A Paradox of Care:
[Re]-Examining Education for Students with Diverse Needs

By Lan Hue Quach

Introduction

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Whether explicitly or implicitly identified, *caring for children* is commonly used as the rationale for why teachers choose to teach, which pedagogical approaches are used, and which school reforms are popularized. Choices that are moral and ethical, according to Carol Gilligan (1982) are not primarily based on rationality. Gilligan asserts that ethical choices are informed by norms of care and relationship, describing care and justice as, "two moral perspectives that organize both thinking and feelings and empower the self to take the different kinds of action in public as well as private life" (p. 209). Her examination of the relational in moral reasoning combined with the work of scholars such as Nel Noddings (1984, 1992), has lead to a body of literature that examines the role that caring has specifically played in the context of schooling (Beck, 1994; Eaker-Rich & Van Galen, 1996; Larrabee, 1993; Miller, 1990; Prillman, Eaker, & Kendrick, 1994). This work has led to the conclusion

that caring is both necessary for and in education (Noddings, 1992; Grumet, 1988; Eaker-Rich & Van Galen, 1996).

However, some scholars would argue that it is in fact in response to the *lack of care* in regards for specific diverse student populations in schools that has energized the charter school reform in an effort to provide parents with more options in public education (Fuller, 2000), despite the underlying costs or unintended consequences. As Lubienski (2001) states, " Frustrated with the 'one-size-fits-all' model of traditional public schools, charter school proponents and parents place their hope in the ability of autonomous schools to provide an array of options for children and to offer some competition for moribund district schools" (p. 1).

Charter schools are diverse and do not fall into "universalistic terms," as described by Fuller (2001). Currently, thirty-eight states have embraced charter schools by passing legislation that provides parents with options in school choice (Sandham, 2001). Inherent in most studies of charter schools is that they are more different than they are alike (Fuller, 2001; Murphy & Shiffman, 2002; Vanourek, Manno, & Finn, 2000; Wells, Lopez, Scott, & Holme, 1999). Some charter schools have been developed to better meet the needs of racially or culturally diverse students (Levin, 1999; Rhim & McLaughlin, 1999) and/or of students identified as "failing," or "at-risk," (Estes, 2004; McLaughlin, Henderson, & Ullah, 1996). Other charter schools have been created to better meet the needs of more academically gifted students or those on the college track, while some focus on a "back to basics" curriculum (Rothstein, 1998). Even though they are diverse, defined by distinct curriculums and varied teaching philosophies and/or pedagogies, the students who attend charter schools resemble students in traditional public school settings.

This article presents a case study of one charter school that challenges the meaning of a public school education for diverse students from a different perspective. This school does not look like other public schools, nor does it resemble other charter schools that are committed to diversity. Rather, New Hope Charter is a child-focused education center situated in a large yellow house framed by white dogwood trees and outlined with pink tulips. To understand the school, one must understand the students. In this school, notions of the "traditional" student, "traditional" education and the meaning of "diversity" are greatly challenged. Students in this school are placed in classroom based on their developmental, rather than chronological, age. Communication with students is less dependent upon the spoken word and more dependent upon physical and non-verbal exchanges. In this school, the teachers have high and clear expectations of students and instruction is personal and individualized. Each student has a different set of needs and learns to complete tasks that are relevant to his or her individual growth.

The teachers in this school are more than educators, they are considered an extension of "family." As part of the family, they do "whatever it takes" for their "kids." From its inception, New Hope Charter is dedicated to the students and to providing a *meaningful* education for sixteen children ages 5-21 who have severe

and profound physical and developmental multi-handicaps. This case study attempts to describe how the meaning of education for these diverse students is redefined within these classroom walls. In this article, I describe a complex story of one charter school that has successfully created a space for non-traditional students with multiple handicaps by framing it within a context of care (Beck, 1994; Eaken-Rich & Van Galen, 1996; Larrabee, 1997; Noddings, 1992, 1984; Miller, 1990). Coupled with this description, I include an interrogation of an educational system that has failed this population of students and highlight the hidden contradictions embedded within the charter reform.

Charter Schools and Special Needs Students

Defined as public schools, charter schools are federally mandated to provide access to education for all students by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended, and the Americans with Disabilties Act (ADA). In a review of the literature, Estes (2000, 2004) found, as a general trend, charter schools often fail to meet the needs of children with special needs. Heubert (1997) specifically identified two specific reasons for this trend/finding. First, adequate compliance would require charter schools act as their own Local Education Agency (LEA) to endure the costs of accommodating for special needs students in addition to their own start up costs. Second, charter schools have more flexibility for admitting and denying admittance to students than traditional public schools because they are so inherently unique. For these reasons, the ability to educate special needs students in charter schools is difficult. Ironically, even without the same challenges charter schools face, traditional public schools have also fallen short in their attempts in educating special needs students, particularly in meeting the complex needs of students with multiple, severe, and profound physical and developmental handicaps. Often separated from the mainstream due to these characteristics, this population of students is often left out of discussions of multiculturalism and diversity in schools.

