students) as well as highly contested ideas about the goals of public schools in a liberal democratic society. Labaree (1997) argues that the history of public schools in our country is the history of the struggle between, and occasional ascendency, of three competing ideas about the goals of public schools: democratic equality, social efficiency and social mobility. This multiplicity of meanings make the question, "Is that school a

public school?" a very complicated question to answer. It raises other critical questions, "Public in what way?" "To what extent?" and "Toward what ends?"

A final reason that it is difficult to assess how charter schools have reinvented the idea of public schools has to do with the basic nature of social policy. Although, in general, policy works to define social problems, set desirable social goals, and choose appropriate means (Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009), the text of policy is always negotiated through the process of implementation in local contexts by local agents (Ball, 1993). This process of re-negotiation is especially true for charter policy where the multiple logics of reform have opened up wide spaces for policy interpretation (Henig & Stone, 2008). It is at the level of the local division and local school that the politically negotiated vision of charter schools is re-negotiated by the administrators, teachers, parents, and students who actually open, run and attend charter schools. This step has the potential to create a variety of charter meanings not only between individual instances of schools but also within schools between individual stakeholders and stake-holding groups. The ideas about public schools that emerge from this process of charter implementation may reflect the outlines of the national reform arguments, but may also present a window onto the political and historical dimensions of public schooling in local contexts. Henig and Stone (2008) discuss the interaction between the "clashing paradigms" and "purified theoretical models" of the national-level and the "local history, material interests, and influential personalities" of the street level as an under-studied dynamic within school reform (p. 193).

Taken together the three points above – (1) an unwieldy coalition of supporters, (2) the contested definitions of public, and (3) the nature of social policy – present a

problem when trying to understand how charters are re-inventing the idea of public schools. Considering the complexity of the reform landscape, it seems an untenable task to try to get a clear sense of the effect of charter policy on ideas of public schools when we base our claims only on the abstractions of policy discussions. Empirical examinations that attempt to generalize across contexts may be fraught with similar problems, however, the question of the public-ness of schools is one that needs to be addressed. As we move quickly to radically reform the policies that govern our public schools (Higgins & Abowitz, 2011), it is important to understand not just if these re-invented schools are working, but also what this re-invention means both in terms of the forms schools may take and the purposes they serve. It is this later issue, about the appropriateness of competing goals for public schools that is often neglected in the policy debates (Labaree, 1997).

Studying the Case of Patrick Henry

The purpose of this project is to explore the shifting ideas about public schools through a study of the case of Patrick Henry School of Science and Arts (PHSSA), a recently opened (est. 2010) charter elementary school in Richmond, Virginia. By focusing on one case, I hope to illustrate the tensions between the national reform discourse around charters and the complex negotiation of charter policy within the local context. The goal with this is not to generalize from the case, but rather to construct a rich story that illustrates the layers of meaning that exist around the idea of the public-ness of this particular school. If this is successful, it will not only be useful within the local context, but I feel it will also have potential to shed light on the tensions and the resonances between the layers of discourse – national and local, public and private.

Inasmuch as the story is presented with the thickness of contextual detail, it may allow

for certain degrees of transferability to other schools in other contexts (Guba & Lincoln,

1989; Rodwell, 1998).

There are two reasons that Patrick Henry is the focus of this study. The first is that

many people have invested themselves in particular ideas about this school. As one of

only five charter schools in Virginia, Patrick Henry has been an important example

within the state-level political discourse on education reform. For example, Governor

McDonnell used it as the site for signing the new 2010 Virginia charter school legislation

(Virginia SB737, Virginia HB1390) and mentioned it specifically as an exemplary model

in his 2011 State of the State Address (McDonnell, 2011). At the same time, the public

debates around the school have drawn strongly on the race politics of Richmond and the

history of *Massive* and *Passive Resistance* to school desegregation in the city (Pratt,

1992; Ryan, 2010). Finally, Patrick Henry has also come to mean many things to the

parents, teachers and volunteers that chose to join the Patrick Henry community. Each

local stakeholder has brought particular ideas about what public schools are and what

they should be to the discussion. As an example of a charter school that sits at the

intersection of these public and private, national and local discourses, a study of Patrick

Henry offers a unique opportunity for examining how the idea of public schools is

constructed from a variety of perspectives.

The second reason that Patrick Henry is the focus of this study is that this is a

very personal project for me. I grew up in Richmond and went to Richmond Public

Schools. My mom was a teacher in Richmond Public Schools. Before entering graduate

school, I taught for many years in public schools in Chicago and in Richmond. In my

years as a teacher and after, I have been involved in progressive activist teacher organizations that took strong stands against charter schools. I live several blocks from Patrick Henry. I went to many of the early meetings when the idea of the school was first discussed and was involved on and off in efforts to open the school. My oldest daughter was in the first Kindergarten class at Patrick Henry and spent three years at the school. My middle daughter is now in Kindergarten there. I can say that through my time working with and thinking about Patrick Henry, I have had to deal with a number of personal struggles over what Patrick Henry means to me. In this sense, part of this study is about working through those struggles. Part of it is also about acting on those struggles by doing a project that may be useful for shaping the community dialogue around the public-ness of Patrick Henry.

Research Questions and Overview of Methodological Approach

The central research question that guides this study is "How do parents construct the idea of public schools as they explain their choice of Patrick Henry Charter School?" To answer this question I conducted a constructivist inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rodwell, 1998) that involved a series of 16 semi-structured interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) with a maximum variation sample (Patton, 2001) of Patrick Henry parents concerning their ideas about the school and about public education. The analysis of these interviews is presented in chapter five and includes both a grounded theory of the parents' ideas as well as a case report I constructed from the categorized units of data that explores the core themes of the theory. The report focuses on the experiences of six composite characters through a series of 17 constructed interview vignettes.

While the focus on the parent perspective relates to my position as researcher, it is also informed by the nature of charter policy, which has shifted the role of parents from critical stakeholders in public education to critical actors (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). In theory, charter school parents are able, not only to hold schools accountable for performance, but also, through consumer preference, influence the form of schools. This repositioning of parents as powerful players in the educational system suggests that it is important to understand the meanings, not just the behaviors, that they bring to the policy debate around charters. Chapter five is an exploration of these meanings for the parents at Patrick Henry.

In line with the policy framework I outlined at the opening of this chapter, I have also developed two sub-questions. The first sub-question is, "How do the parents' ideas about *public* schools reflect the logics embedded in the larger policy discourses concerning charters and the reinvention of public education?" The second is "How do the parents' ideas about *public* schools reflect the local public discourse around the public-ness of the school?" My hope is that these two questions will shed light on some of the complicated and conflicting layers of discourse that shape meaning at the local level. To answer the first sub-question I will use my review of literature in chapter two to develop an understanding of the reform debates around charter schools and their relationship to the contested ideas over public education. To answer sub question two, I will present an adapted constructivist qualitative analysis I conducted of the public discourse that surrounded the school from April 2007 – when the idea of the school was first proposed at a school board meeting – until December 2011 – a year and a half after the school opened its doors. To capture the public discourse I collected and analyzed articles,

editorials and letters from six local print publications (newspapers, weekly magazines) as well as the public comment portion of the minutes from Richmond School Board meetings. This analysis resulted in the construction of two competing narratives about the school, the juxtaposition of which shed light on the how the idea of public-ness was constructed in the public discourse.

In chapter six, I will reflect on how the case report that resulted from the constructivist inquiry of the parent interviews relates to the frameworks that emerged from chapters two and four. Chapter three discusses the justification for the research method I chose and gives details about my process.

Before beginning this work, I will use the remainder of this chapter to present some of the foundational ideas and contextual information that will lay the groundwork for the study. This will include (1) an overview of the popular understanding of charter schools and the general policy logic that underlies it; (2) a description of the local context for this study that will address issues of desegregation and re-segregation in Richmond Public Schools, give an overview of the landscape of school choice in Richmond, explain the evolution of the Virginia charter school movement, and provide a brief history of Patrick Henry; and (3) a reflection on my intellectual, practical and personal research goals for this project with the idea that research goals are a critical interactive component of any qualitative research project (Maxwell, 2009).

What is a Charter School?

Considering the anti-union rhetoric often associated with the current charter movement, it is ironic that its beginnings are often traced to a 1988 speech and subsequent series of editorials written by Al Shanker, the former president of the

American Federation of Teachers (Ravitch, 2013). It was in these pieces that Shanker

first used the word "charter" to advocate the idea of starting autonomous schools, run by

teachers, that would be used as spaces to develop innovative solutions to some of the

toughest problems facing public education (Shanker, 1988). Shanker's idea was realized

several years later as Minnesota passed the first charter law in 1991 and opened the first

charter school in 1992. Other states soon followed and the charter movement has

experienced a rapid growth over the past two decades.

As of 2014, forty-one states and the District of Columbia have adopted charter

school laws. These laws have led to the opening of over 5700 charter schools nationally

enrolling over 1.9 million students (USDOE, National Center for Education Statistics,

2013). While this represents only a small percentage (~4%) of K-12 public school

attendance nationwide, there are certain states and cities (especially large urban districts)

where this percentage is much higher. For example, eighty percent of New Orleans public

schools, and nearly fifty percent of Washington D.C.'s public schools are charters

(Ravitch 2013). In 2011, over 10% of students in Arizona were enrolled in charters

(USDOE, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). In addition there is increased

pressure with new federal legislation to continue charter school growth. One of the

central criteria for access to Obama's *Race to the Top* funds is the degree to which states

support charter school expansion (U.S Department of Education, 2010). This has led a

number of states to rush to extend the power and scope of charter school legislation

(Richmond, 2010).

General Definition of Charter

Although the criteria defining charter school varies in important ways depending

on state laws (Bulkley, 2005; Witte, Shober, & Manna, 2003), there is what might be considered a general definition that is often articulated as a comparison to the traditional public school. In the most basic terms, a charter school is a publicly-funded school that is free from many of the rules, regulations and statutes that govern traditional public school systems. Charter schools are based on a contract between a chartering organization (usually a non-profit) and a chartering authorizer (usually a local school district) who holds the right to revoke the charter if expected levels of achievement or other terms of the agreement are not met. Charters are tuition free and generally open to all students who apply, however lotteries are often used for oversubscribed schools. Many charters provide some form of specialized curriculum that distinguishes them from traditional public schools (Nathan, 1996; Murphy & Shiffman, 2002).

Underlying this definition of charters is a general policy logic that governs how charters, as a school reform, are supposed to work to improve educational outcomes. Charter-school analysts generally present this logic by emphasizing several major policy inputs – increased autonomy, accountability, and school choice – and certain policy outputs – increased student achievement and innovation (*for examples see* Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Fuller 2000; Murphy & Shiffman, 2002; Nathan, 1996; Wells, 2002). This theory is evident in the examples below of definitions presented by three charter advocacy groups. To highlight this point, I have included emphasis.

- U.S. Charter Schools: "Charter schools are *innovative* public schools providing *choices* for families and greater *accountability* for *results*."

- National Alliance for Public Charter Schools: "Charter schools are tuition-free public schools that are *free* to be more *innovative* and are held *accountable* for

improved student *achievement*."

- Center for Education Reform: "Charter schools are *innovative* public schools designed by educators, parents or civic leaders that are opened by *choice*, *accountable* for *results* and *free* from most unnecessary rules and regulations governing conventional public schools."

While the individual ideas that underlie charter theory – autonomy, accountability, choice – are not unique to charter schools (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002) – there is a distinct logic to charter policy that sets it apart from previous reforms. As an ensemble of mechanisms, charter reform tends to shift, and in certain cases amplify, the meaning of these individual policy tools. For example increased accountability has been the hallmark of the standard-based reform movement. Yet, when used in the charter policy context accountability takes on additional meanings. Charters are not just accountable as a part of their agreement to the central charter authorizer (usually a local school district) who could bring down sanctions if outcomes are not met; they are also accountable to the parents, who – acting as consumers in the educational marketplace – can choose to leave the school.

Another example is the issue of autonomy. While districts have made moves over the recent decades toward ideas of *site-based management* (Furhnam, 1993; O'Day & Smith, 1993), charters push the idea of autonomy into new territory. In their ideal form charters ask for autonomy not just as a way of increasing local decision making about curriculum or of reorganizing school leadership; charters try to make a break from most all forms of central oversight including autonomy over governance, freedom from union rules, and financial independence.

However, in many ways, the most important dimension of charter logic centers on the issue of school choice. While school choice options – in the form of magnets, alternative schools and open enrollment policies – have been popular policy initiatives within districts for keeping students in the public system (Brighouse, 2008), advocates of charters push the idea of choice in new directions as well. Charters are not just attended by the choice of students and parents, but they are also opened by the choice of actors outside the traditional system. Charters as a choice initiative address both the demand as well as the supply side of the market equation (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002).

Charter Laws

Another way of approaching the definition of charter schools is to move from the underlying logic of definitions to an examination of how those ideas are translated into state charter laws. Although, as noted above, charter legislation varies significantly between states (Bulkley, 2005; Witte, Shober, & Manna, 2003), most charter laws are constructed around a common set of regulatory issues that include:

- The level of charter school funding: Are they funded at levels equal with traditional district schools? Do all entitlement program money follow the student?

- Charter school caps: Are there limits on the number of charter schools that operate within a district?

- Number of authorizers: How many possible authorizers are there within a state? Is it just up to local school districts or are other options available?

- Types of charter organizing groups allowed: Can charters be converted public schools? Do independent charters have to be organized by a non-profit or are can they be initiated and run by a for-profit company?

- The length of the charter: How long does the charter contract last before it must be renewed with the authorizing agent?

- Degree of autonomy: How much freedom does a charter have over various aspects of school management?

- Teacher certification and work rules: Do teachers need to be certified? Can teachers unionize? Are there regulations on wages and benefits that must be followed?

Each of the current forty-two charter laws was the product of a legislative processes which involved negotiations and compromise between political parties and stake-holding groups during particular historical moments in the politics of school reform. As a result each state law establishes different definitional criteria.

One way of understanding the variance between charter laws is to examine the ranking systems that have been used to assess them (Chi & Welner, 2008). Certainly the most popular among these is published by the Center for Education Reform (CER), a neoliberal pro-school choice advocacy group that supports charters, vouchers, and a repeal of the Blaine Amendment (Allen, Chavous, Engler, Whitmire, & Casey, 2009). Their ranking system assigns grades (A through F) for the "strength" of state charter laws based on a number of criteria. For example, according to the CER, state laws are "stronger" when there are no caps on the number of charter schools allowed to open; when there are multiple school authorizers, rather than just local school districts; when there is maximum autonomy from the local school district; and when schools are freed from collective bargaining and teacher work rules (Center for Education Reform, 2010). While these criteria are useful for understanding the dimensions of charter legislation, it

should be noted that CER presents a version of "strong" charter legislation that appeals to a particular neoliberal ideological perspective (Ravitch, 2010; Wells, 2002). For example, not all charter school advocates believe that charter legislation should negate teacher union contracts or usurp the authority of democratically-elected school boards (American Federation of Teachers, 2000).

In this section I have presented some preliminary background information on charter schools, including their history and the policy logic that underlies them. In chapter two I will take up these ideas again by taking a closer look at the multiple school reform discourses that influenced the development of the charter school idea and the complicated dynamics of the policy levers of charters – autonomy, accountability, choice, and private partnership. In this discussion I will pay close attention to the ways in which charter schools might shape our ideas about the public nature of public schools.

Patrick Henry in the Richmond Context

The other important foundational piece for this study of Patrick Henry is an understanding the local Richmond school context. Establishing the local context for the school includes (1) a review of the troubled history of school desegregation in Virginia and in Richmond, (2) a overview of the current school choice policies in Richmond Public Schools (RPS), (3) a brief history of the Virginia Charter law, and (4) a brief history of Patrick Henry from its origins to its current status.

Massive and Passive Resistance

Virginia, like many southern states, resisted the 1954 mandate of *Brown v. Board of Education* to integrate its schools. This movement, named *Massive Resistance* by U.S. Senator Harry Byrd, involved Virginia's political establishment taking a strong stand

against the racial integration of schools by arguing that Brown v. Board was a federal

intrusion on state authority. Although Massive Resistance as a strategy of open defiance

to the court mandate fell by the late 1950s to legal challenges, the shift toward integrated

schools in the state was nonetheless a painstakingly slow process. Richmond exemplified

this phenomenon. Despite the failure of Massive Resistance, pro-segregation leaders in

Richmond successfully employed an alternative strategy of what Pratt (1992) has called

Passive Resistance. He writes that while Virginia's "early surrender had demonstrated the

futility of open defiance [to the courts], … Richmond's prolonged resistance would

demonstrate the efficacy of more subtle delaying tactics and evasive maneuvers when

implemented under the pretense of gradual compliance" (pp. 19-20). Richmond's strategy

of Passive Resistance allowed Richmond Public Schools the opportunity to develop

various methods of maintaining segregated schools through the use of Pupil Placement

Boards, school conversions, "Freedom of Choice" plans, and "Clustering," while whites

slowly fled the city for the surrounding suburbs (Cole, 2009; Pratt, 1992; Ryan, 2010). As

an illustration of this White flight, the city's school system went from being almost 60%

White in 1955 – the year after the *Brown* decision – to a system that by 1980 was over

90% Black (Pratt, 1992). The legal push for desegregation essentially ended with the

1972 legal defeat of a busing plan that would have consolidated the Richmond City

school division with its two surrounding counties in the hope of promoting racial

diversity in schools. The white flight also led to a dramatic decline in enrollment that has

led to the closure of many schools. RPS went from almost 48,000 students in the 1970-

1971 school year (Pratt, 1992) to less that 24,000 in the 2012-2013 school year (VDOE,

2013 Richmond City School Report Card).

Current Richmond Public School Context

Currently Richmond Public Schools is comprised of 47 schools including 25 elementary schools, eight middle schools, five comprehensive high schools and nine specialty schools. In the 2012-2013 school year, RPS had a student population of 23,649 students. As of October 2013, 77% of RPS students received free or reduced priced lunches, a common indicator of poverty. While 41% of Richmond's population is White, and 30% of its school-age population is White, only 9% of students in Richmond Public Schools are White. The White children who comprise 9% of all students generally attend one of a handful of elementary schools located in the more affluent neighborhood zones. Of the 25 Richmond elementary schools, only six have White populations above 10%. One of these schools has a 78% White student population, another has 62% White students. The remainder of the city's 47 elementary, middle and high schools are predominantly Black. There is also a growing Latino population at several schools in the South side of the city (VDOE, 2013 Richmond City School Report Card).

Another important dimension of the local context is the current system of school choice in Richmond. Beyond the traditional neighborhood zoned schools, there are several selective enrollment specialty schools at both the middle and high school level. While some of these programs – such as the International Baccalaureate program and the "Governor's" high school – are highly competitive and have tended to be over-represented by White and middle-class families, others – such as Franklin Military, serve predominantly lower-income Black and Latino students. Richmond also has an intra-division open enrollment policy that allows students to apply for available spots at any division school. For the most part, the open enrollment policy has been used by middle-

class parents who are looking to get their children into one of the few elementary schools with larger white populations. Spots at these schools are made available by lottery, although the division does not provide transportation, which limits some students' access. The lottery for spots at particular open enrollment schools is relatively competitive. Many families are placed on waiting lists. Since Patrick Henry opened in 2010, a separate lottery has been held for the school.

Charters in Virginia

Charter school legislation in Virginia was first proposed in 1994, however it took five years before it was signed into law by Republican Governor George Allen. The opposition to the law – which led to its slow movement out of committee to the floor of the General Assembly – was led by three groups: the Virginia School Board Association (VSBA), which saw charter schools as a threat to their control over local schools; the Virginia Education Association (VEA), which was primarily concerned about competition for funding with traditional schools and the employment condition of teachers within charter schools; and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which argued that charters might be used as a way of establishing elite schools that would serve primarily white students (Abrogast, 2000). This language of "elite schools" used by the NAACP around the potential use of charters evokes the private segregation academies that emerged during the period of Massive Resistance (Pratt, 1992; Ryan, 2010). The law that eventually passed reflected the compromises that were necessary to get these groups on board. For example, the 1998 Virginia charter law allows only local school divisions to authorize charters, and incorporates no appeals process if an application is rejected, an obvious concession to the

VSBA. The law also requires teachers to be state certified and remain under the same contract as regular division teachers. The concerns of the NAACP were alleviated, to some extent, after a city tour of Boston's charter schools (Abrogast, 2000).

It is perhaps because of this process of compromises that Virginia's charter law has led to the opening of so few charter schools. In the thirteen years since the law's signing, local divisions within Virginia have approved a total of ten charters. Six of those schools have closed – primarily due to financial instability. Currently there are only five charter schools in Virginia. One signal of the restrictive nature of Virginia's charter legislation is that in 2013 the Center for Education Reform graded Virginia's charter law with an "F," and ranked Virginia second to last in the country in terms of the strength of its law.

From the beginning of his administration in 2008 Governor McDonnell made the expansion of charter schools, and the loosening of the law, a central component of his education agenda. One clear sign of this was his appointment of Gerard Robinson as his first Secretary of Education. Before coming to Virginia, Robinson served as the president of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), a national non-profit whose mission is to support charters and parental choice policies in education. McDonnell's support for charters was also clear in his 2010 revision of the Virginia Charter Law (Virginia SB737, Virginia HB1390), which was an attempt to amend the law in ways that would allow for the development of more charters. Among its provisions is an appeals process to the Virginia State Board of Education for charter school applications that are rejected by local divisions, as well as technical assistance from the State Board of Education for writing charter applications. During the same session the governor also

signed legislation that established a policy for publicly-funded University-based

laboratory schools that would be run much like charters, a move which essentially

expanded the number of authorizers in the state (Virginia SB 736, Virginia HB 1389).

McDonnell's advocacy for charter schools led him to be strong supporter of the school.

Not only did he make a number of appearances, but he also held a fundraiser for the

school.

Patrick Henry Charter School

The Patrick Henry School Initiative (PHSI), the founding organization for

PHSSA, first started meeting in the Spring of 2007 with the idea of reopening Patrick

Henry Elementary School – a Richmond Public School that was closed in 2005 due to

under enrollment – as a science-and-arts-focused charter. Central to the idea of the school

was the building itself, which sits adjacent to a large public park along the James River

that the founders imagined as an outdoor classroom for environmentally-focused

curriculum. Also significant was the building's proximity to several predominantly White

middle-class neighborhoods along the south side of the River. While the original Patrick

Henry Elementary School, as with most Richmond Public Schools, had an almost

exclusively Black student body, the Patrick Henry School Initiative was comprised

primarily of White middle class parents from the surrounding neighborhood. This raised

suspicion among many in Richmond that the charter school was designed as a way of

continuing the legacy of racial segregation in the city. Most vocal in this argument was

the Virginia chapter of the NAACP. For example, Melvin Law, president of the

Richmond NAACP, remarked, "if the parents who are clamoring for the Patrick Henry

building to be a charter school had enrolled their children in that building when it was a

public school, it would not have had to close … I know there are some well-meaning parents who are not racially motivated who are supporting the charter school [but] I'm suspicious when there are components in the community who do not use the public schools — they use private schools to educate their children — who are supporters of this charter school" (quoted in Dovi, 2008).

The first charter application for Patrick Henry was submitted to the Richmond School Board in October of 2007, however it took a full year of negotiations before the charter was eventually approved in October of 2008, and at least another full year before the school had secured enough funding and political support to move forward and set an opening date. Throughout the process the Richmond School Board and the Richmond Public School system were often at odds with the school's supporters. While the Richmond School Board approved the charter, their votes were typically divided, and their criticisms of the school has been persistent. The School Board's opposition has been based on a number of issues including concerns about the diversity within the leadership of the school, issues of transportation, financial stability, and curricular content. The school's organizers have responded to these charges by expanding and diversifying the leadership team and building a strong base of political support.

Patrick Henry held its first lottery in March of 2010, with Secretary of Education Robinson making a special guest appearance to pull lottery balls. Although the Patrick Henry building was not ready to be occupied, the school's board of directors secured a temporary location in the basement of a nearby church. The board hired its first principal and its staff through the spring and summer of that year, and opened its doors for the first time in August of 2010. In its first year, the student body of the school was 35% White,

58% Black, 3% Latino and 2% Asian. 27% of students qualified for Free and Reduced

Lunch – demographics which have been maintained through the first few years of the

school. It is worth mentioning that the racial make-up of the school matches the

demographics of the city more closely than any other school in the city.

The school's first several years of operation have been characterized by a number

of challenges. At an internal level, the school has had particular problems with leadership

changes (e.g., four principals in four years), staff changes, as well as internal conflicts

within the school's leadership – administration and board of directors – that at certain

times took on racial overtones. These struggles were compounded by challenges to the

schools' autonomy and governance put forward by the RPS school board and leadership.

The school's high profile status in the city led many of these internal and external

conflicts to be played out on the front pages of local papers, a fact that often exacerbated

the schools problems. However, despite its rocky start, the school has been able to

weather the challenges, and is now on relatively stable ground. In the winter of 2012, the

school moved into the Patrick Henry building, and in 2014, the last phases of renovations

will be close to complete.

As is evident from this brief review of the context, there are many underlying

historical and political issues that have bearing on developing a full understanding of

Patrick Henry. As with the national discourse on charters, the charter school at the local

level is, in certain ways, an "empty vessel" that is constructed through the words and

actions of a set of historically and politically situated stakeholders. While the local

discussions around the school are about Patrick Henry as "the charter school," they have

other layers of significance as well. In chapter four, I will expand this examination of the

local context by conducting an in-depth qualitative analysis of the public discourse around the school as represented in local press and public school board meetings.

Goals of the Study

I will conclude this chapter with a brief reflection on my goals for this research. Joseph Maxwell (2009), suggests that an explication of goals is a critical component of any qualitative study. Not only is a discussion of the goals of research a way of establishing the scholarly worth and justification for the study – an important task in all research – but, specific to qualitative work, a presentation of goals is an act of reflexivity (Finlay, 2002) that exposes the intellectual, practical and personal motivations that may shape the direction and findings of the study. I will discuss the goals of this study by focusing on these three categories – intellectual goals, practical goals and personal goals – with the understanding that there are multiple ways that these categories overlap and intersect.

There are several goals that I have for this study that I believe justify the intellectual value of this inquiry. First, this study has the potential to generate important understandings about the nature of public education in Richmond. In this way it will contribute to the literature on the history and the racial politics of the city and its schools (Cole, 2009; Pratt, 1992; Ryan, 2010). Second, this study has the potential to generate theory, or build on the theories, that are used to understand charter policy and its relation to the reshaping of public schools. As I will argue in chapter two, much of the scholarly work around charters has focused on the means-ends questions of whether charters are working. What this study adds is important empirical work that explores the question of what they might be working toward. Finally, at an even more abstracted level, this study

of charter schools can also be read as a case that illustrates broader political and historical

phenomenon. Charter schools are popular right now because they are a projection of the

zeitgeist. In examining the tensions between centralization and decentralization in

schools, between individual and public rights, and between market and democratic

systems of governance, I believe that the case of charter schools has lessons for the

understanding of other social and political phenomena as well.

        The practical goals of this study not only build directly on the intellectual goals,

but also take primacy in my mind. That is to say, inasmuch as I am interested in coming

to understandings about specific and generalized phenomenon, I am more interested in

the practical application of this knowledge to effect change. At one level, this interest

takes the form of aspirations I have for the potential transferability (Lincoln & Guba,

1985) of the findings. In this sense, my goal is that the understandings generated by this

study might be useful to practitioners and political actors in other contexts. More

importantly in my mind, however, is the degree to which the knowledge developed

through this study will be used within the specific case of Patrick Henry to affect local

change. I am interested not only in exploring the meaning of public schools as related to

Patrick Henry, but also in potentially shaping that meaning through this work. To

encourage this, I have incorporated research methods that engage in collaborative

knowledge development (Rodwell, 1998) with the goal of building respect and

understanding across difference. I feel that the dialogue created through this research

process will be a practical intervention into this school community.

        And this brings me to my personal goals for this study. As mentioned earlier, this

is a very personal project for me. On the one hand, my time in schools has instilled in me

a deep political commitment to certain ideas about public schools and the public purposes

they serve. As a longtime resident of Richmond, I am also invested in the success of the

Richmond Public School system. In this sense, my personal goals for this project are also

my political goals. Like many others I have certain ideas of what type of public school I

want Patrick Henry to be, and how I believe it could serve the public interests of the city.

However, on top of this, I am also a parent with a strong commitment to my daughters

and to their education. To some extent the goal of this project is to work out these issues

in ways that allow me to address both my private and public interests in Patrick Henry.

This is a point I will reflect on more in chapter six.

CHAPTER 2

What makes a public school public? In certain ways, this is an easy question to answer. A school is public when it is funded by tax dollars, generally accessible to all students, and governed by some public authority (Feinberg, 2012; Higgins & Abowitz, 2011). These three qualities – funding, accessibility, and public governance – create relatively clear criteria for judging what is, and what is not a public school.

Understanding the idea of public school in the current era of school reform is significantly more complicated than these criteria suggest, however. Today, the formal qualities of school are no longer stable. For example, are schools still public when mayors wrest control from elected school boards? Are privately-managed online schools public? Are state-sponsored voucher plans a form of public schooling? Are highly-competitive gifted programs within a public system still public? Do charter schools that operate under independent governing boards qualify as public? These are all questions that require a reconsideration of the formal qualities of schools – funding, access, governance – but also hint at the second complicating factor: function (Feinberg, 2012; Higgins & Abowitz, 2011). For example, if I asked someone on the street "what makes a public school public?" it is likely that I would hear just as much about the purposes public schools serve as the formal qualities listed above. I might hear that "public schools level the playing field so that everybody has a fair chance," or that "they prepare students for the jobs of the 21st century," or that "they make our nation globally competitive," or that "they promote diversity and tolerance in our multi-cultural democracy." The list could go on. And it is also likely that if I asked this question among *a group* of people on

the street, I would hear a fair amount of disagreement about what the proper purposes of

public schools should be. Some would dismiss the goal of diversity, while others might

be suspicious of the over-emphasis on job training. And even if there was a certain degree

of agreement about the proper purposes of schools, the questions remains, how do we

know when a school has achieved its public purpose? For example, how do you measure

the level-ness of the playing field?

I start with this reflection because the central purpose of this study is to

understand how the idea of public school is constructed from multiple perspectives within

the particular case of a charter school. Toward this end, this chapter will present several

analytic tools that may be useful when assessing the idea of public-ness, especially in

relation to the charter school concept. The chapter will begin with a discussion of the

somewhat elusive definition of public school. This discussion will include an exploration

of the central tensions within the common understandings of the "public" in public

schools (Higgins & Abowitz, 2011; Feinberg, 2012), as well as an account of how the

idea of the public school has been defined and redefined through the ongoing ideological

battles over the reform of our system of public education (Kaestle, 1983; Labaree, 1997;

Lubienski, 2001). From there, I will shift the discussion toward charter schools as an

example of a reform effort that has reshaped our understanding of both the formal and

functional ideas of public schools. This section will begin by presenting a historical

analysis of the multiple school reform discourses that underlie charter school logic by

juxtaposing Amy Wells (2002) framework of charter reform discourses, and Lisa

Stulberg's (2008) critique of choice scholarship. Finally, I will consider the issue of how

the policy levers of charter schools – autonomy, accountability, choice, and private

partnership (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002) – challenge the traditional "public" form of schools, as well as the implications these changes in form have for the function of public schools.

The Public-ness of "Public" Schools

As discussed in the introduction, one of the challenges of understanding the idea of public schools is the wide range of meanings and associations that emerge. These meanings often depend on who is presenting the idea, in what context, and to what end. Underlying this proliferation of meaning are some core dimensions of public-ness that can be used to categorize and consider the range. The purpose of this section will be to begin to explore the dimensions of the public-ness of schools.

A Scale of Public-ness

Reflections on the public nature of schools leads quickly to the understanding that any criteria established for what makes a school public would need to be constructed not as a dichotomous determination (i.e., public/not public) but rather as a qualitative scale of public-ness that runs along multiple criteria. This would allow us to consider *how* public a school is. For example, considering two of the cases presented in the introduction to this chapter we may ask, is the privately-run online school more or less public than the highly selective gifted program? To answer this question we would have to learn more about each school's admissions policies and curriculum and governance, however after enough information about the schools was collected, an argument could be made.