New Hope Charter places the child at the fore; creating a space that meets both their physical and educational needs, while grounding the school's teaching philosophy in an ethic of care. It is the school's mission to focus on the abilities of children, rather than their disabilities. It therefore becomes a natural response for parents, teachers, administrators, and community members to want to embrace this school and to care about its success. To embrace it without critical reflection, however, supports an insouciant system of education that validates the separation of students who fail to fit into the mainstream mold, despite the efforts of policies that mandate the inclusion of students with disabilities in educational contexts. This practice of separating students with disabilities from the mainstream "undermines the spirit of inclusion" of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as described by Rothstein (1999).

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Paradoxes within the Charter Reform

In a comprehensive study of California charter schools, Wells, Lopez, Scott, and Holme (2002) argue that charter schools are a "postmodern paradox." They assert that "what may be a liberatory reform for some people in localized communities may contribute to the greater inequality across the broader, or more 'global' educational system" (p.182). While local communities become empowered by deregulation of schooling and offered an opportunity to create "sites of resistance," these sites often exacerbate racial and socio-economic inequities (Lopez, Wells, & Holme, 2002). Charter schools use the rhetoric of reform and school choice, but have been described as paradoxical in more than one way. For example, in a study of ten charter schools in New York, Jacobowitz (2000) identified a paradox of support between charter schools and their institutional partners, arguing that while deregulation enables schools to seek institutional partners for support, these need-based relationships can often limit school autonomy.

School choice, in fact, precludes the state from addressing structural inequities that exist between racially and socio-economically diverse groups (Fuller, 2001). Although proponents of the charter school movement may portray this reform as an exemplar of accountability and systematic reform, research shows that the charter school movement is failing the most disadvantaged students (Nathan, 2004). In fact, studies on charter schools across the nation suggest that the charter school movement has exacerbated the inequities in the educational system (Wells, 2002; Slayton, 2002; Scott & Holme, 2002; Lopez et al, 2002). Wells et al. (2000) found that while states with more diverse populations typically enrolled students in charter schools who were affluent and White, those states with more homogenous populations had higher numbers of diverse students in their charter schools. Although there are differences on a state-to-state level, researchers have found that charter schools are actually not particularly diverse either racially or socio-economically and that public schools are actually more heterogeneous than their charter school counterparts (Wells, Holme, Lopez, & Copper, 2000). A closer examination of the demographic makeup of charter schools reveals that charter schools segregate students by racial makeup and social class (Wells et al, 2000). Data that is examined on a school level shows that charter schools tend to enroll students who are predominantly White or students of color, with little diversity among them, specifically in New York (Ascher, Jacobwitz, & McBride, 1999) and Arizona (Cobb & Glass, 1999). The contradictions discussed within this case support the charter reform as paradoxical. While the issues presented do not center around inequities of race, culture, or SES, there is evidence to show that support of this school within this localized community may contribute to greater inequality within the educational system, revealing a *paradox of care.*

The Caring Relation

Many researchers have examined caring in schools and have especially looked at how teachers and schools define and practice care (Eaker-Rich & Van Galen, 1996; Prillman, Eaker, & Kendrick, 1994; Beck, 1994). Noddings (1992) describes caring as reciprocal and relational, not self-sacrificing nor sentimental. Thus, the caring relation is,

> . . . in its most basic form, a connection or encounter between two human beings—a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for. In order for the relation to be caring, both parties must contribute to it in characteristic ways. A failure on the part of either the carer or the cared-for blocks completion of caring, and although theirs may still be a relation—that is, an encounter in which each party feels something toward the other—it is not a caring relation. (p.15)

Upon initial assessment, New Hope charter is an exemplar of a caring relation. There is clear evidence of both the care givers (the parents, the teachers and staff) and the cared for (the students) and reciprocity in the caring relation. However, an examination of the deeper issues inherent in New Hope Charter reveals a school created in direct response to the inequities exacerbated by a system that devalues students who do not fit nicely into society's mold. This school presents a conflicting representation of what education should be: individualized, student-centered, and caring.