The idea of establishing criteria of public-ness is not new. For example, in a piece on charter schools, Ted Sizer and George Wood (2008) suggest that our system of public education is grounded in four fundamental values that should be used to determine the

public-ness of charters. These values are (1) *equity* between schools serving different

communities, (2) open *access* to those schools, (3) a *public purpose* in preparing students

for participation in democracy, and (4) *public ownership* that ensures that schools are

controlled by local boards of education and thus accountable to local communities.

Walter Feinberg (2008) has also established a set of criteria for judging the public-ness of

a school. His criteria include (1) open admissions; (2) staffing based on professional

accomplishment not group membership (3) accountability to the community and not just

the coterie; (4) commitment to student retention; and (5) promotion of student autonomy.

In fact, as an interesting side note, Feinberg suggests that schools that are deemed more

public by the criteria should be subsidized while those scoring low in level of public-ness

should be taxed.

     For Sizer and Wood (2008) and for Feinberg (2008), the central idea is that we

cannot determine a school's public-ness by simple criteria. For example, many might

identify public schools as those that are government run, while non-government schools

are private. However, Higgins and Abowitz (2011) point out that there are some

"government-run" schools that do very little to promote public purposes, and some

privately-funded schools that do much to promote these purposes. One example they give

is the work of James Giarelli (1995) who found that the Quaker school in his community

was doing a much better job promoting community values than his zoned suburban

public school that was organized around the idea of preparing students to be competitive

in high status universities. As Giarelli suggests, "in substance and aims, [this] is private

schooling" (p. 201).

One challenge of constructing a scale of public-ness, however, is that the criteria

and the details that underlie them tend to resolve on normative judgments that may be

tied to ideological positions. For example, while the sets of criteria by Feinberg and Sizer

and Wood have many common points, these are not points with which all would agree.

Consider Chubb and Moe's (1990) radical challenge to the common criteria of public-

ness.

> Almost everyone's first impulse is to think that the purpose of schools is
>
> to provide children with academic training, with essential information
>
> about society and the world, with an understanding of citizenship in a
>
> democracy, or something of the sort. On reflection, however, it should be
>
> apparent that schools have no immutable or transcendent purpose. What
>
> they are supposed to be doing depends on who controls them and what
>
> those controllers want them to do (p. 32).

Chubb and Moe cite a form of public control as a criteria of public-ness, although only in

a market sense. At the same time they write with disdain about certain criteria of public

purpose – (e.g., citizenship and democracy). This puts them at ideological odds with

Feinberg and with Sizer and Wood. Chubb and Moe are unabashed proponents of market-

driven, not democratic, solutions to social problems. Ideology, rather than an agreed upon

technical definition, determines criteria.

The Tensions of "Public"

Rather than resolve this discussion on a particular set of criteria for the public-

ness of schools, I am interested in understanding the categories of ideas that may be at

play in these discussions. Along these lines, Higgins and Abowitz (2011) present a useful

tool that outlines five core tensions that shape our common understandings of the idea of "public." These tensions apply broadly to ideas of the public sphere in liberal democratic society (Habermas, 1962; Fraser, 1997), but were developed with a particular focus on understanding the public nature of schools. While the tensions are inter-related and overlapping, each makes a distinct point about the nature of public-ness. Below I will present these five tensions and follow with a reflection on the possible implications of these tensions for assessing the idea of public schools.

The first tension asks the question, should the account of public be *prescriptive* or *descriptive*? This question is based on the idea that in our culture public conveys idealized types that are often disconnected from the real conditions of social life. For example, we might construct an idea of the public sphere as an open space in which rational discourse around common social problems is exercised (Habermas, 1991). However, we also know from experience that this type of public sphere rarely, if ever, occurs. The problem of focusing too much on idealized visions of public life, is not just that they are disconnected from reality, per se, but also that they may mask unwanted social conditions. However, it is also problematic to lose sight of the ideal public space and construct the idea of public too much in terms of its failures.

The second tension asks the question, in our account of public are we looking for *the* public, or for *publics*? The term "the public" often evokes a singular public that is brought together under the banner of a nation-state (e.g., the American public). However, it is clear that *the* public is often not unified, and that, in reality, there are multiple, overlapping organizations and spaces of public-ness. This tension between the public and multiple publics is not a matter of scale as much as it is a matter of access and exclusion.

The work of Nancy Fraser (1997) is useful in understanding this point. Fraser argues that the space traditionally thought of as the singular public sphere has always excluded certain less-powerful groups. Rather than try to fight for access into a public sphere that will always be characterized by imbalances in power and exclusionary practices, Fraser suggests that disenfranchised groups have often opted instead to create counterpublics that operate separately from the larger public sphere, and ultimately are used to push larger publics toward more inclusiveness. Similar to the previous tension, the challenge is, as counterpublics are created, not to lose sight of the value of a common public space that brings individuals and groups together across difference.

The third tension raises the question, at what scale should we look for a public? While this overlaps in many ways with the previous point, the focus here is on scale, not access. Again, the default tendency is to think of publics being large in size; however, it is also recognized that in many situations, publics are created out of relatively small intrapersonal associations of individuals that share common concerns. To dismiss the idea of small, localized publics is to lose this space of growth and action.

The fourth tension raises the question, what is the relation between state and public(s)? Because public institutions are often overseen by the state, it is common to conflate the two. However, it is important to realize that the public sphere, at least conceptually, exists as a distinct entity that in certain cases may work in the interest of the state, and in others, may act as a check on its power (Waks, 2010). One of the reasons for this conflation is that certain publics, through size, wealth or organization, gain enough political power to ensure that their interests are cared for by the state. In those cases, the interests of a particular public can become melded with the power of the state,

placing other publics in a politically marginalized position. The challenge inherent in this tension is how to provide counterpublics the necessary level of autonomy that allows them the opportunity to challenge the hegemonic power of the state.

The final tension suggested by Higgins and Abowitz (2011) asks the question, is "public" a static descriptor or an idea that must emerge through deliberate action? While the word public is generally used as a noun or an adjective, this question suggests that maybe there needs to be a more active form of the word. The problem with the more static notion of public is that it tends to discourage public work that may be designed to build, enhance, or transform publics. On the other hand, to view the idea of public as a work in progress, is to encourage agency of individuals and groups.

Five Questions about the Public-ness of Schools

Taken together, the five tensions presented by Higgins and Abowitz (2011) create a useful framework for addressing questions about the public nature of schools, not in ideologically prescriptive way, but rather in a way that allows for flexible understandings of possible constructions of public school. Below are five sets of questions I developed based on their framework.

- Should public schools reflect and help students adapt to the reality of public life or should they aspire to an idealized public life? Should a public school be more descriptive or prescriptive in its approach?

- Should a public school reflect the idea of a unified public? Or can a school that serves a counterpublic purpose still be considered public?

- Should the promotion of the public qualities of school happen at a broad system level, or should we advance public ideas at a smaller scale, within schools and communities?

- What should be the relationship between public schools and state power? What level of autonomy should public schools have from state power? What level of accountability should public schools have to state power and interests?

- Should systems of public schools be understood as static entities that define a public space or should they be understood as spaces that allow for the creation of publics and the building of public (or civic) capacity?

These are questions that have implications for the form of public schools – funding, access, governance – as well as the purpose of schools. The hope is that these questions will serve as a tool for reflecting on the discussions of charters and public schools presented later in this chapter, as well as a tool for the consideration of ideas of public-ness around Patrick Henry that emerge in chapters four and five

The Historic Reforming of Public Schools

The debate over the public nature of schools is not a new one. Since the beginning of the idea of public education in our country, there has been an ongoing debate about the form and function of public schools. In this section I will explore this idea by (1) presenting Labaree's (1997) framework around the competing goals of public education and then (2) using historic examples that show how these ideas of public school are constructed in public discourse.

The Competing Goals of Public Education

According to Labaree (1997) at the heart of most political goals discussions in America is a core tension between democratic politics and capitalist markets. He explains the nature of the problem:

> Unfettered economic freedom leads to a highly unequal distribution of
>
> wealth and power, which in turn undercuts the possibility for democratic
>
> control; but at the same time, restricting such economic freedom in the
>
> name of equality infringes on individual liberty, without which democracy
>
> can turn into the dictatorship of the majority. (p. 41)

In terms of schools, Labaree argues that this tension between public rights and private rights, majority control and individual liberty, and political equality and social inequality, has defined the dimensions of an ongoing competition between three distinct educational goals: democratic equality, social efficiency and social mobility. The goals each have a unique political perspective that relates to the way they prepare students for political versus market roles, and the extent to which they portray the purpose of public education as a public versus a private good.

The first goal, democratic equality, suggests that the primary purpose of school is to support our democracy by preparing students to take on political roles as citizens. Part of this goal involves promoting equal access to the educational system and equal treatment within it. Democratic equality is the goal that underlies the push for common schools which brought together various ethnic groups and social classes to build common understanding, but also, in some cases, to assimilate marginalized cultural groups. It is also the goal that supports an undifferentiated liberal arts curriculum that encourages a

diverse student body to engage with a common set of ideas and values. Labaree suggests that the goal of democratic equality in schools is a purely public good in that its main purpose is to ensure the health of our political system.

The second goal, social efficiency, suggests that the primary purpose of school is to support our national economy by preparing students to take their places within the workforce. Unlike democratic equality, the social efficiency goal encourages a differentiated educational system that mirrors the hierarchy and diversity of the labor market. Social efficiency is the goal that underlies the policy push toward graded schools, vocational education and supports standards documents that are aligned to ideas of workplace readiness. Like democratic equality, social efficiency is a goal that supports the public good, however, it is focused on the politics of human capital rather than the politics of citizenship.

The third goal, social mobility, suggests that the primary purpose of school is to provide opportunities for individual advancement within the social class structure. While social mobility, like the social efficiency goal, encourages a stratified and differentiated educational system, the purpose of this is not to serve the labor market as much as it is to act as a social sorting mechanism that builds on ideas of meritocracy. The goal of social mobility is reflected to some extent in the goals of civil rights era legislation that eliminate barriers to individual advancement, and it also reflected in recent neoliberal policies that frame education within a market ideology. Unlike the other two goals, Labaree frames social mobility as a purely private good that constructs the educational credential solely in terms of its exchange value. Where democratic equality defines the

politics of citizenship, and social efficiency defines the politics of human capital, social

mobility expresses the politics of individual opportunity.

An important point Labaree makes about these goals is that while they have all

historically occupied an important part of the national discourse around public schools,

the competition between them has also been characterized by periods of the ascendancy

of one goal over the others.

Reinventing Public Education

Situating Labaree's ideas of educational goals within a historical framework

reveals the dynamic nature of the "public" label in public education. For example,

democratic equality which was at the heart of Horace Mann's and William T. Harris's

conception of the common school movement (Reese, 2000), gave way to social efficiency

goal during the industrial era as Taylorism turned public schools into factory-like systems

that oriented students toward positions as industrial workers (Shipps, 2000), which has

given way to ideas of social mobility in the current era of school reform (Labaree, 1997).

A comparison of writings from the common schools era and the new reform era

illustrates Labaree's point of the ongoing tension and goal ascendency.

In 1876, William T. Harris argued,

The public school is the instrumentality designed for the conservation of

true democratic principles. It protects one class against another by giving

an opportunity to the children of all classes for free competition in the

struggle to become intelligent and virtuous. An aristocracy built on the

accident of birth, wealth, or position cannot resist the counter influence of

a system of free schools wherein all are given the same chances. (Annual

report of the St. Louis Schools 1876,111-12; quoted in Reese 2000, p. 30)

While Harris certainly gives central status to the goal of democratic equality, his interest

in challenging models of aristocratic privilege also led him to celebrate the competition

between classes that evoke the ideal of schools as a means of social mobility.

      We can see a similar juggling of goals in the writing of contemporary school

reformers and charter school advocates Hill, Pierce, and Guthrie (1997). In their

influential book *Reinventing Public Education,* they write,

      Our proposal tries to restore the partnership between schools and families

      that has been destroyed during a period of regulatory excess. It recognizes

      the public interest in schooling, and in ensuring that students learn basic

      skills, prepare for responsible lives as earners and citizens, and understand

      basic democratic values. To protect these public interests, our proposal

      requires that every school operate under an explicit agreement with a duly

      authorized local school board. It makes room for the private interest in

      schooling by allowing families to choose among schools that take different

      approaches to education. Most importantly, our proposal creates

      conditions under which schools can serve both public and private interests

      effectively (p. viii).

Although their proposal uses a language of educational goals that hits all of the standard

notes – including democratic equality, social efficiency and social mobility – at the core

of their idea of public education is a vision with a dramatically different structure from

that of Harris. Rather than advocating a system of common schools "wherein all are

given the same chances," the authors suggest that schools' primary responsibility should be to restore the rights of individual families.

While the basic terms of the goals discussion (democratic equality, social efficiency, social mobility) persist, the meaning of the terms shift in relation to the historical context and the particular political agenda of the speaker. Along these lines, Lubienski (2001) argues that the common school advocates of the 19th century defined public education with a particular political purpose in mind: the preservation of the republic. He writes, "reformers such as Mann both expressed and capitalized on the concern that the democratic experiment would degenerate into chaos—that liberty was coming to mean license," and that in this context common education had the potential to "preserve order by causing students to internalize certain values" (p. 647). The important point in this for Lubienski's argument is not so much that the common school reformers were advocating for this or that type of school, but rather that they were, through "rhetorical feat," "co-opting the 'public' label for their agenda" (p. 646); an agenda which included taming the rampant individualism brought about by free markets and assimilating an increasingly ethnically diverse society.

Using Lubienski's idea, we can read Hill, Pierce and Guthrie's (1997) *Reinventing Public Education* as a very similar project, albeit with very different set of political goals in mind. Rather than taming individualism brought about by free markets, there seems to more of an interest in unleashing it. Rather than being concerned about assimilating a diverse population, they support the idea of allowing the private interests of families and communities to explore a set of diversified educational options. Lubienski (2001) also suggests that the charter school movement is a contemporary example of an educational

reform that is using the "public" label to make ideological cases about the form and function of schools in society. In the next sections I will explore what this means, with the understanding that charters are not a stable policy concept.

The Charter School Challenge to Ideas of Public School

As I suggested in chapter one, charter schools reflect an ensemble of policy ideas that present a powerful challenge to traditional ideas about public schools. In this section, I will reflect on the charter concept by examining the multiple school reform discourses that influenced the development of the charter school concept, and then consider how the complex policy levers of charter schools – autonomy, accountability, choice, and private partnership – shape ideas about the form and function of public schools.

Competing Discourses of Charter School Policy

A number of scholars argue that the charter concept is actually a convenient composite of several dramatically different logics of reform that build on fundamentally different "meanings" of charter school (Darling Hammond & Montgomery, 2008; Henig, Holyoke, Brown, & Lacireno-Paquet, 2005; Murphy & Shiffman, 2002; Rofes & Stulberg, 2004). In this section, my goal is to construct a framework that will be useful for understanding how these multiple discourses might influence how charter policy constructs ideas about public schools. While the presentation will build on contemporary policy analysis concerning charters (Wells, 2002; Stulberg, 2008), it will also examine historic school reform literature from the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s that helped influence the charter idea.

Wells' framework of charter discourses. Amy Wells (2002) argues that "charter school reform was definitely *not* a child of the 1960s" (p.3). Rather she situates charters

within the policy context of the 1980s and 1990s when there was a general backlash against big-government equity-based school policies. Of this era of reform she writes, "rather than focus directly on the needs of students who were most disadvantaged in the educational system, policy makers would try to improve the quality of the overall educational system via an emphasis on higher educational standards – that is "excellence" – as well as an infusion of choice and competition" (p. 4). Within this broad policy context, Wells argues, the idea of charters struck chords with several distinct logics of reform that she groups into three categories: (1) systemic reform and the standards movement, (2) the "market metaphor of school reform" (p.6), and (3) the push for decentralization and local / community control.

The first of the logics presented by Wells is the autonomy-for-accountability philosophy that underlies systemic-reform and the standards-based reform movements (Fuhrman, 1993; Osbourne and Gaebler, 1993). Wells traces this line of reform logic to the 1989 National Governor's Conference - then headed by Bill Clinton. Fuhrman (1993), an early advocate of systemic-reform, identifies three major elements that underlie this policy approach: (1) setting outcome expectations for students that include a specification of knowledge and skills; (2) coordinating key policies such as curriculum frameworks, assessments, instructional materials, and professional development that support the standard outcomes; and (3) restructuring the governance system so that schools have more flexibility to meet the established goals. Of the last element she writes, "Higher levels of governance would focus on outcome definition and accountability and remove constraints on school practice. Schools would determine the instructional strategies most likely to foster student achievement of outcome goals" (p.2).

In considering systemic/standards-based reform as an influence on charter school logic, it is worth thinking about both the contributions it made to the charter argument as well as the ways that it conflicts with some of the basic premises. On the one hand, it is not hard to see how the ideas of increased autonomy and results-oriented accountability – that are hallmarks of systemic-reform logic – directly support the policy logic, as well as the policy rhetoric, of charters (Wells, 2002). Returning to the definition provided by the Center for Education Reform, charter schools are "accountable for results and free from most unnecessary rules and regulations." Nonetheless, despite this similarity in language and logic, it is important to note that systemic and standards-based reforms are more committed to retaining the basic structure of a centralized system than is generally thought to be the case with charter reform. In fact, Fuhrman (1993) writes about the dangers of too much autonomy: "educators may believe it is in their self-interest to keep policymakers out of educational business, but what is truly in their self-interest is to support a conception of policy that would undergird rather than undermine school-based improvement" (p. 6). She goes on to argue that too much autonomy might lead to "the abandonment of the public system and the privatization of schooling" (p. 6). While the name 'systemic' reform implies a foundational shift in the process of public education, systemic-reformers seem to be wary of the more radical notions of decentralization supported by other reform logics.

The second charter school influence that Wells' identifies is the "market metaphor," (p. 6) or the neoliberal ideology, of school reform. Neoliberalism is born out of the ideas of mid-twentieth century economists (Friedman, 1962; Hayek, 1944) who argued that the logic of free-market capitalism, rather than centralized government

planning, should be used to structure social programs. At the core of neoliberal logic is the idea of enhancing personal freedom within competitive markets (Harvey, 2005). As a framework for education reform, neoliberalism suggests a strong push toward deregulation and decentralization of school systems and a simultaneous opening up educational choice programs. The belief is that as educational markets emerge, competition between schools for costumers will not only make schools more responsive to the individual educational needs of parents and students, but it will also exert a pressure that will improve the overall quality of the system (Wells, 2002).

When charters are framed as a choice program, their connection to neoliberal ideology is clear (Wells, 2002). However, as with systemic reform, there are limits to the extent to which neoliberalism captures the full scope of charter logic. For example, considering the relationship between autonomy and accountability in public school policy, neoliberal logic presents a radical stance that goes beyond how charter schools are generally framed. While, like systemic reform, neoliberals encourage local autonomy, they are more skeptical of the centralized systems of accountability-for-results that are at the core of the charter argument. In fact Chubb and Moe (1990), neoliberal advocates, specifically argue against state-mandated systems of accountability for student performance. Rather, they suggest, "when it comes to performance, schools are held accountable from below, by parents and students who directly experience their services and are free to choose" (p. 225).

The third category of reform logic that Wells (2002) identifies as an important influence on charters is what she describes as the "age-old call for decentralization and giving more control over governance and decision making to the local school

community" (7). This category of reform logic in Wells framework comes to represent a

broad and complicated mix of political actors and movements. For example, Wells draws

a clear distinction within this category between the idea of *local* and *community* control.

She associates *local* control with the neo-conservative ideology of "states-rights" that was

argued in response to government-enforced desegregation efforts (Pratt, 1992). Local

control, she argues, is based on conservative fears of government infringement on

individual liberty. Wells associates *community* control, on the other hand, with the Black

Power and progressive White movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Community control,

she argues, emerges from groups that have been traditionally disenfranchised by the

system and imagine schools as a means of creating "localized sites of democracy."

Although Wells does not explicitly mention it, it seems that the sub category of *local*

control encompasses both the teacher-led small schools movement (Meier, 1995; Sizer,

1983) as well as schools that were initiated by community action.

What ties the category of decentralization together for Wells is a common push

for what Nancy Fraser (1997) has termed the *politics of recognition*, that is the idea that

identity groups are seeking counter-public spaces within politics and the public sphere

that will allow them to gain recognition within the dominant culture and mainstream

institutions. Speaking of the local/community control push in relation to charter schools,

Wells writes,

> [W]hether it is the Christian right in a small town or a Latino community
>
> in a crowded urban center, charter school founders and operators clearly
>
> are … trying to escape the "cultural domination" they say they have
>
> experienced in the regular public schools, and they seek to create school

communities in which they can define the identity and culture of the

school. (pp. 8-9)

As with neoliberal choice, advocates of community / local control present a strong notion

of autonomy through decentralization that suggests alternative structures of

accountability. Schools founded on principles of group identity would likely be

suspicious of the centrally-mandated curriculum frameworks advocated by systemic

reformers. While this seems to align local / community control closely with neoliberal

ideology, it is important to note that their motivation for decentralization is based less on

a faith in an idealized market, as it is in a push for political empowerment.

A final point to make about Wells' (2002) framework is that she, like a number of

other charter school analysts (Lipman, 2011; Lubienski, 2001; Lubienski & Weitzel,

2010; Ravitch, 2010; Saltman, 2005, 2007), identified neoliberalism as the dominant

ideology underlying the charter movement. She suggests that it is those that are working

from the neoliberal perspective that have been the most active and organized in the

national charter school movement and the most effective agents of change.

Stulberg's critique. Wells' (2002) framework is useful for this study, in that it

creates the basis for understanding the different logics of reform that underlie the general

theory of charter schools – autonomy, accountability, choice. However, as applied to the

Richmond context, this framework also has its limitations. For example, Lisa Stulberg

(2004; 2008) argues that reform-based frameworks such as Wells' do an inadequate job of

addressing the complicated history of race politics that is so important to understanding

the meaning of the school choice and charter school movement. In particular, her concern

is with how scholars from both the pro- and anti-choice camps have tended to address the

issue of race in school-choice analysis only through a narrow interpretation of the 1954

Brown Versus Board of Education ruling that privileges integrationist over nationalist

strategies of promoting racial equality. When framed strictly from an integrationist

perspective, according to Stulberg, many African American school choice initiatives are

read as cynical movements that have given up hope on the ideals of American public

education. Stulberg is not suggesting a retreat to nationalist strategies, but rather a

complicating of the integrationist/nationalist dichotomy. She writes,

> [T]he question when one examines the race politics of school reforms is
>
> not whether nationalism can, should, or does effectively replace
>
> integration as a strategy for racial justice. Rather, the more accurate
>
> question is: What is the relationship between integrationist and nationalist
>
> goals, and how is this relationship negotiated and realized in specific
>
> strategies for racial justice? Addressing this question necessitates an
>
> attention to the nuances and complexities of the meanings of
>
> integrationism and of nationalism. This understanding, when applied to
>
> school debates, must allow for African American educational autonomy
>
> and community-centered approaches to schooling without seeing these as
>
> necessarily threatening to American integration. This approach, I believe,
>
> allows room for us to see hope in places where scholars often deny that it
>
> exists: in the struggling over a view of racial equality, one that may accept
>
> some tenets of integrationism and reject others. (p. 29)

Toward this end Stulberg (2008) notes several school reform traditions that have

emerged since *Brown* that must be given attention if there is to be a more holistic

scholarly understanding of charter schools. These traditions include the community control movement of the 1960s (Levin, 1970; Podair, 2002), the African American independent school movement, and African American led voucher movements (Fuller, 2002). The common element of these traditions is that they are all rooted in various African American communities' frustrations with the failures of the traditional public school system in serving African American youth. What distinguishes these reform traditions from each other are their specific approaches to choice. While community control promoted parental and community choice concerning the governance and management of schools, it was not designed to expand enrollment options for students and families. The African American independent schools framed choice as a complete opting out of the public system of schooling, while vouchers opted out of the public system while maintaining public funding (Stulberg 2008).

In their formal qualities, these African American-led school movements could fit into Wells (2002) framework. Wells recognized community control as a movement of decentralization. Vouchers are covered by the neoliberal "market" tradition. However, Stulberg emphasizes the point that these traditions have a distinct character due to the race politics underlying them. Two examples will help illustrate this point.

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville District in New York that emerged in the late 1960s (Fantini & Gittell, 1969; Levin, 1970; Podair, 2002) and was grounded in the Black nationalist tradition (Maynard, 1970), was a strong rejection of the integration-based and compensatory equity policies of the education establishment. Rhody McCoy (1970), the district Superintendent at the time wrote,

> For too many years educational policy making and implementation have
> been in the hands of educators. This situation takes on more meaning,
> particularly in the ghetto areas, when the policy implementers are neither
> community people nor ethnically representative of the community. . . Thus
> the stage is set for a revolution. People – Black people – want control over
> their schools for self-determination, for building a strong self-image, for
> individual and community development, for restoration of confidence in
> education, for economic stability, for recognition, and for survival.
> Community control means community growth and development, and the
> school is the hub of this growth. (pp. 170-171).

McCoy's nationalist call for a "revolution" that would allow African Americans to wrest control over their community institutions from the forces of the establishment, is distinctly different than the neo-conservative local control advocates who were fighting to preserve their power against just such a revolution. McCoy is also very suspicious of educators associated with the establishment, a position that creates a natural tension with the progressive White teacher-led schools (Meier 1995). While Wells (2002) groups all of these traditions within a broad category of "recognition," Stulberg (2008) asks us, as we consider the roots of charter discourse, to give attention to the complicated race politics that distinguish them.

Another example that illustrates the need for attention to African American choice movements is the debate around educational vouchers. While the idea of educational vouchers are generally associated strictly with neoliberal school reformers (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Freidman, 1962) who saw them as a way of minimizing the role of the state

in education, Stulberg (2008) suggests that there are two other important voucher traditions. The first relates to vouchers in the form of southern "tuition grant" initiatives for White families that were designed in response to the call for integration. This aligns them more closely with locally controlled state rather than neoliberal minimal state. The other tradition frames vouchers in the context of a progressive state that is interested in social justice, not through integration, but rather through targeted programs that allow the most underserved communities expanded educational options (Jencks, 1966).

An expanded framework of charter discourses. Stulberg's (2008) critique of choice scholarship suggests several ways that Wells' (2002) basic framework of reform logics that influenced charter discourse could be expanded. In Figure 2.1 I have a created a figure that explains such an expansion visually. While two of Wells' three categories remain basically unchanged (neoliberal pro-choice and systemic / standards-based reform), four new categories are added that represent both a clarification of Wells' third category (i.e., decentralization), and the addition of an overlooked category of discourse (progressive pro-voucher). The solid lines in the figure represent direct connections between Wells' explanations and the logic of the new category. The dashed lines represent weaker connections. I have also included representative discourses that serve as illustrations of each category.

There are several ways that this expanded framework is useful as an analytic tool for this project on the public quality of a charter school. First, it establishes some criteria for making distinctions between how discourse might shape the various forms and functions that charters can take. For example, it is likely that a school that was conceived under the logic of neoliberal free-market choice will look and function significantly

differently than a school that is grounded in the discourse of community-control. In the

context of this study, that allows for understanding the roots of the local public and

private discourses around Patrick Henry. For example while Richmond's conservative

daily paper may make an argument for Patrick Henry in the tradition of neoliberalism or

cultural conservative local control, the Governor may draw more heavily on the language

of systemic reform.

Figure 2.1. **Expanded Framework of Charter Discourse Influences**
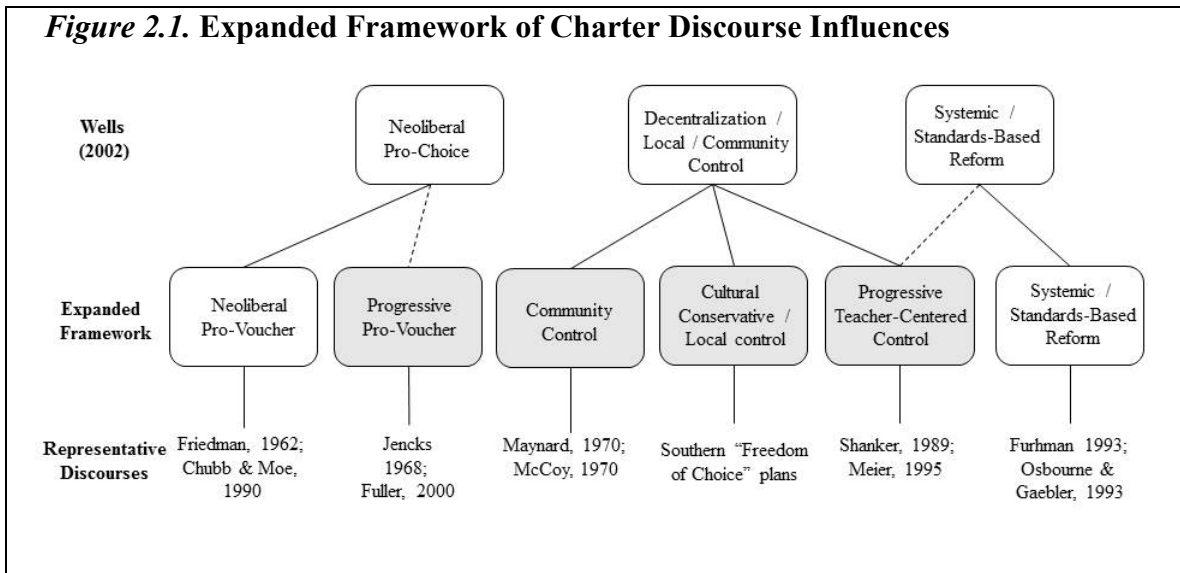
Second, this expanded framework incorporates Stulberg's insights concerning the

complexity of race politics in school choice and opens spaces for these discourses to be

developed. As noted in chapter one, the case of Patrick Henry is rooted in local historical

debates about race and schooling. Applying Wells' (2002) framework alone to this case

might lead to the marginalization of voices that prioritize race within the argument. For

example, under Wells' framework, a pro-choice argument that centered on issues of race

and community empowerment might be written off as the neoliberal co-opting of a

marginalized community.

Finally, I find this expanded framework of charter discourses useful because it

tends to deemphasize the hegemony of neoliberal ideology by creating spaces for counter

discourses, a move that is critical for those who want to see opportunities within the

charter movement for a new progressive school movement (Nathan, 1996; Rofes &

Stulberg, 2004; Stulberg 2008). For Wells (2002) and others, neoliberalism "won the

battle for the soul of a movement" (p.6). This expanded framework based on Stulberg's

(2008) insights re-engages the battle. As you will see in later chapters the battle over the

idea of Patrick Henry would not be well captured in a framework that relied too heavily

on its critique of neoliberalism.

However, this expanded framework of charter discourses also has its own

limitations. Although it outlines the origins of the various discourses that underlie and

influence charter arguments, it does not do an adequate job distinguishing how these

logics are specifically translated into charter policy and into charter schools. If we go

back to think about the policy elements that define charter schools – autonomy,

accountability, choice – we can see that each logic within this framework might not only

suggest a particular combination of policy mechanisms but also might tend to define each

of the mechanisms in distinct ways. In the next section of this chapter I will try to refine

this initial framework by considering charter policy in its technical dimensions with the

hope of assessing its political dimensions (Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009). That is to

say, I will not only look at the structural challenges that charter policy represents (i.e.,

how do charter policies affect the ways public schools look and work?), but also reflect

on the functional challenges they represent (i.e., what are they working toward?).

The Form of Charter Reform

Generally, when we think of public schools, the image that comes to mind is one that is built on both the common school movement of the mid-nineteenth century and the progressive-era reforms of the early 20th century. This image is associated with large publicly-funded neighborhood schools, with democratically-elected local school boards, with bureaucratic and managerial systems of administration and accountability, with graded school structures, common curriculum, and standardization of practice (Kaestle, 1983; Tyak, 1974). It is a model influenced both by the democratic idealism of Horace Mann and William T. Harris as well as the economic pressures of rapid industrialization (Reese, 2000). However, while this is a very familiar model, it is an increasingly unpopular one that in the face of new reforms is beginning to collapse (Higgins & Abowitz, 2011).

Although charter reform is just one example of this new policy direction of school reform it is notable for several reasons. First, as outlined in chapter one, the general logic that underlies charters – autonomy, accountability and choice – epitomizes the most important policy dimensions of this new reform direction. Unlike standards-based reform, which is heavy on accountability, but lighter on choice and autonomy, charters offer strong positions on each. Second, because charters incorporate these multiple policy tools, they represent a radical structural challenge to the traditional form of public schools (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002; Sarason, 2002). As Lubienski and Weitzel (2010) argue, "Charter schools are designed to be game changers –uniquely positioned to break the cycle of ineffective reform. As an idea, charter schools are not about curriculum and pedagogy. Instead they are focused on changing the fundamental government and

management structures of schooling" (p. 2). Third, despite their radical nature, charters have become perhaps the most popular of the new reforms by building and sustaining a broad base of political support among a diverse coalition of interest groups (DeBray-Pelot, Lubienski, & Scott, 2007) and thus have expanded their reach relatively quickly.

My purpose in this section is (1) to understand how the formal policy levers of charters are changing the shape of public schools, (2) to consider how the multiple discourses of charters presented in the previous section construct these policy levers, and then (3) to reflect on the implication these changes have for ideas about the form and function of public schools. To accomplish this I will look at the charter movement through the lens of each of its popularly argued policy components – autonomy, accountability and choice. It is also useful to consider an additional dimension of charter policy, that is, the extent to which public-private partnerships are encouraged in the development of charters. Although public-private partnership is not an explicit part of charter definitions put forth by most charter advocates, it is a policy variable that has significant influence on the form of charter schools. For example, according to a recent study over a third of charter schools nationally are managed by for-profit Education Management Organizations (EMOs) (Miron & Urschel, 2009; Miron, Urschel, Mathis & Tornquist, 2010). While, as I will argue, there is considerable overlap and interaction between these four components, reframing the analysis through each lens adds the understanding of where charters stand in relation to traditional public school system and what the implications are for shaping our ideas about public schools.

Charter autonomy. One of the key policy tools that helps distinguish charters from traditional public schools is the decentralization of authority, or, what charter

advocates often refer to as, *charter autonomy* or *charter flexibility* (Murphy and

Shiffman, 2002). Basically, the policy mechanism of autonomy devolves public school

authority from the central systems of administration (federal, state, and local), to

individual schools. This shift of authority can happen to varying degrees along a number

of dimensions (Wohlstetter, Wenning, & Briggs, 1995). For the purposes of this

argument I distinguish four unique forms of charter school autonomy. These forms of

autonomy could be enacted in various combinations to varying degrees. They are: (1)

curricular autonomy – control of what to teach and how; (2) assessment autonomy –

control over how to measure student outcomes; (3) regulatory autonomy – control over

staffing decisions, attendance policies, work rules, etc; (4) budget autonomy – control

over how to spend allotted public and private funds. It is clear how autonomy in certain

dimensions and not others might have substantially different effects on ideas of public

school. For example, a school with a high level of curricular autonomy, but less

regulatory autonomy is likely to look very different than a school with a high level of

regulatory autonomy but little curricular autonomy. Specific levels of charter school

autonomy are generally determined by state charter laws (Shober, Manna, & Witte,

2006).

The push for charter school autonomy comes from a variety of policy and

ideological perspectives, each of which frames the intentions and effects of autonomy

according to its particular logic. This has meaningful implications for ideas about public

schools. For example free-market advocates (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1962)

present autonomy as a necessary counter to a system that has been led to inefficiencies

and poor performance through the exercise of direct democratic control over schools.

Chubb and Moe argue that effective authority in schools must be "radically decentralized … No one makes decisions for society. All participants make decisions for themselves" (29). From this perspective autonomy become a means of creating conditions conducive to market innovations and diversification (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). In effect it liberates school-level personnel from centralized regulations to act as entrepreneurs who are given both "freedom from" the regulations of the traditional system, as well as "freedom to" be innovative, in service of the parent / consumer.

This market perspective of autonomy is dramatically different than the versions supported by other school reform logics. For example, when McCoy (1970) calls for a "revolution" that will allow Black people to gain "control over their schools for self-determination, for building a strong self-image, for individual and community development" (p.171), he is framing autonomy as a means of supporting, rather than rebuking, direct democratic control of schools. And for progressive educators (Meier, 1995; Sizer, 1983) the push for autonomy has a different sense altogether. In a revealing passage Deborah Meier (1995) argues for the value of autonomy in public education:

> One of our primary reasons for starting the school – although we didn't admit it – was our personal desire for greater autonomy as teachers. We spoke a lot about democracy, but we were also just plain sick and tired of having to waste so much time and energy negotiating with school officials over what seemed like commonsense requests, worrying about myriad rules and regulations, being forced to compromise on so many of our beliefs. We came together with our own visions of what teaching could be if only we had control. We saw parents as crucial, but viewed their input

as advisory. Parental choice was in part a way we imagined we'd increase

our autonomy. (p. 23)

While autonomy from the centralized system was supported within a number of different

school reform discourses, these articulations seem to have very different political

purposes. While Chubb and Moe (1990) see autonomy as means of advocating for

parental consumer empowerment, and McCoy (1970) sees it as a way of advocating for

community political empowerment, Meier (1995) is honest about the fact that within her

school, these stated goals were both means to another end, teacher empowerment.

Charter accountability. The second policy lens to consider is charter

accountability. One way of defining accountability is with the principal / agent model

(Hill, Lake, & Cielo, 2002). In this model accountability is understood as a contractual

agreement between a *principal* who needs a task completed and an *agent* who is

contracted to complete the task. In the traditional model of school accountability, school

bureaucracies – which are under the control of democratically-elected boards and state

and federal officials – act as the *principals* holding schools and the staffs within schools –

as *agents* – accountable for implementing a particular educational program that will

achieve particular outcomes.

Given this model, there are three ways that charter accountability has changed the

traditional accountability dynamic. First, charter accountability has changed the terms of

the contract. That is to say that, in theory, charter accountability works in tandem with

autonomy to emphasize product, not process. Instead of holding schools accountable for

following specific standards frameworks or curriculum guidelines, charter schools are

primarily held accountable for the results they produce (Bulkley, 2010). Because this

model of accountability is closely related to the logic of the systemic-reform model, I will call this *systemic accountability*.

The second shift in accountability comes as a result of changing stakes of the charter contract. Because charters are opened by virtue their charter agreement with an authorizer – usually a local school board – they are held accountable not just for specific student outcomes, but also for meeting other terms of the contractual agreement that typically include certain goals related to financial stability. This contract raises the accountability stakes. Under charter policy, the contracts of charter schools that do not comply with charter regulations or fulfill their promised outcomes can be revoked and schools closed (Hill, Lake, & Cielo, 2002; Miron, 2010). Although, new reform policies – especially under NCLB – have made traditional school closings more common as well, charters formalize and encourage this process of school closure for poor performance as a primary mechanism of accountability. I will call this second shift in accountability *contractual accountability*.

The third, and perhaps most radical, way in which charters shift the traditional idea of school accountability is by changing the *principals* of the accountability model. That is to say, within the charter framework, schools become accountable not just to the local boards that authorize them, but also to parents and students, who could freely choose to exit a school that didn't show results (Labaree, 2000); to teachers, who could choose not to work in a charter that didn't provide ample pay or amenable work environment; and to private funding sources that many charters require to stay afloat financially (Hill, Lake, & Cielo, 2002; Huerta & d'Entremont, 2010). This expansion of charter accountability could be understood in two ways. On the one hand this shift away

from strictly centralized forms of accountability could be framed as the movement from the democratic accountability of traditional schools toward a *market accountability* model (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hill, Pierce & Guthrie, 1997). From this perspective, schools are freed from the oversight of public bureaucracies, but must constantly respond to the market pressures of parents and funders and possible employees each of whom acts as a principal. In theory each of these principals has the ability to exert accountability pressure on the school to perform has the power to close the school if the school does not respond. However, this very same movement away from centralized accountability structures toward multiple principals has also been argued not as a rebuke, but rather as a reassertion of *democratic accountability*. For example, Meier (1995) frames accountability within the decentralized school as a "public accountability" (p. 9) that is enacted through the shared decision making of local actors and responsive to broader ideas of the public good.

This raises the question, does this dramatic multi-dimensional expansion of accountability – for student outcomes, for financial stability, to parents as consumers, to local democratic decision-making – actually strengthen the accountability of charters? While, on the one hand, it would seem that more is better, there are concerns among many that the fragmentation of accountability under charter reform has led to systems where most schools are left either unaccountable or accountable for the wrong measures (Wells, 2002). For example, research has shown that despite weak test performance among a number of charter schools, the school closure rate for charters is very low – signifying a failed accountability system. Moreover, when charters are closed it is often

for regulatory or fiscal problems rather than problems of student achievement (Miron, 2010).

The restructuring of accountability has a number of implications for the ideas about the form and function of public schools. Perhaps the most important change in this regard is how it shifts roles and power relationships among key actors. For example, district leaders go from providing fiscal and instructional oversight for a system of schools for which they are directly responsible, to the role of managing an ever-changing portfolio of schools that can be opened and closed according to local market needs (Bulkley, 2010). Charter accountability also brings new actors into the dynamics of school reform: charter governance boards are created, parents are empowered as consumers, and private donors often gain important influence (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002).

Charter choice. In many policy discussions, charter schools are framed within the policy context of school choice. The basic premise of choice policy is that parents and students should be given alternatives to the traditional neighborhood school. In this regard, an important point that a number of choice policy analysts raise is that school choice is pervasive throughout our school system not only in the form of formal choice policies – such as magnet schools, charters, and open enrollment policies – but more significantly through structural choice mechanisms – for example, private schools or residential relocation based on schools – and stealth choice mechanisms – for example, parents use of cultural capital to advocate for preferred placement in the system (Rofes & Stulberg, 2004; Brighouse, 2008). From this perspective, the question is not if choice

policies should be enacted, but rather how we might manage our current choice system to ensure equitable outcomes.

Current formal school-choice policies range from the very common magnet, specialty school and open enrollment options that have become a part of most school district policies to the extreme of vouchers that allow parents the choice of exiting the system all together (Freidman, 1962). Within this landscape of school choice, charters are often framed as a compromise between vouchers and more moderate choice policies (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002; Wells, et al.,1999). The primary expectation of charters as a school-choice policy is that charters will introduce market accountability into the public school system. As charters compete against each other and with traditional public schools to attract students and parents, there will be system-wide pressure to develop innovative programs and improve student performance. However, questions have been raised about the degree to which market imperfections prevent school-choice policies from working in the intended ways (Lubienski, 2008).

While arguments for formal school choice policies are generally connected with the logic of free markets (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1962) they have a complicated and conflicted set of influences (Stulberg, 2004). As with autonomy and accountability, the market version of choice, has a counterpoint in the ideas of community control advocates (McCoy, 1970) and progressive democratic educators (Meier, 1995; Sizer & Wood, 2008). In addition there is also an important argument that frames choice not just as a mechanism for affecting specific policy outputs, but also as an end in itself. While this idea appeals to the small government conservatives and libertarians, it also resonates with disadvantaged urban populations that, through structural injustices, have been

denied access to educational options (Lubienski & Wietzel, 2010). Educational choice in this sense becomes a core public right (Fuller, 2002).

Charter schools and private sector influence. The final policy component that is important to understanding the form of charter schools is the extent to which charter policy allows for and / or encourages private-partnership in public education. This can come either in the form of contracting out various levels of public school management and administration (Miron & Urschel, 2009), or through supplemental funding to schools through private donations and grants. Like the other policy mechanisms of charters – autonomy, accountability and choice – the policy approach regarding private partnership is a unique element of charter laws that has a significant influence on the way charters are redefining the idea of public school.

The concept of shifting the administration of schools from the public to the private sector can be traced to the work of Milton Friedman (1962). Friedman argued that while as a society we do have an obligation to support compulsory education and even to subsidize it for those who could not afford to pay, the public administration of school is not justified within a free society. He writes, "educational services could be rendered by private enterprises operated for profit, or by non-profit institutions. The role of the government would be limited to insuring that the schools met certain minimum standards, such as the inclusion of a minimum common content in their programs, much as it now inspects restaurants to insure that they maintain minimum sanitary standards" (p. 89). Underlying this proposal is the idea that markets are better positioned than public managed systems to provide goods and services in a way that is effective, efficient and responsive to the diverse interest of individuals and communities. In certain respects

charter schools can be understood as part of this movement toward private contracting. The idea that charters are quasi-public institutions (Lipman, 2011) rests in the fact that charters exist between the public and private domains. Although they receive public funds, they do not act not as public administrators, but rather as autonomous public agents (Abowitz, 2001; Waks, 2010; Wilson, 2010).

The logic of private contracting has been used, within the realm of charter schools and traditional schools, to justify a number of smaller steps in the direction of privatization as well. For example, over recent decades a number of pieces of school management have been contracted to private for-profit and non-profit entities. This includes the contracting of non-instructional tasks (buses, food service, building management), as well as instructional tasks (e.g., textbooks, pre-packaged curriculum, standardized tests, and virtual classes).

The level of private management versus district control within charter systems varies significantly between states. At one extreme we see the emergence of for-profit charters such as the Edison schools (Saltman, 2005); for-profit virtual schools; and education-management companies (EMOs), who are contracted to help charter schools with basic school administration (Scott & DiMartino, 2010). At the other there are states, such as Virginia, where the laws tie charters closely to the centralized district administration. One of the critical issues with these forms of private partnership, is the degree to which the benefits of autonomy (diversification, local responsiveness) are lost when schools become part of a private franchise operating in more than one context. Some states have written, or re-written, their charter laws to limit the ability of for-profit companies from organizing or managing charter schools.

Another important aspect of this policy piece relates to the general funding

formula for charters. When a state's law funds charters at lower levels than traditional

public schools, or does not allow funds for the provision of facilities, it indirectly

encourages schools to seek additional funds through private foundation grants, loans and

other forms of fundraising, that often hold schools beholden to the private sector (Huerta

& d'Entremont, 2010; Scott, 2009; Wells, 2002).

A policy model of school form. The goal of this review of policy tools was to

create a more precise way of understanding how the new reform directions that underlie

charter policy affect ideas about the form of public schools. In figure 2.2 I break these

four policy tools into a number of separate levers that represent various dimensions

covered in the previous discussion. On the left side of the model are characteristics that

distinguish the traditional school form (centralized decision-making, traditional

accountability, no formal choice policies and full public-administration and funding). On

the right side are the new directions toward which charter policy is pushing the form of

public schools

Figure 2.2. Policy Levers of New Reform

Traditional Public Schools   **Autonomy**   **New Public Schools**

Curriculum

Centralized Authority and Decision-Making

Assessment — Market

Public Regulations — Democratic

Budget

Accountability

within-system

Traditional Accountability

Systemic

Contractual

out-of-system

Market

Decentralized Democratic

Choice

No Formal Choice

Market

Democratic

Private Partnership

Full Public Administration and Funding

Independent Public Agent

Private Grant and Foundation Funding

There are several points to make about the dynamics and limitations of this framework. First, it should be noted that each of these individual levers are matters of degree, not dichotomous designations. For example, a school should not be categorized as autonomous or not autonomous, but rather considered as autonomous along different dimensions, to different degrees. In this regard it is also worth considering that schools rarely, if ever, operate at an end point of the lever. Even traditional public schools have some degree of private partnership (e.g., using text books and standardized tests,

fundraising through grants), and even the most radical charter schools operate within some system of centralized accountability.

A second point about this model is that many of the policy levers are interconnected and interactive both within and between policy tools. For example, a low level of *assessment autonomy* is naturally going to affect the level of *curricular autonomy*, especially if there it is operating under a high degree of *systemic accountability*. While these levers are conceptually distinct in certain respects, they also need to be understood in relation to the ways they interact.

A third point to make about this model is that the position of levers for a given instance of a school will be dependent not only on the structure and logic of charter policies – which establish rules and regulations that determine the range that charter forms may take – but also on the local context where they are enacted. One good example of this is how the effects of school choice as a policy lever are highly dependent on district-level contextual factors: the size of the district, the quality of the other schools, the location of the school of choice. While in certain district contexts a school of choice could affect certain outcomes (e.g., competition leading to increased innovation in neighborhood schools) in other contexts this effect could be negligible (Lubienski, 2008).

However, despite these limitations, this policy model is useful not only as a way of thinking *generally* about how charter policy is affecting ideas about public schools, but also for thinking *specifically* about particular instances of charter schools and how they might differ along these various policy dimensions. One of the problems of charter scholarship, especially empirical impact studies, has been the tendency to treat the vast

array of charters as an "undifferentiated typology" (Henig, 2009). This framework is a step toward differentiation.

In that it is also useful for thinking about how charter policy affects the public purpose of schools. It allows us to ask at what point does the distance and difference from our traditional understanding of public schools, bring into question the very public-ness of the alternative form and its meaning for the relationship between school and society? For example, if control of public schools – starting them, structuring them, running them – is passed from a centralized public authority to decentralized systems of management, are schools still public? This radical shift in form compels us to reassess the meaning of public schools. Lubienski (2001) argues that historically the "public" label has always been a contested term that is used to advance particular political agendas. In this case, we might ask, what agenda – or agendas – are charter schools promoting as they redefine public schools?

Conclusion

Through this chapter I have explored literature around public schools and public school reform that may be useful in thinking about how charter policy shapes ideas about the public nature of public schools. This has included a reflection on the possible dimensions for determining the public-ness of schools, an examination of the school reform discourses that influenced the development of the charter school concept, and a analysis of the complex policy levers that underlie charters and new school reform.

As a methodological point, it is important for me to say that the ideas and theoretical lenses presented in this chapter were not used in any direct fashion as deductive frameworks for the qualitative analyses that I conducted around the public

discourse about Patrick Henry (in chapter four) or the parent interviews (in chapter five).

The analyses in chapters four and five employed inductive coding strategies that were

designed to develop grounded theories of the phenomenon. However, the theoretical

lenses developed in this chapter will be examined in relation to those grounded theories

in chapter six. The goal then will be to reflect on what insights these lenses provide as

well as their limitations.

In the next chapter I will present the process and justification of the method used

to collect and analyze the data related to Patrick Henry.

CHAPTER 3

In this chapter I will outline the research design I developed for answering my research questions and explain the reasoning behind my methodological decisions. I will begin by discussing the complicated nature of my stance as researcher with the idea that this stance has significant bearing on many of the methodological decisions discussed in the chapter. I will then give an overview of the entire design and situate the project within the interpretive/constructivist paradigm. Next, I will give a detailed description of the methods for this study that will include discussion of participant selection and recruitment, data collection techniques, and data analysis techniques. Finally I will review several strategies that I have used for ensuring qualitative rigor during the research process.

Researcher Stance

Although it is most common in qualitative studies, ideally all research should be assessed in terms of the relationships between the positionality of the researcher and the topic and methods of study. These relationships have the potential to influence the study in everything from the selection of the question and methods, to the processes of data collection and analysis. Although in positivist and post-positivist paradigms, the subjective influences are generally framed as potential threats to validity that must be controlled for, in constructivist and interpretivist paradigms subjectivity has the potential to be developed as a valuable tool within the research process (Finlay 2002). Within the non-positivist paradigms, the researcher is a co-constructer, rather than extractor, of meaning (Lincon and Guba, 1985; Rodwell, 1998). For this reason, an open assessment of the subjectivity of the researcher, also known as reflexivity, is critical.

An assessment of potential reflexivity was especially important to this study. As mentioned in chapter one there were multiple ways that my personal connection to the topic of research and my involvement as a parent in the school had bearing on the data presented and the interpretations made from it (Finlay, 2002). In this section I will explain what I saw as the most relevant aspects of my researcher position. This position was the basis for the methodological decisions that I present through the remainder of the chapter.

First, I grew up in Richmond and attended Richmond Public Schools (RPS) for elementary, middle and most of my high school career beginning in the late 1970s and through the 1980s. While I attended my zoned neighborhood schools for elementary and middle school, my mom, who was a teacher within RPS, and my dad were vocal advocates for me and my sister, often showing up at the schools and talking to the principals to make sure that we were placed into certain classes and certain programs. For example in middle school I was placed within a program that was based on a formal RPS policy known as "clustering" that essentially grouped White students within certain schools together to ease their cultural adjustment to the system (Cole, 2009). After middle school, my parents decided to send me to private school for one year. This decision was probably based on my poor academic performance in middle school as well as the fact that my zoned high school was not a viable option from my parents' perspective. After one year at the private school, I was allowed in my sophomore year to go back to RPS to an alternative "Open" school for the remainder of high school. Throughout my K-12 experience, I was a good example of a student whose family used the public school system, but exercised a high degree of choice within it.

A second important part of my stance as researcher related to my experience as a public school teacher and an activist for social justice in schools. I taught high school English for twelve years in one Chicago Public School and then for two years in a Richmond Public School. Both schools were large, comprehensive, zoned neighborhood schools that served almost exclusively poor and working class students of color. Both schools were struggling academically and labeled "failing" under state accountability systems. These schools were definitely not schools of choice. Through my time as a teacher in these schools I became a vocal critic of the high-stakes testing and choice policies promoted by NCLB. I saw these policies doing damage to the systems, the schools, the teachers and, most importantly, the students within them. One particular target of my frustration in the Chicago system was the Renaissance 2010 charter school initiative pushed by former "CEO" of Chicago Public Schools, and current Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. Although I knew of some examples of good charters within Chicago, I also saw how they were often being used in the system to undermine the traditional public schools in certain communities. My concerns about the inequities and injustice of the system led me to become heavily involved in Chicago Teachers for Social Justice, an organization that works to promote social justice in schools both through collaborations with communities, policy work and curriculum development. In 2010, several years after moving, I helped found a similar organization in the Richmond area.

Perhaps the most important – and complicated – dimension of my researcher stance related to my ongoing involvement with Patrick Henry, including my role as a parent of one student, and one former student at Patrick Henry. Beginning in 2007, when I moved back to Richmond from Chicago, my wife and I became involved, to a limited

extent, in the work of the Patrick Henry School Initiative. Early in the process we attended several meetings and worked briefly on a curriculum committee. Our initial interest in the group was partially related to the fact that we had a daughter who was coming up on school age, however I was also curious – as a teacher and an advocate for public schools – how the charter conversation was unfolding in Richmond. Initially, what I saw led me to back away from the group. Not only was there a lack of diversity among the initiative's leadership – at that point the group was almost exclusively White and middle class – but I also felt that their discussions of the charter were promoting a concept of the school with which I wasn't comfortable. It seemed too focused on establishing a specialty school option that would help pull middle class parents back into the system, rather than as a means of improving the public system for all students.

Nonetheless, while I became less involved in the planning, I kept close attention on the development of the school as it worked through the long authorization process. Eventually, the conversation around the school began to expand. More African Americans joined the leadership and it seemed the discussions started to shift toward a greater recognition of how the school fit into the politics and history of schools in Richmond. By the time the school was ready to start the enrollment process for its first class, my wife and I were hopeful enough about the possibilities of the school that we decided to give it a chance. We saw the charter not only as a good option for our daughter in terms of the curriculum, but also as an opportunity for challenging the traditional system in a way that would support the broader idea of public education.

Since Patrick Henry opened in August of 2010, I have spent quite a bit of time at the school volunteering in classrooms, chaperoning fieldtrips, and attending school

events. I have also been moderately involved with school leadership. I have attended

charter board meetings, I have been on two principal hiring committees, and I have

headed up a project for the board of directors for several years that involved developing,

distributing and analyzing a parent satisfaction survey. In addition I have also spoken

several times publicly at Richmond School Board meetings advocating for the school.

Through all of this work I have had an opportunity to get to know a number of teachers,

administrators, board members, parents and students.

A final critical point related to the reflexivity within this particular research is that

I am White, male, and middle class. This identity position has bearing on all of the above

experiences and, to the extent that this research explores issues of race, class, privilege

and power, this identity has been a point for ongoing reflection.

In certain ways my role as an involved parent and advocate for the school offered

opportunities for this research (Sherif, 2001). Through my prolonged engagement with

the school, I felt that I had a solid understanding of many of the contextual factors that

were important for the analysis. I also felt that people who I knew and with whom I had

worked at the school trusted me and were willing to talk with me openly and honestly

about their experiences. I believe my standing at the school as a parent and an advocate

allowed me a depth of understanding and a level of access that I doubt an outside

researcher would have been able to achieve.

However, my position as researcher also presented challenges for establishing the

credibility of this research. At the center of this project was a question about parents'

perspectives on the meaning of this school. Not only did I enter this research as an

academic with general expectations about what I might find among the community of

parents at the school, but I also came in with my own answer to this question as a parent and I had a strong personal investment in promoting my vision. That is to say, I chose the charter for my daughter because I had a particular idea of the type of school it could be. My hope was not only that it would push against standardized models of curriculum and assessment that I feel have been so damaging to the experiences of teaching and learning, but I also wanted the school to serve public purposes. I wanted the community of the school to represent the diversity of the city, and my hope was that the creation of this school would be an opportunity for addressing race and class-based school inequities within the city. I also had clear ideas of the type of school I did not want it to be. I did not want it to be another specialty school for the White middle class community. My desire as a parent to advance my perspective came into direct conflict with my role as a researcher. This conflict led me to think several times through the process of changing my topic. This was not only because I worried that my role as parent was going to bias my research, but also that my role as researcher was going to limit my ability to act on my ideas about the school, and on behalf of my daughters who attend the school.

There are two ways that I responded to this aspect of my project. First, to the extent possible, I built the credibility of my findings by attempting to bound my subjectivity through certain methodological techniques such as reflexive journaling, memoing, peer review and member checking (Rodwell, 1998). The intent with this was not to overcome my subjectivity, but rather to try to be as transparent and thoughtful as possible about the ways my subjectivity interacted with my data collection and analysis. My second response to my researcher position was to frame the project, at least to a certain extent, as praxis-oriented. I believe the project was not just about extracting

knowledge from the site, but also about creating critical dialogues within it that could transform the site itself.

Study Design and Paradigm Choice

Before getting into the logistics and reasoning behind specific methodological decisions, it will be useful to present the overarching structure of the research design and its relation to the research questions. The primary research question (PRQ) that guided this study was:

PRQ: How do parents construct the idea of public schools as they explain their choice of Patrick Henry Charter School?

Based on my interest in thinking about parents' ideas of public schools in relation to both national and local discourses around charter policy and the idea of public schools, I also developed two sub-questions (SQ).

SQ1: How do the parents' ideas about *public* schools reflect the logics embedded in the larger policy discourses concerning charters and the reinvention of public education?

SQ2: How do the parents' ideas about *public* schools reflect the local public discourse around the public-ness of the school?

Although this was a fully qualitative study, I structured the research process into three phases of analysis. Each phase was distinct in terms of types of data collected, the methods of analysis, and the general epistemological assumptions behind them. For this reason, I found it useful to understand this study as multi-method qualitative design (Tashakori & Teddlie, 2003). This decision has to do with ways that mixed- and multi-method theorists have developed the concept of methodological triangulation. This study

builds on that tradition. This was also an example of multi-paradigmatic research, in that one phase of the qualitative analysis was guided by the post-positivist assumptions of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and the other was guided by the constructivist/interpretivist assumptions of Guba & Lincoln (1989).

Figure 3.1 illustrates the overarching design of this study. In the figure, the three large boxes represent the three phases of research I conducted, the shaded circles represent various fields of data, solid arrows represent processes of data analysis, and squares represent conceptual frameworks or theories. The dashed arrows that go from the phase one and phase two frameworks represent the influence of these frameworks on the foreshadowed questions that influenced the inquiry process of the third phase. PRQ stands for primary research question. SQ 1 and SQ 2 stand for sub-questions one and two. It should be noted that phase one was completed in chapter two and thus the focus of this chapter is on the methodological design of phases two and three. Also to note is that although these phases represent a particular sequence of research activity, the process was also a recursive one (Maxwell, 2009); analysis that occurred in later phases sent me back to re-open questions and reanalyze data from earlier phases. Below is a general description of each phase.

- ***Phase One.*** The goal of phase one was to develop the foundation for answering the first sub-question. This phase was accomplished in chapter two where I explored the reform debates around charter schools and their relationship to the contested ideas over public education. The frameworks that emerged from phase one will be used in chapter six to answer sub-question one.

Figure 3.1. **Study Design**
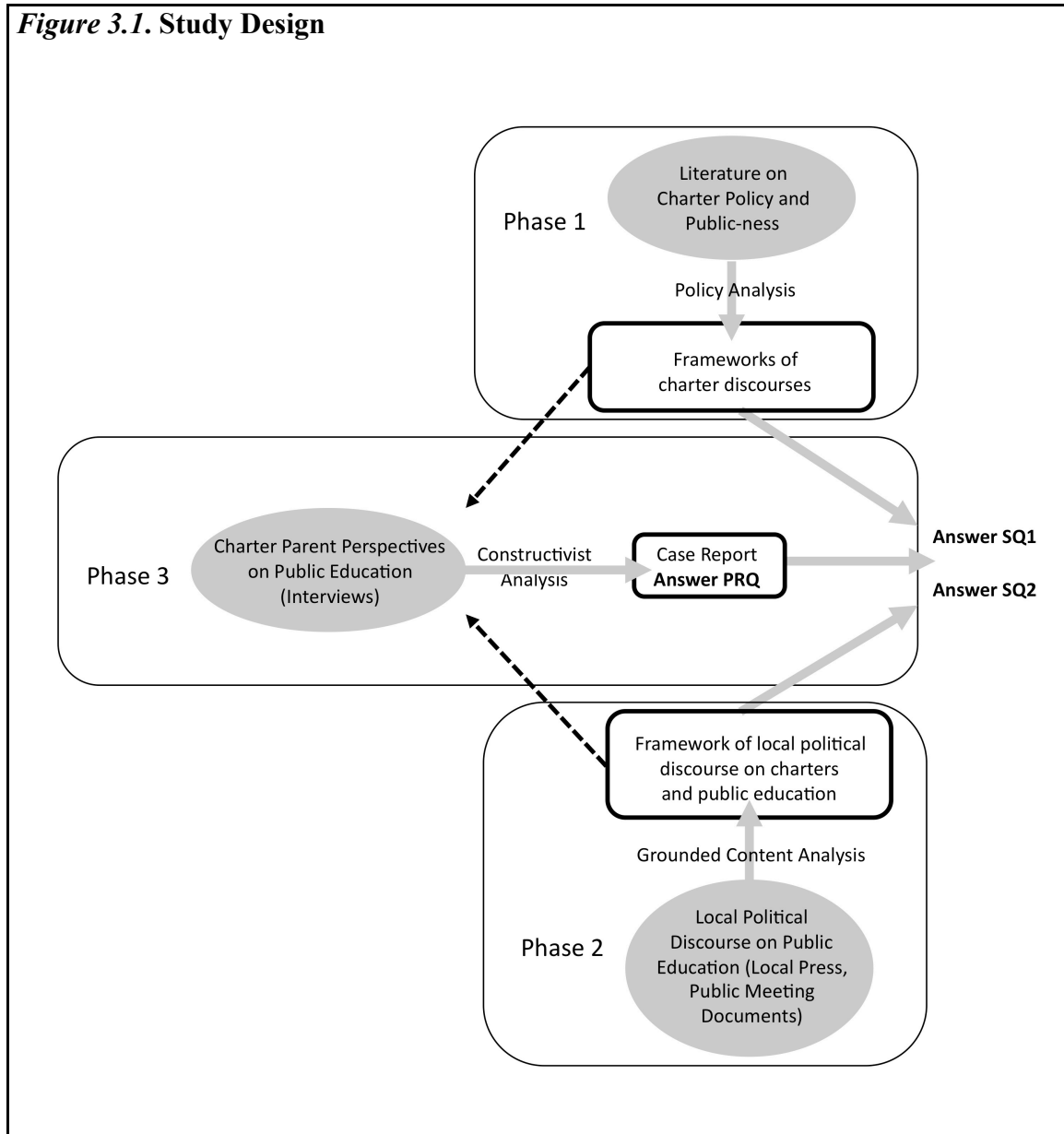
- *Phase Two.* Phase two involved the development of a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of local political discourse around the opening of Patrick Henry in the Richmond context. The review covers a five year window starting in April of 2007, when the idea of the school was first mentioned in a public meeting, and concluding December of 2011, a year and a half after the school's opening. The

data came from a review of six local press sources and the public comment

portion of the minutes from Richmond Public School Board meetings.