As we embrace its success, we may also be supporting the transfer in responsibility of educating non-mainstream students from the public schools to parents and educators frustrated with the status quo. Advocating for the need to create separate schools for different students even under the guise of care can, in fact, perpetuate inequality and reinforce the claim that students with special needs or handicaps are too difficult to educate and have no place in the traditional public school system.

Methodology

New Hope Charter was one school included in a state-wide evaluation of charter schools conducted from 2000-2003 at a large public university in the South. Using qualitative research methods, this case study was informed by rich descriptive data collected primarily in the form of observations and interviews with participants. Case studies offer researchers the ability to examine a research context and study participants using rich description and field notes in search of dominant themes to develop a better understanding of a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Stake, 1995, 2000) or in this case, the particularities of this charter school. Due to the location of the school, the data were primarily collected during an intense three-day on-site visit of the school. However, informal contact with the director and teachers following the visit continued over the next academic year. Although the actual time

spent within the school walls was short-lived, the research team was welcomed in the school and made to feel "a part of the family."

Site visits involved in-depth observations in classrooms and individual and focus group interviews with administrators, community partners, teachers, and parents. In addition, researcher reflections, often written at the end of informal meetings with a parent, after lunches with the director and teachers, and at the end of each day, were included in the data analysis. To elicit information from the study's participants, open-ended questions were developed to create a semi-structured protocol that guided individual and focus group interviews.

Data collected by the evaluation team yielded numerous hours of interview data and over sixty pages of field notes. Archival data that included the original charter school application, web-site content, newspapers and news briefs, and school brochures were included to triangulate data and inform the interpretations. All data were coded and interrogated for dominant themes and patterns as well as regularities and irregularities (Delamont, 1992).

The caring relation as described by Noddings (1984, 1992, 2001) as it exists between the one(s) caring (the teachers and staff) and the cared-for (the New Hope students) is used to frame the data. In addition, the role of reciprocity in the caring relation between students and their teachers and students and lack of caring in the larger context of schools is discussed.

Results

The Caring Context

New Hope Charter sits in the heart of a historical district of a small town adjacent to a small local college. This is not the typical school comprised of hallways lined with classrooms and separated by grade levels. In this school, the classrooms are extensions of home, located in a renovated house and lit naturally by light that enters through large Victorian windows. The students in this school are not brought by school buses but are driven individually to school by a driver. Unlike many makeshift spaces often used for the site of a charter school, the teachers and staff at New Hope successfully created a school that reflects the extension of a caring home environment by being resourceful, practical, and creative. When asked to describe the rationale for the layout of the school, the school's director stated, "In this school, physical needs drive physical space."

This space was previously a day care facility that was carefully transformed into New Hope Charter School, equipped to meet the needs of students with extreme special needs. After state inspectors restricted the use of the upstairs for educational purposes, the once large house turned into a school with very limited usable space. With great creativity, the staff transformed the downstairs into a fully functional educational facility. Specifically, two new-handicapped bathrooms were con-

structed in the house for the students and the office was created from unused hallway space. The three most desirable rooms were reserved as the classrooms for students. This school also has a therapy room, a room for personal care, and a kitchen. The upstairs was transformed into space for storage on one side and a meeting room for adults. While this space may be considered raw to some and eclectic to others, it reflects the efforts of people who substituted aesthetic form with functionality. By transforming this house into a school that embodies the extension of home as well as a place where learning and growth occur, the teachers and staff went beyond a verbal expression of care on a daily basis. They were successful in creating a space to meet the needs of their students mainly because they adopted a "whatever it takes" mantra.

Nel Noddings (1992) describes the "desire to be cared for is almost certainly a universal human characteristic" (p. 17). This desire is true of children, but particularly true for children whose lives are constrained by physical and mental handicaps and who are solely dependent upon another. In an interview, one parent describes the difficulty in raising a child with such needs.

> It breaks my heart to know that my child has such unique needs that confine him to a wheelchair. It makes it impossible for him to have a normal life. I want him to be able to do what kids do and to go to school and be treated like everyone else, but you know he can't. You feel blessed to have them in your life, yet also feel a great sense of sadness not because of them, [pause] but for them.

Although parents and teachers felt this sense of sadness, they did not let this prevent them from adopting a "whatever it takes" mentality to transform an old house into a school that is devoted to individualized learning.

The "Ones-Caring": Teachers and Staff

Teachers are first and foremost the "one(s)-caring." They are "engrossed" in the cared-for "completely and nonselectively" (Noddings, 1984 p. 176). In this school, teachers must embody this characteristic of engrossment. When they commit to teaching in this school, they commit to the role of caring and to the family. Everyone describes the people at New Hope Charter as "one big family." This family is not only made up of the teachers, staff, and students but also the parents and the community.