- ***Phase Three.*** Phase three involved a constructivist qualitative inquiry (Rodwell,

  1998) into the multiple meanings of public education expressed by parents of

  students at Patrick Henry. The data for this phase came from a series of 16 semi-

  structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) with a

  maximum variation sample (Patton, 2001) of parents. The theory and case report

  that resulted from this phase represents the answer to the primary research

  question.

Paradigm Choice

This study employed qualitative interpretive inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1989)

guided by the ontological and epistemological assumptions of constructivist research

(Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Rodwell, 1998; Schwandt, 1998) and modified for the

particulars of this situation and the research questions. There are several qualities of this

study that position it within interpretive inquiry and align it with the principles of

constructivist research.

First, the primary research question assumes that knowledge is socially

constructed by individuals and therefore must be understood from multiple perspectives.

Unlike, a positivist or post-positivist study which might seek to capture some stable idea

about the meaning of public schools conveyed by charter policy, with the constructivist

approach there is the assumption that meanings shift according to the experiences and the

social positioning of the individuals who articulate them, as well as the particular social

context within which the knowledge emerges (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The

constructivist approach frames an individual's meaning making not as a static construct to be captured, but rather as part of a dynamic process that shifts through time, social setting and dialogic situation. This stance had implications for my research practice because of my evolving relationship to the site. It also had implications for the nature of the knowledge produced.

Second, the research questions suggest a process of meaning making that is inductive rather than deductive in nature. The frameworks that were used for answering the sub-questions were developed out of analytic activities designed to understand socially-constructed meanings (policy meanings, local political/historical meanings) through attention to a multiplicity of voices. The figure and case report of phase three present another inductively developed grounded theory about the public-ness of schools. The core goal of this research is not to confirm or disconfirm the validity of any of these theories or frameworks, but rather to demonstrate their inherent limitations in assessing the effects of policy on local contexts.

Finally, this project was constructivist in that it was designed with a distinct praxis-orientation (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Rodwell, 1998). This is especially true through the parent interviews where constructivist research methods were used to create a hermeneutic-dialectic among the participants that allowed for critical dialogue between diverse perspectives to emerge. Rodwell (1998) writes,

> [A]ll hermeneutic processes will have an interventive aspect and all will create change at least at the level of individual consciousness. A quality hermeneutic circle can simply be the forum for dialogue aimed at co-constructed understanding, not radical change. Either way, radical or

simply educational, the hermeneutic process will still be a strategic,

interventive part of constructivist inquiry. (p. 81)

Although, in this research I was interested in the development of theories that could be

used both in local discussions and broader academic/policy discussions of charters and

public education, I have been just as interested in using the research process to encourage

a critical dialogue across difference within the school community. With this latter

research goal, I am focusing attention on the authenticity dimensions of constructivist

rigor (Rodwell, 1998).

Methods

In the following section I will detail the methods of research that I used to

conduct phase two and phase three of the research. For the sake of clarity, I will begin by

discussing the unique methods of each phase including issues of sampling, data collection

and data analysis. I will then move to a more general discussion of methodological issues

that apply across the phases such as researcher stance and qualitative rigor.

Phase Two

Phase two used a qualitative analysis of local press and school board meeting minutes to

develop a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of local political discourse around

public education and charters in the Richmond context. The main question of this phase

of the study was, How have the ideas about public schools been constructed through the

local political discourse surrounding the opening of Patrick Henry? The theory that

emerged from this was then used in chapter six to consider how parents' ideas about the

charter school were related to the local context.

Data collection and sampling. The data for this phase came from a review of public documents spanning roughly five years from April of 2007 until December of 2011. The documents included the public comment portion from the minutes of Richmond School Board meetings and from six local press sources. Below, I describe each of these data sources, discuss the methods I used when reviewing the data sources, and provide information about the number of documents found from each source.

Richmond School Board Meeting minutes. I downloaded the minutes of all full Richmond School Board meetings from the Richmond Public School Board Website. I did not include the minutes of work sessions or committee meetings. After the minutes were collected and organized, I conducted a key word in context search for "Patrick Henry" and "charter." All hits were reviewed and 35 documents were determined to be relevant to the study (n=35).

Local press. Patrick Henry has garnered a significant amount of attention from the local press. For the purpose of this analysis I considered the published pieces from six local press sources. These pieces included news articles, long format investigative journalism, editorials, op-eds, and letters to the editor. Below is a short description of each press source with information about how data were collected.

- *Richmond Times-Dispatch.* The Richmond Times-Dispatch (RTD) is the main daily newspaper for Richmond, and as the paper of Virginia's capital, it is the default paper for many of the surrounding municipalities. The paper was founded in 1850 and its current daily circulation is approximately 186,000. To identify articles from the RTD, I conducted a LexisNexis Academic search using the terms "Patrick Henry" and "Charter" with a date restriction between January 2007 and

the time of the search – December 2011. All hits were reviewed for relevance to the study. This resulted in the identification of 147 relevant pieces.

- *Richmond Free Press.* The Richmond Free Press (RFP) is a Black-owned weekly newspaper founded in 1992. The RFP has a circulation of more than 35,000. To identify articles concerning Patrick Henry from the RFP, I reviewed an archive of all back issues since January 2007 through the Virginia Commonwealth University's Special Collections. Relevant articles were scanned and converted to text files. This resulted in the identification of 23 relevant pieces.

- *The Richmond Voice.* The Richmond Voice is a Black-owned weekly newspaper. To identify articles concerning Patrick Henry Charter School from the Richmond Voice I reviewed an archive of all back issues since January 2007 through the Virginia Commonwealth University's Special Collections. Relevant articles were scanned and converted to text files. This resulted in the identification of 16 relevant pieces.

- *The Virginia Defender.* The Virginia Defender (VD) (formally known as the Richmond Defender) is a quarterly all volunteer newspaper started in 2002 and published by the Defenders of Freedom Justice and Equality. The VD has a circulation of approximately 16,000 and is distributed throughout Richmond and 12 other Virginia cities. To identify articles from the VD, back issues since January 2007 were downloaded from the VD website and reviewed for relevance to Patrick Henry. This resulted in the identification of 5 relevant pieces.

- *Style Weekly.* Style Weekly (SW) is a free weekly newspaper covering news arts, and culture. SW was founded in 1982 and has a circulation of approximately

35,000. To identify articles about Patrick Henry, I searched the online archives of

the SW website using the search terms "Patrick Henry" and "Charter." This

resulted in the identification of 20 relevant pieces.

- *Richmond Magazine.* Richmond Magazine (RM) is a monthly magazine that

    covers news, culture and travel related to Richmond and central Virginia. RM was

    founded in 1980 and has a circulation of 200,000. To identify articles about

    Patrick Henry, I searched the online archives of the Richmond Magazine website

    using the search terms "Patrick Henry" and "Charter." This resulted in the

    identification of 26 relevant pieces.

Data analysis. After collection and preparation, each source was entered into

ATLAS.ti 6.2 as a primary document in a hermeneutic unit. The documents were

organized chronologically by month and by news source in a sequence that began with

the voices of the least powerful or least represented groups to allow these voices to give

form to the initial category structure. This practice reflects the fairness dimension of

authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1989) which calls for the evenhanded presentation of all

viewpoints, allowing alternative perspectives to be both acknowledged and assessed for

their merit and worth (Rodwell, 1998).

For the first wave of coding, all documents were read in order and relevant units

of data were identified and given descriptive or emic codes. Through subsequent waves

of analysis constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) data analysis was used to

develop code categories that eventually began to coalesce around several key themes

including public-ness, equity, access, governance, and purpose. Network maps were used

to explore the relationships between codes within these themes. Memos were then used to

systematically describe the network maps using units of data pulled from the coding

categories. This analytic work – network mapping and memoing – revealed the polarized

nature of the public discourse as well as its narrative qualities. This led to the idea of

creating two competing stories about the school. These stories were then analyzed in

relation to the original themes. Chapter four presents the two stories and an analysis of

them.

In the presentation of data source documents (i.e., news articles and public

meeting minutes) are linked to the ideas presented in the analysis through a system of

superscripts that refer to the source documents. Appendix A presents the list of

documents.

Phase Three

Phase three involved a constructivist qualitative inquiry (Rodwell, 1998) into the

ideas of public school expressed by parents of students at Patrick Henry. For this phase of

the study I conducted 16 interviews with parents of Patrick Henry students over the

course of five months through the spring and summer of 2012. Below I will discuss the

method I used during this phase of the research. This includes a discussion of my

foreshadowed questions, my sampling techniques, a description of my sample, and finally

a discussion of my data collection and data analysis procedure.

Foreshadowed questions, working hypotheses, and theme development. At

the beginning of phase three, I developed a set of foreshadowed questions about the topic

that helped guide my participant selection, my data collection, and my initial analyses of

data. Rodwell (1998) writes that foreshadowed questions are "those issues that the

inquirer brings to the inquiry from his or her own experience, from study, or from general

curiosity" (p. 148). In the case of this study, the foreshadowed questions emerged from

three sources: (1) my phase one review of literature concerning the broad discourse

around public-ness and charter schools; (2) my phase two investigation into the local

political discourse surrounding Patrick Henry; and (3) my own experiences as a student

in Richmond Public Schools, as a public schools teacher, and as a parent of a Patrick

Henry student. One way of thinking about the foreshadowed questions is as a reflection

of the dynamic range of the human instrument of qualitative research that has become

"shaped in preparation for this particular inquiry" (p. 149).

As the data collection and analysis proceeded and themes began to emerge, the

foreshadowed questions took the shape of working hypotheses that expressed my

thoughts and hunches about what was going on. It is important to note that these working

hypotheses were not hypotheses in the traditional sense, but rather tentative descriptions

of a specific context. A core premise of constructivist inquiry is that working hypotheses

will naturally shift multiple times through the process of inquiry. In fact, if hypotheses

failed to shift, questions could be raised about the trustworthiness and authenticity of the

research (Rodwell, 1998).

Sampling. The specific focus of phase three was to understand the complicated

range of ideas about public schools that are expressed by parents who chose Patrick

Henry. For this reason I selected a purposeful maximum variation sample (Patton, 2001)

of parents to interview (n=16). Supporting this sampling approach was the idea that

differences in meanings would occur along certain characteristics related to the social

identity, positioning and prior experiences of the participants. Based on the foreshadowed

questions (Rodwell, 1998) developed out of my fieldwork and the review of the literature

I sampled for variation along five specific characteristics. Below is a list of these characteristics with a basic statement of the rationale for its inclusion.

- *Race.* Considering the history of racial segregation in the city and the failed efforts to integrate the city's schools, I felt that a participant's racial identity might influence his or her ideas about public schools.

- *Age.* A participant's age and length of time living in the city might influence his or her level and type of understanding of the race politics of the city and the schools.

- *Experiences with schools as a student.* I felt that participants who had attended public schools might have different perspectives than those that attended private schools. The type of public school (Richmond/not-Richmond, urban/suburban/rural, neighborhood/selective) might matter as well.

- *Socioeconomic status.* I believed that socioeconomic status (SES) might relate to the availability of educational options. The perspectives on public school choice might vary between members of different SES groups.

- *Experiences with schools as a parent.* Parents of kindergarteners who were entering formal K-12 schooling as parents for the first time might have different perspectives from parents who have prior experience negotiating systems of schooling.

One challenge related to this method of sampling was a logistical problem of getting access to participants representing a variety of stakeholder groups. In comparison to other Richmond Public Schools, Patrick Henry had a very diverse student population (Black/White and a range of SES) that represented a number of different neighborhoods

from around the city. Although I was an active member of the school community, the network of families I knew was limited and unbalanced in relation to the diversity of the school. For example, many of the people I knew at the school were through personal neighborhood connections. For this reason I knew many more White families than Black families and I knew many more middle class families than working class or poor families. If I had recruited participants only from within my current social networks, I would likely have missed important perspectives. It was important that in my sampling, I found ways to gain access to the various networks in the school.

To address this challenge I used several different strategies of participant recruitment. First, I recruited participants from within my current networks. Second, I solicited participants for the study through flyers posted (Appendix B) at the school and in school publications. Third, I elicited the help of several individuals to act as gatekeepers to particular social networks within the school to which I didn't have access. I consulted with these individuals through the course of the study and asked them to help identify possible participants. To ensure privacy, the recruiters approached potential participants, explained the study and the commitment using a recruitment script (Appendix C), and then had the parents sign a permission to contact form (Appendix D).

I used several strategies to ensure the confidentiality of the individual participants. In the presentations of data, not only did I change names and identifying details, but I also created composite characters around particular identity positions that do not correspond to individual participants. In addition, all participants were given an opportunity to member check the final case report to make certain that I didn't compromise their identity while also accurately reconstructing their position. Because of

the importance of the local context to the nature of this study, I decided not to change the name of the city or the school. In the participant consent form (Appendix E) I informed parents that the city and school name would be used, so they could take that into consideration when deciding to participate.

The parents. The 16 parents that participated in this study were diverse along a number of demographic characteristics (race, age, gender, income level) and brought with them a range of experiences within schools both public and private. At the end of each interview parents were asked to complete a short demographic form (Appendix F). Below is description of the sample according to the five sampling characteristics listed above.

- *Race.* The sample included nine White parents, six Black parents, and one mixed-race parent.

- *Age.* The mean age of the sample was 39 with a range from 29 to 54. Three of the participants had participated in cross-city bussing during desegregation.

- ***Experiences with schools as a student.*** The parents I interviewed attended a variety of types of school. In some cases the parents stayed with the same type of school throughout their K-12 career, in other cases they moved between types. The sample included five parents who had attended their zoned Richmond Public Schools, three who had attended zoned public schools in other cities, three who had attended suburban zoned public schools, three who had attended rural public schools, and two who had attended public schools in other countries. Five of the participants attended private schools. In two cases these private schools were Catholic, and in one case it was an alternative school for struggling students. One of the participants was homeschooled for part of the K-12 experience.

- *Socioeconomic status.* Parents indicated their socioeconomic status on the demographic survey given at the end of each interview. They survey asked them to estimate their annual household income within the categories 0 to 30 thousand, 30 to 60 thousand, 60 to 90 thousand, 90 to 120 thousand, and more than 120 thousand. With the sample there was one family who estimated 0 to 30 thousand, seven families who estimated 30 to 60 thousand, six families who estimated 60 to 90 thousand, and one family who estimated 90 to 120 thousand dollars a year.

- *Experiences with schools as a parent.* Among the parents, five had only one child, nine had two children, and two had three children. The parents' children who attended Patrick Henry ranged in grade level from Kindergarten through 5th grade. Eight of the parents also had children who were younger than elementary age (pre-K) or older (middle / high school). For seven of the parents, Patrick Henry was their first experience negotiating K-12 schools. The other nine had either brought their child to Patrick Henry from another school situation, or had older children who they had negotiated through the K-12 school system. Of those who had prior experience negotiating schools, five had children in zoned Richmond Public Schools, two had children in out-of-zone Richmond Public Schools (open enrollment), and one had a child in a suburban public school. In addition one had a child who had been in a Catholic school, and two had children who had been home schooled.

Beyond the characteristics pulled from the working hypotheses, there was additional variation within the sample that may have bearing on the participants' constructions of public schools.

- *Gender.* Twelve of the participants were female. Four were male.

- *Working in schools.* Three of the participants were teachers in either public or private schools. Another parent had extensive experience tutoring and assistant teaching in both public and private school settings. Another parent had served on the board of a charter school in another city.

- *Family members who were teachers or involved in education.* Four of the participants came from families where one of the parents was a teacher. One had a parent who had been a member of a local school board.

- *Part of the Patrick Henry founding group.* Three of the participants had been involved, to varying degrees, in the founding of Patrick Henry.

Data collection. The primary source of data for phase three of the study was a series of 16 semi-structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The interviews were conducted between February and June of 2012. The interviews occurred in a location and time of the interviewee's choosing. The interviews were recorded and lasted anywhere between 30 minutes and 90 minutes.

The interview protocol (Appendix G) included the following six prompts:

1. Tell me about your school experiences as a student.

2. In general, what do you see as the role of public schools in society?

3. What do you imagine as the perfect school for your son or daughter?

4. Tell me about the decision to send your child to Patrick Henry.

5. What are your current feelings about the school?

6. If Patrick Henry closed, or if you left the school, what would be your next choice?

The interview prompts remained stable throughout the study, however probes under each of the questions were also used to allow for engagement with the shifting ideas and interpretations that emerged through the data collection and analysis. An initial set of probes were developed under each of these prompts based on the foreshadowed questions (Rodwell, 1998) which emerged out of phase one and phase two of the study.

In line with the constructivist stance of this project, the interviewing methods were based on the conception that interviews are not a process of extracting meanings held by static subjects, but rather as an active process of meaning making where knowledge is constructed through the collaborative interaction of the respondent, the interviewer, and the meanings that emerge through the hermeneutic dialectic (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Rodwell, 1998).

This particular understanding of qualitative interviewing had the following methodological implications for this study. First, adopting this stance suggested a particular conversational relationship within the interview. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) write that active interviewers "converse with respondents in such a way that alternate considerations are brought into play. They may suggest orientations to, and linkages between, diverse aspects of respondents' experience, adumbrating – even inviting – interpretations that make use of particular resources, connections and outlooks" (p. 17). This idea aligns closely with the principles of constructivist inquiry and the hermeneutic dialectic where the researcher uses the space of the interview not just to understand the perspectives and experiences of the participant, but also to engage them with ideas that are emerging through the research process.

A second implication was that this construction of interviews as a collaborative

process required that close attention be paid not just to the respondent's articulated

meanings, but also to my influence on the meaning-making process. The point of this

reflexive examination was not to frame influence as potential bias that needed to be

controlled or neutralized, but rather to acknowledge my influence as a contribution that

should be taken into account throughout the process of data collection and analysis.

Data analysis. Data analysis occurred in two distinct periods: (1) during the

process of data collection and (2) after all of the interviews were completed. Both will be

discussed below.

Analysis during data collection. The data analysis that happened during the

process of data collection was not a formal process as it would be in traditional constant

comparison grounded theory study. Rather, this early analysis occurred informally in the

context of my fieldwork, through the interviews, during transcribing, and throughout my

days as I lived with the ideas and perspectives that emerged through the work. The

documentation of the ideas that emerged from this period of the analysis occurred in the

context of the reflexive journal and in the reiterations of the working hypotheses and in

the shifting probes of the interview protocol. This part of the analysis was critical in that

it directed the participant selection and interview process. However, no formal unitizing

or categorizing of data occurred until all of the data was collected.

Data deconstruction and reconstruction. When all of the interviews were

completed and transcribed, all interview transcripts were reviewed and edited for clarity

and relevance to the inquiry. These transcripts were then entered as primary documents

into ATLAS.ti 6.2 for a process of constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967;

Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Rodwell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first step in this analysis was to unitize the data into concise but meaningful chunks and then begin assigning a set of working codes to the data that allowed for tracking to the original source. The process of unitizing the data created approximately 4000 units ranging in size from one word to several sentences. Once all data were unitized, units were sorted and lumped (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rodwell, 1998) to identify relevant themes or categories. All categories were given definitions that served as decision rules for units within the category. The goal of this process was to create a hierarchical system of categories that was non-redundant and exhaustive.

   Negotiation of the reconstruction and the case report. Once the category structure had been settled, I developed a tentative visual framework of the structure (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that represented the grounded theory (figure 5.1). Using the visual framework I wrote a first draft of a case report that elaborated the theory using example units and incorporated all of the codes and categories from the analysis. A second draft of the case report was then written as a series of vignettes that focused on six composite characters that represented unique identity positions. The vignettes were constructed by weaving together units pulled out of the codes and categories from the framework.

   Once the vignettes and the transitional discussions between them had been completed, the case report was sent to my peer reviewer for feedback and then to the interview participants for a member check. For the member check I asked participants three questions: (1) Are any of the facts in the case report wrong? (1) Do you hear your voice in the case report? (2) Do you feel that your ideas have been accurately presented?

To this point I have received seven member checks that affirm the credibility of the report.

This process of member check was different from what I proposed. Originally the plan was to have the participants member check only the visual map of the theory. However, as the analysis was emerging, I felt that a check of the case report itself would be a more accurate way to assess the credibility of the study.

Trustworthiness and Authenticity

Legitimation in social science research has to do with establishing the quality of inferences that are made through the research process. Within the positivist and post-positivist paradigms, legitimation is articulated through well-established notions of validity, reliability and generalizability (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). Within the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm legitimation has a more complicated typology. Part of this has to do with the various ways that researchers within the non-positivist paradigms have chosen to respond to the challenge of legitimation (Tashakori & Teddlie, 2003). In some cases researchers have wholly rejected the idea of legitimation (Wolcott, 1994), in other cases they have adopted a parallel language to the positivist paradigm (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982), and in still others they have attempted to redefine the criteria of legitimation for the alternative paradigms (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, I will address the issue of legitimation through two alternative set of criteria that have been established as specifically relevant within the constructivist research paradigm: trustworthiness and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Manning, 1997; Rodwell, 1998).

Trustworthiness

The criteria for trustworthiness were designed in response to the general

expectations of positivist research assumptions. That is to say, trustworthiness is about

accounting for the "truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality" of the research

product (Rodwell, 1998, p. 96). Generally, trustworthiness is discussed in terms of four

criteria: (1) credibility, which relates to the accuracy of the results and interpretations

from the perspectives of the stakeholders; (2) dependability, which involves accounting

for the changes made to the research design as it emerges; (3) confirmability, which is the

reasonableness of the logic that connects inferences to the data; and (4) transferability,

which is the possibility that the understandings developed might be useful in other

contexts.

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study several strategies were used.

- *Prolonged engagement and persistent observation.* Credibility is enhanced

  through prolonged engagement and persistent observation within a research

  context. This gives the researcher the ability to understand the layered complexity

  of context from the perspective of a participant. I believe that my history with

  Richmond, with systems of public schools, and with Patrick Henry added to the

  credibility of this study.

- *Reflexive journaling.* During the course of the study I kept an ongoing reflexive

  journal that documented my evolving ideas about the topic. The reflexive journal

  was a way of capturing my subjectivity to some extent and considering it in

  relation to the data. Although I did not engage in a formal audit of the final case

report, the journal provided a way to assess the findings in terms of their

confirmability.

- *Methodological journaling.* In addition to the reflexive journal, I kept a

  methodological journal that documented methodological decisions made through

  the study. This included probe development, sample selection, and reflections on

  data analysis. The methodological journal was a way of documenting the

  dependability of the research.

- *Peer review and debriefing.* Before beginning the research I recruited a peer

  reviewer who had no connection to the inquiry, but had knowledge of the

  constructivist method. I met with the peer reviewer on a regular basis through the

  course of data collection. During the meetings I provided updates on the process

  of my study and the challenges I was encountering. The peer reviewer asked

  critical questions that allowed me to assess my methodological decisions. The

  peer reviewer also reviewed my final case report before sending it out to the

  participants for member check to make an initial assessment of quality.

- *Member checks.* Member checks refer to the process of reviewing data and

  interpretations with participants to ensure that the meanings that are constructed

  are accurate from the participant's perspective. I engaged in several levels of

  member checking through the data collection and analysis process. First, within

  the context of the interview, I reviewed emerging co-constructed interpretations

  with the participants. Second, I allowed participants to review transcripts of

  interviews for accuracy of ideas and transcription. And finally I went through a

member check of the final case report. These processes of member checking strengthened the credibility of the findings.

- *Thick description.* In writing the case report, I attempted to capture the understandings of the participants and describe the context using thick description. In this the hope was that the product of this research, when read, might be transferable to other settings.

Authenticity

While the criteria of trustworthiness were meant to legitimize interpretivist/constructivist research in relation to the positivist and post-positivist paradigms, the aspects of authenticity were conceptualized specifically within the assumption of the constructivist paradigm in mind. Authenticity has to do with the values of pluralism, multiple perspectives and the ability of research to educate, empower and promote action to change existing conditions (Manning, 1997; Rodwell, 1998). Authenticity in research practice involves making sure that the research fairly represents all perspectives and does so in a way that gives just weight to ideas that emerge out of different positions of social power. Authenticity also speaks to the potential of research to educate stakeholders and build understanding and acceptance between them, as well as to develop actionable knowledge that can be used to transform social situations. In many ways, the dimensions of authenticity – the degree of fairness, the level of consciousness-raising, and the impetus to action – are directly related to the quality of the hermeneutic dialectic established through the constructivist process.

Through the course of this study, there have been several points where the dimension of authenticity has been realized. This was most obvious in the context of interviews, when parents would step back and reflect on the quality and impact of the process. This dimension of authenticity is portrayed in the case report through the character of Devon. He states,

We are getting the kids together. Let's get the parents together too. Like you and I. I mean I see you all the time and I never knew you were working on your Ph.D. You see me all the time, and you never knew I was working in the schools. This is the first time you and I have really had a conversation. If you want a school to be successful, something needs to be done to bring the parents together. So you can learn from each other. If everybody learned from each other I think everything would be a whole lot different. Then that way I don't have a false perception of you based on seeing you in a meeting and you complaining, and I'm like 'Oh that's one of those parents that's always complaining about the school, and this and that.' Instead maybe we should take the time to say, how can we make the school better. Because it's like the questions you're asking, the school should have been doing that a long time ago.

As I suggested in chapter one, one of the primary goals of this research was to affect change in the local context in ways that built on the values expressed through the authenticity criteria. The sense of authenticity that came from these moments during the research is something that I hope will continue to emerge as the work is published and presented in the school and through the Richmond community.

CHAPTER 4

"We oppose any scheme that creates a private school in a public school setting,"

- Melvin Law, former Richmond School Board chairman and a Richmond
  NAACP branch member; quoted in "City charter school opposed; Foes
  question plans for Patrick Henry in South Richmond" *Richmond Times
  Dispatch*, Saturday, May17th, 2008 [14]

"Put simply, a charter school is a public school run independently. . . The school is free,

because it is still public. The money used to run the charter school comes from the same

coffers, albeit at a smaller percentage, that fund the rest of the public schools."

- Richard Day, president of the Patrick Henry School Initiative; op-ed titled
  "Patrick Henry Initiative Is About Opportunities and Options," *Richmond
  Times Dispatch*, Sunday, May18th, 2008 [15]

Above are two excerpts from pieces published a day apart in the *Richmond Times

Dispatch (RTD)* in May of 2008 just prior to an important Richmond School Board vote

that moved the Patrick Henry charter application forward. The first is a direct quote from

an article covering a press conference convened by the Richmond NAACP, the

Richmond Education Association, and the Richmond PTA on the steps of the Patrick

Henry School building. The second is from an op-ed published a day later – apparently in

response to the NAACP argument – written by the then-president of the Patrick Henry

School Initiative (PHSI), the organization that drafted the charter application and

organized the political support for it.

I open with these excerpts above because they illustrate a key idea that drives the

presentation of the findings in this chapter; that is, the debate around Patrick Henry was

not only a *public argument* – involving a back and forth between prominent individuals, established organizations through press conferences and op-eds in the city's leading paper – but also a debate about the *public-ness* of the school. For example, while Melvin Law describes charters as a "scheme" designed to siphon off public dollars for a "private school;" Richard Day defends charters as "independent" yet tax-supported – thus "free" and "public" – institutions. It is clear from even these short excerpts that Law and Day not only disagree about the question of whether or not to approve the school, but the language they use to describe it indicate that they also have very different ideas about what defines a public school and very different stories to tell about the school's emergence into the Richmond school scene.

The purpose of this chapter is to address the following question: How have the public discourses around Patrick Henry constructed the idea of public schools? In relation to the full study, this analysis will serve as context for the constructivist inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Rodwell, 1998) of the Patrick Henry parents' ideas about public schools presented in chapter five. The analysis in this chapter will provide a thickness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to the story around the schools' development and the historical political context of Richmond that was introduced in chapter one. It will also allow for consideration of the ways in which local public discourse around the school might have influenced parents' ideas about the public-ness of the school. This later point is one that I will take up in chapter six.

Outline of the Chapter

As discussed in detail in chapter three, the analytic strategies that were used in this analysis resulted in a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of the local political

discourse surrounding Patrick Henry that resolved on the development of two competing narratives. The narratives capture opposing positions – one for and one against the school – but also tell alternative stories that are built on particular characterizations of communities and particular framing of conflicts. In this chapter outlines of these narratives are presented and then used to develop the following three points.

First, the differences in the ways the characters and conflicts are established in the narratives reveal competing ideas about the communities that constitute the public in public education. While the story told by the opponents of the school focused on highlighting imbalances of privilege and power between communities, the supporters seemed intent on blurring those boundaries.

The second point relates to how the stories presented alternative ideas about legitimate public control of schools. While critics of the school grounded their arguments in a defense of the tradition of local control that defines legitimate public control of schools at the school division level, supporters tended to develop the idea of public control of schools in much broader terms. It certain cases, there was a recognition of the legitimacy of the democratically elected school board, however, there were also pushes to suggest the value of decentralizing the legitimate control of schools to different *publics* (e.g., to communities, to parents, and in certain cases to markets).

Finally, I will explore the implications of the overarching narrative frames that were used within the two stories to build a case about the relationship between Patrick Henry and the larger system of public education. I will suggest that among supporters and opponents of the school, the narratives were strategically and creatively stretched to accommodate the specific policy debates of the day.

Before outlining the two narratives and discussing what they might teach us about the idea of public schools, I will spend time describing the scope and context of the public discourse. In this I will discuss how the discussion of the school developed over time and through the various sources, as well as present an overview of the key voices that participated. This will lay a foundation for the narratives and through this add depth to the meanings that emerge. The chapter will conclude with a brief discussion that ties the findings back to the key ideas from chapter two and sets the stage for the analysis of the parent interviews in chapter five.

Scope and Context of the Debate

It is not hard to defend the claim that no K-12 school, public or private, in the Richmond Metropolitan Area has received as much public attention surrounding its opening as Patrick Henry School of Science and Arts. As detailed in chapter three, my review of six local print media sources between April 2007 – the first mention of the idea for the school in the press – and December 2011 – a year and a half after the school's opening – yielded 237 articles, letters to the editor, and editorials that directly referenced the school and/or the events that led to its opening. This included certain spikes in coverage. For example in 2010 – the year the school opened – there were 104 pieces total across the six sources. In addition, my review of the minutes from the Richmond School Board meetings yielded 34 primary documents where Patrick Henry was the subject of at least one public comment. Again this included certain watershed meetings. For example at one critical school board meeting in May of 2008, where the fate of the charter contract was on the agenda, over 60 people delivered public comment either for or against the school. And this was only a fraction of the total media coverage and public debate that I

observed while conducting this study. My analysis did not include coverage in other local print media (e.g., city-wide weekly magazines and community newspapers), on local network television or local radio, or on internet-based education blogs and community forums. It also did not include the minutes from Patrick Henry board meetings, City council meetings, or state legislature meetings. While some of the articles and meeting minutes I reviewed made just passing reference to the school, a vast majority were specifically focused on Patrick Henry and the complicated issues that surrounded its emergence onto the Richmond school scene.

The question is *why?* Why would a small new elementary school, in a region with hundreds of public and private K-12 schools, receive so much public attention? One way to answer this question is to consider the importance of timing and context in this case. As I argued in chapter two, Patrick Henry has emerged during a specific era of school reform in our country where the story of charter schools battling against the status quo of a failing public school system is a popular one to tell (Ravitch, 2010). On top of this, Patrick Henry emerged into a specific context as the first charter elementary school, not only in the city, but also in the state. In this respect many perceived the opening of PHSSA as Virginia's critical case. Conveniently located just a couple miles from the center of state government, policy makers, political organizations, and local education pundits were literally able to use the school as a stump for political rhetoric on education reform issues: Governor McDonnell signed the 2010 charter school legislation at the school; the State Secretary of Education pulled the balls at the first enrollment lottery; U.S. Representative Eric Cantor made a photo-op visit to the school in 2013; the NAACP held press conferences on the school's doorstep. So in one respect, it is fair to say that

Patrick Henry attracted so much public attention, because it was simply the right type of school in the right place at the right time.

There are several characteristics of the data that are important to understand as a foundation for the analysis to come. The first has to do with what appears to be its dichotomous nature. On the one hand this illustrates a real quality of the data. Although the documents I analyzed came through six distinct media sources, each of which carried a particular editorial perspective, the arguments tracked in this study were polarized and often carried a consistent set of messages. For example, supporters of the school almost always argued the school's public nature, while opponents argued its private nature. On the other hand, this dichotomy fails to capture some of the complex qualities of the debate. Within the pro- and anti-charter positions were speakers that used a variety of approaches and forms of support that revealed a multi-faceted and dynamic, rather than dichotomous, collection of meanings.

The second key point about the data is that the ideas expressed on each side represented perspectives from a range of political levels including individual parents and community members, locally elected officials (e.g., Richmond's mayor, Richmond school board members, Richmond city council members), state level politicians (e.g., Governor McDonnell, State legislators, Virginia Legislative Black Caucus), local organizations (e.g., Patrick Henry School Initiative, Richmond Crusade for Voters), and nationally-affiliated organizations (e.g., Richmond NAACP, Richmond Education Association). There were also connections between some of the local perspectives and the platforms of national education reform groups. For example, State Secretary of Education Gerard Robinson was a former president of the national, pro-charter, Black

Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO). Another example is that in 2010 the local

Greater Richmond Education Reform Alliance (GRERA) was established through

significant start-up funding from the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools

(NAPCS). One effect of this multi-level debate is that the argument over Patrick Henry

was one that was about the school itself, as well as the larger policy issue of charters in

Virginia, and in the country. Often the arguments jumped between these policy topics.

The third key point about the debate is that it was dynamic over time. Some

changes over time related to the emerging status of the school. For example, early debates

around the approval of the charter in 2007 shifted after approval in May of 2008, and

then shifted again in 2010 after the school opened. The debates through each of these

phases of the school's development carried distinct themes. Early concerns about the

diversity of the school, quickly faded after the school opened with a diverse school

population. The conversation also changed as a result of the shifting political landscape.

For example, while the early debate focused on the local politics of the Richmond School

Board, the 2008 election of Barack Obama and the 2009 election of Governor Bob

McDonnell – both pro-charter politicians – shifted the conversation significantly to

position the school within the state and national-level education reform context.

The final characteristic worth noting is that the debate was imbalanced with a

majority of the voices coming out in favor of the school. This was due both to the

dominance of particular public outlets, but also because the school successfully expanded

its public and political support as it grew. The issue of imbalance is most clearly

illustrated in the influence of the *RTD*. Not only does the *RTD* have the largest circulation

of any of the six publications I reviewed, but also having a daily publication allowed the

paper to out report, over time, any of the other sources covering the school. Both the editorials and the articles slanted strongly toward support for the school. This imbalance was exacerbated by the fact that the opposition press (*Free Press, Richmond Voice, Virginia Defender*) quickly trailed off after the school opened. Another important dynamic related to the imbalance was that there were a significant number of shifts in perspective toward support for the school by key political figures. For example, Richmond's mayor Dwight Jones and city councilman Marty Jewell, both prominent political figures in the Black community, shifted from critics to supporters of the school after it opened.

The Competing Narratives of Patrick Henry

In the section below I present two narratives about the opening of Patrick Henry that are designed to capture the sense of the stories told by both the supporters and the critics of the school. These narratives are presented in the of form of outlines to emphasize the idea that they are constructed out of ideas collected from multiple sources over a span of several years of public discourse. In a certain sense the elements of the narratives hold together through common uses of language, as well as constructions of characters and conflict. However the narratives also are filled with contradiction and tensions, some of which I will explore in the discussion that follows. For this reason, each outline should also be read as a collection of fragments rather than a coherent whole.

In the presentation of data through this chapter, source documents are referenced through a system of superscripts. Appendix A presents the list of documents.

The Story of the Supporters

From the supporters of the school, the story of Patrick Henry tended to present the following story line:

1. Richmond Public Schools has long been a failing and inequitable public school system that is cheating the children and driving families out of the city. [6, 11, 15, 18, 22, 32, 50, 52, 67]

2. The decline of Richmond's schools is a result of the school system's entrenched bureaucracy, that not only exhibits a level of disorganization and incompetence, but whose primary interest is in maintaining power through defense of the status quo. [8, 22, 23, 29, 40]

3. However, within the city there has been an intense demand among parents for more school options. Parents feel that not every school is a good fit for every student and that there is more than one way to teach children. [8, 15, 17, 32, 33, 59, 63]

4. In 2007 the status quo was challenged by a grassroots group of parents, volunteers and community activists who had the idea to reopen Patrick Henry – a recently closed Richmond Public School – as a charter school focused on an arts- and science-based curriculum. [8, 15, 17, 57]

5. The founders suggested that as a charter school, Patrick Henry would offer needed competition and show those in the system, through example, how a public school can be successful. [2, 31, 52, 55, 76]

6. The school would also be a cost effective policy for the system in that the school would operate on less per-pupil funding than a traditional RPS school. [15, 48]

7. The school would not only be open to the entire city but it would promote diversity in a system that is highly segregated. [2, 4, 8, 9, 11, 14, 24, 27, 28, 59, 66]

8. The school would benefit the system by providing an option that would attract new families to RPS [48]

9. Patrick Henry had the potential to liberate the children, especially predominantly minority children from deprived neighborhoods, from the failing school system. [7, 8, 9, 23, 24, 27, 30, 34, 39, 52, 54, 74]

10. In reaction to this challenge, the bureaucrats and their allies went on the defensive. They feared that the success of the charter school might reflect poorly on the status quo. The system bureaucrats established review committees that imposed onerous administrative burdens and restrictions that slowed down the opening and hampered the growth of the school. [8, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, 29, 39, 44, 59, 65, 76]

11. Despite this mean-spirited attempt at obstruction by the system leaders, the school prevailed through the hard work and determination of these concerned parents and community members. [21, 23]

12. Their victory was evident as the school was accredited in their first year setting a new standard for education in the city. [25, 76]

The Story of the Opponents

From the opponents of the school, the narrative was based on a very different story line.

1. Richmond Public Schools has been a largely successful system. The standards are high and, as a result, the test scores have been steadily rising. All elementary schools are accredited. [6, 19, 51]

2. However, since the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown versus Board of Education decision forced the desegregation of schools in Virginia, a large faction of the White community in the Richmond area has been intent on re-segregating the schools and establishing private academies that serve their communities needs. The effort to reopen Patrick Henry as a charter school is just the newest chapter of this battle. [24, 41, 42, 51, 52, 54]

3. The proponents of Patrick Henry are a group of largely affluent and predominantly White families in Richmond who have abandoned the district or who never belonged, and who have no commitment to public schools in Richmond. [9, 11, 14, 20, 22, 24, 30, 37, 43, 45, 47, 49, 51, 54, 65]

4. The charter application that the Patrick Henry supporters developed was not well designed and did not meet the basic State standards. [8, 10, 19, 40]

5. However, the scheme to start the school has been aided by corrupt politicians at the local level who violated the policies and procedures to support middle class Whites' wishes. [6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 26, 41, 51]

6. The school has also served as the "poster child" for Governor McDonnell's push for legislation to expand charter schools in Virginia, a blatant attempt to override local school boards. [41, 42]

7. Behind the Governor's push for charter schools is the goal of declaring Virginia open for charter school business and ultimately turning public education - into a gigantic private, for-profit enterprise. [2, 8, 41, 42, 51, 52, 58]

8. Patrick Henry will drain scarce resources from Richmond's cash-strapped schools and also suck involved parents and motivated students from the system. [11, 20, 22, 36, 37, 46, 49, 54]

9. It is a school that was not designed to serve White middle-class students only. [6, 13, 16, 37, 64]

10. Ultimately the approval of this school was a decision that is to the disadvantage of thousands of public school students, the majority of whom were low-income and Black. [8, 9, 11, 22, 31, 37, 46, 49, 51, 58]

11. When the school opened, all of the charter school leaders' talk of community voice, diversity, and care for poor children gave way to the establishment of a mostly White school governing board that acted like a community social club with clearly racist tendencies. [8, 9, 11, 22, 31, 37, 46, 49, 51, 58]

12. On top of the racism exhibited by the board, there was a level of administrative incompetence. This was shown in the board's lack of attention to proper bookkeeping, following the rules of procedure, and showing a reckless disregard of its duties. [6, 55, 60, 61, 62]

Defining Public Schools Through the Characterizations of the Public/Publics

A range of characters occupies these narratives about Patrick Henry. They include individuals (e.g., Governor McDonnell), classes of individuals (e.g., students, bureaucrats, Blacks, middle-class Whites, "the deprived"), organizations (e.g., Richmond School Board, corporations) and geographic communities. Within the stories, some of these characters take on specific roles as actors – protagonists or antagonists – while others become the subjects – in certain cases victims – of circumstance and conflict. The

differences in the ways the characters and conflicts are established reveal competing

ideas about the communities that constitute the public in public education.

An example of this is evident in the differences in the ways parents are

characterized. While the depiction of the child as victim was common across both stories,

[8, 11, 23, 24, 27, 34, 35, 39, 46, 49, 54, 58, 74] the portrayal of parents was more complicated. In certain

cases parents occupied a similar position to children as victims of the system. One

common example of this from both stories was the tendency to associate the student /

victim with his or her parent (e.g., "thousands of students and parents" [8] or "families") [2,]

[15, 27, 51, 75] However, this association only tended to apply to the "disenfranchised" parent

or family. When the story turned toward the particular group of parents who led the

Patrick Henry School Initiative dramatically different characterizations were used. The

opponents of the school framed this group of parents as the central antagonists. Far from

victims, these parents were the "privileged" few, "who abandoned the district or who

never belonged" and who were attempting to "carve out an educational island." [24] They

were also described as attempting to "drain," "steal," and "suck" money from the system.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the supporters, the very same parents were the

undeniable heroes. They were the "stalwart group of true believers," the "empowered" [72]

activists, and the savvy entrepreneurs who fought against a broken system.

This contrast of the characterization of parents illuminates a key difference

between the stories in the ideas of how communities constitute the public. From the

opponents of the school, the tendency was to divide communities clearly along lines of

race, class and privilege. Distinctions were made between the select "few" and the

"thousands" of RPS students, between the "predominantly White" and the "Black,"

between the "largely affluent" and the "low-income," and between those who are in the

public system of schools and those who come from outside and from private schools.

Within this story, the "public" in public education refers specifically to disenfranchised

communities.

In contrast, the supporters of the school had a broader, more inclusive vision of

the public. While there was still a tendency within this story to divide communities

between the "deprived" and the "tax-paying" "private-school families" who are

"searching for and deserving of more public school options," [56] Patrick Henry was framed

as a school designed for both publics. The language within this narrative tended to blur

the promise of social justice for the disenfranchised ("all students deserve the opportunity

of a quality education, no matter where they live") [54] into images of an idealized market

for all (a "level playing field of educational opportunities"). [2, 14] While the opponents'

story was focused on highlighting imbalances of privilege and power between

communities, the supporters seemed intent on blurring those boundaries.

Defining Public Schools Through Public Control

In both cases, the story of Patrick Henry was presented as a struggle for control

against undemocratic and unresponsive government, however between the stories there

were very different ideas presented about how public control should be re-imagined.

Critics of the school grounded their arguments in a defense of the tradition of

local control that defines legitimate public control of schools at the school division level

in the body of an elected school board [8, 41, 42, 51] Within this story, "democratic local

control of our schools, is under attack" [42] from several directions. At certain times the

focus was on the overreach of state government, represented by Governor McDonnell

who placed the expansion of charter school's at the center of his legislative educational agenda. In this case ties were made between McDonnell's education agenda and the undue influence of the private sector. Concern was expressed about how the legislation "abandons" the control of schools "to the tender mercies of private, for-profit corporations promoted by people ideologically opposed to the very concept of public schools." [51] Breaking down the charter legislation one critic stated, "with charters, public money funds a public school that is not under public control" [51]

A second target was the Richmond School board itself, which had failed to operate effectively as an elected body. This critique suggested that the Richmond School Board was acting inappropriately – in some cases illegally – when it approved and then supported the school.

Finally, the critique of the opponents of the school focused on the quality of governance of Patrick Henry's founding group, the board of directors and the staff and administration. There were claims that the school's founders were "seeking to take education into their own hands" [6] and were looking "to control every aspect of this school" [55] rather than respect the "Local Educational Authority." [55] The diversity of the school's leadership was also questioned. The claim was made that "African-Americans are underrepresented on the board and among the faculty." [60] One African-American board member who resigned and became a harsh public critic of the school was quoted as asking, "Who gave you the right to determine your so-called internal controls? I'm begging you not to hurt this board and the school with your self-determined standards." [55, 62] "This is a public school and you are going to have to conduct business like it was a public school." [55]

Supporters of the school tended to develop the idea of public control of schools in much broader terms. In certain cases, there was recognition of the legitimacy of the democratically elected school board, however, there were also pushes to suggest the value of decentralizing the legitimate control of schools to different *publics* (e.g., to communities, to parents, and in certain cases to markets). As with the opponents of the school, some supporters argued that the democratically elected school board failed as a legitimate representation of the public's interest. [8, 22, 29, 30, 38, 40, 50, 75, 76] This critique included a questioning of priorities. For example one supporter suggested that RPS had implemented "change many parents don't want, while dragging its feet concerning a proposal many parents emphatically do." [50] A PHSI leader stated that the Board's decisions "don't always reflect those they represent." [30]

Among proponents this critique of the school board was often paired with ideas about the opportunities that the school offered for rejuvenating public governance. For example, one common argument in support of the school was to suggest that Patrick Henry had awakened citizens to participate more actively in structures of local governance and hold their elected officials accountable. [8, 21, 68, 72, 76] Part of this involved awakening parents' sense of political power. In one impassioned speech the head of the Patrick Henry board told parents "You are their constituents. You vote them in, or you vote them out. They are going to listen to you, and your voice is very powerful." [72] In certain cases the image of the empowered citizen participating within the traditional structures of democratic governance shifted to images of decentralized control and community accountability. [1, 3, 5, 15, 21, 53, 57, 71] In these cases there was an emphasis on the "grassroots effort" [15] around the school that was not about holding the system

accountable for taking action, but rather about doing it themselves through "many hours

of hard work, admirable goodwill, and indomitable perseverance." [21] The charter school

was framed as "free from many local controls." [3, 5] The community was encouraged to

"decide for themselves" [15] what makes a good school and "to be accountable and

responsible for its children." [1, 71] It is important to note that this represents a real shift in

the nature of school control. As one supporter suggested, the "main goal is to involve the

public in public education by offering a new way to get citizens more personally

involved." [15]

A final line of argument around public control from some supporters of the school

was that Patrick Henry presented the opportunity to introduce a model of market – rather

than democratic – accountability into the school system. [17, 18, 29, 59, 63, 70] In these cases, the

schools' leaders were the entrepreneurs, [17, 18] the school was a "startup," [59] and parent and

community voice was framed in the language of supply and demand. [29, 63]

Defining Public Schools Through the Strategic Use of Narrative Frames

The juxtaposition of these stories also highlights a significant difference in the use

of narrative frames. There is a clear tension that emerges between the school's critics,

who construct the idea of public school through a reliance on the historical narrative of

race and education in Richmond, and the supporters, who use a narrative framework of

American innovation and enterprise. One story is keenly focused on contextualizing

current policy on the lived historical experience of African Americans in Virginia, the

other builds on images of popular American archetypes that emphasize forward

movement and progress through market-tested technological innovation. In both cases the

overarching narratives are strategically and creatively stretched to accommodate the specific policy debate of the day.

The reliance on history was most obvious in the story put forth by the opponents of Patrick Henry. The battle was, in the beginning and in the end, an extension of the civil rights battle by African-Americans for equity and access in education. This story was filled with historical references to Brown versus Board of education, to Massive Resistance, to post-Brown "freedom to choose" policies, to "White flight" [50] and to all White "private academies." [41] Yet, the use of this narrative was in certain cases significantly stretched to accommodate the particular issues surrounding the school. For example, in an attack on charter legislation, State Senator Marsh, a former civil rights attorney, decried that "equal access to education" and "democratic local control of our schools" were "under attack." [42] While Marsh seems to associate "local control" with the hard fought achievements of the civil rights era (along with "equal access"), this framing is at odds with another version of local control that argues for the protection of states' rights and which was used in the post-Brown era to argue for Massive Resistance to federally mandated de-segregation in Virginia. It is also at odds with versions of local community control advocated by some African American communities to take control of schools from failing systems.

When history was used among supporters of the school, it was generally used, not to establish an overarching narrative, but rather in a very targeted and selective fashion to build particular aspects of the story. For example, when talking about the need for the school, supporters often employed language and imagery that evoked the Civil Rights era. Supporters asked for "freedom and justice" [15] for the "minority" students ("the poor

and Black") who were stuck in "schools that don't teach." [35] This use of race to evoke

historic injustice – while compelling – stands in sharp contrast to the conspicuously race-

less and class-less portrayal of the parents who led the charge for the school. References

to race and history were also used to counter the claims of opponents. In certain cases this

meant dismissing the "racial paranoia" [29] of the opponents and insisting that "history is

not repeating itself." [65] In other cases, references to race were used to emphasize the

color-blind nature of this policy. One prominent example of this was the frequent

references during the debate over Patrick Henry to president Obama's support for

charters. One supporter complained that "some local Black leaders aren't buying in…

despite the fact that Sen. Barack Obama, the country's first major-party Black nominee

for president, supports charter schools." [30]

   In contrast to the overarching narrative of historical injustice in education, the

central narrative frame of the school's supporters involved archetypal images of

American ingenuity and enterprise. Part of this involved framing the emergence of the

school not in relation to the past, but rather as "progress" [17] and an "opportunity to look

toward the future." [8, 30] One approach to this narrative was to rely on a metaphor of

scientific experimentation, where Patrick Henry was a "laboratory of ideas" [9, 30] and an

"Erlenmeyer flask of educational experimentation."[23] Within this metaphor, those who

opposed the school were "stifling innovation." [17] Along these lines, one supporter of the

school highlighted the struggle between the school's founders and the RPS central

administration stating, "Thomas Edison tried more than 6,000 materials for his light-bulb

filament before he found the right one. Imagine how much darker the world would be

today if an oversight committee had rejected the notion of an incandescent bulb without even giving it a chance." [17]

The other approach used by some supporters was to frame the school as an example of American free enterprise. The most dramatic example of this came in a supportive op-ed in the *Richmond Times Dispatch* that presented an extended metaphor comparing Patrick Henry to a tax-supported McDonalds restaurant. The revealing quality of this narrative makes it worth quoting at length:

> Say you live in a city where just about every restaurant is a McDonald's. Everybody pays taxes to support the McDonald's restaurant chain, and everybody can eat at McDonald's for free. You can go to one of the few private restaurants in town and pay extra for a different kind of meal - but you still have to pay taxes to support McDonald's. A few of the McDonald's in town are excellent. Some are lousy. Most are mediocre. Everybody agrees they ought to be better. But although the company has begun modest improvements, it hasn't figured out how to make the establishments substantially better across the board. One of the McDonald's shuts down. Time goes by, and a group of residents wants to re-open and run the joint themselves. The members think they can serve better burgers and fries at a lower cost. They've spent extraordinary amounts of time, money, and effort to make their case on paper. Now all they're asking is a chance to prove it. Should the McDonald's corporation let them? [18]

On the one hand this passage highlights the common sense logic of the market metaphor. It reinforces the ideas that standardization leads to mediocrity and that innovation and competition are the cure. Overall the story told here leaves us thinking 'yes, they should let them try!' However, the extended articulation of this metaphor also reveals how imposing a free-market metaphor onto a public system has severe limitations. There are no tax-supported fast food restaurants where everybody eats for free and improving public education is not a matter of serving "better burgers and fries at a lower cost."

While it seemed the narrative frames used around Patrick Henry were, in all cases, stretched to meet the evolving political contours of this emerging school, these stories nonetheless revealed contrasting ideas about the nature and direction of public schools.

Conclusion

Considering the scope of this study, the stories and the discussion presented in this chapter are useful in number of ways. I believe this analysis not only enriches our understanding of how the core elements of the general debate around charter policy and the nature of public education influence the local public discourse, but also how the dynamics of local context push back and shape the debate as well. Within this tension between the national and local, my particular interest is in how the ideas of public schools are constructed. There are several points, I will make in this regard.

The first is to consider how the stories presented about Patrick Henry relate to the idea that charter schools are a reinvention of public schools (Allen, Chavous, Engler, Whitmire, Williams, & Casey, 2009; Fuller, 1996; Hill, Pierce & Guthrie, 1997). On the one hand there were a number of elements within the stories that seemed to support the

idea of reinvention. There was a strong critique of the status quo, and a push for alternative constructions of the systems of education. However, this reinvention was fragmented in several ways. First, there were somewhat contradictory pushes between market and democratic constructions of public. In certain cases the parents were empowered consumers, in others they became active citizens. There were also somewhat contradictory impulses to both align with and create distance from the traditional public system. For example, the school was an opportunity for the disenfranchised student to escape the public system, while it was also a new option that pulled the middle class parent back to the system. Ultimately it seems that the story told by the supporters of Patrick Henry was not necessarily about redefining public schools in Richmond in a particular way, but rather about keeping the definition very flexible.

The second point is that while these stories played on lines from the national debates over charter schools, they became an opportunity to address deep differences in ideas about issues of equity, access and control in Richmond's system of public schools. Within the story of the opponents of the school, the opening of Patrick Henry is not just an attack on the system of public schools, but, more importantly an attack by Richmond's middle-class White population on a large segment of the city's Black community; an attack that is closely connected to a history of injustice within the city. What is striking in the juxtapositions of the narratives is how little the supporters of the school do to counter this claim. While there are mentions of race, and concerns expressed about equity and access, there are few engagements with the history of systemic racism in the city. Ultimately, the polarized quality of these narratives reflects a deep divide in understanding between communities in the city.

A final point is that as the stories around Patrick Henry began became closely tied to familiar narratives, both national and local, they seemed to become less and less useful for understanding the circumstance of Patrick Henry as a real school comprised of a real school community within the public school context of Richmond. In the next chapter I will present the analysis of the parent interviews I conducted. As you will see the ideas in these interviews will reflect the themes of the broader discourses around charter schools and public-ness, however, they will do so in a way that illustrate the complex dimensions of policy in action.

CHAPTER 5

This chapter presents a constructivist analysis of interviews with 16 parents about the process of choice that led them to enroll their children in Patrick Henry. The chapter addresses the research question: "How do parents construct the idea of public schools as they explain their choice of Patrick Henry Charter School? "

I will present the analysis in two ways. First, I will discuss a grounded theory I developed that organizes the high level themes from the analysis and represents the basic relationships between the themes (Figure 5.1). Second, I will present a case report I constructed from the categorized units of data that explores the core themes of the theory. The report focuses on the experiences of six composite characters through a series of 17 constructed interview vignettes. The characters do not correspond to individual research participants, but rather represent unique identity positions that relate to sets of ideas that emerged in the analysis. Each character includes ideas expressed by multiple participants. The differences between the identity positions of the six characters used in this report fall along lines of race and class, but also relate to differences in prior school experiences and political worldviews.

These characters and vignettes emerged as the center of this report, only after a full first draft of the analysis was written which laid out a highly structured presentation of data based on the themes presented in the theory. While the first draft was useful as an outline of the category structure of the study, its effectiveness as a case report was limited. When trying to address the issues of identity within the highly structured narrative, I found myself backing away from any claims about identity, because within the isolated categories there were so many counter-cases and contradictions. However,

backing away from the issue of identity was not appropriate. As you will see, issues of

identity are critical to understanding the meanings that emerge. Focusing on the vignettes

allowed me to show the ideas in complex relation to each other as well as to the various

identities of the characters. It is my sense, that this presentation is much truer to the raw

data than the more structured approach.

My hope is that the two approaches to presenting the analysis will complement

each other. While the theory pulls the ideas of the 16 participants together into an abstract

and overarching structure, the vignettes ground the analysis in the voices of the

participants and highlight the conflicts and contradictions both within and between the

identity positions.

I will begin the case report with a presentation of the grounded theory. I will then

briefly introduce the characters, giving some demographic and background information

that is relevant to their perspectives. Next, I will present the case report across five

sections, each of which addresses one component of the theory. Finally, I will conclude

the report with some lessons learned from this analysis.

Grounded Theory of Patrick Henry Parents' Ideas about Public Schools

Figure 5.1 presents a visual representation of the grounded theory that emerged

from the analysis of the parent interviews. It includes eight major themes: (1) *context of*

choice, (2) *qualities of curriculum*, (3) *qualities of community*, (4) *purposes of school*, (5)

dilemma of choice, (6) *attitude toward difference*, (7) *attitude toward control*, and (8)

attitude toward responsibility. I have used the first five themes to structure the case report

– with each represented in one section. The final three themes – difference, control and

responsibility – are important to understanding multiple components of the participants'

ideas and are woven throughout the case report. Below is a brief discussion of the theory

that elaborates the definitions of and relationships between the themes.

Figure 5.1. Patrick Henry Parents' Ideas about Public School
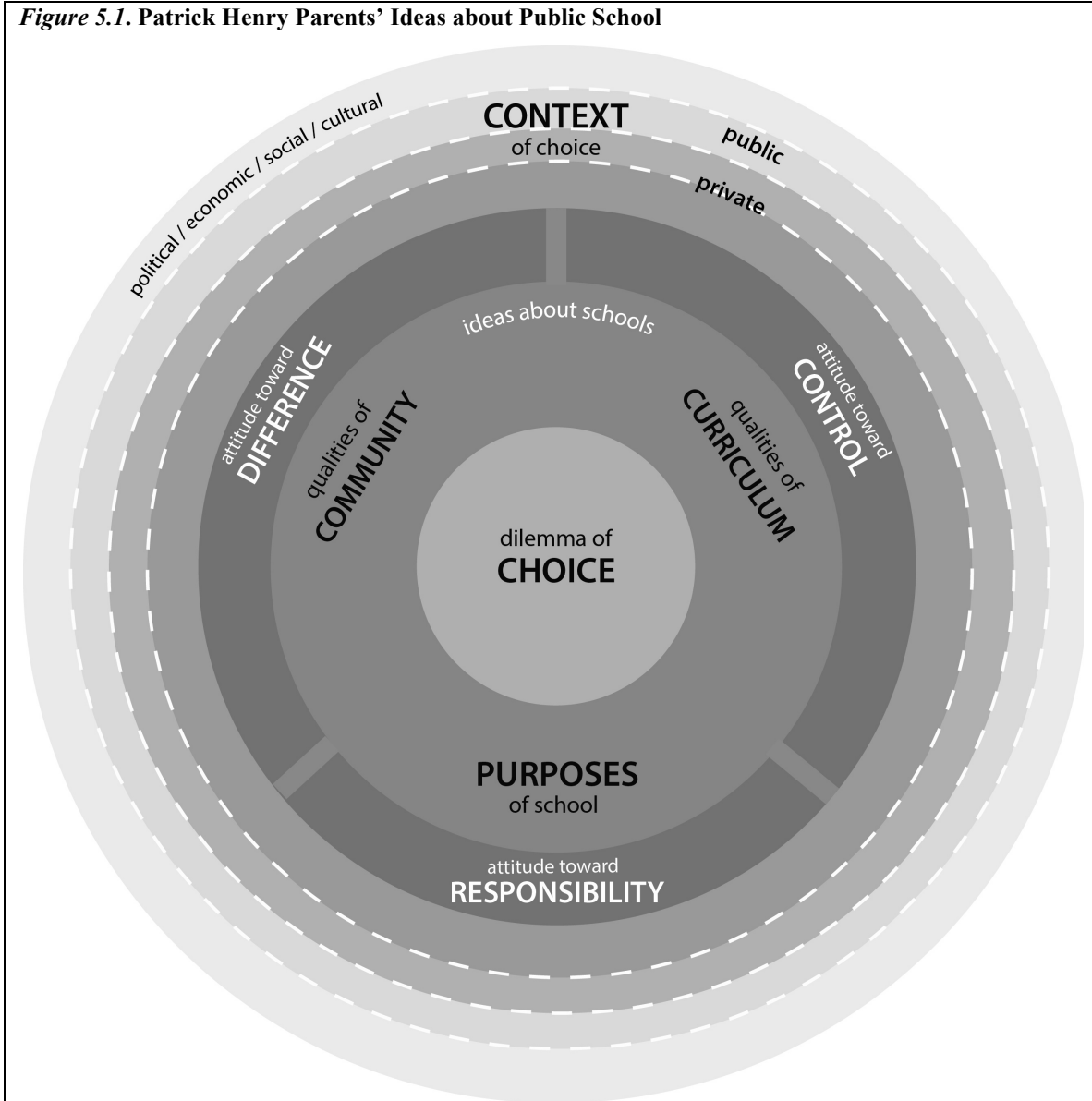
On the outer edge of the figure are several concentric circles separated by dotted

lines that represent the context of choice. This area includes the political, economic,

social, and cultural contexts that relate to parents' choice process. For example, a political

context may determine the policies that establish an array of school options, while the

socioeconomic context may determine the resources a parent may draw on when

choosing schools. The layers of the context represented by the dotted lines separating the

circles suggest that the context of the individual expands out to include a range of group

affiliations some of which we might consider part of the parents' private sphere (e.g.,

family), and some of which would be considered – to varying degrees – public (e.g.,

social network, neighborhood, city, nation). The dotted lines suggest that a parent's

individual context is related to, but not wholly determined by, the broader community

and or citywide contexts. The parent's context of choice establishes limits to the school

choice (i.e., what schools are available?) and influences the preferences that parents bring

to the choice process (i.e., what schools are viable?).

Embedded within the circles of context, are parents' ideas about schools. At the

very center of the framework this includes a circle that contains the theme dilemma of

choice. This theme relates to the parents' direct experience of choice as they weigh

factors and ultimately make a commitment to a school. Directly outside the dilemma of

choice are three interrelated themes that define parents' ideas about school. This includes

their thoughts about the qualities of curriculum, the qualities of school community and

the purposes of school. Parents' thoughts about the qualities of curriculum include ideas

about the content of curriculum as well as the methods of teaching and learning.

Thoughts about the qualities of school community include ideas about the differences

between strong and weak school communities. Not only were these two themes

(curriculum and community) interrelated in many ways, but they also both presented

criteria for evaluative judgments. That is to say, in both cases parents were presenting

ideas about what makes a good school – in terms of curriculum and community. Also

within the circle representing ideas about schools is a third theme, the purposes of school. Most parents saw schools as serving a range of purposes, but expressed different ideas about what they considered the most important roles of schools. These purposes expressed by parents included both those that were focused on the development and wellbeing of individuals as well as more public purposes that were about promoting the common good.

An important final element of the figure is a circle that surrounds the parents' ideas about schools. This circle contains three attitudes that are important for understanding the differences in parents' perspectives related to the choice process. The first theme within this circle is attitude toward control. This relates to parents' ideas about the need for order and control. It also connects to parents' attitudes toward risk. The second theme is attitude toward difference. This theme relates to how parents define and react to differences between individuals and groups. The third theme is attitudes toward responsibility. This connects to understandings of responsibility at the individual and collective levels. In the case report that follows, these three themes are not addressed in separate sections, but rather are woven through the story. However, the importance of these themes will be brought to light in the lessons learned section.

Preface to the Case Report

Below are brief introductions to the six characters:

Cheri is a married, lower middle-class Black woman in her late twenties who lives on the Eastside of Richmond. Cheri grew up in the same neighborhood where she now lives, and attended the public schools. Cheri works as a clerk in local grocery store. Cheri has a son, Tyquan who is in middle school and a daughter, Rashawna, who is currently in

fourth grade at Patrick Henry. Prior to Patrick Henry, Rashawna attended Brook

Elementary, her zoned Richmond Public School. Tyquan also attended Brook.

Holly is a married middle class White woman in her early thirties who lives in the

neighborhood near the school. Holly grew up in Richmond, however when she was

school age, her parents moved to a suburb of Richmond where she attended the public

schools. Holly works from home as an independent graphic designer. Her son, Jason,

started Patrick Henry as a Kindergartener and at the time of the interview was in first

grade. Holly also has a second child, a younger daughter, who is enrolled in a private pre-

school.

Tom is a married, middle class, White man in his late forties who lives on the

Northside of the city several miles from the school. Tom grew up in a midsize southern

city and graduated from that city's public school system during an era of busing. Tom

works as an architect. Tom has one son, Nick, who is currently in third grade at Patrick

Henry. Prior to attending Patrick Henry, Nick was homeschooled.