Most of the teachers and assistants at New Hope Charter School have been with the parent organization (The New Hope Agency) between 15-20 years. New Hope does not have a principal who leads the teachers and staff. Instead, the head administrator is considered the education director. The staff is comprised of several teachers and a variety of occupational, physical, and speech therapists. The commitment of the school is clearly reflected in the longevity of the entire staff. The love and commitment for these children is reflected in the teachers and staff's goal to provide an individualized and meaningful education. Their philosophy is grounded in the belief that these students cannot be educated unless their medical needs are also considered. Meeting the needs of the entire child and adopting a

"doing whatever it takes" attitude is what enables the teachers and staff at New Hope to be successful.

More powerful than collegial relationships, the teachers, parents, students, and staff created a familial relationship with one another in this school. This theme emerged from various interviews with parents, teachers, and staff and numerous observations where time and time again, everyone described one another as a member of a larger family community. As a teacher or staff member, the demands of teaching students with a multiplicity of complex physical, developmental, and educational needs can create a unique challenge. In individual interviews and focus groups, teachers and staff revealed that, despite the challenges and many hardships, the reason why they stay is because "they are family." When asked about the challenges of this job, one teacher stated,

> It can be real tough at times, especially when you know how fragile these kids are. Sometimes we lose one. Those are the roughest times. However, we all seem to make it through because we have each other. We know that if we can get through those times, the daily challenges don't seem like such a big deal.

When the school had to hire new teachers or staff, they reported looking for candidates who were willing to become "a part of the family," rather than being just another employee. One teacher viewed her role at New Hope as a mission rather than a job and "the children keep her coming back each day." The commitment that everyone at New Hope has to the students forges the relationships that they have with one another and it is through on-going communication and dialogue that the school is able to meet the needs of the students. They do this on a daily basis, despite the significant pay cuts the teachers and staff had to take in order to dedicate their lives to children who need personal attention for growth.

Community Support

In interviews with the principal and teachers, it became clear that this school survived because everyone—from parents to the school bus drivers—is fully invested in its success. Much of the funding that New Hope Charter receives comes from an amalgam of different state and local agencies as well as private contributions. The Department of Public Instruction, the United Way, as well as parents, families, and community churches support this charter school. When teachers and parents were asked about how this school can properly run, each reported the importance of a collegial effort and adopting a "doing whatever it takes" mentality at all times. In an interview with the director, she stated:

> We get anything and everything we can for free. We just have to work together to make it work. We can't just sit on our hands and wait for opportunities. We don't mind doing the work, but we really need more help, more money to do it right. We make it through, one day at a time.

The director's husband along with other family and community members spent time painting, landscaping, and building ramps for access in order to get this school running. Although the parents and teachers were willing to give everything that they had, it was never enough. The problems that New Hope faced with finances are consistent with what many charter schools face. Lack of funding continues to be the greatest challenge for the teachers and staff at New Hope Charter. The needs of the students require that there are many professionals on staff, including physical therapists, speech pathologist, psychologists, and occupational therapists. But despite the financial strain and external challenges, the teachers and staff maintain the level of quality in education that they believe in by seeking resources in order to meet the needs of these students. On a daily basis, they do whatever they need to in order to "make it work."

The Cared-For

At the time of the data collection, there were sixteen students enrolled in New Hope Charter. Two students were autistic and fourteen students had a variety of multiple, severe and profound handicaps. The students in this school were predominantly White with the exception of one African American adolescent girl and an African American elementary-aged boy. With the exception of four students, the remaining twelve children were confined to wheelchairs and/or relied heavily on braces and other devices to support their head and bodies. Each student had limitations, but excelled in this school. Each student engaged in developmentally appropriate tasks and visibly seemed content. The parents, teachers and support staff described these students as "gifts," treasures," and "real human beings with real human needs."

While the staff appreciated these students, in the teacher and parent interviews, participants consistently described how the public schools not only failed in meeting the needs of these students, but saw them as "burdens" and "inconveniences." One parent remembered a conversation with a principal in which he told her that her child needed to be in a different place than a public school. The principal said to this parent, "He simply does not fit and we don't really know what to do with him."

One teacher in an individual interview contrasted the views of the teachers in her former school with the views at New Hope Charter by stating,

> Yes, these kids are different—but they are so special. The public schools see them as a burden rather than see them for what they have to offer. They are the most lovable kids and they can do a lot more than people think they can. Here we [New Hope Charter] focus on their abilities, rather than on their disabilities. We see their potential rather than their limitations. If we don't, I'm not sure who will.