Brenda is a middle class White woman in her mid thirties who lives in the

neighborhood near Patrick Henry. Brenda grew up in a suburb of a large metropolitan

area where she attended independent private schools. Her father was a college professor.

Brenda has a female partner and one adopted daughter, Sandra, who in second grade at

Patrick Henry.

Devon is a married, middle class, Black man in his mid fifties who lives on the

Southside of the city. Devon grew up in the neighborhood where he now lives and

attended neighborhood public schools. Devon's mother was a social worker in the public

school system. Devon started a non-profit that establishes community job training

programs for youth. His programs are run out of Richmond Public High Schools. Devon

has a daughter Shanice, who is in first grade at Patrick Henry. Before attending Patrick

Henry, Shanice was in Kindergarten at Washington Elementary, her zoned school.

Nancy is a single, lower middle class, Black woman in her early thirties who lives

on the Eastside of the city. Nancy grew up in the same neighborhood where she now

lives, but attended the gifted program at Hillside, a well-respected city elementary school

on the city's West end. Nancy's father was an administrator in Richmond Public Schools.

Her son David is a Kindergartener at Patrick Henry. She also has an older daughter,

Maya, who is now in middle school that attended Bell Elementary, a popular open

enrollment school in the city.

Final notes before reading

Before proceeding, I want to make two final notes about reading the case report.

First, while my goal in writing has been to highlight the ideas and voices of the

participants in my study, my voice is also an important part of the narrative that follows.

In the vignettes I play the role of the interviewer ("J"), and I also provide the

introductions to and transitions between the vignettes that highlight relationships and

tensions between ideas and connect the ideas of the characters to the major themes of the

theory.

Second, it is important to consider when reading that the quality of this case

report should be assessed in relation to the concept of trustworthiness that is based on the

assumptions of the constructivist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Manning, 1997;

Rodwell, 1998). That is to say, rather than considering the validity or generalizability of

the story that follows, it should be assessed in relation to the ideas of credibility and

transferability. The narrative was written with the idea that thick descriptions of the experiences and ideas that emerged from interviews will evoke both intellectual as well as visceral emotional responses that will allow the reader to consider the extent to which the this story is useful in understanding similar issues in other contexts.

The story that follows in the case report will follow the order of the first five themes of the theory presented earlier. This will include sections focused on the context of choice, the qualities of curriculum, the qualities of community, the purposes of school, and finally the dilemma of choice. The three remaining themes from the theory – attitude toward difference, attitude toward control and attitude toward responsibility – will be woven through each of the sections and explored in more detail in the lessons learned section.

Case Report

Context of Choice

In the Richmond-area there is a wide range of public and private elementary school options. While every family has access to their zoned Richmond Public School, there is also the option to apply to "open enrollment" public schools, and, of course, to enter the lottery for Patrick Henry. Richmond is also adjacent to several counties with large, well-regarded, public systems. In addition to public schools there are a number of private school options including Catholic schools and independent private schools that offer a range of educational approaches. Within Richmond there is also a growing home-school community, that not only offers supportive networks but also several home school cooperatives. However, despite this broad range of school options, among the parents I spoke with it was clear that not all schools were available to all families, and of the

available schools not all were viable options. Both the availability and the viability of

school options related to a range of contextual factors that surrounded the families. For

example, consider the following interview vignette with Holly:

Vignette 1: You have to go to Bell (Holly)

J: What schools were you considering?

H: When you start researching schools, you hear things. You hear stories and things like

that. And everyone tells you in Richmond, 'You have to go to Bell. You have to go to Bell.

It's the only school to go to.' But that was not a neighborhood that we could afford at this

point. And so we would be talking about another pretty major commute and that puts in a

lot of obstacles when we have a child that's in pre-school somewhere totally different.

But then one day, I was doing a search for schools with environmental curriculum, and I

saw a website about the garden program at Warner and was blown away. Then I went to

the open house, and was just so impressed. We met one of the Kindergarten teachers and

I absolutely loved her. You know, she had lots of play stations set up in her Kindergarten

room and talked about what she had heard on NPR. It was so different than what we

expected. But that's on the other side of town so we started thinking about moving to that

neighborhood. It's like when you start thinking about schools, you are constantly thinking

about moving.

J: What was your zoned school at the time?

H: Brook. I think it was Brook.

J: And was that under consideration?

H: I hadn't heard good things. A woman I know through work said, 'oh, you can't send

your kid there.' And my only experience with Brook was that I had gone to a Caribbean

dance performance held at the public library near Brook and a class from the school

came, and there were some kids who were completely out of control. And it wasn't all the

kids. But there were enough really out of control kids that the other kids were sitting

there really dejected. The teachers didn't notice and I just felt like, big sea little fish for

my son who is quiet and all that.

Like most of the parents I interviewed, Holly's sources of knowledge about school

choices seemed related to her socioeconomic context. The time she committed to her

school research was likely due to her flexible work schedule. However, more

importantly, the social networks she tapped into, gave her a broad range of school

information that allowed her to understand the options available, as well as develop

perceptions of the viability of the various options. One obstacle for Holly was her

socioeconomic context; that is, the financial restraints that limited her family's ability to

move to another school zone in the city. A final point to be made about this vignette

relates to her somewhat conflicted attitude toward difference. While, on the one hand, she

was excited that Warner elementary was so different than she expected, she appreciated

the fact that, like her, the teacher at Warner listened to NPR. It seemed to me that Warner

was different than she expected in that it was a familiar social setting.

The following vignette with Cheri, a lower middle class Black mother, shows how

differences in socioeconomic factors change the landscape of school choice.

Vignette 2: I didn't see anything wrong with public schools (Cheri)

J: When did you first hear about Patrick Henry?

C: Well, I didn't really know about it. I really didn't do any research. Rashawna was at

Washington. Her older brother went there, all her friends go there. That's where we live

and that was fine. She was comfortable there. I actually found out about Patrick Henry last minute. Because the teacher that she had at Washington was like, 'You need to get her out of here. It's not challenging enough.' And she told me that. But I really didn't have any problem with the public school. But she was my daughter's teacher so she was like, 'get on out of here.' So I decided to look into it and it was different. The teachers when they introduced themselves seemed like they were really into the kids and into them learning. The environment seemed very warm and welcoming. And I like that it was more like a family-oriented environment. And I thought that was good. So I said, okay, I think that will be nice. But I really didn't see anything wrong with public school. I was a product of public school. I got a job and learned responsibilities and life skills. So I really didn't see anything wrong.

J: Do you think some people see something wrong with the public schools?

C: Yeah, I do.

J: And what do you think that's about?

C: I guess it is all about their preference. I really don't hear too many people that grew up in public schools that have any problem with them.

Unlike Holly, Cheri admits that she hadn't really put thought into the school choice process until the teacher at Washington suggested Patrick Henry as a better place for Rashawna. Prior to her awareness of – or interest in – other options, it appears that Cheri's primary impression of Washington came from her neighborhood context and the personal connections to the community that surrounded the school. Also important was her self-identification as a product of public schools. This seemed to serve as both a justification for her choice, but also, to some extent, a defense against those from other

contexts – like Holly perhaps – that found "something wrong" with the zoned public schools in the city. Unlike Holly, it seemed that Cheri had less interest in putting forward positive and negative assessments of schools. Although Cheri did pull her daughter from Washington based on the teacher's comments, she concluded by saying that nothing was wrong with the public school. It was also interesting to me that once the teacher presented the idea that there were better options, Cheri engaged in a choice process that was very similar to Holly's. She attended an open house, got an impression of the school, and began to think that maybe this "different" type of school was good.

In the sections that follow I will explore how parents assessed the qualities and the purposes of schools. These ideas are the foundation not only for identifying what makes one school different than another, but also what makes it a better option from the perspective of the parent.

The Qualities of Curriculum

When talking to parents about the process of school choice, a common idea was that they really wanted something "different" in terms of curriculum. When I explored this topic I found that there was a relatively consistent vision of what this meant. It included ideas about how parents wanted content to be structured, the types of learning strategies they thought worked best, and the roles of teachers in the process. The parents made their points about the preferred model of curriculum both through direct descriptions of how it should look, but also through contrast with their ideas about the standard public system. For example, consider the interview vignette with Tom, who has a son, Nick in the third grade:

Vignette 3: Learn this, learn this, learn this (Tom)

J: What do you see as the problem with our public education system?

T: I would say standardized testing is the first one in the foreground. I remember when I was in school there was still sort of an emphasis on being able to come up with your own stuff. Think about things. You know, generate your own ideas and question what is there. Because the teachers had the leeway. They could provide a structure and let the student have a lot of leeway within that structure. Like at Patrick Henry right now the structure is so narrow and there is this frantic pace. It's all about the test. Nick is basically taught to the test. That's just the goal right now. Everything is about sitting down and doing a worksheet with SOL 3 point something on it. It's just 'learn this, learn this, learn this.' Be able to regurgitate it. And then they send homework that is the exact same thing that they went over in class. And we give everybody everything, but just a little bit of it, so nobody actually knows enough to do anything. They don't actually understand what it is they are doing. I mean I went on the field trip last year at the beginning of second grade where we went to the park. I saw one teacher quizzing the Kindergarteners on the different parts of the flower. And one kid said 'petals,' and someone said 'flower,' and someone said 'leaves' or something. And so she said 'That's right.' And then another teacher said, 'No, no, no, you are going to mess them up for the SOLs. It's petals, stem, and leaves. You can't teach them the wrong thing.' And that struck me. We are here in the park and she's worried about the SOLs, which her students aren't even going to take this year. You know? It's another three years out at that point. It's like no, go by the book. No matter that the kids are suffering. No matter that the kids are bored. Doesn't matter that it's not helping any, you just have to do this. So I would say that's probably the main place we

have gone wrong. And I think, from what I have been exposed to in the media and things

like that, these problems are sort of rampant throughout all public education. Not just in

Richmond. Not just in Virginia. Like in many many states.

I found that Tom's critique of the broad public system of education was common among

many of the parents interviewed. He employs images of a teacher-centered class where

students sit down and complete worksheets while memorizing and "regurgitating"

information. Tom, like most parents, associates this rote model of learning closely with

ideas about the state standards (SOLs) and the standardized testing movement. Embedded

within his critique are also ideas of how a "different" curriculum should look. Tom

evokes a time before the testing movement ("when I was in school") when the emphasis

was on inquiry-based types of learning, "generating ideas" and asking questions. His

ideas also seem to present an alternative vision of the role of the teacher. In the typical

public classroom, Tom depicts the teachers as rigidly following the mandates of the

standard curriculum regardless of their impact on student learning. While in his preferred

model, teachers had "the leeway" to take the structure of the curriculum and make

decisions about the directions of teaching and learning.

In the vignette below, Holly, whose son Jason is in the first grade, builds on ideas

about the preferred curriculum.

Vignette 4: That's his thing (Holly)

J: And so what were you expecting with Patrick Henry?

H: Well, what sold us about the school was the thought that there would be a non-

traditional method of learning. A different curriculum. More freedom. I can remember

when I was kid doing a science workshop about the water cycle and thinking, why am I

not learning about this in a creek instead of on a worksheet? I mean, I can see a few

minutes a day on technical stuff, but then you need to follow up with practical hands-on

creative projects. So more focus on the hands-on piece, and then, you know, if you are

really good at something, you can focus on that and explore it. I like the idea that the

curriculum is open to pretty much everything and anything, but also shows the

connections between the subjects. There are not just these little parts of the brain that

learn math or English. You know what I mean? I feel like it kind of works together. And

you know that is kind of a Montessori thing too, where every child is working at their own

pace but they are not made aware of it. If a child is accelerating, that child can just go

ahead as fast and as far as they want to go. They don't have to be held back. And with

Patrick Henry the fact that it was positioned close to the park was important. The charter

specifically mentioned that they would use the park as an extension of their classroom.

You know the outdoor curriculum. That did it for me, 'cause that has always been Jason.

That's his thing being outside. Above all other things, he just wants to play outside with

his friends. He loves to swim. He loves to garden. Do all that stuff. He has got to go

somewhere where they are outside more that 40 minutes a day. He needs to blow off

steam. Being outside and being physical and healthy is just as important as sitting at a

desk and learning. In fact, if you are not getting any exercise your brain is not working

right anyway.

It seemed to me that Holly's hopes for Patrick Henry's curriculum provided a

perfect counterpoint to Tom's critique of how the Patrick Henry curriculum had actually

been enacted. Rather than having a narrow and isolated curriculum, Holly seemed to

believe that learning would be better if the curriculum was broad, if connections were

made between the subjects, and if learning was active and experiential rather than rote. Holly's vision also seemed to support the idea that curriculum should be differentiated and personalized to the needs of the individual student. Here, instead of making the point through contrast with the public system, she made it through comparison with the private Montessori model. In part, this involved having a curriculum that allowed students to focus on their individual strengths and was paced appropriately for their learning needs. However, for Holly, the idea of a personalized school also meant finding a real match for her son, Jason. In the vignette, her thoughts on Patrick Henry's proposed curriculum seemed to be very much focused on what Jason liked to do.

The theme of a personalized curriculum is explored from a different perspective by Brenda, whose daughter Sandra is in the second grade.

Vignette 5: Kids who don't fit in with the standard (Brenda)

J: Earlier you discussed the idea of having a curriculum that accommodated difference. I'm trying to understand exactly what you mean by that.

B: I'm talking sort of like in a dream world I guess. I think a specific example is where I see kids at an early age right now already being sort of segmented, by whether they are good readers, or whether they are good at math, or good at sitting still, or whatever it is. But I can see from the outside kids who are brilliant, brilliant kids who don't fit in with the standard of sitting in your chair all day for six hours and doing worksheets and taking tests. I know these tests are supposed to be a very scientific or quantitative measurement of what kids have learned, but memorizing facts doesn't necessarily mean that students have mastered the material. And it's just their strengths are not being harnessed. I know that since we are a public school, receiving public money we can't

avoid it. We have to be held accountable. But the concern for me of having a child in a situation like that is they start building these same judgments about themselves. They are in an environment where this is okay and this is not okay, they are being put in this box or that box. It's less of how do we pull out this strength. I say all this and then I think, well, there's got to be some structure and standards in a classroom. And I think there is also a time and a place for learning how to push through the boredom. Like Sandra gets bored really easily or, at least, she perceives herself as being bored really easily. So just like the idea that she can do something on her own without being bored is something that I think is important too. You don't get to just teach willy nilly. And so, I guess I would like to see a nice mix of that.

Like Tom, Brenda articulates a strong critique of standardization and testing. In certain respects, Brenda's point about 'harnessing strengths' sound similar to Holly's ideas about the personalization of curriculum. However, I felt that Brenda's focus was different. For Holly, it seemed that the primary concern was on allowing each individual child to accelerate at their own pace. For Brenda, it seems to be about how the system applies labels to students that limit the students' ideas about what they can achieve. The juxtaposition of Brenda and Holly's ideas about personalization of curriculum highlight a possible tension: personalizing curriculum and harnessing the strengths of the individual may be good until the point where it becomes a systematic means of sorting and labeling students. Another important idea that distinguishes Brenda's perspective is her recognition that school cannot be tailored to the specific needs of her daughter, Sandra. In this Brenda seems to occupy a slightly different perspective than Holly and Tom.

In the final vignette on curriculum, Cheri, whose daughter Rashawna is in the fourth grade, also presents ideas that both challenge and support the push for an alternative curriculum.

Vignette 6: What are you doing in class? (Cheri)

J: What are your thoughts about Patrick Henry's curriculum?

C: Well, in the beginning I was kind of worried, because I was wondering how they were going to incorporate having that hands-on experience along with the normal academics. I was a little skeptical about it. And then, not physically having something to put my hands on as far as the curriculum, and being able to sit down and look through it, I think that was a little off setting. Are you really getting what you are supposed to be getting? I'm not sure. I don't have it. I can't read it. Everyday Rashawna is telling me, 'We walked to the park. We walked down the street.' So I'm like, 'What are you all doing in the classroom? Doing any Math? Are you reading?' You know? I was wondering how they were going to incorporate it all together for them to pass the SOLs. My main concern was really, when they get ready to transfer into middle school, are they going to be up to par? I didn't want somebody to say, 'Oh this kid should be held back' for whatever reason. So, that was one of my concerns at first. But, that I think was a little bit eased in dealing with the teachers. They kind of filled that gap. They were able to say, 'Well this is what is going on, let me give you some input.' Even though I didn't have the curriculum in hand, being able to go to them and having that open communication, I think that that kind of filled that gap. And now when my daughter comes home, and we could be riding, and she'll see a water drop on the car and start talking about it and she

can give you a full conversation on condensation and, you know, life cycle and

everything. So that's when I realize, I was like, okay, you are fine.

J: Right, it's a very different curriculum. You went to school, and I went to school, before

the SOLs were around. Do you have opinions about the SOLs?

C: Everybody don't test well. You have some people that work well under pressure and

you have some people that don't. Thank goodness my older son can test pretty well, but I

don't know how Rashawna is going to do. So, I really don't think they should use that to

base on what a child has really learned. Every child is different. You got to sit down one

on one with the child and not expect everyone to learn in the same way. I think you can

get more from a child as to what they have learned by talking to them, you know, versus

writing it down. Just sit down and talk to the kids, take time out somewhere during that

week that they use for SOLs. You can just sit and talk with the kids and basically a little

small talk, a general conversation on the child's level, and see what they know. Because

some of them can tell you some things, you know?

Unlike the other parents, Cheri presents – at least at first – a critique of the

alternative curriculum. Her primary concern is that the students might not be prepared "to

pass the SOLs." However, this initial skepticism shifts when she listens to Rashawna

demonstrate her learning by giving a "full conversation on condensation." In addition,

similar to Holly and Brenda, Cheri seems to support personalized learning suggesting that

teachers really need to have that "one on one" time with the students. Cheri's ideas on

curriculum reveal interesting tensions related to the purpose and structure of

accountability in the system. On the one hand it appeared that she wanted a certain level

of accountability to parents. She wanted to be able to "hold on" to and review the

curriculum. However, she also suggests that maybe just talking to the teachers was enough. In a similar way, while she recognizes the value of the SOLs as an important system-accountability measure that ensures that students are "up to par," she also advocates for less formal models of assessment that are based on "talking with the kids."

Across the four vignettes on curriculum there were many common ideas about the content and structure of teaching and learning. In general, parents wanted curriculum that emphasized hands-on learning and critical thinking. They wanted the content to be integrated, not isolated. They wanted teachers to be facilitators, not lecturers. And yet I found that despite the apparent consistency in the vision of curriculum put forward, there were differences and tensions both between and within parents' perspectives.

Parents' thoughts about the qualities of school not only addressed issues of curriculum but also, as is evident from the vignettes above, ideas about school community. As will be seen in the next section, ideas about community and curriculum overlapped in many ways.

The Qualities of School Community

Ideas about school community covered several levels. For example, among the parents in this study, there were discussions that concerned classroom community, others that focused on the professional community of schools (i.e., teachers, staff and administration), and still others that incorporated parents into the idea of a broad school community. In addition there were discussions of how non-school communities (e.g., neighborhood communities, the business community) interacted with the school. As with parents' ideas about curriculum, there was a relatively consistent picture painted across the parents interviewed of the core qualities of a successful school community. Much of

this is evident in the vignette below, where Nancy, a single Black mother, discusses her impressions of Bell Elementary, a popular Richmond open enrollment school that her middle school-age daughter, Maya, attended. Nancy also has a son David, who is a Kindergartener at Patrick Henry.

Vignette 7: The heart it used to have (Nancy)

J: What was your impression of Bell when Maya went there?

N: I'll tell you one thing about Bell. I felt very supported. I had really good connections there. It was a very positive experience. I met a lot of great people. I've made life-long friends there. The principal that we had at the time was fantastic. She was so passionate about her job and she totally supported me. She worked with me. Most of the teachers were great. They loved what they were doing and seemed to be in it for the right reasons, not just to get a paycheck. And it helped that the principal really supported the teachers so that teachers felt confident in their work. I also felt that the teachers communicated well with me. I mean we had a couple that just really understood Maya and loved her and encouraged her. They would listen to her and find out what was going on in her life, and what she thought and cared about. They were okay with her free spirited way of learning and just offered so much support and guidance. And Maya was just really engaged. She loved going to school.

J: Did you think about sending David to Bell?

N: Not really. At that point I became interested in Patrick Henry. And from what I heard Bell doesn't have the heart it used to have, which made it what it was. It used to have the highest rate of parental involvement in the city. And that was one of the things about Bell that made it so great and community-oriented, was that everybody was there afterschool.

It was like a village school that just happened to be in a larger city. And unless you had somewhere you had to be, I mean everybody was on the playground until the sun went down. Everyone. You did your homework on the playground. You got to talk with parents and find out what was going on. It was sort of like the communication tree. It was right there. Everything you needed to know you found out on the playground.

J: What changed with Bell?

N: With rezoning, it just started getting a lot more mixed, you know. I'm not saying they didn't have behavioral issues before, they did. But you were pulled if you had a behavioral issue there. Out. They are going to deal with you. But you put seven of them in a class coming from, you know, a rough background, and you don't have that option anymore. What do you do when you have seven of those kids in your classroom? I remember talking to a friend of mine that volunteered in the lunchroom at Bell. She said the teachers were just yelling at the kids. It was just crowd control. Nobody was listening. Nobody was in their seat. I remember she said, 'It's just chaos all the time. It's just chaos. It is just so much noise.'

It was interesting to me that when asked to give an impression of Bell, Nancy focuses first and foremost on personal perceptions of the school community rather than issues of teaching and learning. For Nancy it seems that in the school choice process ideas about the qualities of school community were possibly just as important as ideas about the qualities of curriculum. Overall, it is clear that Nancy had a very positive impression of Bell's community when she was a parent there. It was a school community that was characterized by supportive and caring relationships and exhibited strong communication across many levels. Nancy's description of the Bell community also

focused on the characteristics of the individuals. The students, parents, teachers and administrators at the school were described as involved, engaged and committed to each other and to the broader mission of the school. When Nancy laments the thought that Bell "doesn't have the heart it used to have," she discusses how the community changed due to rezoning which led to behavior problems and loss of control. Before the rezoning she suggests that Bell had policies in place that allowed the school to move students out that didn't conform to certain expectations. The forced introduction of socioeconomic diversity may have been perceived as a threat to the school's cohesive community.

In the next vignette, Holly presents a mostly negative assessment of Patrick Henry's community that contrasts sharply with Nancy's experiences of Bell.

Vignette 8: I am seeing surviving right now (Holly)

J: How do you think it has gone? What would be your assessment of Patrick Henry at this point?

H: Honestly I have been very discouraged. I feel like we have lost the investment of the parents. I know that's typical. You have always got those few people who are going to work hard, and kind of pay attention and do stuff in any organization, but I think that's one thing that the school really needs to revisit, this idea of parental involvement. We have a waiting list of over one hundred people. If parents aren't stepping up to the plate, then what? We have a volunteer requirement and that is a way of potentially forcing parents to invest more in their own children's education. Not just in the school. It's really about your own kid, you know?

J: Do you see any bright spots right now?

H: Well, I like that the classes are small. You know, I worry about those public schools where they have 20 or 30 kids in a class. It is really a lot for the teachers to handle. You are going to lose kids. I feel like with smaller classes, a teacher has more time to work with kids and get to know them. Like Jason this year just had a great teacher that has had deep impact on him. She has really given him a chance to kind of step into himself in a great way this year. But when I walk in the school, I only see a few classes that seem like mini communities and are thriving. The others I see are just a mess from the outside looking in. And among the teachers there is this beat down feeling. I can see it on their faces. They look run over. I don't see the support from the leadership for the teachers to do what they want to do or what they need to do. And I don't think it is any one person's fault. You know what I mean. But with the teachers I am seeing surviving right now. And that worries me. There seems to be this surrender. And I think that is trickling down to the kids. I can see that some of them have just shut down and checked out. Honestly, I have also been discouraged by the race stuff with the parents. I just have been really shocked at how, you know I can't pin point it, just how people are so paranoid and suspicious I mean I think it's completely and utterly justified in the big picture of things. But I just feel like there is so much anger and hurt and unfairness.

J: What do you think that is about?

H: I think it's about Richmond. When you look at the census data and the actual census map that shows all the White people here and Black people there. But I felt like as soon as the race part got brought into the school discussions, it lumped together all people of one color versus people of another color regardless of what their actual situation was. I don't know, maybe it's like voting along party lines.

The two vignettes above suggest several key ideas about parents' conceptions of school community. First, in the descriptions of Nancy and Holly, we begin to get some sense of the differences between what might be considered successful and unsuccessful school communities. With Nancy's vision of Bell as one standard, we might consider a successful school community as cohesive and characterized by supportive and caring relationships and involved and committed individuals. Using this definition, unsuccessful communities would be those – like Holly's assessment of Patrick Henry – that are fractured and conflict-ridden and where the members of the community are disengaged. A second key idea raised by these vignettes is that diversity in school community may be a challenge. Holly's description of Patrick Henry's beaten down community is understood to some extent through her honest assessment of the racial divisions within the community. While she recognizes the legitimacy of the suspicions of the Black community, she is also frustrated that the "race stuff" has to be part of the discussion. It appears her concern is that the focus on race tends to fracture and divide communities "along party lines" rather than bring them together. Finally, these vignettes suggest the idea that one means of constructing a strong community is through forms of exclusion. While Nancy seems to suggest the idea that Bell was successful because it could move students out, Holly discusses the idea of exclusion through enforcement of the school's parental volunteer requirement.

In the next vignette, Brenda gives a different perspective on Patrick Henry that presents an alternative understanding of what makes a successful school community.

Vignette 9: Room for people to really participate (Brenda)

J: What do you see as the strengths of Patrick Henry right now?

B: The diversity is great and that was important to us. I think there is always more room for how it can be embraced and really used as like a teaching mechanism. But first you have to get teachers that really get it; teachers that come with some cultural competence. I mean you can have a person who has been teaching for many years, but if this teacher has grown up in a certain neighborhood all her life and has only been exposed to certain elements but never has really lived or experienced the culture where the children come from, that's a problem. And then you also have a group of parents who felt that just because they look good on paper, that they are good. The scary thing I see and hear are people saying, 'I want diversity, I love diversity' but they don't really understand. I was talking about diversity and this one parent said to me, 'Yes, diversity is really important. It is so important that 'those kids' are exposed to something else, so that they can decide what they want to be like.' That was one of the scariest comments that I have heard in my adult lifetime. It is just a reminder to me of what we might be dealing with in teachers and other parents in the school. And so I don't care what your background is, and what kind of cool things you have done. I say if you don't understand that, you are not in the right school.

J: Besides the diversity of the school are there any other bright spots?

B: Well, really, I have grown to love the idea of the school. I remember when I first heard about Patrick Henry. You know, I saw people saying, 'I want to work. I want to devote my time and energy to create something to help. You know, not just me and my kid, but to help our town.' And originally I was somewhat suspicious of their intentions. But as I saw the community grow, I wanted to be a part of that. And I know we are really struggling and I think we are feeling the toll of everything, all the opposition from the city

that has been put in front of us. But, at the same time, it is amazing that the school

succeeded with the city trying to shut it down at every turn, you know? And then I think

that some of the chaos around the school, I actually put that in the positive column. I

think sometimes it was over the edge a little bit. But I think what it did was that it allowed

more room for people to really participate and to get invested in the school. It's almost

like we thrive on living on the edge of this thing falling apart. And so like watching that

desire and the people really care, that keeps me going. To see people still rallying, and

claiming it and wanting it. And it wasn't necessarily planned, but when I step back and

think about it, that's one of the reasons that I am really into the idea of Patrick Henry, is

that it's not prescribed. It's not like a typical school where you drop your kid off. Like

there is something to be said for the messiness of it. It teaches our children something.

So, I'm really proud of that about Patrick Henry.

I heard a number of interesting connections – both resonances and tensions –

between Brenda's ideas of school community and those of Nancy and Holly. The first

relates to the issue of diversity. On the one hand, Brenda, unlike Nancy and Holly, seems

to see diversity as an essential quality, rather than a potential threat, to a strong school

community. In fact, this belief is so strong that, like Nancy and Holly, Brenda seems to

suggest forms of exclusion – if you can't embrace diversity you are in the wrong school.

Another important connection between the three vignettes relates to the idea of

involvement. Like Nancy and Holly, Brenda puts a strong emphasis on the importance of

the commitment and the involvement of the community members and the strength of

their relationships as they work together to keep the school open. However, what is

important about Brenda's perspective on the school community of Patrick Henry is that

it's "not like a typical school." For Brenda, the strength of the Patrick Henry community

did not seem to come from the structure and control of the environment, but rather,

somewhat ironically, from the conflict and chaos (the fear of "this thing falling apart")

that resulted from its struggle to survive. A final point about Brenda's vignette is that it

appears to encourage overlap between ideas about the qualities of curriculum and the

qualities of community. That is to say, for Brenda, both the diversity and the agency of

the school community, become dimensions of curriculum ("it teaches our children

something").

A final perspective on school community comes from Devon, a Black man in his

early fifties, whose daughter Shanice is in first grade in Patrick Henry. In the beginning

of this vignette Devon discusses work he has done through his job training non-profit that

works within Richmond Public High Schools.

Vignette 10: Let's get the parents together too (Devon)

J: Many of the parents I spoke with have discussed the importance of parental

involvement for schools. What are your thoughts about parental involvement at Patrick

Henry?

D: I know they say parent involvement is everything, but with the way the economy is

sometimes parents have to work longer hours than they used to have to work. So the

amount of time that a parent has to work with their child at home is somewhat limited.

I mean I had a lot of experience of working with the parents. One of the things, being that

I work in schools, I see these kids from high risk neighborhood, about 98% of the kids are

on the free lunch program. And some of these kids are being raised by their grandparents

or aunts or relative or somebody because a lot of kids parents were either incarcerated

or had experienced incarceration or had some type of issues with substance abuse or things like that. So involvement is hard. So I think the ideal school would be one that has resources and has teachers that think outside the box, and know how to work with that community. Like at my center we take referrals from teachers and principals for kids who seem like they were somewhat troubled. We go on and visit their parents or their grandparents and explain to them that we want to mentor and work with the kids. We've done things to develop the parents' skills too. Because you know in most of these classrooms the kids are using computers, but a lot of parents who didn't grow up with computers, how can they help their child, if they don't know how to use it themselves.

J: Do you think Patrick Henry is doing a good job reaching out to parents?

D: I don't know. It doesn't seem to be working. If they want to bring the school together, they need to do something. And I'm not talking about going to the board meeting and complaining about the curriculum or complaining about what the school system is not doing for the kids. I am talking about bringing the parents together to ask them, how do you feel as a parent? We are getting the kids together. Let's get the parents together too. How do you feel, you know? Like you and I. I mean I see you all the time and I never knew you were working on your Ph.D. You see me all the time, and you never knew I was working in the schools. This is the first time you and I have really had a conversation. If you want a school to be successful, something needs to be done to bring the parents together. So you can learn from each other. If everybody learned from each other I think everything would be a whole lot different. Then that way I don't have a false perception of you based on seeing you in a meeting and you complaining, and I'm like 'Oh that's one of those parents that's always complaining about the school, and this and that.' Instead

maybe we should take the time to say, how can we make the school better. Because it's

like the questions you're asking, the school should have been doing that a long time ago.

Devon's ideas about school community seemed different than the parents from the other

vignettes in several ways. One example is his framing of parental involvement. While he

recognizes the importance of parental involvement, his construction of it seems to shift

some of the responsibility for developing the engaged community off of the parents and

on to the school. It also changes the nature of the involvement. His idea is that the school

might become an integral part of the social support network within the broader

community. Another unique quality of Devon's perspective was his assessment of what it

took to bring communities together. Unlike Brenda, who saw the political rallying of the

school against the city as a unifying experience that helped build community, Devon

seems to associate it with a particular group within the community ("one of those

parents"). To solve the problem of community divisions, Devon suggests "bringing

parents together" to talk and learn from each other. As with his thoughts on parental

involvement, he puts the responsibility for this work on the school.