The school's director described the negative experiences that one student had in her previous schools in the following statement:

> Susan is autistic. She lives in a group home and was a student at New Hope Charter. She was at New Hope because the school that she previously attended found her difficult and often called her case manager to "have her removed." For this reason, Susan ended up spending more time of school than she spent in it. In the hope to find a school that would invest in her education, the case manager brought her to New Hope.

Due to the diversity of needs and developmental differences in each child, teaching and learning must be individualized to be appropriate. Through *modeling*, the teachers and staff at New Hope provide students with opportunities that are individual and developmentally appropriate. These students experience personal growth that allows them to shape themselves through their experience- they learn to care and to be cared for, despite the challenges.

Redefining Teaching and Learning

The ability to reason is what is traditionally valued in schools. For students who are incapable of engaging in reasoning because of their physical, mental, or developmental handicaps, schooling in the traditional sense of the word may seem inappropriate. In *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, Noddings (1982) also discusses the caring for strangers and distant others and describes how "we" often experience a distance to those persons who are "disabled." There is such a separation because we often do not recognize those human responses that are unfamiliar to us. She states,

> If our knowledge comes only from books and lectures, it is easy to sentimentalize the disabled and suppose that we need only avoid prejudice. In actuality the range of disabilities is enormous. Some are so small that we should ask ourselves whether we have invented them to keep our specialists in business. Some, managed sensitively, may be converted into new forms of creativity. Some are so severe and pervasive that most of us would be unable to detect a characteristically human response. (pp.124-125)

Fortunately for the students at New Hope, the "we" that run the school reject that distance and validate the many other human responses that are equally if not more important than the ability to reason. Although the kind of learning that occurs at New Hope Charter is unlike conventional learning, it is clear that the students here are progressing. In one classroom, there were six students who ranged from age six to age twenty. For example, while three students work together completing a sorting activity, another student worked individually at her own space separated by a screen to keep her focused. One student sat in a wheelchair that was modified by the addition of skis to keep him from flipping over as he rocked. In another part of the room, another student worked in her wheelchair on another individual task while constantly smiling at her peers. One student spent the day working on motor control while another engaged in an activity that focused on his responsiveness to stimuli.

The two other classrooms were designated for the remaining ten children. In one classroom, there is one teacher and two autistic students. Each student had his and

her own carrel and individual desk lamp. As she spoke to the children with a soft and comforting voice, she rubbed their backs and looked intently into their eyes. The teacher usually worked with the students at their individual desks or at the larger table. She often looked into their eyes with silent encouragement, repeating aloud, "You will complete this. You can do this." As she used both verbal and non-verbal responses to communicate to them, she does not expect the same in return.

The third classroom served the remaining students. At the time of data collection, there were only two teacher assistants in that classroom. New Hope tried to fill the teacher position, but was unsuccessful in finding someone who would commit to the greater mission of the school. Until the position was filled, the teacher assistants lovingly tried to meet each individual student's diverse needs. The students who are able to feed themselves were given positive feedback from the assistants while they tried to feed the two others students who could not physically feed themselves. After lunch, the children's teeth were individually brushed for them and quickly moved back into the larger circle for a class activity. The teachers and staff at New Hope stayed dedicated, and together they overcame the daily challenges in teaching severe and multi-handicapped students. Through the kind of teaching and learning that occurs in this school, to care and to be cared for is inherent in the multiple relationships the teachers, staff, students and parents share.

Reciprocity

In any caring relationship, there needs to be what Noddings describes as reciprocity. In essence, the one-caring needs to know that the cared-for recognizes and receives the caring. Otherwise, the cared-for can claim that the teacher or the parent does not care. Through instruction and daily interactions at New Hope, it is clear that the teachers at New Hope are invested in, committed to, and care for their students. It is less obvious, however, how students acknowledge this care. Noddings (1984, 1992) states that a verbal expression of care is inadequate in truly showing the receipt of the act of caring. Demonstrating reciprocity in the caring relation through verbal communication is impossible for the students at New Hope Charter. Instead, the students and teachers rely on alternative forms of expression.

In *Bitter Milk*, Madeline Grumet (1996) writes about what teaching means to women and argues that it is within human relationships that knowledge evolves. Using the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's language of the body-subject, Grumet asserts that "knowledge from and about the body is knowledge about the world" (p. 3). Only by embracing this understanding about the knowledge of body can we validate the experiences of the students at New Hope Charter. Knowledge for these children is constructed through the relationship that they share with their teachers. Teachers need to show students that they care through the act of *modeling*, by creating a caring relationship with each individual student. Through other responses such as

laughter, touch, facial expressions, eye contact and the like, teachers and students can express care. Through body knowledge, the caring relation is sustained.

The students at New Hope must then rely on human responses to express reciprocity to the ones-caring. The following response from a teacher interview highlights what reciprocity looks like in this context,

> Susan spends half of her day at New Hope with her teacher Liz and the other half of her day at her group home participating in a vocational program. It is natural for the teacher to cut up Susan's food and feed her. She can't say anything, but you know in your heart she appreciates the attention.

Fieldnotes from classroom observations underscore this relationship.

> She [the teacher] talks to her [Susan] as if she was the most important person in the world while never expecting a response. Liz tells Susan about what she will learn, what she will do, and how she can do anything because she is so special. Susan sits in her chair eating silently, void of any reaction. There is vacancy in her eyes and she is unresponsive. While she will look in the direction of the hall as other teachers, staff, and visitors pass by, she remains disconnected to the world around her. To the outsider, it is difficult to see teaching and learning. It is difficult to see if the instruction Liz provides is beneficial and one wonders if Susan even knows who Liz is and/ or what she is doing. But Liz just keeps going.

Noddings states that "to accept the gift of responsiveness from the cared-for is natural for the one-caring. It is consistent with caring." (p. 72). In an individual interview, one teacher remembers a story about Susan,

> What started off to be a normal day ended up being one anything but normal. Liz [Susan's teacher] has epilepsy although this has never interfered with her instruction. One morning, Liz had a seizure in the middle of class and fell to the floor. The classrooms are somewhat separated from one another, so unless you walked down the hall towards the front of the house, this particular classroom would be out of view. When Liz fell, Susan got up out of her seat where she usually sat all morning. She then moved out from her classroom where it was safe and familiar into the other classroom across the foyer in search of help. She walked up to another teacher and took her hand. Without a sound, she walked this teacher into her classroom to help Liz. Before that day, she never left her classroom without help from somebody.

According to Noddings (1986),

> What the cared-for gives to the relation either in direct response to the one-caring or in personal delight or in happy growth before her eyes is genuine reciprocity. It contributes to the maintenance of the relation and serves to prevent caring from turning back on the one-caring in the form of anguish or concern for self. (p 74)

While the caring relation is clearly evident in the relationship between the teachers and the students, the success of New Hope Charter depends on the commitment from the larger institution of education to "care" about these

students. However, teacher and parent interviews revealed just how much the traditional public schools failed to do so.

A Lack of Care

The development of New Hope Charter School was necessitated by the lack of options parents had in providing their children with an appropriate and challenging education. This is consistent with most research focused on charter schools and special education services. According to a national study conducted by Fiore, Harwell, Blackorby, and Finnagan (2000), parents identified negative experiences with traditional public schools as one of the primary reasons for enrolling their children in charter schools. Careful analysis of school documents and transcripts of interviews with parents and teachers at New Hope Charter revealed a disturbing history of the exclusion of students with multiple and profound handicaps within this community and surrounding areas.

Before there was New Hope Charter School, there was The New Hope Agency. This group was created by parents, educators, and nurses frustrated by the lack of services available for children and adults with severe and profound multi-handicaps. This group gathered in a basement of a small town church over thirty years ago to discuss the lack of availability of resources to serve their children. They described a lack of trained professionals in regular day care facilities, leaving parents feeling helpless in their inability to find care for their children. Once established, this agency grew and obtained funding from the Department of Disability Services to move beyond day care services to focus more on the educational needs of these students. From this agency, several centers were created for children from eight weeks to adults. One center focuses on children from eight weeks old to pre-school. Another facility provided services for students ages 5 through 21, while a separate adult facility provided resources for adults with special needs. Soon after, the local county school board contracted this agency to work with school-aged students in the public school system.

However, the lack of resources, funding, time and understanding that the staff experienced in the public school system made meeting the needs of students simply insurmountable. The center eventually only received $720 per student, an amount that is grossly inadequate to provide all of the support services these students need. After much confrontation with the public school administration over lack of appropriate funding, the staff realized the need for change. The staff soon discovered that they were unable to meet the educational needs of these students without first meeting their physical and mental needs. The growing frustration was coupled with a suggestion made by the superintendent of the system to apply for a charter. Thus, with feelings of anger and frustration, this group of parents, teachers, and nurses collaborated with one another to develop the New Hope Charter School, a school specifically designed to be child-centered and inclusive. From the New Hope