At a general level, across these vignettes, there seemed to be a relatively common

set of ideas as to what made a good school community – e.g., trust, care, communication,

involvement. However there also seemed to be significant tensions between ideas. In the

next section, I will present four vignettes that explore parents' ideas about the purposes of

school. The ideas in these vignettes will connect closely to parents' perspectives on the

qualities of curriculum and community, as well as build on the themes of control,

difference and responsibility.

Ideas about Schools: The Purposes of Schools

Through the interviews I found that parents' ideas about the qualities of curriculum and of school community naturally flowed into thoughts about the purposes of school. When I explored the topic by asking directly about the purposes of schools, parents shared their thoughts not just about what schools are doing, but also their opinions about what schools *should* and *should not* be doing. While all parents recognized that schools – especially public schools – were playing multiple roles, there were meaningful differences between what parents perceived as the most important roles of school. The vignettes in this section will explore ideas that emerged in the interviews related to both the range and the priority of purposes.

In the vignette below Cheri gives her perspective on the question of purposes.

Vignette 11: I think it depends on the person (Cheri)

J: What do you see as the purposes of school?

C: I think the purpose is first of all to be a place where children can come to learn and get the basic foundation of what they need to survive in the world. I mean I think it is important for people to be prepared for something in life, to see that they have some things to offer, something to contribute. Because some people say, 'Oh well I want my child to go to college.' But you got to come to the reality that not every child is going to go to college and not every child wants to go to college. You know a kid might be good in math, might be good in science and say, 'I like fooling with electricity.' So, how can you tell that child, 'I don't want you to be an electrician, I want you to be a doctor'?

J: Some parents have discussed the idea that one purpose of public school is to help people from different backgrounds learn how to get along and work together. What is

your thought on that idea?

C: I am not saying that's not important, but, like I said, the main thing of a school is to learn. We should be promoting, 'okay I want to learn about this so I can see where it is gonna go for me.' You want to give them something to shoot for. See what I am saying? I think if you are really passionate about the diversity and stuff, you will find avenues to involve your children in activities where they will be exposed to that. You know, I've seen schools that are not diverse at all; that are basically one race or another. But I know parents that take their children outside of those communities and get them involved in other stuff where they can get, you know, the diversity and stuff that we don't get in the school.

J: So if you see the main purpose of school as making sure the students learn, do you think our public schools are doing a good job?

C: Well I would say yes. But I would say it all depends on the person to use that though. A teacher might teach a student something, but that don't mean that they are going to take what they learned and use that. See what I am saying? So I think it depends on the person to use what they gain. It's all in the child. And if the parents would instill in the kids what you are supposed to be doing: 'You are going to school to learn. You are not going to school to fight. You are not going to school to beat up anybody. This is what you are supposed to be going to school to do.' And I think as long as that child knows what they are supposed to be doing and goes to school to do that, public schools will be doing fine.

J: So if a student doesn't do well. If they don't learn in that setting, and if they come out of school unable to find a job, who is responsible?

C: Yeah. I would say the individual. I would say it is the individual. I know that now the

economy is tough, but are they really going out there and doing everything they can to

find a job? And if they can't find a job are they trying to go back to school, or do

something to try and move forward?

The core theme that runs through Cheri's ideas on the purposes of school is the

importance of individual responsibility. From her perspective schools provide the

opportunity for "learning" and "preparation," however the responsibility for taking

advantage of that opportunity rests with the student. I also found it interesting the way

she framed the role of the parent. They were the ones responsible for filling out the

child's education – for, example by creating opportunities for diversity – as well as for

instilling certain values and behavior expectations. Overall, it seems that Cheri's embrace

of the idea of personal responsibility has led her to envision a very limited set of purposes

for school. In the next vignette Brenda presents a broader vision of the purposes that

schools can and should fulfill.

Vignette 12: So much more than a charter school (Brenda)

J: I'm interested in the purposes of schools? Like, if schools were working well, what

would be happening?

B: When I think of Sandra, I would want for school to help her to have gained

confidence; confidence in herself and her ability to advocate for herself. But also to work

with and interact with different people. I want her to take care of people around her and

be a very empathetic and nurturing person in general. I'd like her to care about the

community and just care about things going on around her other than herself. And then

there are some people who say, 'get the education first, get the education first, get the

education first,' you can learn all this other stuff later in life. I have this discussion with Black families I know. And so everything is about the education. But I'm more about the self-esteem early on in life, and understanding yourself and your place in the community, because I think that's where you learn to have compassion for other people. And I think that helps nurture sort of participation civically. Of course this seems like a stretch these days because we are pretty far from this right now, but what public education can do is that it allows the society to encourage kids that there is like this social contract. And that they are going to school and that, in theory, is a really good and positive experience and that part of the deal is that they work not just for their own benefit, but for the greater good. And I think that's something that can be done in public education.

J: So you really see schools serving a broad range of purposes beyond academics?

B: Yeah. I think they just take on a variety of roles. And maybe they shouldn't but they do. And I feel like that's because school is where kids spend a good portion of time, you know? And so I think that interaction with pretty much everybody they come into contact with during school is important. From the morning, whether it is their school bus driver or their lunch monitor, or their teacher or their classmates. It is a learning environment, but on so many different levels. Which is why I think diversity makes it even better, because you have a variety of cultures and personalities and characteristics which you come in contact with. And this teaches them to deal with people. Like even at the meeting the other night. All the race stuff really came out. And there were so many layers to it. And I was so upset, but at the same time I knew it was kind of an important moment in the sense that, this is the first time we are really having these conversations about race in the school system. I was so upset by how everything was, but I eventually realized that

actually, those were really important conversations. So, I think it shifted my expectations

about Patrick Henry a little bit. I learned that it was more than just starting a charter

school. Because really the stuff that we were talking about in the beginning, which was

like heavy experiential learning and all those things, it didn't totally happen. But, this is

important for the city, and we are doing this thing.

Brenda appears to respond directly to parents – like Cheri perhaps – that focus

only on the educational purposes of school. To me this illustrated the idea that parents

were aware of differences in vision between certain communities about the purposes of

schools. Another critical difference between Brenda and Cheri is that Brenda gives a

strong case for the public purposes of schools. This includes the familiar ideas of

education for civic participation, however she also suggests that that school itself might

serve a public purpose by providing a community space for overdue and uncomfortable

conversations about race and schooling in Richmond. It seemed to me that Brenda's ideas

about the purposes of school really rested on this sense of school as a physical space

within a community where people assembled and spent time.

In the next vignette, Nancy presents ideas about schools that also focus on the

public purposes. However, her ideas are very different than Brenda's.

Vignette 13: It's a need whether they like it or not (Nancy)

J: What do you see as the purpose of public schools?

N: Like if you were just to ask me from today's perspective, I would say public schools

are there to prepare children to enter the workforce and to keep America competitive and

innovative as far as technology and keeping up with the times and staying ahead in

science and technology. And also we need the young people to come up and run the

country. We always need new doctors, dentists to replace the workforce that's here. So we want to bring a workforce that is emotionally, intellectually and socially prepared for that. And I think because there are so many families where both parents are working now, those families that don't have the support at home are relying on the public education system to teach their children not just academically, but socially. I would listen to my father, who was a principal in Richmond, about how teachers aren't just saddled with the responsibility of preparing academically, but they have to pick up on the emotional teaching that is not taking place at home. Cause there are so many kids that are not trained to know right from wrong, how to treat people, how to handle their anger, how to have goals for themselves, how to take care of themselves. Like I remember in middle school, it was so bad that there were kids whose parents were never home. Some of them were working two or three jobs just to hold down the rent, so there was no safety net for these kids to learn what they needed to learn.

J: So do you believe the schools should be responsible for this?

N: I think it is a need whether they like it or not. Whether it is the parent's fault, or whoever's fault it is, I think it's a huge need. To not just educate academically, but to reach kids emotionally and spiritually and with social training. And I think the political system in our country has a huge divide in this. You've got part of the country that feels like okay, we are doing too much for the needy. What are parents doing? The other side of the thought is, whether that is what it should or should not be the reality is these kids need that support at the school.

Although like Brenda, Nancy had a strong sense that the schools should serve public purposes, her take on those purposes was different in significant ways. While

Brenda seemed to focus on the idea that schools could encourage local civic engagement, Nancy spoke more of the public schools' role in supporting national economic interests. Another difference relate to how Nancy conceived of the schools' responsibility for addressing diversity. Where Brenda seemed to embrace the idea of building understanding across difference, it seemed that Nancy was suggesting that schools should acculturate and socialize students into mainstream values. I also found Nancy's perspective on the relationship between roles and responsibility unique. Although in some ways Nancy's critique of absent parents echoed Cheri, ultimately Nancy accepted the idea that, whether we like it or not, schools needed to step up and take responsibility for the situation.

I will conclude the section on the purposes of schools with a vignette from Tom.

Vignette 14: Not all mixed up together (Tom)

J: In my discussions with parents, many have mentioned the importance of schools preparing students for the workforce. What are your thoughts on that idea?

T: Yeah, I hear this idea too. Sort of systemically preparing kids to go get some office job, where they have to listen to rules, and they have to sit, and they have to listen to authority and know how to sort of work the system, or feel comfortable in that system. And the idea of it is that you have to train them early for this. And that always rubbed me the wrong way. Because I felt like, 'why am I having my kid start practicing at age five to go do something everyday that he hates so that he can climb some kind of ladder?' It's like what are we preparing them for. Are we teaching them not to try and think outside the box and do something that's not in the norm? Are they going to live in such a corporate

society? I feel like it has got to have a higher purpose than just sort of preparation for

drudgery.

J: Another idea that has come up during the interviews is the thought that schools are a

place where students can learn to work with people from different cultural backgrounds.

What is your reaction to that?

T: Well, I think it's a side effect of a public school education. I think that it happens

sometimes. It happens in Patrick Henry because it's bringing people from different

communities together. But is social engineering the primary responsibility of schools? No

it's not the primary responsibility. It is incidental. And I don't think that's a bad thing.

But a purpose, I don't know. I mean when I think about desegregation, I don't think of it

as being done so that Black and White children are together necessarily. It's so Black

children get what White children get. You know, so like that it's fair. And I am not talking

about equal but separate. Not that. But it's so that everything is absolutely fair. And, of

course, we know it's not. From my own experience growing up in a city that was busing

students and seeing the segregation in the lunchroom and all of that, if that's one of its

purposes then it's failing miserably.

J: So what would you say is the primary purpose of schools?

T: You know I feel like it serves a lot of these basic necessity purposes above education

that really the government should take care of anyway. You know like it shouldn't

necessarily be wrapped up together. But it is. And what has struck me at Patrick Henry

was just the gratitude among some parents for these services being there. I sensed that

for some that was enough. You know as long as the kids were safe and got fed that was

enough, and for them there was less of an incentive to change the way the education

actually happens. For them there was actually more of a personal responsibility to take care of your child's own education. And so I think right now, my impression as to what is going to happen is that Patrick Henry will start losing some of the students in the White population because they came here with the idea of like, 'We want an integrated curriculum. We want work in the park. We want a green education. We want creativity and critical thinking.' And that's not happening right now. I think if that doesn't turn around in the next year or two, Patrick Henry will just remain a regular elementary school. I think that could happen with Patrick Henry if they are not careful. So with purposes, I feel it is important to address them but I feel like it would be really great to be able to address them outside of the discussion on education, where they are not all mixed up together. Where you don't have to think about how changes in the way you do education might have a trickle down effect for families who are counting on it for meals or for daycare, you know. But we are sort of stuck in this system of education. And the fact that the system is having to fulfill all these other needs, it seems like a big, humongous, immovable object, to change anything.

In this vignette, there are several ideas related to the purposes of schools that create important tensions with the perspectives of other parents. The first is Tom's critical take on standardized public systems, which seems to put him in sharp contrast to Nancy, who supported both the workforce preparation and social training purposes of school. The second key tension relates to Tom's frustration with diversity within the public system, which appears to be related to his personal experiences of failed desegregation as a student. For example, while Brenda centered many of her ideas about the purposes of school around the concept of bringing people together, Tom argue directly against the

idea of that as a purpose. Tom, like Brenda, also presents ideas that suggest that parents and families from different communities have fundamentally different ideas about the purposes of school. However, where Brenda portrayed the Black community as focusing specifically on "education first," Tom suggests just the opposite.

In these interviews I found that parents' ideas about schools were constructed out of ideas about the qualities of curriculum and school community as well as the perceived purposes of school. In the choice process this construction of the idea of the school became very important. In the final section of the narrative, I will present three vignettes that address the dilemmas that parents face as they weigh the factors that underlie school choice.

The Dilemma of Choice

When choosing a school, parents weighed a range of factors. Obviously some of the factors related to their ideas about school explored in the previous sections, however, there were others as well. For example, as mentioned in the opening section, the cost of private schools or moving were part of parents' choice process. Some parents also expressed the idea that they preferred a school that was conveniently located or a school where the schedule fit their particular lifestyle. In the end, for each parent some combination of factors was considered and a decision about a school for their child was made. What I found through conducting these interviews was that for many parents the school decision was a personal struggle between public and private commitments. These struggles were often characterized by a range of emotions including guilt, anxiety, hope and fear. In the vignette below, Devon discusses his disappointment with Patrick Henry and his thoughts about his next steps.

Vignette 15: Some things have made me almost regret it (Devon)

J: So now that you have been here a year, what's your impression of the school?

D: Well, some things have made me almost regret it. After this first year I am like, 'Oh my God, did I make the right decision by bringing her over here?' She was in Kindergarten at Washington, and I was comfortable with that. The teachers were really energetic, they were doing things with the kids and everything. But then I heard about the charter school and I had seen things on TV about a Black lady up in Chicago that had started a school. She took kids from like the inner city and she really worked with them. And those kids became high achievers. So I went through public schools, but I said, well I'll give the charter school a chance to see because they said there was going to be, you know, integrated curriculum and that they were going to be using the park as a learning environment, smaller classes and that some of the teachers had been in special training. But there's been so much growing pains and struggles. So I worry a little bit about whether Shanice will be able to really take advantage of what the school will probably become. And I often wonder, I wonder if I had left her at Washington, how would it have been. You know I realized when I put her in, I said, I know I'm in this for the long haul. Change is going to take some time, and you know, you got new principals, you got new teachers, new parents. And really I am just surprised at how it's gone.

J: Can you tell me more about that?

D: There are just a whole lot of reasons that I am disappointed. Just all the misperceptions. Like at this PTA meeting there was an older White lady sitting there talking to one of the young Black parents. She didn't know I was standing behind her. I didn't know her, hadn't even been introduced to her. So I heard her telling him, she said,

'Yeah, we are trying to make some changes here because we don't want this school associated with the old Patrick Henry.' And I'm like, 'the old Patrick Henry?' And so then I had to go ask another parent, 'What does she mean?' The only thing that she could have meant was that at one time Patrick Henry use to be all White, and then as the years changed it became a predominantly Black school and then they closed it down. And this young parent is probably in her twenties or something like that, and so I am listening, I'm like, okay, so you are telling her this, for what? Those are things that I think I said sometimes people have to be careful of the words they speak because of the perception. Because those are the things that make me skeptical. And I am just protective about Shanice and what she is exposed to. And sort of like the realities of this society.

J: Okay. So the last question is . . . and maybe this is where you are now, if you had to leave the school, where are you going?

D: Well, I did open enrollment and she is number three on the Bell waiting list. But as of right now, I am sending her back to Washington. But hopefully she will get a space in Bell.

J: And why Bell?

D: I hear a whole lot of good things about the school. How the kids are learning. I think they are a blue ribbon school and all those kind of things. I just think it's a more established program and they are not just struggling constantly to just have some good regular consistent programs going on. And she would also have, the extra resources like title-one math and all that kind of stuff.

J: Were you considering Bell when you chose Patrick Henry?

D: No, I just found out about open enrollment just this year. Cause they really don't

announce it. I don't think too many people know about open enrollment. And I found out

about it from another parent here that they were going to do it, and I was like wow.

Cause they don't let you know these things. But I think that is not right.

J: No it's not. I think that is all the questions I have. Is there anything else you would like

to add about your experience at the school?

D: No. I really didn't want to pull her out, but I have to do what is best for her.

J: Yes, absolutely.

D: And at this time, this is not what is best for her.

It seems that Devon's regret was about letting his hope for what Patrick Henry might become get in the way of his responsibility as a parent to get his daughter into the best school situation possible. He pulled her out of an established program for one with much less certainty around it, and now is considering moving her back to something more "established." I also found it interesting that while it was the curriculum that drew him to the school, it was not the curriculum that seemed to be driving him away, but rather the racial tensions within the Patrick Henry community. While it appears from this vignette and earlier, that Devon is a parent who would in most cases be willing to engage in the work of building community across difference, his dilemma is that he senses the process of building community is long, and in the meantime Shanice may be exposed to attitudes and ideas that, he sees as unhealthy and unacceptable.

In the next vignette, Nancy presents a different perspective on the theme of parental responsibility in the choice process.

Vignette 16: I will sacrifice (Nancy)

J: My last question. If Patrick Henry closed at the end of this year, where would David

go?

N: I would probably home school because I can't think of a school that I would just feel totally comfortable with. I feel like a lot more people are doing it for a lot better reasons. Yeah, I don't know. So I feel like with homeschooling there are a lot more options. Like there are a lot more classes that are geared specifically to homeschoolers. I mean I am under no delusion that I know everything and can be my child's only teacher. I certainly don't believe that, but I feel like David can teach himself an awful lot too.

J: And you would be able to do that with your job?

N: I am really torn about this now. I am worried about David. And it all feels like a personal failure for me. I want him to get through school. That's my job. At least get him through school. I need to participate more in his education, so actually I'll be resigning from my job. Next Friday will be my last day. I do have the option to work part time somewhere. And it's because I feel like I can't do it. Like the schoolwork that comes home. The things that he is getting wrong, it is because he is not practicing. And it is because I am not taking the time to practice with him. I can't blame the school. I can't blame the teacher. This is my fault that there is not enough time for me in the evenings. Because I am not picking them up until 6 o'clock. At home 6:30, 7:00 and dinner. I guess because I am a single mother just doing it all and Dad is not in the picture. And just trying to work. And I don't want to take away from him. I am one of those people, I will sacrifice. If I were to stay home and live with my parents for a little while to do that, they have enough space. Cause I don't have a mortgage any more. My car is paid off. And so I'm wearing the same raggedy clothes that I wore before. But those are the economic sacrifices that I am making right now. Instead of going to the beauty salon next week, I

am taking my kids to the circus but it's for them, and I know a lot of people, don't have that option, but then again some people, they don't want to give up the plush comforts for that. So it is all a matter of what you want to give up.

While Devon seemed to regret his choice of Patrick Henry because of the school's failure to meet his expectations, especially in regards to the community, Nancy's dilemma seems to be one of personal guilt for not being more involved in David's education. Although the homeschooling option would require significant personal sacrifice, it also seems to give her a large degree of control over the situation. It allows her to construct a "totally comfortable" school option. It seems then that Nancy's struggle, relates to some level of mismatch between her strong sense of personal responsibility and desire for control, and her socioeconomic situation as a single mother of two. It is interesting that this discussion of her willingness to sacrifice becomes an opportunity to distinguish herself from others that may share her economic challenges but not her core values.

In the final vignette Brenda discuses her struggle choosing a school for Sandra.

Vignette 17: We had to think, what do we do? (Brenda)

J: Can you tell me about how you chose Patrick Henry?

B: I knew I would put Sandra in public school, like I knew we wanted to be part of that community in some way. And I was really torn, because we lived in the city, and my local school was Brady Elementary. I was feeling really torn between wanting to invest in our community school and at the same time, at what expense would that be to my kid? And so we had tried the lottery into Bell and Patrick Henry and we were really low on the list at Bell - like that wasn't going to be an option. At Patrick Henry we had a better number,

but didn't hear anything after that. And we were sort mixed about Patrick Henry anyway.

J: What was that about?

B: Well, living in the neighborhood, we started hearing about it pretty much from the beginning. And mostly at that point had a negative response to it. I'll just speak for myself but I think my partner and I both felt the same. Which was that it was sort of a bunch of mostly entitled middle class White parents. Like maybe they didn't want to send their kids to a predominantly Black school. So they wanted their own free private school basically where they could send their kids. And I didn't have a positive association with the idea of charter schools in general just from people that I know and trust in terms of how it broke down politically. But, like I was just concerned about the idea that there would be this process of taking time and resources and community energy away from the traditional public schools. But really it was a case-by-case situation for us. So we wanted to look at it and consider it with the other options. And we weren't dead set against them. I mean obviously. We wouldn't have ultimately decided to do it if we weren't a little bit open to the idea. So then we started to go to some of the meetings related to Patrick Henry and feel like despite the negativity we had about the people who were kind of the founding group, that there was the potential for this to be a pretty unique community that reflected the city of Richmond and the people. And that totally just changed for me, my take on the school. So it went from being something that I really didn't want to be a part of to something that I felt was potentially a really valuable thing for the community and for the city, that wouldn't otherwise exist. So that's when we decided to apply. And the fact that it was close by our house. All of the things sort of lined up in its favor.

J: But when you applied you ended up on the waiting list?

B: Right. We didn't hear from them and so we sent Sandra to Brady. And the teaching was like okay, but it was rough around the edges. There was a lot of yelling and it was just so different from what we hoped for. Ultimately it didn't feel like it was a good school. And we didn't have a positive interaction with the teacher. Didn't feel like she wanted to be there. And I'm not opposed to Sandra having challenging situations in the world. Like I am not afraid of that. But I do know that there is line on that. And I feel like Sandra is really sensitive and has certain needs and I can't drop her into a rough situation. And so then after the first week of school we got a call from Patrick Henry that a spot had opened up, and so we had to think, what do we do? On the one hand we thought about like this is just a self-perpetuating thing. If a school is struggling so the people that have the resources and the wherewithal to consider other options don't go there, it just gets worse and worse and worse. Like are you turning your back on those kids by doing that? You know what I mean? So we talked about that. But then what if you have a kid that is in the system and is being crushed by the system what do you do? I don't know. You know? Is it right to think about using my kids to try to affect change in society? It's a battle I would love to fight and win, but I feel beaten down by it and I don't know.

On one level, it seemed that Brenda's dilemma of choice was the story of her personal negotiation of her commitments to certain ideas of public. For example, she began with a commitment to the idea of the neighborhood school and against the idea of the charter. However, this commitment shifted after seeing the community of the charter evolve and recognizing its potential value to the city. As with all of Brenda's vignettes, the idea of community was central to her assessment of schools. In this sense, Brenda's

public commitment to a school seemed really to be a commitment to an idea of

community. However, like Devon and Nancy, Brenda's choice of school was

complicated by her strong sense of personal responsibility to her child. As much as

supporting the neighborhood school might be good for the community, ultimately she did

not feel like it was a good choice for Sandra. Her concern is whether by sending Sandra

to the neighborhood school, she might just be using her daughter for her personal

political ends. In the end, Brenda appears to hold on to some sense of guilt for not

fighting the battle.

Lessons Learned

If the case report above is an accurate construction of the lived experiences of

these Patrick Henry parents, then a number of lessons are suggested about how the idea

of public school is understood by this group of parents. These lessons will be an

important foundation for chapter six, where I discuss the broader implications of this

study for policy and practice.

How Public is a School?

The interviews with these parents explored ideas about schools, in general, as well

as the particular nature of public schools. In these discussions I found that there were

very fluid boundaries between the ideas of public and non-public schools. There was not

generally a sense that you either chose a public school or a private school. Rather –

especially as parents became engaged with the choice process – there were multiple

options, some public and some private considered. However, this expansion of options

did not necessarily eliminate the sense of what distinguished a public school.

There were strong associations with, and ideas about, public schools that were important to the choice process. In certain cases the "public" school became a proxy for the community, both in terms of a collection of people, as well as a geographic space (e.g., "when you think about schools, you think about moving"). For certain parents this public school community was a familiar setting, for others it seemed foreign (a place for "those kids"), and for others it existed as an abstract concept. Beyond the community, there was also a strong association between the idea of "public" in public school, and the system of public education. Public-ness, in this case signified a large bureaucratic system tied to ideas about the political system and the economic system. In most cases this idea of public-ness carried negative associations.

When these ideas about public schools were used through the choice process to assess schools, it created a situation where there were degrees of public-ness. For example, for certain parents, it seemed the neighborhood school was the most "public" of the schools, however, there was an acknowledgment that there were other "public" options (e.g., county schools, open enrollment, Patrick Henry) that may have less of a "public feel." Whether this was a good or bad thing, depended on the parent.

Approaches to Difference

One of the clearest ideas that emerged for me from the analysis was that parents' perceptions of the quality of a school were often closely tied to their perceptions about the quality of the school's community. At one level, this meant that good schools were ones where the relationships within classrooms and within school buildings – between students and teachers and administrators – were built on trust, caring and support. At another level, the idea extended to include the broader school community of parents,

families and neighborhoods. At this second level, perceptions about the school

communities began to build upon ideas about differences between socioeconomic and

cultural groups. Many of these ideas focused on differences in values between groups.

For example, certain groups were perceived as not valuing education, others were

perceived as not valuing diversity. In these discussions, the categories of race and class

were central. In certain cases race and class were employed to draw distinctions. In others

they were carefully avoided. There appeared to be a tension between the tendency to

define groups according to categories and the desire to challenge the value of grouping. It

was acknowledged by several of the parents that by grouping, individual perspective is

lost and – as Devon suggested, "misperceptions" grow. What was especially interesting

to me was that the generalizations made about the attitudes and ideas of other groups

were often contradicted by the interviews with parents from those groups. Thus, the

categories of race and class did not hold in relation to the range of ideas that were

presented.

This construction of attitude toward difference has implications for the idea of the

public school. Many of the parents expressed the idea that public schools are the place

where the public comes together. Yet, the choice process seems to have created a system

– especially in Richmond's highly segregated schools – where parents were choosing a

particular public. The choice of Patrick Henry brought them into a school community in

which there were significant differences between groups that manifested in conflict and

tensions. For some parents this seemed to be an opportunity to realize the idea of a

unified public school. For other parents, there was tendency either to try and control the

community or to retreat into a more familiar public.

The Empowered Parent

For many of the Patrick Henry parents, I felt that engaging in the choice process had awakened a sense of agency that allowed parents to fulfill both private and public interests. In certain cases the agency was related to their role as chooser in the system. While some parents entered the choice process with, what I perceived as, a high level of consumer savvy, others developed savvy through the process of opting-in to Patrick Henry. For example, after being led to Patrick Henry by her daughter's teacher, Cheri became a chooser. Devon's options were improved when tapped into the social networks of Patrick Henry and discovered the open enrollment process. In these cases, the entry into the community-of-choice led not only to changes in activities (e.g., attending open houses, entering lotteries) but also attitudes. For example, it seems that the fact that Cheri chose Patrick Henry may have led her to the idea that she could hold the school responsible for the curriculum.

However, for some parents in Patrick Henry, the school also became a space for building a sense of civic agency. Many parents perceived the school's value in addressing issues of inequity within the system as well as inequities and racial divides within the city. Some felt that by choosing Patrick Henry, they were investing in a cause that could serve the public good. The fact that the school was pitted against the system in a struggle for control, created for some parents an opportunity to engage in public action.

Attitudes about Control

Parents' ideas about schools, and public schools in particular, were related to various attitudes toward control of schools. On the one hand, there was a strong push-back against a public system of education – best articulated by Tom – that was

characterized as an impersonal and inflexible mechanism of control enacted through guidelines and mandates. In this framing, the centralized control of the system not only impacted teachers' autonomy, but also led the teachers to replicate the mechanisms within the classrooms where students sat in their desks and completed worksheets. This critique suggests the need for a decentralization of control that would allow more flexibility and freedom in the classroom and in the school.

However, there was also a strong sense among many of the parents that it was important to keep schools *in control*, especially in the context of a diverse school. The desire to protect a child from a chaotic, out-of-control classroom was one dimension of this, but so was the desire to protect children from a school environment characterized by racism and racial conflict. From a more positive perspective there was also a sense among many that a cohesive community has an order and structure to it. Ideas about how to achieve this controlled community varied. In some cases it led to ideas of reducing difference within the school community – for example, through exclusion. In other cases it led to ideas about the need for schools to actively socialize students. In still other cases, it suggested the need for certain processes of community building.

The Roles and Responsibilities of Public Schools

Through the interviews there were complex tensions around ideas about the roles and responsibilities of public schools. Some parents defined the purposes of public schools in a relatively narrow fashion; others felt that they should be broader. The difference between these groups generally related to different ideas about the extent to which public schools should move beyond the core educational purposes to serve broad public interests (e.g., supporting diversity within the community, teaching civic values,

providing social service to communities). It seemed to me that these differences were related to several factors. For example, in certain cases I understood the tension in relation to parents' ideas about individual responsibility. It seemed that the more emphasis a parent put on individual responsibility the more likely he or she was to feel frustration with the public purposes of school. The sense was that public schools were being unduly obligated to compensate for the lack of personal responsibility among certain people and groups.

In other cases, parents leaned less on arguments about individual responsibility and recognized that social and economic contexts were inequitable and that public schools, in response, needed to address these inequities. However, in these cases, there seemed to be a divide in perspective. On the one hand there were parents who seemed to recognize that certain public interests needed to be met, and yet they felt distance from those public interests. There was a sense in which those public interests were not necessarily in the interest of *their* public. An example of this is Tom who contrasted his values around education with the parents for whom having the kids "safe and fed" was enough. On the other hand there were also parents that believed in the public purposes of schools and felt a responsibility to those public purposes. Some felt obligations to their neighborhood schools and the students and families within them. However, as we saw, this often came into conflict with their feelings of parental responsibility. In the end, it seemed that feelings of frustration, feelings of distance, and feelings of guilt led many parents pull away from the public school and their commitment to the public purposes of schools. These observations led me to consider the ways in which the choice system had shifted responsibility onto the parents in ways encouraged abandoning public

commitments. In the choice system the individual parent becomes responsible for making the right choice, a dynamic that seems to pit public and private interests.

In the final chapter I will continue to explore these lessons by considering how parents' ideas about public schools relate to the ideas about public-ness and charter schools presented in chapter two, as well as the theory of local public discourse developed in chapter four.

CHAPTER 6

While the general tendency in modernist empirical research is toward parsimony, there is pragmatic value in developing complexity through the use of multiple theoretical lenses. Stephen Ball (1993), reflecting on the challenges of policy analysis, claims "this unfashionable position" for his own work.

> In analysis of complex social issues – like policy – two theories are
> probably better than one, or to put it another way, the complexity and
> scope of policy analysis – from an interest in the workings of the state to a
> concern with the contexts of practice and the distributional outcomes of
> policy – precludes the possibility of successful single-theory explanations.
> What we need in policy analysis is a toolbox of diverse concepts and
> theories – an applied sociology rather than a pure one. Thus, I want to
> balance the modernist theoretical project of abstract parsimony against a
> somewhat more post-modernist one of localised complexity. (p. 10)

Through this study of Patrick Henry I have explored and constructed a wide variety of theoretical lenses to understand how the idea of public schools is constructed within the complex policy dynamics of national and local discourses. These lenses include the various frameworks of the policy discourses presented in chapter two, the grounded theory of public discourse around Patrick Henry presented in chapter four, and the grounded theory of the private discourse of Patrick Henry parents presented in chapter five. Each of these lenses utilizes a system of concepts, assumptions, expectations and beliefs to build understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Although these lenses,

by necessity, tend to simplify, they are simplifications that have the potential of improving understanding (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In the previous chapter I answered my primary research question, "How do parents construct the idea of public schools as they explain their choice of Patrick Henry Charter School?" A focal point for the work in this chapter will be the two sub-questions I presented in chapter one: "How do the parents' ideas about *public* schools reflect the logics embedded in the larger policy discourses concerning charters and the reinvention of public education?" and "How do the parents' ideas about *public* schools reflect the local public discourse around the public-ness of the school?" Considering Ball's (1993) point above, the overarching goal of this final chapter is to consider what my "toolbox of diverse concepts and theories" might suggest about the topic, and then reflect on what implications this study may have for future research, policy and practice. In this, I am interested in the utility and limitations of the individual lenses, as well the resonances and tensions between them.

This chapter will include (1) a series of reflections on the relationships between the theoretical lenses explored and developed through this study; (2) a discussion of the scholarly implications and practical applications of this study; and (3) a final, personal reflection on how my interest in Patrick Henry have evolved through the course of this study.