Agency emerged the creation of New Hope Charter School, a private corporation transformed into a semi-autonomous public school whose aim was to provide more educative services to these students. With the knowledge that these students often have multiple and complex medical needs that require the services from various medical professionals and therapists, New Hope Charter School was determined to create a school that would meet students' medical as well as educational needs. Thus, the services that traditional public school provided were considered inadequate (at best) for this population of students, leaving no other choice but to create a separate school.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees that all children with disabilities have access to a free and appropriate public education. However, this law does little to regulate the quality of education that students receive. One parent stated, "the mere access to education is clearly not enough." In fact, researchers have argued that an identical education often *ensures* inequality (Noddings, 1992; Nieto; 1995, Ogbu, 1992; Fuller, 2001). Although the public school system is obligated by law to provide these students with an education, parents reported that public school staff made it explicit that students with these kinds of disabilities had no place in their school.

Parents reported feeling ignored and dismissed by the traditional public schools. Parents described at length how schools and principals took great measures to make their children feel unwelcome and excluded. One parent even remembers overhearing this principal tell his administrative assistant, "Good, let the charter school 'deal' with these kids. We can't do anything for them here. They really don't belong and are just one more thing to worry about." In an interview with another parent frustrated with the traditional public school in which her child was enrolled, she stated:

> When you take your child to school so they can learn and grow mentally and the school that you take them to explicitly treats them as outsiders, you become outraged. There is no excuse for the bad treatment of children. I just had it. If I didn't find the option that New Hope provided, I would have taken my child out of school completely. I felt it was probably better to expose him to the little bit of stimuli I could provide at home rather than expose him to the cruelty of students and teachers who clearly did not view him as a valued human being.

While the public school administrators often made parents feel that they had no rights, the staff went out of their way to explain to parents their rights. In describing how the traditional public school treated her child, one parent said, "The system [public school] wanted Chris to fit into a class rather than making a class to fit him". Many of these parents felt victimized by the system and disempowered in providing their children with a positive school experience. Parents felt that the traditional public school merely provided babysitting services rather than structured education. Most of these parents felt that the inclusion of their children in mainstream classrooms only created a space where they were ridiculed and ignored and that this charter school was the only logical option. One parent recalled,

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I have taken David in and out of different schools. I remember enrolling him into a new school and was worried about how he was being treated. When I showed up one day unexpectedly, the principal left me waiting in his office for an hour. I just wanted to see how he was doing in this new school. When I finally got to the classroom, it was crowded and my David was sitting in the corner by himself. He was just sitting there, all alone in the corner. I was in tears. Is this why he is in school?

Parents also reported that their children fell victim to acts of discrimination and neglect. In contrast, New Hope Charter provided parents the opportunity to give their children a meaningful education, despite any physical, mental, or development limitations. Parents reported feeling secure and confident that they were sending their children to a safe place where they would no longer be ignored.

Caring Too Much

Every child and adult who entered its double doors were embraced and welcomed into "the family." It was evident that teachers and staff "really cared" about their students. Within a caring relation, the role of care giver that the parents, teachers, and staff occupied and the role that the students occupied as the cared-for was clear. Even though the students at New Hope Charter had limitations and could not express reciprocity through verbal communication, observations of the classrooms and school revealed that the caring for students in this context was indeed authentic. The teachers and staff worked hard to create a school that placed the child at the center and developed a mission grounded in an ethic of care through its examples of modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. Despite the daily challenges of teaching students with severe and profound multi- handicaps, New Hope Charter managed to find creative solutions to problems that many charter schools face in terms of resources and funding, the data suggests that New Hope Charter is a success.

This school became what Fuller (2001) describes as a *site of resistance* and warrants examination beyond the surface of the implications for supporting the success of New Hope Charter and others like it. While this discussion is necessary, it is not one that is critical of the charter school itself, but one that interrogates a system of education that is clearly failing non-mainstream students with diverse needs. In an examination of the larger school context and how the education system treats students with disabilities, there are clear paradoxical relationships that emerged.

Discussion

A Paradox of Support

The charter school movement, once sustained by educators, parents, and organizations with alternate visions of schooling, has been slowed by the realities of maintaining an autonomous school without adequate support and funding

(Wells, 2002). This lack of support and funding has mostly impacted those schools that need it the most. As a school that is specific to a particular population, New Hope Charter must be generously funded in order to properly meet the needs of students with multiple and severe handicaps. Although the local school system and administrators verbally express a commitment to the success of New Hope Charter, few do much to contribute to it.

Students, teachers, parents, schools, and communities benefit specifically from the success of this charter school. With deregulation comes the responsibility to sustain the life of a school with limited funding and resources. The charters that serve more affluent students can raise private funds with little problem, while those that serve the most disadvantaged children continue to struggle (Estes, 2004). New Hope Charter is a school that serves students who are described as "severely/profoundly mentally challenged and medically challenged." This school requires not only teachers, but also the work of therapists, doctors and other medical professionals who can meet students' needs. Charter schools that serve as their own Local Education Agency (LEA) are required to assume the responsibility for providing these resources to their students (McKinney, 1998), despite the costs. These students are multi-handicapped and many have medical complications that often require hospitalization. In this school, funding is needed for more than textbooks and transportation. Although New Hope was granted a charter, without adequate support and funding, it is also destined to fail.

Failure of this school would again leave parents with few options. Parents were hopeful but recognized this reality. Many reported feeling fearful of losing good teachers due to the lack of funding, uncertain of how long this school would be able to survive. They felt that the teachers and staff were grossly underpaid, given the great responsibility they had in educating these students. While one parent commented that the vision of New Hope Charter is one that should be "continued, expanded, and modified by other schools that believe in children," others were doubtful that would happen. The parents in this school felt that New Hope Charter was able to provide these kids with something that the traditional public school clearly lacked—hope, time, support, and clear knowledge of their students' particular needs. Parents who once felt unimportant and dismissed by public school administrators now felt hopeful and empowered by the staff at New Hope Charter who truly made a difference in the lives of their children. Yet without broader evidence of care through more institutional support and funding, the success of this charter school remains questionable.

A Paradox of Care

Students with special needs have been a challenge for traditional public and charter schools. Issues with lack of funding (Fiore, Harwell, Blackorby, & Finnagan (2000), teachers with a lack of expertise in the field (Estes, 2000; 2001), and the potential for discrimination against students who "cost more" to teach (Nathan,

1996) have been identified as key issues related to special needs populations. However, the services that New Hope Charter provides are unmatched across the county or state, making the success of the school highly important. Logically, it makes sense to support a school that has given parents an alternative to what the traditional public school could [not] provide in terms of a meaningful education for their students. It is both unrealistic and absurd to impose traditional curriculum, state mandates, and educational expectations on students who function at significantly different levels than mainstream classroom students. It makes sense for all students, but particularly students with such complex severe, profound, and multiple handicaps to be in a school that values the ethic of care.

Parents and teachers are finally satisfied with the education that their children are receiving at New Hope Charter, while the public schools are unburdened with the responsibility to educate students with severe and multiple handicaps. According to one parent, "The school system is so relieved not to have Johnny in their school anymore. The principal became very nice to me once he found out that I was enrolling Johnny elsewhere." The traditional public schools were pleased to send these students to a separate school, taking them "off the hook" in terms of responsibility for these students. Teachers and parents both agreed that they hope districts will see how successful this charter is and support it as a reasonable alternative for public schools. Believing that children can learn when they are given a fighting chance, New Hope Charter cares for these students. Principals, districts and others who once felt burdened by the responsibility to care for this population now care about the success of this school.

The creation of this separate educational facility for students with severe/ profound and multi-handicapped children has been a welcome response to the failure of the traditional public schools. However, there is an inherent danger in having to create an autonomous space, a separate facility, in order to adequately meet the needs of students who fail to fit within the mainstream mold.

Conclusion

Embedded in the rhetoric of change and reform, charter schools have become a logical alternative to public education for discontented parents, teachers, community activists, corporations and the like whose visions of what schooling should be differs dramatically from what already exists (Wells, 2002; Lopez, Wells, & Holme, 2002; Fuller, 2001; Cookson, 1994). New Hope Charter became the "only true option" in schooling for parents with severe and profound multi-handicapped children. It has been seminal in the [re]examination of educational needs for this population. New Hope charter provides a glimpse inside yet another diverse charter school, one with an alternative vision of educating children, particularly children with a unique multiplicity of needs that inhibit them to nicely conforming into society's construction of the *typical* student.

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The vision of this Charter School was embraced by all, including parents, teachers, and the community. The students' needs were met, teachers loved and cared for the students, the parents collaborated with the teachers to provide access to education for all students. It was like one "happy family." However, as idyllic as the school seems, there are underlying issues embedded within the larger context of schooling that need further interrogation.

While the local community should be praised for its success in finally creating a space that can appropriately serve a population of students otherwise ignored in the traditional public school, it is necessary to interrogate the support of separate schools for diverse students, inevitably exacerbating greater inequalities across the larger educational context. New Hope Charter is an exemplar of a caring relation and its success has not been because of "the system," but despite it.

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