Relationships Between Levels of the Study

In this section I will present three short pieces that consider the relationships between the levels of the study. In the first piece I will examine the ways in which the school reform discourses around charters were reflected in the local public discourse in

Richmond and in the perspectives shared and stories told by the parents I interviewed.

Next, I will take a look at how the framework of public-ness developed by Higgins and

Abowitz (2011) that I presented in chapter two might help frame the core themes of

public that emerged through the analyses in chapters four and five. Finally, I will

introduce and address a question with which I have struggled since the beginning of this

project: To what extent is Patrick Henry an example of neoliberal school reform?

The Uses and the Limits of Public Discourse

The two sub-questions for this study both ask about how the ideas of Patrick

Henry parents reflect particular public discourses, national and local. Before discussing

how these reflections of discourse may have happened, and possible significance, it is

worth taking time to reflect on the meaning of public discourse. Using Toulmin's (2003)

ideas about the uses of *justificatory arguments*, I suggest that public discourse is a

particular field of argument that, on the one hand, is connected to the broader category of

argument through certain procedural elements (i.e., an explicit or implied statement of

problem, identification of solutions, presentation of opinion, and justification with

grounds or evidence), but on the other hand, uses a unique set of criteria and particular

rhetorical logic to make its case. This point is clearly illustrated by contrasting the

qualities of public discourse with another field of public policy argument, empirical

scholarly research. Although both types of argument address social problems by

presenting a position on a course of action that is justified on some particular grounds or

evidence, the two types of arguments are very different. While the scholarly empirical

argument is systematic and explicit in its presentation, the argument made through public

discourse is likely to have a less formal structure. While the strength of the scholarly

argument comes from the weight of the empirical evidence collected, the ideas presented in public discourse are often justified through anecdote, analogy, metaphor, connotation or emotional resonance. Although these qualities may cause some to dismiss public discourse as little more than sound and fury, this dismissive approach misses the subtlety and nuance this type of speech carries and the purposes it serves in the policy-making process.

Addressing this idea, Stone (1997) points to the failure of rationalist reasoning in understanding "the essence of policy making in political communities." She argues that it is the struggle over ideas that define speech in the polis. She writes, "Shared meanings motivate people to action and meld individual striving into collective action. Ideas are at the center of all political conflict. Policy making, in turn, is a constant struggle over the criteria for classification, the boundaries of categories, and the definition of ideal that guide the way people behave" (p. 11). Stone's reflections on speech in the polis – what I call public discourse – are useful in the context of this constructivist research project about the public nature of public schools. The arguments presented about charters through the national reform debates and about Patrick Henry through the Richmond press and public meetings were battles for classification and definition that were designed to influence thought as well as political behavior. Considering the range of ideas and frameworks that emerged from the analysis I found this process occurring across and between several levels.

Public discourse as a vehicle for political agendas. In the analysis of the local press and speech at public meetings, I found that many of the arguments made about the school reflected the charter discourse traditions presented in chapter two (Wells, 2002;

Stulberg 2008) (see figure 2.1). Some of these discourses were more evident than others.

It seemed that the discourses that were used most frequently were not necessarily those

that captured the qualities of the school, but rather those that resonated with the

ideological agendas of the stakeholding groups who were presenting the ideas. For

example, the editorial writers of the conservative *Richmond Times Dispatch* tended to

describe the school through a neoliberal discourse of entrepreneurship, innovation, and

the empowered consumer, despite the fact that Patrick Henry did not fit the model of

neoliberal school reform very well. In a similar fashion, the leaders of Richmond's

NAACP, in their critique of the school, focused on the idea that Patrick Henry was – in

the spirit the southern "Freedom of Choice" plans – a new instance of the push by

Richmond's White community for local control. Although, again, this assessment of

Patrick Henry was too narrow to capture the complexity of the school, the utility of this

discourse was in its support of the Richmond NAACP's political agenda, as well as its

resonance with the lived experiences of Richmond's Black population. In both of these

cases, the discourses were not so much about Patrick Henry, as the fact that, as a charter

school, Patrick Henry became an opportunity to push particular long-standing agendas.

This reflection on the relationship between the national charter discourses and the local

public discourse suggests that the ideological qualities that underlie the national debates

over education reform, are not only transferred, but may in fact be enhanced when they

are reiterated at the local level and layered on top of pre-existing political dynamics.

　　　　Speaking and enacting discourse. The ideas that the Patrick Henry parents'

shared about schools through the interviews were not what I would consider public

discourse. It was not calculated speech designed to influence others' political behaviors,

but rather, private reflections that I elicited through the interview process. However, the parents, were, what might be considered, the target of the public discourse. In the language of Stone (1997), they were among those who the speakers in the public sphere wished to "motivate… to action." There were two ways in which I saw the public discourses of national and local policy reflected in their stories.

First, there were examples, throughout the interviews, of parents re-iterating the language and logic of particular discourses. For example, Nancy seemed well versed in the discourse of social efficiency (i.e., "public schools are there to prepare children to enter the workforce and to keep America competitive "), while Brenda re-stated arguments made by the charter school critics about how charter schools were designed to siphon off resources from the public system. Absences of this effect were interesting as well. There were many strong arguments made through the local press and public meetings that were not picked up by the parents as they discussed their experiences of the school. For example, in one of the interviews, when I brought up the claim made by the opponents of the school, that Patrick Henry was not open to all students, a parent replied dismissively, "Yeah, I've heard that argument" and then moved on.

The second way I saw the reflection of discourse occurring among the parents was in the ways the substance of the public discourses resonated with their experiences. That is to say, the discourses not only shaped the ways the people talked about public schools, but also shed light on their behaviors and motivations for action within the local context. For example, there were ways in which the parents' ideas about schools reflected the neoliberal perspective that choice positions them as empowered consumers. Cheri's

movement from non-chooser to chooser is an example of this. In this sense, the idea is that the discourses that underlie policy also shape the field of action.

However, these reflections of the language and the logics of various discourses within the experiences and ideas of the parents were never clear reflections. They were blurred and layered and often conflicting. As language practices, certain discourse were taken up to make certain points but would fade or shift as the topics of the interviews changed. If, as Stone (1997) suggests, the goal of speech in the polis is to "motivate people to action and meld individual striving," we might say that the analyses presented in this study reveal the complicated reality of this form of political work. This is an idea that connects to literature on the local negotiation of charter policy (Henig & Stone, 2008) as well as broader discussions of how meaning is constructed through public discourse (Lakoff, 1996; Stone, 1997).

The Enhanced or the Diminished Public School

I opened the first chapter of this study with the idea that underlying the debate over charter schools is a basic question about their public-ness. Are charters quasi-public schools designed to weaken the foundation of public education (Lipman, 2011; Ravitch, 2010, 2013; Saltman, 2005, 2007; Shanker, 1994), or do they provide the opportunity to revitalize the public nature of public schools (Allen, Chavous, Engler, Whitmire, Williams, & Casey, 2009; Fuller, 1996; Hill, Pierce & Guthrie, 1997)? This study has explored how this debate over the public-ness of charter schools was played out through the complex dynamics of the local Richmond context. In my analysis I found that it was certainly present in the local public discourse around Patrick Henry, where the public nature of the school was a central issue of contention. It was also apparent in the

interviews I conducted, where tensions arose within and between parents' ideas about the public qualities of schools. Upon reflection on the relationships between these phases of the analysis, I found the ideas about public-ness presented by Higgins and Abowitz (2011) helpful in identifying the core themes of public-ness that were at play in this study.

Unified versus fragmented public. In their discussion of the five core questions of public, Higgins and Abowitz (2011) present the idea that public-ness often hinges upon the tension between the ideal of a unified public sphere (Habermas, 1991) and the more fragmented notion of counterpublics suggested by Fraser (1997). At the level of the public discourse in Richmond, it seemed that the supporters of Patrick Henry pushed the idea that the school would represent an idealized unified public. While their arguments did, at times, distinguish between particular publics (e.g., "the deprived," "the tax-paying parent"), they ultimately framed the school as a space that was open to all: an opportunity to some, an option for others. In the context of a highly segregated school system, this claim of openness was used to suggest an enhanced public quality to the school. The public opponents of Patrick Henry on the other hand, seemed to suggest that the school's supporters were using the mask of openness to hide their intention of carving off a space that served the interest of the White community. From their perspective, the school was a private enterprise. In this sense, the voices of the opposition seemed to reflect Fraser's (1997) notion of a counterpublic that recognizes and resists the pretext of the idealized public sphere.

Among the parents this tension took different forms. Most parents expressed at least some belief in the idea of public schools as a space for enacting the unified public

sphere. Brenda, perhaps showed the strongest commitment to this idea. For her, Patrick

Henry offered the opportunity to bring people of different backgrounds together and

bridge communities that had been divided. However, for Brenda and others, this abstract

idea came into conflict with private interests. It seemed that the system of choice had

encouraged parents to abandon the idea of the unified public school and instead select

schools that represented particular publics. For the most part these moves to smaller,

more homogenously defined publics, were not what Fraser (1997) would classify as

counterpublics. According to Fraser (1997), counterpublics are developed out of political

concerns for recognition. Instead, these moves seemed like retreats into more familiar and

comfortable private spaces. This suggests that the system of choice might work in ways

that encourage the abandonment of the ideal of the unified public school.

      Relation to state power. I also found it helpful when thinking about the issue of

public-ness in the case of Patrick Henry to consider how the public discourse and parent

perspectives presented the relationship between public schools and local and state

government. Higgins and Abowitz (2011) suggest that although there is a tendency to

understand public schools as simply government-run, the public sphere should – at least

in theory – be positioned as distinct from, and in certain cases in opposition to, state

power (Habermas, 1991). Considering the analyses of the case of Patrick Henry, this

tension was evident on several levels. For example, within the local public discourse

there was a strongly voiced concern among the public opponents of the school about the

corrupting influences of state power on the function of the democratically elected school

board. The approval of Patrick Henry, from this perspective, represented how the

interests of particular publics (e.g., the entitled middle class) on the one hand, and private

sector interests on the other, had influenced the state to co-opt a public institution.

However, supporters of the school framed this dynamic in a very different light. Again

the target was the local elected school board, however, from their perspective the school

offered an opportunity for concerned citizens to hold an unresponsive state power

accountable. In this case the public quality of the school was enhanced by virtue of this

challenge.

Among the parents, this tension emerged along a very different set of concerns.

For many it seemed that the idea of public school had become essentially

indistinguishable from the idea of a centralized, government-run system. This was

evident in parents' discussions of the purposes of school. For some, the broad range of

public purposes served by public schools was a sign that state interests had encroached

upon the proper role of schools, academic preparation. This led some parents – for

example Tom – to want to disentangle those "basic necessity purposes… that the

government should be taking care of anyway" from education. This perception also led

some parents to characterize certain public purposes, as systems of state control: For

example, promoting diversity became a project of "social engineering." Another powerful

example of the perception of this conflation of public and state power came through

critiques of the standardized systems of curriculum, accountability, and assessment. In

this case, the "public" schools were the ones that were all about the tests.

Enacting a public. A final lens that I found useful for understanding the issue of

public-ness in the case of Patrick Henry was Higgins and Abowitz's (2011) idea about

the tension between static and active notions of public. At the heart of this tension is the

question, do publics just exist, or are they enacted though public work? In the local

political discourse, this tension was played on by the supporters of the school. There was

a tendency among them to contrast the static ("status quo") quality of the traditional

public system, with the idea of the active "grassroots" group of "concerned citizens" and

community members that were fighting for the school. As one supporter suggested, the

"main goal is to involve the *public* in public education by offering a new way to get

citizens more personally involved." This contrast between the active public and the status

quo was used to bolster the public quality of the school.

Considering the stories I heard through the interviews with the parents, I found

that this characterization of the active public held to a certain extent, but was limited, in

many cases, by parents' sense of agency in relation to the system. On the one hand, there

were clear examples of parents who presented ideas that suggested that publics were built

through deliberate work. Brenda saw the strength of the school community in the political

struggle to keep the school open. Devon felt that community was built through local

conversations across difference. However, there were also clearly articulated limits.

Certain parents felt overwhelmed by the size of the system they were resisting. Others

felt conflict between their desire to make change through action and their feelings of

responsibility to their children. As Brenda stated, "Is it right to think about using my kids

to try to affect change in society? It's a battle I would love to fight and win, but I feel

beaten down by it and I don't know."

Reflection on the Neoliberal Qualities of Patrick Henry

As I suggested in chapter two, many charter school analysts who recognize the

multiple discourses that shape the charter concept, have also come to argue that those

working from the neoliberal perspective dominate the discourse around the national

charter debate and have been the most effective agents of change (Lipman, 2011; Lubienski, 2001; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Ravitch, 2010, 2013; Saltman, 2005, 2007; Wells, 2002). Understandings of the neoliberal perspective and its relation to the form and function of public schools is critical in this era of school reform where market ideology seems to have infused so many dimensions of public education from curriculum to school choice to new forms of private governance. The critique of this ideology suggests that neoliberal school policies undermine the public purposes of schools that support equity and social justice in our society.

Although I came into this project with a disposition toward this critique, I wanted to approach my study of the school with that idea that any number of things could be going on with Patrick Henry. On the one hand, I didn't want to think that I had picked "the charter school" because it was an easy nail to hit with that particular theoretical hammer. I also wanted to hold onto the idea that hegemonic discourses, such as neoliberalism, are inherently unstable, especially within the complex political dynamics of local settings. Nonetheless, despite this desire for restraint, throughout the study I have wrestled with the question: To what extent is Patrick Henry an example of neoliberal school reform? Now that my analyses are complete, I have several points to share.

Patrick Henry as a political prop. First, there was certainly a sense within the local public discourse that the school was serving as a political prop for promoting neoliberal ideas about school reform. Patrick Henry was the carefully chosen site of Governor McDonnell's signing of the 2010 revisions to the Virginia charter school law. In 2013, the school was a photo opportunity for Eric Cantor as he touted his support for the "Student Success Act," federal legislation that supports the expansion of "high-

quality charter schools." The school was also a regular topic of *Richmond Times Dispatch* editorials that built on market narratives about entrepreneurial solutions to the dysfunctions of bureaucratic public systems. Although, throughout the analysis I have suggested how this framing is disconnected from the circumstances of the school, the extent to which it served as a flagship for these neoliberal policy agendas is worth noting.

Neoliberal versus progressive democratic tensions. A more complicated picture emerges when the qualities of Patrick Henry as a public school are considered in relation to the neoliberal ideas of school reform. In chapter two I presented a framework (figure 2.2) that considered the various constructions of the policy levers underlying charter schools and other new school-reform efforts. One of the points of this figure was to show how charter policy ideas such as autonomy, accountability, and school choice could be enacted in ways that support either market (i.e., neoliberal) or progressive democratic ideologies. For example, the push for autonomy through decentralization could be understood and enacted as a rejection of democratic public governance of schools and a turn toward free market solutions (Chubb & Moe, 1990). However, decentralization could also be understood as a reorientation of democratic governance to the local level, for example in the spirit of the community control movement (McCoy, 1970).

The tensions between neoliberal and progressive-democratic framings of the policy levers were evident in the case of Patrick Henry. For example, the school did present a challenge to the democratically-elected school board. There was a separate non-elected Patrick Henry governing board that gained control of certain dimensions of the school's operation. In a certain respect this seemed like autonomy leading to the privatization of school governance. However, the school's political work against the

school board and school system also seemed to awaken the spirit of democratic civic

engagement characteristic of the community control movement. In terms of choice, the

school seemed to support parent identities as consumers within a market of schools,

however, the study also suggested that this was a quality of the system that pre-dated the

charter. Parents have been engaged in the processes of choice in Richmond for many

years. When considering how charter policies were enacted in the case of Patrick Henry, I

found that the particular neoliberal qualities of the policies were hard to isolate. On the

one hand these qualities were diffused by competing – non-neoliberal – tendencies within

the school. On the other, they were confounded with effects that were inherent in the

larger public system.

Patrick Henry parents and neoliberal ways of thinking. The point that struck

me the most during the analysis was the sense I had of the impact of neoliberalism on

parents' ways of thinking. In the grounded theory I presented in chapter five (figure 5.1),

I identified three attitudes that were critical for understanding parents' range of ideas

around schools: (1) attitude toward difference, (2) attitude toward control, and (3) attitude

toward responsibility. When parents were constructing ideas about schools I found that

these attitudes interacted in ways that suggested particular worldviews, which, in certain

cases, seemed to resonate with neoliberal ideology. For example, among some parents,

the tendency to highlight differences between the values of communities was coupled

with an attitude toward individual responsibility that justified the inequitable conditions

of the system, an idea that supports a neoliberal model of meritocracy. Another example

was the way in which the need some parents had to exert control within the process of

school choice was enhanced by their sense that the responsibility for their child's

education was now very much their own, and that success or failure to negotiate the

system was a reflection of individual merit. What was interesting to me about these views

– which I felt aligned with neoliberal ideology – was that they seemed to be built upon

the personal experiences of the parents within the system, not exposure to the public

discourses that may have advanced them (e.g., *RTD* editorials). This suggests to me that

the struggle to define public schools happens not only through the ways that public

discourse influences the ideas and actions of local actors, but also in the ways that local

actors through their experiences of ideologically determined systems bring those

discourses into being.

Implications for Research, Policymaking and Practice

Considering the scope and purpose of this study and the range of ideas that were

generated, I believe that this project has implications for research, policymaking and

practice. Below are some reflections on this.

Contribution to the Research on Charters

One way of categorizing the scholarly literature on charter schools is to make a

distinction between the empirical and non-empirical work. The research on the empirical

side tends toward technical questions about whether charters are "working." This

research generally takes the form of large scale studies of specific outcomes such as

student achievement (Braun, Jenkins, & Grigg, 2006; Hassel, Terrell, Kain, & Ziebarth,

2006; Raymond, 2009; Hoxby, 2004), effects on segregation (Garcia, 2010; Frankenberg,

Siegel-Hawley, Wang, 2010; Miron, Urschel, Mathis, & Tornquist, 2010), effectiveness

of charter accountability structures (Hill, Lake, & Cielo, 2002), and effects on funding

(Huerta & d'Entremont, 2010). While this is valuable work, it is often based on the

assumption that the proper goals for public schools are static, easily articulated, easily measured, and agreed upon. For example, this research tends to take for granted that high standardized-test achievement is good, race and class segregation is bad, and strict public accountability is good. At a certain level these goals may seem beyond debate, however close attention to any of them reveals a much more complicated set of policy dynamics and underlying political issues. Considering the complex ideological roots of charter policy, focusing on whether charters are "working" without also considering "what they are working toward" is problematic.

The non-empirical literature on charter schools might be said to have the opposite problem. In the work of policy scholars (Henig & Stone, 2008; Ravitch, 2013; Stulberg, 2008; Wells, 2002), educational historians (Labaree, 1997) and educational philosophers (Abowitz, 2001, 2010; Higgin & Abowitz, 2011; Wilson, 2010; Waks, 2010) concerns about the ideological implications of charter policy have been explored. However, in this work I find that the emphasis on the abstract arguments about charter policy are limited in their usefulness when considering the local cases where it might be employed. Yes, a critique of neoliberalism is an important tool for understanding the potential impacts of charter school policy, but if it is too blunt of a tool it might fail in its application to particular cases.

With this idea in mind, it is my hope that this study on Patrick Henry serves, in some respect, as a bridge between these two literatures. On the one hand, it suggests the need for more empirical charter research around goals-oriented questions so that our empirical knowledge about the effects of the policies can be understood in relation to what those policies mean to the individuals and communities that enact them and/or are

subject to them. On the other hand, this study suggests that non-empirical charter policy

frameworks might be significantly enriched through empirical studies that consider the

utility and limitations of the frameworks in particular settings. In fact I would go even

further and suggest that in addition to testing existing frameworks, there should be more

research that uses constructivist analyses (Lincoln & Guba, 1989) to build grounded

understandings of charter policy in action. The proliferation of ideas and ideologically

driven discourses that swirl around charter schools turn most deductive "single theory"

approaches (Ball, 1993) into weak explanatory tools.

This point has implications for policy as well. As suggested in chapters two and

four, the policymaking discussion around charter schools at both the national and local

levels have tended to be polarized around particular ideological camps. Within these

discussions carefully selected research becomes a means of justifying claims either for or

against charter policies (Henig, 2008, 2009), a process that some have termed "policy-

based evidence making" (Boden & Epstein, 2006). Putting forward research that

complicates, rather than reinforces ideological positions, might lead to more reflective

policymaking. Of course the potential for this type of effect is dependent on the ability of

researchers to move beyond dissemination in academic publications, and to determine

ways to get complex ideas translated into forms that are usable in policymaking circles.

Contribution to Literature on the History of Schools in Richmond

Just as at the national level, the charter movement has become an open space for

long-standing debates over alternative ideas about public education, the debates around

Patrick Henry were just the most recent articulation of a decades old struggle over the

form, function and control of public schools in the city. I feel that this study makes

several contributions to the literature around the history of public education and public

life in Richmond, Virginia.

First, I believe that this research contributes to understanding of the race and class

divides in the city and their relationship to the history of failed school desegregation

(Cole, 2009; Duke 1995; Silver & Moeser, 1995; Pratt, 1992; Ryan, 2010). While in

certain respects this research reflects familiar dynamics of power and privilege, I feel that

it also sheds new light on the dimensions and the shifting dynamics of these struggles. As

I have suggested, race and class divides were strong factors in the ideas that were

constructed around the school, however these divides were complex and defied

generalization.

Second, I feel that this research is useful in the local context in that it considers

the Richmond school context through the lens of new school reform efforts. As I have

argued throughout this study the policy push toward decentralization, choice policies and

shifting accountability structures change the form and functions of public schools.

Although Virginia has been slow to adopt many of these reforms, the pressure from

national and state level policy makers is increasing. This study of Patrick Henry offered

the opportunity to examine the effect of these policies in the Richmond context. For this

reason, the ideas generated from this study may be useful in future discussions about

changes to local school policy structures. In particular, I believe that it will be useful

when considering the value of expanding school choice through charter schools or other

policy initiatives.

Finally, I believe that this work serves as a historical document of the opening of Patrick Henry School of Science and Arts, and of the context of Richmond Public Schools at the time.

Implications for Patrick Henry and Other School Communities

Through this project I have also thought carefully about the ways this research might inform the work within schools and school communities. In particular, I believe the Patrick Henry school community might benefit from reflecting on the ideas that emerged from the parent interviews as well as the analysis of local press. My hope, in this respect, is that this research helps the school's leaders (administrators, teachers, parent leaders) to think about strategies for structuring school policies and building school community so that Patrick Henry serves both the public and private interests of the students, the families and the broader Richmond community. To the extent that this story around Patrick Henry resonates with the experiences of those who work, and are connected to, other school communities, I believe the research will be valuable in those settings as well.

Final Thoughts: The Evolution of my Interests in Patrick Henry

In chapter one, I presented two reasons for studying the case Patrick Henry. The first was that studies of local cases of schools shed light on the complex dynamics of school reform policies. This is a point I have attempted to illustrate in various ways through this work. The second reason I gave for studying Patrick Henry was my personal connection to the topic. As I said then, one of the motivations for this project was to explore my own struggle between my personal and public commitments to public schools. In this final section of the last chapter, I will reflect on where this project has left

me in regards to this struggle. I will do this by discussing the evolution of my interests in the school.

What inspired me to attend my first Patrick Henry planning meeting in 2007 was a political interest in what was going on with this charter school. Based on my experiences as a teacher and an activist in Chicago and my experiences of the inequities within Richmond Public Schools, I entered that first meeting with a good amount of skepticism about the politics of the project and the people involved with it. At that first meeting, I felt like a spy collecting information that I could use to build a public case against the school. However, over the next year, through 2008, my opinions of and relationship to the school evolved. Part of this was due to changes I saw in the leadership and philosophical direction of the Patrick Henry School Initiative – the group that founded the school – and part of it was also certainly due to the fact that my oldest daughter was getting closer to school age. If opened, Patrick Henry would be a school in my neighborhood – walking distance from my house – that, if the plan came through, would have an environmentally centered, integrated curriculum. This was appealing to me and my wife. The fact that it also might have a diverse school population made it even more appealing. This interest in the school led me to support the school's efforts as they struggled to open. Although I continued to think carefully about the political implications of the school in relation to the larger system, I did so while attending school board meetings with signs in support of the school, and speaking out during public comment sessions. In 2009 my interest in the school shifted again. At that point I had left teaching to become a full time doctoral student in Virginia Commonwealth University's School of

Education. Through my graduate classes I began researching and writing about charter

schools and eventually decided to take on Patrick Henry as the topic for my dissertation.

I see now that the evolution of my interest in Patrick Henry has taken me from a

political interest, to a parental interest, to a research interest in the school. However,

while these interests have evolved over time they have not supplanted each other. Rather

they are layered in ways that make all of them relevant to the ways I think about the

school. The struggle in this for me is that these interests often conflict. For example, my

political interests push me to actions that might influence the direction of the school,

while my research interests warns me against getting too involved. A second example is

that my research interests have occasionally led me to ideas about the school that I chose

not to pursue because of my personal interests in maintaining my relationships with the

school community. A third example is that my parental interests have led me to pull my

oldest daughter from the school and send her to a private school setting, a move that

challenged both my political and research interests in Patrick Henry. There are many

other examples of personal conflicts of interest I have experienced through this study.

Similar to the point Labaree (1997) makes about the competing goals of

education, each of these interests are in continual competition and have each had their

moments of ascendency. Although the tensions between these interests are often difficult

to navigate, I see them as productive and ultimately supportive of each other. I believe

that in the end, these layers of interest improved my ability to speak to the politics of the

school, have improved the quality of this research endeavor, and have made me better

able to navigate the process of school choice as a parent. Now that this research is

complete, I know that my interests in Patrick Henry and my work with the school

community will shift again. I am curious to see where it goes.

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APPENDIX A – Primary documents

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Patrick Henry

Parents and Guardians

Volunteers are needed to participate in a research project through VCU's School of Education concerning parents' perspectives on charter schools and public education.

Would you be willing to be interviewed about your personal experiences of education and your experiences as a parent or guardian of a Patrick Henry student?

For more information contact
Jesse Senechal at

APPENDIX C - Recruitment Script

**PROJECT TITLE: Choosing the Charter: Parents' Perspectives
on the Shifting Nature of Public Education**

My name is Jesse Senechal and I am a graduate student from the Department of Education at VCU. I am conducting a research study to understand the perspectives on public education and charter schools of parents and guardians of Patrick Henry students. For this project I will be interviewing approximately 20 to 30 people. I want to know if you want to learn more about participating in this study. If you have questions about this study you can ask them without making any obligations to participate. I also promise that I will keep this conversation confidential. Do you have any questions at this time? Are you interested in learning more about the study?

If you have questions later, please contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or you may contact my advisor, Dr. Gabriel Reich at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

APPENDIX D – Permission to Contact Form

**PROJECT TITLE: Choosing the Charter: Parents' Perspectives
on the Shifting Nature of Public Education**

What is the purpose of this form?
Jesse Senechal, a doctoral student at Virginia Commonwealth University and a Patrick Henry parent, is conducting a research study to understand the perspectives on public education and charter schools of parents and guardians of Patrick Henry students. For this research he will be interviewing twenty to thirty parents of guardians. He wants to know if you want to learn more about participating in this study. **By signing this form, you will allow him to contact you in the future to explain the study and to ask if you want to participate. You have no obligation to actually participate in this study.** Only the person giving you this form, and the researcher, will see this confidential form. You may withdraw permission to be contacted at any time by contacting the researcher at the phone number or email on the attached flyer.

If you agree to be contacted in the future, please indicate your preferred contact method and sign below.

Preferred contact method:

        phone: _____

        mail: _____

        email address: _____

_____   _____
Signature   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date

APPENDIX E - Research Subject Information and Consent Form

TITLE: Choosing the Charter: Parents' Perspectives on the Shifting Nature of Public Education

This consent form outlines important information about a research study in which you are being asked to participate. Before you sign this consent form, it will be discussed with you in detail by the researcher at which time you will be free to ask any questions regarding the language of the form or your participation in the study. You may take home an unsigned copy of this consent form to think about or discuss with family or friends before making your decision.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this research study is to understand the perspectives on public education of parents and guardians of students at Patrick Henry Charter School in Richmond, Virginia. The study is part of a dissertation research project in Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Education. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a parent or guardian of a Patrick Henry student.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT
This research seeks to understand the different perspectives people have about the charter school. For this project you will be one of twenty to thirty people who are being interviewed.

In this study you will be asked to participate in an interview concerning your perspectives on public education and your experiences as a Patrick Henry parent or guardian. These interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed. The interview should last between 45 and 90 minutes. After the first interview, you may be asked to participate in a follow up interview. Before the completion of the project, you will have an opportunity to review the findings of the interviews to ensure that meanings developed from the research process accurately reflect your experiences and your views. All interviews and meetings will be conducted at a time and in a place most convenient to you.

RISKS, BENEFITS AND COSTS
It is unlikely that participation in this study will cause you any risk or discomfort. However, sometimes talking about life experiences causes people to become upset. You do not have to talk about any subjects you do not want to talk about, and you may leave the project at any time.

You may not get any direct benefit from this study, but the information we learn from this study may help us think about the meaning of public education and the topic of charter schools in new ways. In addition many people find talking about their experiences helpful.

There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time you will spend in the interviews.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Potentially identifiable information about you will consist of this consent form, a demographic data form that will be completed during the interview, audio files of interviews, transcripts of

interviews, researcher field notes, journal entries, and communications with the researcher. A fake name will replace your name in documented field notes and will not be connected to names on the consent form or other forms containing identifying information about you. All electronic data will be kept in password protected computer files. Hard copies of data will be kept in locked filing cabinets. Transcripts of interviews will be kept for a minimum of five years after the completion of the study. All other data containing identifiable information on computer files and hard copies will be destroyed upon completion of the research study. Access to all data will be limited to the researcher.

Findings from this study may be presented at meetings or published in papers, but your name will not ever be used in these presentations or papers. It should be noted that, because of the importance of the local context to the study, the name of the school and the city will be used in the presentations of data.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL
You do not have to participate in this study. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study.

Your participation in this study may be stopped at any time by the investigator without your consent. The reasons might include:
- You are unable to meet the required steps within the process.
- You are unable to attend follow up meetings, sessions, and interviews.

If you leave the study, you will be given the option of having any data already collected about you destroyed and not used in the project.

QUESTIONS
In the future, you may have questions about your participation in this study. If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, contact:

Student Investigator
Jesse Senechal
School of Education
Virginia Commonwealth University
XXX-XXX-XXXX
senechaljt@vcu.edu

Or

Faculty Instructor
Gabriel Reich, PhD
School of Education
Virginia Commonwealth University
greich@vcu.edu

CONSENT
I have been given the chance to read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. Questions that I wanted to ask about the study have been answered. My signature says that I am willing to participate in this study. I will receive a copy of the consent form once I have agreed to participate.

_____

Participant name printed   Participant signature   Date

_____   _____

Principal Investigator Signature   Date [4]

APPENDIX F – Demographic Data Form

**PROJECT TITLE: Choosing the Charter: Parents' Perspectives
on the Shifting Nature of Public Education**

The data below is being collected to help give context to the information you share through the interview. Some of the questions are asking about personal information. All information will be kept strictly confidential. You may skip any question you do not wish to answer. Thank you for your participation!

Name: _____

1) How old are you? _____
2) What is your gender?
   o Female
   o Male
3) With which of the following racial/ethnic categories do you most closely identify?
   o African American
   o White
   o Asian American
   o Latino
   o American Indian or Alaska Native
   o Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   o Other _____

4) How many children do you have? _____
5) How many school-age children do you have? _____
6) How many of your school-age children go to Patrick Henry? _____
7) In what grade(s) at Patrick Henry is/are your child(ren)?

   Child 1 _____
   Child 2 _____
   Child 3 _____

8) What is your best estimate of your family's annual income?
   o Less than $30,000 a year
   o Between $30,001 and $60,000 a year
   o Between $60,001 and $90,000 a year
   o Between $90,001 and $120,000 a year
   o More than $120,001 a year

APPENDIX G – Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about your school experiences as a student.

2. What do you imagine as the perfect school for your son or daughter?

3. Tell me about the decision to send your child to Patrick Henry.

4. What are your current feelings about the school?

5. If Patrick Henry closed, or if you left the school, what would be your next choice?